Regenerative Laughter in Boccaccio's *Decameron*

In the 1930s, there was allegedly a prolonged battle of wit between the playwright George Bernard Shaw, then at the height of his career, and Winston Churchill, who, at that time, was in the political wilderness. The climax came when Bernard Shaw wrote to Churchill in an apparent gesture of reconciliation, saying simply:

> Dear Mr. Churchill,
> Enclosed you will find a ticket for the first night of my new play.
> Yours sincerely, Bernard Shaw.
> P.S. I enclose another ticket for a friend—if you have one.

The sting was in the tail, as they say, *in cauda venenum*. But Churchill was not to be worsted. He replied:

> Dear Mr. Shaw,
> To my great regret I find that a previous engagement must prevent me from attending the first night of your play.
> I should, however, be glad to receive a ticket for the second performance—if there is one. WC.

As I have a terrible memory for anecdotes and funny stories, it is of some relevance to speculate why on earth I still remember this one, some forty years after I first heard it. No doubt there are several reasons. The combination of malice and urbanity, the absolute simplicity of the pay-off, and that *double* climax; a good punch line that prepares for a better final one.

I doubt very much, though, that I would have remembered the story if it had not been attached to the names of Churchill and Bernard Shaw. And the reason why I am reminding you of it is not because I believe it to be true—although it is certainly 'ben trovato'—but because it illustrates from the contemporary world the nature and the appeal of one quite important group of stories in the *Decameron*.

What Boccaccio does is to take a piece of repartee, or a witty taunt or a rebuke, attribute it to a famous personality of the previous generation, set in a particular context, and—without regard to historical accuracy or to his sources—tell the story in his own words, in order to build up interest and suspense, and put over the punch-line to the maximum effect.

So for example, he tells excellent stories of just this kind about Dante's friend, the poet, Guido Cavalcanti, and about the most famous painter of the first half of the fourteenth century, Giotto. But what I would like to do is to give you a precis of another story of this kind, very different in character, but with a double climax, like the story of Churchill and Shaw.

This is told about a noble Florentine, Currado Gianfigliazzi, and his rascally Venetian cook, Chichibio. Currado was dining with guests, and he was looking forward to eating a particularly plump crane, that his own falcon had caught that morning. But, when the crane was served, one of the thigh joints was found to be missing—and as readers, we know that the cook has given it to his girlfriend. The cook is summoned, and attempts to turn the whole thing into a joke by explaining that all cranes have only got one leg.

Currado is not appeased. He restrains his anger for the sake of his guests, but he insists that the cook shall ride out with him at dawn, and if he cannot point out a one-legged crane, he is going to have a beating that he will remember all his life.

So Currado and Chichibio ride out at dawn, and the cook has no idea as to how he might escape his beating. Suddenly he catches sight of a dozen or so cranes by the riverside, all fast asleep and standing on one leg—as, of course, herons and cranes usually do. So he calls out, 'Master, you see I was telling the truth. Look over there,

and you'll see that cranes do have only one leg and one thigh.' But Currado is not to be mollified. He says simply, 'Wait until we are a little nearer'. Then, he calls out 'Ahoy!', and, of course, the cranes lower their other leg before they take flight.

Currado swings round on Chichibio and says, 'Well, have they got two legs or haven't they?!', and the terrified Chichibio, his inspiration coming from he knows not where, answers: 'Ah, yes, but, you didn't call out "ahoy!" to the crane yesterday evening. If you had, he would have put his other leg down, just like these.'

The sheer audacity of the reply has its effect—all parents will recognise the situation—and Currado's anger dissolves into good humour and laughter.

So there you have an example of the simplest kind of story in the *Decameron*, which, in Boccaccio's day, was known as a 'motto' (as in 'bon mot'), the same word doing duty for the witty saying and for the story which leads up to it. Clearly it is still closely to related to what we call a 'joke', as when we ask 'have you heard any good jokes lately?'; and it

is worth mentioning that, historically speaking, earlier *collections* of tales in Italian—the sort of collections that gave Boccaccio the idea for his *Decameron*—were dominated by little stories or little jokes of just this kind.

There is of course absolutely no sign of the joke losing its popularity. The man who can remember jokes is still welcome company after dinner, especially if he can remember if he has told them before! Publishers are still bringing out collections of jokes that the rest of us can use in after-dinner speeches; and if we are waiting in the doctor's waiting room, even though we are worried, we may still raise a smile at the terrible jokes in *Reader's Digest*.

We speak of jokes as providing 'entertainment', as a pleasant way of 'passing the time', or as a 'diversion' or a 'distraction', something which 'takes our mind off things', or as a 'relaxation'. And with that last word, 'relaxation', we are drawing, quite unconsciously, on the concepts and terminology of medieval doctors, who were concerned not so much with the *causes* of laughter, as with the physical manifestations—with that extraordinary series of contractions of the diaphragm, and tightening of the vocal chords, which give rise to choking noises, gurgles and wheezings that can convulse the whole body.

Medieval doctors believed that these spasms were beneficial to our physical organism, by distending and relaxing the muscles, by discharging the pressure of anger (as in the story I have just told you), by 'quickening' the 'animal spirits', and, above all, by stirring up and expelling one of the four humours, called the 'black bile' which is the cause of melancholy—*melan* and *cholia* are simply the Greek words for 'black' and 'bile'. I believe that there is more than a grain of truth in the medieval account—even if we do have to change the terminology. The *act* of laughing *does* do us good, however slight the cause, and it does provide some kind of physical therapy. This is part of what I had in mind when I suggested, with the title of this lecture, that the laughter caused by reading the *Decameron* could be called 'regenerative'.

Obviously, I am aware that this is a very incomplete theory of laughter, and a rather feeble claim to make on behalf of a masterpiece. And by this point, you might be wondering what on earth I am doing here, turning your attention to jokes and stories that were old six hundred years ago? If you do have any doubts or reservations of this kind, Boccaccio is the man to set them at rest. To find out why, we must look in to the main events in his life, and the social and political upheavals of *his* time.

