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Brittany Asaro

University of San Diego, brittanyasaro@sandiego.edu

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An Inside View: Gendered Perspectives on Freedom in *Decameron* 7.5

Brittany Asaro, *University of San Diego, USA*

THE FIFTH TALE OF DAY 7 in Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* features a woman rebelling against her jealous husband, who has confined her in their home. From a structural viewpoint, *Decameron* 7.5 could be considered the very center of the collection's feminist worldview. It is the central story set in the womb-like Valley of Women,¹ the topic is the tricks that women play upon their husbands, and the narrator is Fiammetta, whom Boccaccio often presents as an embodiment of a female perspective.² The story begins with the *brigata*'s unanimous praise of the previous tale's protagonist for having done to an evil man (her jealous husband) exactly what he deserved (defaming him and inciting an attack upon him). Whatever appreciation for women's autonomy this reaction seems to suggest, however, is shattered by the intrusion, in midsentence, of this day's ruler—*il re*: "Posto aveva fine la Lauretta al suo ragionamento; e avendo già ciascun commendata la donna che ella bene avesse fatto e come a quel cattivo si conveniva, il re, per non perder tempo, verso la Fiammetta voltatosi, piacevolmente il carico le 'mpose del novellare."³ Day 7, after all, is not a

Contact Brittany Asaro at brittanyasaro@sandiego.edu.

1. See Elsa Filosa, "Decameron 7: Under the Sign of Venus," *Annali d'Italianistica* 31 (2013): 314–53, 346–47.

2. Marilyn Migiel suggests that "in response to Dioneo, the narrator who introduces bawdiness and bodiliness into the *Decameron*, Fiammetta reestablishes difference as an important category in narration and reading. She reorganizes the reading relationship around the question of gender difference; she redelivers the possibility of reading (and writing) as a woman," in *A Rhetoric of the Decameron* (Toronto, 2003), 31. As will be seen below, I agree with Migiel that Fiammetta is a foil to Dioneo, revealing the misogynistic undertones of his words by contextualizing them within women's social reality.

3. Giovanni Boccaccio, *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio, Decameron*, ed. Vittore Branca, vol. 4 (Milan, 1976), 612. All quotations from the *Decameron* are taken from this edition, and subsequent citations with day, story, or section (I have used "intro" for introductions and "conc" for conclusions), and sentence number appear parenthetically in the article. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine, and reproduce Boccaccio's words as literally as possible to facilitate analysis.

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queendom but a kingdom, governed by the resident transgressive alpha male Dioneo. Boccaccio's choice of a male sovereign in this apparent stronghold of female power is one of many textual cues that signal a pervasive threat of male oppression and violence, even in spaces reserved for women.⁴

The imposition of male power in female space creates tension throughout *Decameron* 7.5, a feminist reading of which is my objective in this essay. Here we move from the verdant Valley of Women to the limited territory conceded to women within the urban environment: the household. Boccaccio demonstrates that women's mobility within this space is severely restricted by male structures, both literal (the walls of the fourteenth-century domicile, within which women are confined) and figurative (patriarchal social codes that threaten their well-being). I interpret Fiammetta's tale as a direct response to Dioneo, and to the male hegemonic structures that he represents. Fiammetta illustrates how these structures ignore, trivialize, and dismiss female victimization. What is more, she implies that these practices remain consistent throughout the catastrophic season of the plague in which the *Decameron* is set. While Dioneo depicts the postpandemic world as a new beginning, offering enhanced freedoms for all, Fiammetta indicates the dangers that continue to threaten women's existence, as well as how a woman's freedom is always conditional.

The *Decameron* suggests that women's dependence upon men stems not from biological inferiority but from the necessity of male guardianship to protect women from the dangers imposed on them, paradoxically, by male structures. At Dioneo's coronation as king of Day 7 in the Conclusion to Day 6, outgoing queen Elissa laughingly declares that it is time for him to take up the task of ruling and guiding women, and charges him to do so in a way that garners praise: "Tempo è, Dioneo, che tu alquanto pruovi che carico sia l'aver donne a reggere e a guidare: sii adunque re e sí fattamente ne reggi, che del tuo reggimento nella fine ci abbiamo a lodare" (6.conc.2). Behind Elissa's apparently playful commission is a serious reminder of Dioneo's duty (his *carico*—as well as that of the other male members of the *brigata*) as guide, or chaperone, established in the Introduction to Day 1. Here, in the Church of Santa Maria Novella, Pampinea delivers a stirring monologue, urging the ladies to leave Florence immediately in the interest of self-preservation, to escape the plague. Though it initially seems that she has managed to convince them—most seem "ready to depart

4. By examining this topic I join a dynamic scholarly conversation about violence against women in the *Decameron*, a "heightened awareness" of which Migiel attributes to feminist responses to Boccaccio (*Rhetoric*, 30). Also informing my study is Mihoko Suzuki, "Gender, Power, and the Female Reader: Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron*," *Comparative Literature Studies* 30, no. 3 (1993): 231–52.

from where they sit” (quasi, quindi levandosi da sedere) (1.intro.73)—she soon finds resistance in Filomena, who is convinced that if the ladies are unaccompanied by men, their endeavor will end in dishonor:

L’altre donne, udita Pampinea, non solamente il suo consiglio lodarono, ma disiderose di seguitarlo avevan già piú particolarmente tra sé cominciato a trattar del modo, quasi, quindi levandosi da sedere, a mano a mano dovessero entrare in cammino. Ma Filomena, la quale discretissima era, disse: “Donne, quantunque ciò che ragiona Pampinea sia ottimamente detto, non è per ciò cosí da correre a farlo, come mostra che voi vogliate fare. Ricordivi che noi siamo tutte femine, e non ce n’ha niuna sí fanciulla, che non possa ben conoscere come le femine sien ragionate insieme e senza la provedenza d’alcuno uomo si sappiano regolare. Noi siamo mobili, riottose, sospettose, pusillanime e paurose: per le quali cose io dubito forte, se noi alcuna altra guida non prendiamo che la nostra, che questa compagnia non si dissolva troppo piú tosto e con meno onor di noi che non ci bisognerebbe: e per ciò è buono a provederci avanti che cominciamo” (1.intro.73–75).

“Remember that we are all women,” Filomena advises, “and none of us is such a girl that she does not know well how women reason together and govern themselves, without a man’s guidance.” The ambiguous structure of Filomena’s admonition invites us to ask how, exactly, *are* women able to reason together and govern themselves without a man’s guidance? Boccaccio, in fact, shows us. In the same passage, Filomena herself praises Pampinea’s oration as “excellently said” (ottimamente detto) (1.intro.74), and we see that, within minutes, the ladies had managed to make together the logistical preparations for their journey (“avevan già piú particolarmente tra sé cominciato a trattar del modo”), ready for immediate departure (“quasi, quindi levandosi da sedere, a mano a mano dovessero entrare in cammino”) (1.intro.73). With his usual shrewd irony, Boccaccio thus demonstrates to his readers exactly what women are capable of when left to their own devices: rationality and organization. How are we to interpret, then, Filomena’s subsequent unflattering portrait of women as “volatile, quarrelsome, suspicious, cowardly and fearful” (mobili, riottose, sospettose, pusillanime e paurose) (1.intro.75)? The key is in her sobriquet, “very discreet” (discretissima), connoting her skill in navigating behavioral codes, reinforced by her distinction between “women” (femine) and “girl” (fanciulla) (1.intro.74). Women understand such codes, in contrast to girls, who do not. In other words, Filomena’s description is the prevailing patriarchal view of women in the absence of male guidance, the inaccuracy of which

has just been confirmed.⁵ Nonetheless, it is a perception that will be understood by any woman “of age” who has been fully initiated into the gendered power dynamics of fourteenth-century Florentine society.