Boccaccio was born in 1313, the illegitimate son of a wealthy merchant and banker. He was put to study arithmetic and accountancy, and while still a boy, he was apprenticed to another merchant. The first major event in his life came in 1327, when he was 14, when his father was sent to Naples as an agent for the famous Bardi company, one of the biggest 'banks', as we would now say, trading in fourteenth-century Florence. Boccaccio continued his practical training in commerce, and was also made to follow courses in law—the *Decameron* shows a detailed knowledge of trade and law which is worthy of either Shakespeare of Dickens.

Naples, at that time, was the court of the French ruler of the whole of southern Italy, Robert of Anjou, a patron of the arts and of learning who would later confer a laurel crown on Petrarch. It was a lively and art-loving court, to which Boccaccio had open access through his father, and he soon began to make his name there as a poet. His father was posted to Paris in 1332, but Boccaccio remained; and thus at the age of nineteen, he was effectively freed from paternal restraint. Indeed he stayed there until he was 27 years old, and it was while he was still at the Neapolitan court, and still in his early twenties, that he completed three major works, which, in effect, made available in Italian the content and spirit of three of the best known romances in medieval French literature.

At the age of 27, in the winter of 1341, he was recalled from the civilised, Frenchified court of Naples to his native Florence (much against his will, in the first instance). He went on writing in Florence, though, with enormous energy; and while he was still in his thirties he completed another group of long and varied works, culminating in the *Decameron*. The late 1330s and 1340s, however, were years of economic recession and political upheaval in Italy as a whole, and in Florence in particular. King Robert had died, the south was torn by civil war, and the great banking houses of Florence went bankrupt one by one. There were popular uprisings and continued violence. Florence tried the experiment of an outside dictator, and then had great difficulty in chasing him out of office again.

In short, the 1340s in Florence was one of those decades which give us some perspective, and some reassurance, about the political and economic troubles of our own time, particularly when we remember that, in Florence, the decade was to be rounded off by the coming of the worst attack of bubonic plague that Europe had ever known. The Black Death may have carried off as many as sixty thousand people in a city which had about 100,000 inhabitants.

Boccaccio was actually in Florence throughout the plague year, and he lost his father and stepmother as a result of the plague. But his reaction to this unparalleled disaster was to write the one hundred tales that concern us, to make a book which a great literary critic once described as 'the only cheerful and funny book in the whole of Italian literature'. So do keep in mind that the *Decameron* was written in the years 1349–51, immediately after the visitation of the black death.

The so-called 'framework' of the stories opens with a long introduction, that gives a detailed and harrowing description of the plague and of its consequences. And it is in this introduction that we find a very spirited defence of the author's action in writing such a book at such a time, and a very vigorous affirmation of man's need for gaiety, joy, love and all the graces of civilised living—a need which is never greater than in times of disaster.

Let me quickly summarise the Introduction. Seven young women and three young men—all wealthy and well-bred—are persuaded by the eloquence of one of their number that there is nothing that they can usefully do to help the afflicted, that to remain in Florence is to expose themselves needlessly to the dangers of infection and robbery, and that the instinct of self-preservation is something universal and good. The group resolve to move a mile or so outside the city, to one of the villas of the wealthy which had been abandoned (I have often walked by it on the way up to Fiesole), and to remain there until danger had passed.

The most outspoken and well characterised of the young men, Dioneo, insists that they should do all they can to live *joyfully*: all dark thoughts are to be left behind, no-one is to be allowed to bring sad news, they must sing, dance and eat the finest foods. 'We must live with gaiety, festively.'

When they have arrived at the villa, they resolve on a constitution for their ideal society, in which each of them in turn shall be the ruler, king or queen, for one day. Their servants go to prepare the rooms and dinner, they sing, dance and eat; and it is only then that the first 'queen' proposes that it would help them to live *festevolmente* if they were to tell one story each per day, and if all the stories of the given day should have a common theme, which would be chosen and announced by the new 'king' or 'queen' on the evening before. Thus the *Decameron* is not just any one hundred tales in any order, but ten days with ten stories on a given theme.

Now, I must not give you with the impression all these stories are comic; rather, I find it helpful to reduce the categories from ten to just five. In the first group, I would put the rather rambling adventure stories, based on ancient and medieval romances of the kind that Shakespeare still wrote (as in *Pericles of Tyre*), full of mishaps, shipwrecks, pirates, long-lost children and late recognitions. Second, serious, sometimes tragic, tales of unhappy love or greatness of soul (including the story of Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*). Third, stories which recount triumph over obstacles and adversity as a result of human quick-wittedness and cunning. Fourth, the 'motti', which we have just looked at. And fifth, what Boccaccio called 'burle' or 'beffe'. A 'beffa' or 'burla' includes both the elaborate confidence trick or practical joke, and the story culminating in a lie told on the spur of the moment by a lover or a thief who has been caught *in flagrante*.

Of course, my five groupings are fluid and uncertain; but I would estimate that about half the stories in the *Decameron* are either 'motti' or 'beffe'; and for the rest of this lecture I shall focus on some aspects of Boccaccio's humour and comedy in these fifty tales, ignoring the rest of the work.

Let me remind you now of some typical 'beffe'. The best known—and deservedly—are the group of stories dealing with three Florentine painters; Bruno, Buffalmacco, and their friend and victim Calandrino. On one occasion they lure Calandrino to an assignation with a woman, and then arrange for his wife to arrive on the scene. In another they steal Calandrino's pig, and then convince his neighbours and wife—by means of a rigged 'trial by ordeal'—that Calandrino had taken and eaten the pig *himself*. On a third occasion, they persuade Calandrino that he has a tummy ache because he is pregnant!

Perhaps the best of the group is the very first, which I will lay out in full. Bruno and Buffalmacco arrange for another friend to persuade Calandrino that if he goes to the nearby valley of the Mugnone (a stream flowing into the Arno, which I have walked along many times), he will find a *heliotrope*. Now, a heliotrope is a semi-precious, black stone, which, according to the medieval encyclopaedias, possessed the power of making the bearer invisible, a power, as Calandrino realises, that would be very useful to a thief.

Bruno, Buffalmacco and Calandrino set off to the Mugnone together, where Calandrino pounces on every black stone in sight and completely fills his smock and his cloak with them, until he is weighed down so much that he can hardly walk. At this point, Bruno and Buffalmacco pretend that they are unable to see him. In loud voices they begin to exclaim at their own credulity for going out on this fool's errand, and they curse their sly dog of a friend who has obviously slipped away and gone back to Florence to laugh at them both.