The next speaker, Elissa, echoes Filomena, conceding that men are the head of women, and without their order a women’s actions rarely meet a praiseworthy end.⁶ Boccaccio again challenges patriarchal society when Elissa then asks, “But how are we to have these men?”: “Disse allora Elissa: ‘Veramente gli uomini sono delle femine capo e senza l’ordine loro rade volte riesce alcuna nostra opera a laudevole fine: ma come possiam noi aver questi uomini?’” (1.intro.76). The question not only suggests the idea of men as an instrument to be used by women (even if their purpose is to navigate a world in which women are subordinate), but with the verb *aver*, alludes to women’s dominance as possessors of men. Elissa’s definition of men as head of women is thus not an affirmation of an inherent superiority. Instead, it is an indication of their superior status.⁷ The privilege linked to such status is men’s ability to determine whether or not a woman’s action is “praiseworthy” (*laudevole*), ultimately leading to her acceptance or rejection within society. Boccaccio suggests that without male allies (ambassadors to the patriarchy, if you will), women are completely unequipped to sway the reputation upon which their well-being depends. This stands in stark opposition to Pampinea’s earlier description of how society as a whole—now a scattered collection of plague survivors—has ceased to make distinctions between what is honest and what is not (“senza fare distinzione alcuna dalle cose oneste a quelle che oneste non sono”) (1.intro.62). Tragically, far from allowing them to preserve their lives without the restrictions of decorum, as Pampinea hopes (“E ricordivi che egli non si disdice più a noi l’onestamente andare, che faccia a gran parte dell’altre lo star disonestamente”) (1.intro.72), this moral flexibility has only left women more vulnerable. It exposes them to censure and creates for them a path to dishonor that is now completely devoid of agency, and a result of passivity—to “fall” (*cadessimo*) into

5. This is a historical reality, put succinctly by Christiane Klapisch-Zuber: “Any woman alone was suspect.” She explains that the perceived need for male guardianship extended even into the domestic space: “An unmarried woman was considered incapable of living alone or in the absence of masculine protection without falling into sin,” in *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago, 1985), 119.

6. Giuseppe Mazzotta identifies this line as an ironic allusion to St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians 5:22–23, and to Boccaccio’s “double mockery of the City and the Church,” in *The World at Play in Boccaccio’s “Decameron”* (Princeton, NJ, 1986), 55. I will briefly comment below on how the protagonist of *Decameron* 7.5 is betrayed by both civic and ecclesiastical male authority figures; that is, by the City and the Church.

7. That Elissa is speaking about status rather than innate ability is supported by her focus on the functions (as opposed to natures) of men and women: “their [men’s] order” (*ordine loro*) and “our [women’s] deeds” (*opera nostra*).

it “by neglect or inattention” (per ischifaltà o per traccutaggine):⁸ “acciò che noi per ischifaltà o per traccutaggine non cadessimo in quello di che noi per avventura per alcuna maniera volendo potremmo scampare” (1.intro.65). Truly imprisoned, the women of plague-ridden Florence now risk disgrace by rebelling as well as by following the status quo.

What is more, in the same passage, Boccaccio establishes an equivalency between women’s honor and health and, conversely, between their disgrace and death. Pamphinea advises the ladies to flee dishonorable acts like death itself (“e fuggendo come la morte i disonesti essempli degli altri”) (1.intro.65). Shortly afterward, Elissa asserts that if the ladies wish to maintain their “salute” (understood as both health and safety) they need to ensure that, wherever they go, trouble and scandal do not follow: “se alla nostra salute vogliamo andar dietro, trovare si conven modo di sí fattamente ordinarci, che, dove per diletto e per riposo andiamo, noia e scandalo non ne segua” (1.intro.77). All other appearances of the word “salute” in the Introduction to Day 1 (1.intro.19, 34, 63) are references to bodily health, where maintaining it means staying alive during the plague. Elissa thus equates the ladies’ well-being—not merely social acceptance, but physical wellness—to their success at avoiding scandal. They thus choose to leave the city with male companions, the guardians of the ladies’ reputations as well their mortal lives.

Returning to Day 6, the “praiseworthy end” (laudevole fine) (1.intro.76) that Elissa says women cannot achieve without men’s order in Day 1, has been transformed into “praise” (lodare) (6.conc.2) that she, now the outgoing queen, says the new king will earn if he rightly rules and guides women. Her commission is a reminder that the sole reason for the men’s presence is their service as chaperones, since without requiring this function the ladies could have left the city without them. Dioneo’s first decision as king, however, is to reject this responsibility and instead propose a scandalous topic: “the tricks that wives play upon their husbands, for love or for salvation, whether they

8. I have used Donald Beecher and Massimo Ciavolella’s translation of *ischifaltà* and *traccutaggine* from Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron: Selected Tales* (Peterborough, 2017), 38. Some other possibilities include “reluctance or indifference” (Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella [New York, 1982], 14) and “timidity or complacency” (Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. Wayne A. Rebhorn [New York, 2013], 16). A related example of women receiving blame for behaving immorally even as society itself breaks down appears earlier in the Introduction to Day 1, when women, abandoned and dying of the plague, not only are criticized for seeking medical help but are also held responsible for the promiscuity of an entire generation: “E da questo essere abbandonati gl’infermi da’ vicini, da’ parenti e dagli amici e avere scarsità di serventi, discorse uno uso quasi davanti mai non udito: che niuna, quantunque leggiadra o bella o gentil donna fosse, infermando non curava d’aver a’ suoi servigi uomo, qual che egli si fosse o giovane o altro, e a lui senza alcuna vergogna ogni parte del corpo aprire non altramenti che a una femina avrebbe fatto, solo che la necessità della sua infermità il richiedesse; il che in quelle che ne guerirono fu forse di minore onestà, nel tempo che succedette, cagione” (1.intro.29).

are discovered or not” (delle beffe le quali o per amore o per salvamento di loro le donne hanno già fatte a’ lor mariti, senza essersene essi o avveduti o no) (6.conc.6). The theme is unique on two fronts. It is the first time that a day’s ruler has proposed a topic based on someone else’s idea, and it is the first topic to be met with resistance from the other storytellers (in this case, as we will see, the women). Significantly, both are consequences of Dioneo’s reappropriation and misinterpretation of a woman’s words, a manifestation of his egregious misunderstanding of the female condition.

Dioneo admits that he has taken the topic from the servant woman Liscica. Dioneo identifies Liscica not as his muse or inspiration but as the true author of the idea he is now presenting. He specifies that it was she who “found for him” (m’ha trovata) the next day’s subject matter, that it comes from “her words” (le sue parole) and even admits that without her he would have had difficulty in devising a theme (arguably his foremost duty as the day’s ruler): “se donna Licisca non fosse poco avanti qui venuta, la quale con le sue parole m’ha trovata materia a’ futuri ragionamenti di domane, io dubito che io non avessi gran pezza penato a trovar tema da ragionare” (6.conc.4). He then cites two pieces of information that he has learned from Liscica. The first is that not one of her female neighbors was a virgin when she was married; the second is that she knew well the many tricks wives play upon their husbands. Dioneo quickly dismisses the first fact as *opera fanciullesca* (a girl thing, if the gracious reader will pardon my tongue-in-cheek use of a modern expression) and adopts instead the second, wives’ tricks, which he considers “pleasant to talk about” (piacevole a ragionarne): “Ella, come voi udiste, disse che vicina non avea che pulcella ne fosse andata a marito e soggiunse che ben sapeva quante e quali beffe le maritate ancora facessero a’ mariti. Ma lasciando stare la prima parte, che è opera fanciullesca, reputo che la seconda debbia essere piacevole a ragionarne, e perciò voglio che domane si dica, poi che donna Licisca data ce n’ha cagione, delle beffe le quali o per amore o per salvamento di loro le donne hanno già fatte a’ lor mariti, senza essersene essi o avveduti o no” (6.conc.5–6). Parsing his speech, we see Dioneo assign female agency to promiscuity. The agent is “(female) neighbor” (vicina), reinforced by the modifier “maiden/virgin” (pulcella). “Husband” (marito) appears only as an object, a destination; and conspicuously absent is the male participant equally responsible for the woman’s loss of virginity. Also absent are allusions to the interrelated dangers that premarital sex represents for an unmarried woman: social ostracization, financial instability, and physical danger in many forms (rape, physical abuse, childbirth).⁹ By deeming their cause as “a girl thing,” Dioneo