Calandrino is persuaded that he has found a heliotrope and become invisible. He is absolutely delighted and does indeed set off home. Bruno mutters: 'Ah, if Calandrino were here, I'd pick up one of these stones', suiting his action to the words, 'and I'd fling it at him *like this*!' Of course, he hits Calandrino with the stone. Calandrino keeps silent, and they go on, absolutely peppering him with stones all the way back to Florence. He enters the city, at dusk, still weighed down by all these stones, and, as it happens, no one recognises him or greets him in the twilight on his way through the streets back home. Naturally, he is even more convinced that he has become invisible. He is bruised all over, but 'unbowed', and full of excitement. But, alas, as soon as he gets home, his wife *does* see him, and immediately scolds him for being so late for dinner. Calandrino is furious as well as crestfallen, and he takes it out on his wife by giving her a beating, on the grounds that women spoil everything and that she has somehow taken away, neutralised, the magic properties of the heliotrope. His 'friends', Bruno and Buffalmacco, appear—with friends like these, who needs enemies?—and put an end to the beating, making peace between husband and wife; and they finally depart, leaving 'Calandrino full of gloom, with the house full of stones'.

I have now told you enough about these stories now to make you aware of the *limitations* of the genre in which Boccaccio exercises his gifts as a comic writer. The short story, as such, always imposes very strict limits on length and characterisation, and the 'beffa' (the trick or practical joke) virtually demands a cast list in which the characters are divided into the *deceivers*, on the one hand, and the *deceived*, on the other. The stories are always about an unequal contest between the two sides, intrinsically no more interesting than a

game of football in which you know that one team is going to win by twenty goals to nil. The humiliations imposed on the losers usually involve beatings, imprisonments, or immersions in excrement—so it is rather a limited menu. I am reminded that the sharp-witted Florentines who are the heroes of these tales are still very little loved in other parts of Italy; and as a Dante scholar, I reflect that Dante would have consigned most of Boccaccio's comic 'heroes' to the lowest zones of his *Inferno*—to the circles reserved for the gravest crimes, for the punishment of fraud and treachery.

You will gather that I do believe that Boccaccio is, among other things, a great comic writer; but I do not want to gloss over his limitations, and I would be doing him a disservice if I left you with the impression that he possessed all the qualities I admire in *other* comic writers. It is only rarely that he matches the sheer gusto and linguistic invention of Rabelais; he does not have the idiosyncrasy of Lawrence Sterne; he does not have the delicate irony of Jane Austen; he does not have the polish of an Oscar Wilde. Moreover, he simply lacks the *space* that the young Dickens allowed himself to develop his comic characters to the full; in Dickens's novels characters like Wackforth Squeers or Mr and Mrs McCawber keep on coming back, whereas Calandrino is virtually the only character in the *Decameron* to appear in more than one tale. The 'beffa' is like the theatrical farce—it must move to a climax swiftly and precisely, with perfect timing, and certain more relaxed kinds of humour are just not possible.

On the other hand, I do not want to concede too much. There are some lovely comic characterisations in the *Decameron*, even if they are scarcely more than 'walk-on' parts; and even some of the 'victims and 'stooges' can be portrayed with enough depth and sympathy to lift them above the level of mere farce. I think, for example, of the portrait of the innocent and gullible old friar in the very first tale in the book, the man who receives the mock confession from Ser Ciappelletto. And I think too of Calandrino, who has more than a touch of the complex character created by two Australian writers in the 1950s and 1960s for Tony Hancock. Like Hancock, Calandrino is vain, gullible, selfish and greedy. He likes to think of himself as cunning and able to outwit his friends; he is a romantic—he can believe that a young and beautiful woman is in love with him; and if he wants to become invisible, it is so that he can become like the hero of a medieval romance.

We see in the story of the heliotrope how Boccaccio reveals Calandrino's character. He does so by letting him speak at length in his own words, as when with great excitement he shares with Bruno and Buffalmacco what he has been told about the heliotrope:

> Calendrino, avendo tutte queste cose seco notate, fatto sembianti d'avere altro a fare, si partì da Maso, e seco propose di voler cercare di questa pietra; ma diliberò di non volerlo fare senza saputa di Bruno e di Buffalmacco, li quale spezialissimamente amava. Diessi adunque a cercar di costoro, a ciò che senza indugio e prima che alcuno altro n'andassero a cercare, e tutto il rimanente di quella mattina consumò in cercargli. Ultimamente, essendo già l'ora della nona passata, ricordandosi egli che essi lavoravano nel monistero delle donne di Faenza, quantunque il caldo fosse grandissimo, lasciata ogni altra sua faccenda, quasi correndo n'andò a costoro, e chiamatigli, così disse loro:—Compagni, quando voi vogliate credermi, noi possiamo divenire i più ricchi uomini di Firenze, per ciò che io ho inteso da uomo degno di fede che in Mugnone si truova una pietra, la qual chi la porta sopra non è veduto da niun'altra persona; per che a me parebbe che noi senza alcuno indugio, prima che altra persona v'andasse, v'andassimo a cercare. Noi la troveremo per certo, per ciò che io la conosco; e trovata che noi l'avremo, che avrem noi a fare altro se non mettercela nella scarsella e andare alle tavole de' cambiatori, le quali sapete che stanno sempre cariche di grossi e di fiorini, e tòrcene quanti noi ne vorremo? Niuno ci vedrà; e così potremo arricchire subitamente, senza avere tutto dì a schiccherare le mura a modo che fa la lumaca.
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> > *Having made a mental note of all that he had heard, Calandrino pretended that he had other things to attend to and took his leave of Maso, determined to go and look for one of these stones; but he decided that before doing so, he would have to inform Bruno and Buffalmacco, who were his bosom friends. He therefore went to look for them, so that they could all set forth at once in search of the stone before anyone else should come to hear about it, and he spent the whole of the rest of the morning trying to trace them. Finally, in the mid-afternoon, he suddenly remembered that they were working at the nunnery a little beyond the city gate on the road to Faenza, so he abandoned everything he was doing and proceeded to the nunnery, running nearly all the way in spite of the tremendous heat. And having called them away from their painting, he said to them: "Pay attention to me, my friends, and we can become the richest men in Florence, for I have heard on good authority that along the Mugnone there's a certain kind of stone, and when you pick it up you become invisible. I reckon we ought to go there right away, before anyone else does. We'll find it without a doubt, because I know what it looks like; and once we've found it, all we have to do is to put it in our purses and go to the money-changers, whose counters, as you know, are always loaded with groats and florins, and help ourselves to as much as we want. No one will see us; and so we'll be able to get rich quick, without being forced to daub walls all the time like a lot of snails.*