9. This brings us to a third anomaly related to Dioneo’s topic (the other two are noted above) identified by Teodolinda Barolini: Liscica, “to whom [Dioneo] appeals as *auctoritas* for his topic is not a social equal but [an] intrusive member of the *volgo*,” in “‘Le parole son feminine e i fatti sono maschi’: Toward a Sexual Poetics of the *Decameron*,” *Studi sul Boccaccio* 21 (1993): 175–97, 177. The servant woman’s “promotion”

not only trivializes these threats,¹⁰ but condemns the most vulnerable members of society—young, unmarried women—to deal with them alone. The threat of danger, even death, also lurks in the deceptively playful topic of the day, in the second motive for women's tricks, *salvamento*. "Salvation" from what, exactly? The most explicit answer is from discovery of the affair, but the term also evokes the looming possibility of violence in the event of a trick's failure.¹¹

Unprecedentedly, the women of the *brigata* implore that the theme be changed on the grounds that it is unsuitable for them. Michael Sherberg recognizes the implication of "danger that men represent to women" in Dioneo's topic, maintaining that "the key word here [in the ladies' protest] is the verb *convenire*, which occupies the semantic field of decorum." He cites this etymological link along with a second—to the Latin *cum venire*—to demonstrate how "they suggest to their king that he recall why they have come together, and whether what he now demands of them suits that purpose."¹² I agree with Sherberg but will add two points of refinement. First, this reminder of the *brigata*'s purpose is necessarily linked to a reminder of the men's role as chaperones; and second, the *Decameron* confirms that for women, the threat to decorum and honor connotes physical danger, an equivalency established, as we have seen, by Pampinea and Elissa in the Introduction to Day 1. Is this the peril to which the ladies truly object, when they disapprove of the day's topic? They know well, after all, that a woman's sexual transgression (or the perception of such) is always a serious matter: one that, for them, is neither "girlish" nor "pleasant," but life-threatening.

Dioneo staunchly refuses the ladies' request, offering as his defense, in fact, an unfaithful adaptation of Pampinea's speech in Santa Maria Novella. In Day 1, Pampinea had asserted that civic ("le leggi") as well as natural law ("natural ragione"),¹³ each of which justifies self-defense, concede to her and her female companions the

demonstrates Dioneo's blindness to differences not only of gender but of class. He is seemingly unaware that, unlike Liscia's neighbors, the gentlewomen of the *brigata* must go to their husbands as virgins (*pulcelle*) to secure advantageous marriages, and that premarital loss of virginity will result in the exclusion from the limited, normalized avenues to relative safety that society offers them.

10. Musa and Bondanella translate this expression as "child's play" (*Decameron*, 410). Similar translations include "a subject that concerns children" (Rebhorn, *Decameron*, 512), and "which even a child could have told you," in Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. G. H. McWilliam (London, 1995), 478. Such word choices, however, indicate only that the subject matter is perceived as juvenile, and omit the gender present in the original text.

11. This is confirmed in Fiammetta's tale, when the husband alludes to physically abusing his wife after her trick has apparently failed, and he thinks he has discovered her affair. See n. 25, below.

12. Michael Sherberg, *The Governance of Friendship: Law and Gender in the "Decameron"* (Columbus, OH, 2011), 155.

13. For echoes of natural law theory in this passage, see Sherberg, *Governance*, 38–41; and Susanna Barsella, "Boccaccio, i tiranni e la ragione naturale," *Heliotropia* 12–13 (2015–16): 131–63, 141–43.