But he also does so by describing Calandrino's actions, as when he rushes eagerly ahead, filling his clothes with black stones:

> Calandrino andava, come più volonteroso, avanti e prestamente or qua e or là saltando, dovunque alcuna pietra nera vedeva, si gittava, e quella ricogliendo si metteva in seno. I compagni andavano appresso, e quando una e quando un'altra ne ricoglievano; ma Calandrino non fu guari di via andato, che egli il seno se

n'ebbe pieno; per che, alzandosi i gheroni della gonnella, che all'analda non era, e faccendo di quegli ampio grembo, bene avendogli alla coreggia attaccati d'ogni parte, non dopo molto gli empié, e similmente, dopo alquanto spazio, fatto del mantello grembo, quello di pietre empié.

> *Calandrino went on ahead, darting this way and that, and whenever he caught sight of a black stone he leapt on it, picked it up, and stuffed it down his shirt, while the other two trailed along behind, occasionally picking up an odd stone here and there. Before he had gone very far, Calandrino found that there was no more room in his shirt, so he gathered up the hem of his skirt, which was not cut in the Hainaut stype, attached it securely to his waist all round, and turned it into a capacious bag, which took him no long time to fill, after which he made a second bag out of his cloak, which in no time at all he had likewise filled up with stones.*

This passage illustrates Boccaccio's marvellous command of sentence structure and rhythm, which are the comic writer's equivalent of what the comic actor does with intonation and timing. The rhythms seem to fill out and bulge just like Calandrino's clothes; an effect which can also be observed in the later passage already mentioned where Buffalmacco throws the 'heliotropes' at Calandrino—the sentences there seemed to be 'aimed' just as accurately as the stones they describe.

I must also stress that Boccaccio had a marvellous ear for the exuberance of Florentine popular speech, and he loved to reproduce it, or improve on it, just as Charles Dickens would do with London speech, in characters like Sam Weller. He took the greatest delight in the amazing range of words and metaphorical expressions used to denote all the less elegant functions of the body. He just adored that most characteristic of Italian happenings, the 'scene'—the scene on the street after a car accident, for example, which can still give rise to an epic exchange of insults and threats, and which is played for all it is worth before a street full of connoisseurs. Sometimes, he will just let his characters have their head, and let them talk in this idiom for a whole page at a time. This wonderfully racy speech is of course untranslatable, so let me try my best to read aloud a passage from the story in which Calandrino's friends make him believe that he is pregnant, and which we pick up at the moment when the 'doctor', who is 'in' on the practical joke, gives his diagnosis, so that you can hear the dignified voice of authority:

> [*Il medico*:] Vedi, Calandrino, a parlarti come ad amico, tu non hai altro male se non che tu se' pregno.
> [*Calandrino*:] Oimè! Tessa, questo m'hai fatto tu, che non vuogli stare altro che di sopra: io il ti diceva bene.[^3]

> Doctor: *Look here, Calandrino, speaking now as your friend, I'd say that the only thing wrong with you is that you are pregnant.*
> Calandrino: *Ah, Tessa, this is your doing! You will insist on lying on top, I told you all along what would happen.*

Boccaccio was a very deliberate and highly self-conscious writer, and some of the limitations on his range that we have noticed are no more than the inevitable consequences of the ancient and medieval theories about comedy which he would have accepted. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle had given the following celebrated definition:

> As for Comedy, it is an imitation of men worse than the average, worse, however, not as regards any and every sort of fault, but only as regards one particular kind, the Ridiculous, which is a species of the Ugly. The Ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or a deformity not productive of pain or harm to others; the mask, for instance, that excites laughter, is something ugly and distorted without causing pain.
> Aristotle, *Poetics*, ch. 5.

Today, we should want to extend or expand that definition in several directions, but it seems clear to me that the spirit of these remarks does fit Boccaccio's kind of comedy remarkably well. I think many would agree that Aristotle's distinctions in this passage do explain why we are able to laugh at the villainy of Boccaccio's heroes, and at the humiliations and beatings which their innocent victims have to endure. Boccaccio's style—those qualities we have just been admiring—is interposed like the Comic Mask between ourselves and, as it were, the real events.

There were also other schoolroom definitions current in the fourteenth century which were a good deal narrower than Aristotle's, and it is to them we owe some of the other features that are most characteristic of the stories in the *Decameron*. Isidore, author of the most used encyclopaedia in the Middle Ages, had defined tragic writers (*tragoedi*) as those who relate deeds of ancient times,

and the bloody transgressions of depraved and vicious kings; whereas writers of Comedy (*comoedi*) describe the doings of private citizens, and tell of the debauching of virgins and the love affairs of prostitutes:

> Tragoedi sunt qui antiqua gesta atque facinora scelatorum regum luctuosa carmine spectante populo concinebant. Comoedi sunt qui privatorum hominum acta dictis aut gestu cantabant, atque stupra virginum et amores meretricum in suis fabulis exprimebant.
> Isidore, *Etymologiae*, XVIII, 46.

It is because of this assumption that whenever Boccaccio wants to make us laugh, he writes about ordinary people rather than kings and potentates, and about contemporary events rather than the remote. It is an important point because Boccaccio is very sensitive to matters of rank, place and time. By and large, his adventure stories have a 'timeless' setting in the Near East or North Africa; the serious or tragic tales are told about lords and ladies who lived in northern Italy and France some fifty or a hundred years earlier; while the comic tales are set in Florence or the other cities of Tuscany in the present day.

It is therefore to the comic tales that you have to look, if you want details of everyday life in the fourteenth century—and you will not be disappointed. We are given glimpses of how the law courts worked; we learn about customs arrangements and the ways in which trade was carried on; what it was like to travel by sea or on horseback; and what the pecking order was in a very class conscious society. We find out, too, how and when girls were given in marriage; and—coming to the details which are exploited for comic effect –how a corpse was buried, how the ritual of confession was conducted, and what a friar wore underneath his habit.

I have no doubt that a good deal of the pleasure we get in reading the *Decameron* does come—to revert to the Aristotelian categories—from the 'imitation of reality', and 'from the imitation of men worse than the average', which is achieved by a combination of convincing psychology, convincing living speech, in convincing situations, established with a careful eye for significant detail.

Moving on now from medieval theory, it is self-evident that comedy has often been a great deal *more* than the 'representation of ordinary people'. Because it presents itself as no more than 'entertaining', 'diverting' and 'relaxing', comedy has often been the only possible vehicle—and the most deadly vehicle—for personal attack, for the lampoon. I remember a Democratic candidate for the Presidency in the States who never recovered from being praised for his 'Norwegian charisma'; and similarly a contender for the leadership of the Conservative Party in Britain, a worthy but plodding man, who vanished from the race when he was described as a 'grey mouse, painted grey three times'.

Under the name of satire, comedy has always been used to expose human folly and vice in general, and it has always been a weapon for the have-nots to expose injustices, and to ridicule abuses in the distribution and exercise of power in their particular societies. You need only think here of the wonderful Czech, Polish and Russian jokes which flourished under the communist regimes. All these aspects of comedy or humour have been well known since the earliest times. However, until recently it has been less obvious that comedy may be the voice of another kind of protest; a subversive, anarchical voice, rising out of the individualistic self and calling into question *all* forms of socialisation, good or bad: protesting against *all* the shared habits and values, beliefs and taboos, customs and laws that are the necessary bond of any human society.

Where the infant simply screams, the little boy makes rude gestures, and the adolescent writes graffiti or performs acts of ritual vandalism, the adult will tell or will enjoy a certain kind of subversive humour. Twentieth-century psychology and anthropology viewed this kind of comedy as the expression of the unconscious and subconscious self, the Id, as the voice which defies all the limitations and inhibitions which are accepted by reason, that is, by the Ego. Certainly, there are times when this kind of dark humour becomes the expression of a cosmic uncertainty and fear. Sometimes when we cannot find any purpose in living, or when we are terrified by pain, or simply scared of dying, we protect ourselves by mocking, at times blasphemously, all religious solutions, all traditional sources of comfort, all the taboos and customs that cushion the impact of death and suffering. Recently, too, comedy has been seen as the voice of the Body attacking all the aspirations, pretensions or ideals of the Spirit. When moralists go over the top in praising the dignity and worth of humankind, comedy becomes scatological, and reminds us that the body requires a 'throughput' of so many pints of fluid and so many ounces of matter a day.

Above all, though, comedy reminds us that the young adult body is dominated by chemical and physiological processes inseparable from the drive for self-reproduction; it reminds us that sexual desire is apt to run counter to all social restraints, that it is accompanied by uncontrollable suffusions and tumescences, and that sexual desire is felt no less keenly by 'nice' young ladies than it is by lustful young men. Good breeding and polite society continue to cast a veil over all these bodily facts, and this reticence is part of a whole complex of acts of concealment and euphemism—of what we call 'tactfulness', 'consideration for the feelings of others, 'half-truths' and 'white lies'—which all civilised societies seem to demand of their responsible members.

I think it is true, in short, that 'all the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players'. Society demands of us that we assume various roles, or that we act out various parts in life; and comedy has always thrived on the exposure of the gap between the actor and the role he is playing, between the reality and the pretence—especially when the acting involves deliberate bad faith, and when the fictions or pretences that are necessary in civilised living become open to the charge of cant and hypocrisy.

These are broad and important truths, which demand a fuller and more nuanced analysis than would be appropriate here. It will be enough if I have reminded you of the obvious, namely that it has always been one of the main functions of the comic muse to make us face up to the raw facts of instinctive, animal life, to teach us to be sceptical about all social systems, to mistrust the expert in every field from theology to medicine, and to question the right of any human being to determine the fate or the happiness of another in the name of some religious truth or of some authority beyond appeal. While such generalisations may seem questionable, I believe that, if I were given enough space, I could at least explain what I mean in each case with examples from the *Decameron*.

Indeed, I am fairly sure in my own mind that it is *because* Boccaccio gave such vigorous expression to a healthy spirit of irreverence and mockery that his tales are far more than simply good jokes or elaborate hoaxes, and have such a lasting appeal even in times as troubled as those in which the work was written. And I could substantiate and 'instantiate' virtually all the claims about the nature of comedy that I have just been making by reference to the stories that turn either on the issue of religious belief, or on the representation of members of the established church in the fourteenth century.

For instance, Boccaccio's retelling of the ancient fable of the three rings—apparently identical, symbolising the three faiths of Christianity, Judaism and Islam—calls into question the claim of any religion to possess a monopoly of the truth. Many stories mock the credulity and superstition of ordinary people, or ridicule laymen who become religious fanatics, or make fun of those who believe in ghosts, in purgatory, in miracles of any kind, and especially those allegedly worked by the relics of saints. Remember that in all these tales, Boccaccio is playing on religious fears and taboos that he himself shares with the most sophisticated of his intended readers. If you do not feel a tinge of unease in a sexual joke about 'the resurrection of the flesh', then you are not experiencing Boccaccio's comedy as you should.

In the fourteenth century, the church not only exercised moral and spiritual authority, but wielded considerable political and economic power, and a number of tales in the *Decameron* use the various modes of comedy to attack the abuses of this power. Best of all is the story about the Jew who is finally converted to Christianity after a visit to Rome—a visit from which his Christian friends had done their best to dissuade him. The corruption and the self-indulgence of the papal court were on such a scale that the Jew decided that only the religion of a 'true god' could possibly survive and indeed flourish under such leadership!

In Boccaccio's society, again, the natural targets for any attack on pretence, hypocrisy and humbug were of course members of the clergy—people in Holy Orders. Such people preached self-denial and practised self-indulgence; they preached poverty and lived in luxury; they preached chastity, and practised something else entirely. The many excellent stories that illustrate the triumph of lust over principle in the persons of the clergy prove that *Amor vincit omnes*, 'Lust conquers them all'—monks and nuns, abbots and abbesses, friars in the town, priests in the country, and even hermits in the desert.

I think it is a mistake, however, to think of them simply as anti-clerical stories (which is how they used to be read and enjoyed in Protestant countries). Rather, they are to be understood as comic deflations of the hypocrisy of all people who are placed in authority in any society—of all people who preach one code of morality and live by another. Thus the most characteristic of these stories, or so it seems to me, is not the one about the fathering of a whole colony of little monks and nuns by the gardener in a nunnery. Nor is it the last story in Day Three, about Rustico the hermit and how he taught Abilech to 'put the devil in hell'.

Instead, it is the story of an abbess, who was solacing herself in her cell with the local priest when she was summoned to come and deal with a young novice who had been discovered in bed with her lover. The abbess snatches up her clothes in the dark, and, by mistake, she pulls onto her head not her own elaborate head-dress but the priest's breeches, 'le brache del prete'. As soon as she arrives at the scene of the crime, the abbess launches in to a high flown speech of horror and disgust at such goings on—but the effect is somewhat spoiled when her victim and her audience notice the breeches on her head.

Everyone who has ever been a prefect at school, a parent, a teacher, or a dean of discipline in a college, has been guilty at sometime or other, and to some degree, of the abbess's hypocrisy; and the point of the story is to remind us to touch our own heads the next time that we are tempted to sound off in this way.

Now, obviously, not all irreverence, or scepticism, or mockery, or attacks on authority are funny, and even when they are comic in form and effect, the spirit of irrationalism and anarchy can transform true humour into what we call 'black humour', 'sick' or 'nihilistic'. Comic writing, or comic drawing of this kind, can come close to denying any dignity to man, or any value to life in a civilised society. It will tend to represent the community and its institutions as nothing other than a means of deforming and enslaving the individual.

You will not find any such extremism in Boccaccio's comic tales. He was clearly passionately convinced of the truth of Aristotle's dictum that man is a *social animal*, who cannot actualise his potentiality—cannot indeed become fully human—except when he lives as a member of a highly diversified society. His ten young men and women withdraw from Florence precisely because the rule of law has collapsed, thanks to the Black Death. They remain outside the rest of society for barely a fortnight, forming themselves into an ideal community, with diversification of tasks, and an authority based on rotating kingship. They do not tell any stories on Saturday, and they go to church on Sunday. While the atmosphere of their conversation is charged with sexual awareness and sexual attraction, there are no breaches of social propriety in deed, or in word. In fact, the decorum and propriety of their speech is exemplary, even when the subject matter is most risqué.

I want to emphasise at this point that Boccaccio is not a *gross* writer. He is explicit and frank about sex, but only as far as the rich resources of metaphor will allow; and he is not titillating or pornographic. Sex is neither a 'sacrament', nor an occasion for smut. His sensuality is really that of a middle-aged male—by which I mean that some of his most sensual descriptions are those which describe the pleasures of the table—clean cloths and napkins, fine cooking, vintage wines. The acts of love that give him most pleasure to

describe are like those enjoyed by the merchant Rinaldo, who was robbed by highwaymen on a winter's evening, but was rescued from the cold to enjoy a warm bath, a warm bed, and a warm widow; with no courtship, no deception, and no obligation for the future.

In recent years, feminist scholars have been quoting with approval the speeches that Boccaccio puts in to the mouths of some of his women characters in the stories—speeches in defence of woman's sexual instinct and of its free expression. But when you read these speeches in context, you realise that all the characters who infringe the ordinary moral code of fourteenth-century Italian society, and especially those whose love cuts across barriers of rank, usually come to a tragic end. If a stable boy who has seduced his master's daughter is saved from death, it is because he turns out to be the long-lost son of a nobleman. The young man who so delighted Caterina with 'the singing of his nightingale' on the hot and steamy night when she begged permission to sleep out on the balcony is not allowed to leave the premises by her father until he has plighted his troth; and this is only possible because he is, in the event, a very eligible young man of good family.

The sense of decorum is everywhere present in the formal structure of Boccaccio's prose. The balanced rhythms and the Latinate syntax of almost every sentence

are a constant reminder of Boccaccio's admiration for all aspects of ancient civilisation. This point is well illustrated by the climax of one of the most risqué of all the tales. A young and lusty wife, Peronella, has been caught out by the unexpected return of her husband, and she conceals her lover in a huge tub. It turns out, however, that the husband has only come back early because he has found a friend who wants to purchase that very tub. 'Ah', says Peronella, thinking quickly, 'but I've already found a customer; and' (raising her voice) 'in fact, he's in the tub now, he's inspecting it.'

The lover quickly realises what is required of him and acts out his part. He calls out that he is willing to buy the tub, but only if the husband will climb inside and give it a good clean. There follows the scene of sexual intercourse below:

> Disse allora Giannello:—Il doglio mi par ben saldo, ma egli mi pare che voi ci abbiate tenuta entro feccia, ché egli è tutto impastricciato di non so che cosa sì secca, che io non ne posso levar con l'unghie, e però noi torrei se io nol vedessi prima netto.
>
> Disse allora Peronella:—No, per quello non rimarrà il mercato; mio marito il netterà tutto.
>
> E il marito disse:—Si bene,—e posti giù i ferri suoi e ispogliatosi in camicione, si fece accendere un lume e dare una radimàdia, e fuvvi entrato dentro e cominciò a radere. E Peronella, quasi veder volesse ciò che facesse, messo il capo per la bocca del doglio, che molto grande non era, e oltre a questo l'un de' bracci con tutta la spalla, cominciò a dire:—Radi quivi, e quivi, e anche colà',—e—Vedine qui rimaso un micolino.
>
> E mentre che così stava e al marito insegnava e ricordava, Giannello, il quale appieno non aveva quella mattina il suo disidero ancor fornito quando il marito venne, veggendo che come volea non potea, s'argomentò di fornirlo come potesse; e a lei accostatosi, che tutta chiusa teneva la bocca del doglio, e in quella guisa che negli ampi campi gli sfrenati cavalli e d'amor caldi le cavalle di Partia assaliscono, ad effetto recò il giovinil desiderio; il quale quasi in un medesimo punto ebbe perferzione e fu raso il doglio, ed egli scostatosi, e la Peronella tratto il capo del doglio, e il marito uscitone fuori.
>
> Per che Peronella disse a Giannello:—Te' questo lume, buono uomo, e guata se egli è netto a tuo modo.—Giannello, guardatovi dentro, disse che stava bene e che egli era contento; e datigli sette gigliati, a casa sel fece portare.

> *So Gianello said: 'The tub seems to be in pretty good shape, but you appear to have left the lees of the wine in it, for it's coated all over with some hard substance or other that I can't even scrape off with my nails. I'm not going to take it unless it's cleaned out first.' So Peronella said: 'We made a bargain, and we'll stick to it. My husband will clean it out.' 'But of course,' said the husband. And having put down his tools and rolled up his sleeves, he called for a lamp and a scraping tool, lowered himself into the tub, and began to scrape away. Peronella, as though curious to see what he was doing, leaned over the mouth of the tub, which was not very wide, and resting her head on her arm and shoulder, she issued a stream of instructions, such as: 'Rub it up there, that's it, and there again!' and 'See if you can reach that teeny-weeny bit left at the top.' While she was busy instructing and directing her husband in this fashion, Giannello, who had not fully gratified his desires that morning before the husband arrived, seeing that he couldn't do it in the way he wished, contrived to bring it off as best he could. So he went up to Peronella, who was completely blocking up the mouth of the tub, and in the manner of a wild and hot-blooded stallion mounting a Parthian mare in the open fields, he satisfied his young man's passion, which no sooner reacher fulfilment than the scraping of the tub was completed, whereupon he stood back, Peronella withdrew her head from the tub, and the husband clambered out. Then Peronella said to Giannello: 'Here, take this lamp, my good man, and see whether the job's been done to your satisfaction.' Having taken a look inside the tub, Giannello told her everything was fine, and he was satisfied. He then handed seven silver ducats to the husband, and got him to carry it round to his house.*

Notice, first, the loving eye for detail in Peronella's gestures and words, as she puts her head into the barrel so that the husband cannot see what is going on,. This is followed by the heightening of the language by means of assonance, fuller rhythms, and classical allusions, as the lover goes about his business as best he may; then finally, comes a sequence of gerunds and past participles describing his disengagement and withdrawal. Boccaccio is such a skilful writer that he transforms the scene in to something as natural as a stallion mounting a mare, and as chaste, in its own way, as a pas de deux in a ballet. It is as funny a sexual farce as you could hope to read, and it is light years removed from its classical source in a tale by Apuleius.

At times, you may feel that Boccaccio is too much in control, too much aware of the social proprieties, and that this self restraint can inhibit the free flowering of his comic talent, in much the same way that the *form* of the stories which involve a 'motto' or a 'beffa' can make certain kinds of comedy impossible. He is certainly at his best, and his comedy is most exhilarating, in the stories which have as their heroes—their *anti*-heroes!—rogues and scoundrels, who win our admiration by their quickness of wit and inventiveness, or what has been called 'lateral thinking'.

An iconoclastic friend of mine, Guido Almansi, wrote a brilliant and challenging book on Boccaccio, which he called *Portrait of the Artist as a Liar*; and I would like to turn the words in his title round to make the point that Boccaccio has given us several wonderful portraits of the 'liar as an artist', or of the con-man as a virtuoso—portraits of men who 'love the lie', and detest any inaccuracy. I am thinking of the immortal Ciappelletto in the very first story, and above all, of Frate Cipolla.

Cipolla is a little like Chaucer's Pardoner: he is a friar with a gift for raising money by his sermons and by the sale of bogus relics. In one small town, Certaldo (which was Boccaccio's home town), his intention was to produce a parrot feather to his congregation and pass it off as being 'a feather which was dropped by the Angel Gabriel at Nazareth'. But, at the moment in his sermon when he came to open his casket and reveal the wonderful relic, all he found, to his utter amazement, was a few pieces of charcoal. What on earth is he going to do or say?

Well, having quietly cursed his own negligence in allowing anyone to interfere with his casket (a lovely touch), he draws a deep breath, and launches in to a magnificent impromptu account of how he travelled through many strange lands (which have wonderful nonsense names based on streets in Florence) and how he came to Jerusalem, where the Patriarch showed him many precious relics, including the coals used to roast St Lawrence—and here they are!

> Egli primieramente mi mostrò il dito dello Spirito Santo così intero e saldo come fu mai, e il ciuffetto del Serafino che apparve a San Francesco, e una dell'unghie de' Gherubini, e una delle coste del Verbum-caro-fatti-alle-finestre, e de' vestimenti della Santa Fé cattolica, e alquanti de' raggi della stella che apparve a' tre Magi in oriente, e una ampolla del sudore di San Michele quando combatté col diavolo, e la mascella della Morte di San Lazzaro e altre. E per ciò che io liberamente gli feci copia delle piagge di Monte Morello in volgare e d'alquanti capitoli del Caprezio, li quali egli lungamente era andato cercardo, mi fece egli partefice delle sue sante reliquie, e donommi uno de' denti della Santa Croce, e in una ampolletta alquanto del suono delle campane del tempio di Salamone e la penna dello agnolo Gabriello, della quale già detto v'ho, e l'un de' zoccoli di San Gherardo da Villamagna; il quale io, non ha molto, a Firenze donai a Gherardo di Bonsi, il quale in lui ha grandissima divozione; e diedemi de' carboni, co' quali fu il beatissimo martire San Lorenzo arrostito; le quali cose io tutte di qua con meco divotamente ne recai, e holle tutte.[^7]
>
> > *First of all he showed me the finger of the Holy Ghost, as straight and firm as it ever was; then the forelock of the Seraph that appeared to Saint Francis; and a cherub's fingernail; and one of the side-bits of the Word-made-flash-in-the-pan; and an article or two of the Holy Catholic faith; and a few of the rays from the star that appeared to the three Magi in the East; and a phial of Saint Michael's sweat when he fought with the Devil; and the jawbone of Death visiting Saint Lazarus; and countless other things. And because I was able to pleace freely at his disposal certain portions of the* Rumpiad* in the vernacular, together with several extracts from Capretius, which he had long been anxious to acquire, he gave me a part-share in his holy relics, presenting me with one of the holes from the Holy Cross, and a small phial containing some of the sound from the bells of Solomon's temple, and the feather of the Angel Gabriel that I was telling you about, and one of Saint Gherardo da Villamagna's sandals, which not long ago in Florence I handed on to Gherardo di Bonsi, who holds him in the deepest veneration; and finally, he gave me some of the coals over which the blessed martyr Saint Lawrence was roasted. All these things I devoutly brought away with me, and I have them to this day.*

In this tale you have everything—freedom of invention, a love of nonsense, linguistic verve, an implied attack on superstition (and on the church which permitted its abuse), and a celebration of intelligence, in the form of quickness of wit—which in their totality are just irresistible, and which generate the kind of liberating laughter which I would want to call 'regenerative'.

The greatest expert on Boccaccio in recent times was probably Vittore Branca, but I am afraid his work does contain a few blind spots. In his concern to restore Boccaccio to his own age, and to see him as a man of the Middle Ages and not of the Renaissance, he insists, among other things, that the first story in the collection represents Ciappelletto as

the new Judas, while the last story of all represents patient Griselda as a new Mary. Guido Almansi was rightly inpatient with this interpretation, pointing out that for us today, Griselda, who allows her children to be taken from her in the belief that they were going to be murdered, is a criminal, or at least a pathological case; whereas Ciappelletto, who ingeniously saves the life of his merchant friends by making a false confession, ought to be considered a hero.

The truth lies surely somewhere in between Branca and Almansi. Ciappelletto is neither a villain tout court, nor a hero. He is a *comic* villain; or better, he is the villainous protagonist of a comedy. His magnificent deceptions do not excite unqualified admiration. We do not want to imitate him, and we do not want our children to grow up like him. What he excites is a certain kind of laughter.

Boccaccio's laughter is healthy, or so it seems to me, because it recognises and dramatises the dialectical correlation between the irrational and the rational self, or between the demands of the individual and the demands of society. There is no single or final solution to the conflicts and dilemmas and contradictions which are simply inherent in our human nature. Caught between so many thrusts and so many attractions, the best we can possible hope to do is to find, quite truly, a *modus vivendi*.

It seems to me that the kind of laughter I have in mind—regenerative laughter—does spring from the recognition and acceptance of this point of view. It implies a sense of proportion, a sane perspective, a willingness to make the best of things. Perhaps the only way that we can express this kind of insight is through metaphor and image.

For some time I have been struggling to develop a simile based on electricity, and the positive and negative poles that are required for electricity to flow. I think the image has some possibilities. Let 'body' and 'spirit' (or individual and society, or instinct and reason) be the 'negative' and 'positive' poles. The point of the comparison is that both of these poles are necessary—you cannot combine them, or conflate them—and they are reversible, depending upon the direction of flow.

Connect these poles with a filament of suitable resistance, pass a current of wit between them, and the result will be a steady light or a pleasant warmth that can symbolise one kind of humorous writing. Or alternatively, think of the positive and negative poles as being like the terminals of a sparking plug. Get the gap right, pass the current into one terminal, and the electricity will leap across to the other, sparking as it does so. The sparks will ignite an explosive mixture, the kind of explosion that can drive things forward.

Medieval doctors and logicians never tired of repeating Aristotle's remark that man is the only animal 'capable of laughter'. It is our distinctive quality, and it would be sound medieval or scholastic reasoning to argue that when a species has a particular capacity, or a particular potentiality, it must actualise that potentiality before it can be fully itself, before it can attain what they called the 'second perfection' in the exercise of its unique and proper activity. In this perspective, then, we are not fully human except in the act of laughing (and the thought that this conclusion might be true in some sense is, at least, amusing…). This is why it gives me such joy to think of Boccaccio, aged about forty-four, settling down to write the *Decameron* in the immediate aftermath of the Black Death; and it is why I was delighted to learn that the Berlin manuscript of the *Decameron*, discovered and published in the early 1970s, has been recognised as being in Boccaccio's own handwriting when he was an old man.

It had been widely assumed that the older Boccaccio, who gave most of his time to diplomacy and scholarship, had come to repent and repudiate the vanity of his all too earthly book. We now know that six hundred years ago, when Boccaccio was in his early sixties, in poor health and quite close to death, he settled down to copy out the whole of his splendidly regenerative book—which is, as we saw, perhaps the only 'cheerful' book in Italian, and certainly one of the most heart-warming books in the whole of world literature.

FIXME: NOTES FOR SELF AND PAT

- This is edited from a version seemingly for delivery without slides but *with* a handout; it is substantially different in part from the annotated typescript which I have and which, I infer from the reference to 9/11, dates to late 2001 or shortly thereafter.

** IT CERTAINLY READS WELL WITHOUT ANY VISUAL ILLUSTRATIONS.

I'LL ATTEND TO THE POINTS BELOW AT A LATER STAGE AND CHECK ALL THE QUOTATIONS IN ITALIAN AND ENGLISH.

MANY THANKS FOR YOUR CARE, TOM.

- Page 5, I have excised the reference to the handout where the influence of Boccaccio on Chaucer is shown; and also the list of middle period works.

- However, I have reproduced two of the three passages of Calandrino's tale, but the last (Buffalmacco throws the stone) I thought could survive with simply an allusion.

- I have had to insert some ‘connective tissue’ to ease the pivot back to Boccaccio at page 17 in place of an apology to the audience—hence the sentence beginning ‘These are broad and important truths…’ demands your scrutiny.

- I feel that, given the weight he bears throughout and especially in the denouement of the lecture, it may be useful to interpolate Ciappelletto’s story more substantially into the lecture, in particular if it’s intended for an audience who may not be wholly familiar with the tales of the Decameron. What do you think?

- I have left in, though slightly edited, the simile of electrical polarity, but it feels somewhat isolated in its position in a conclusion which heads in a slightly different direction. (It is also absent from the typescript of the original valedictory lecture).

- I have however excised the rhyme on Solomon and David, as it seemed to me to deflect from the thrust of the closing image of the older Boccaccio.