right to flee plague-ridden Florence in order to save their lives: “Natural ragione è, di ciascuno che ci nasce, la sua vita quanto può aiutare e conservare e difendere: e concedesi questo tanto, che alcuna volta è già addivenuto che, per guardar quella, senza colpa alcuna si sono uccisi degli uomini. E se questo concedono le leggi, nelle sollecitudini delle quali è il ben vivere d’ogni mortale, quanto maggiormente, senza offesa d’alcuno, è a noi e a qualunque altro onesto alla conservazione della nostra vita prendere quegli rimedii che noi possiamo?” (1.intro.53–54). In Day 6, Dioneo cites this familiar pretext of a world turned upside-down, offering as an example the silencing (that is, the breakdown) of civil and ecclesiastical law, as “ample license to preserve one’s life”: “Or non sapete voi che, per la perversità di questa stagione, li giudici hanno lasciati i tribunali? le leggi, così le divine come le umane, tacciono? e ampia licenzia per conservar la vita è conceduta a ciascuno?” (6.conc.9). Embedded in Dioneo’s series of rhetorical questions are three interconnected themes from Pampinea’s speech: lawlessness (“le leggi . . . tacciono”), self-preservation (“conservar la vita”), and freedom (“ampia licenzia”). By invoking these themes to justify telling bawdy stories, Dioneo proves to be not merely ignorant but utterly dismissive of female experiences of anarchy, self-preservation, and freedom, an insensitivity implied by the masculine “ciascuno” (everybody, every [male] body).

It is significant that Dioneo was not present for Pampinea’s speech, which was delivered in an exclusively female space in which the ladies were poised to aggressively pursue self-preservation—before Filomena and then Elissa point out the risks of traveling unchaperoned. We must assume either that Dioneo overheard words that were not intended for him (an act of intrusion that would align with his transgressive nature) or that the correlation between his and Pampinea’s words originate from a higher level of narration—the authorial voice. In either case, Dioneo severs Pampinea’s speech from its original purpose, a call to survival since the women have been left for dead by the men who were charged to protect them, their male relatives: “E qui d’altra parte, se io ben veggio, noi non abbandoniam persona, anzi ne possiamo con verità dire molto più tosto abbandonate: per ciò che i nostri, o morendo o da morte fuggendo, quasi non fossimo loro, sole in tanta afflizione n’hanno lasciate” (1.intro.69). By exposing them to scandal and trivializing the impact of words (both what women say and what others say about them) on their well-being, Dioneo essentially reenacts their guardians’ abandonment in Day 1.

The violence inherent in Dioneo’s appropriating Pampinea’s words is the first in a series of increasingly aggressive tactics to coerce the ladies into doing as he wishes. He next assures them that all know of their virtue, which could not be diminished by “the terror of death” (*il terrore della morte*), let alone by amusing stories: “Appresso, chi è colui che non conosca la vostra onestà? La quale non che i ragionamenti sollazzevoli

ma il terrore della morte non credo che potesse smagare” (6.conc.12). A comparison with Dioneo’s source material reveals that *il terrore della morte* was not meant as a mere rhetorical device. In the corresponding point in the Introduction to Day 1, Pampinea speaks of the quite literal death (the plague) that threatens all women, which, in contrast to Dioneo’s use of the masculine “ciascuno” above, she emphasizes with the feminine “ciascuna” three times in succession: “io comprendo, e voi similmente il potete comprendere, ciascuna di noi di se medesima dubitare: né di ciò mi maraviglio niente, ma maravigliomi forte, avvedendomi ciascuna di noi aver sentimento di donna, non prendersi per voi a quello di che ciascuna di voi meritamente teme alcun compenso” (1.intro.55).¹⁴ The grave realities of women’s existence, which Pampinea affirms are clearly perceptible to “a woman’s sensibilities” (sentimento di donna), are thus transformed, in the male voice, into hollow expressions: a sinister deformation of Dioneo’s own insistence upon the difference between deeds and words that supposedly favors the ladies’ protection. Here, the faulty logic of equivalency between the sexes—that, during the plague, women must enjoy the same freedom of speech as men—leads Dioneo to the dangerously (for women) inaccurate assumption that they will not be exposed to scandal by telling ribald stories, if they behave rightly: “Donne, io conosco ciò che io ho imposto non meno che facciate voi, e da imporlo non mi poté istorre quello che voi mi volete mostrare, pensando che il tempo è tale che, guardandosi e gli uomini e le donne d’operar disonestamente, ogni ragionare è concesso . . . Per che, se alquanto s’allarga la vostra onestà nel favellare, non per dover con l’opere mai alcuna cosa sconcia seguire ma per dare diletto a voi e a altrui, non veggio con che argomento da concedere vi possa nello avvenire riprendere alcuno” (6.conc.8, 10). If he were faithfully reproducing Pampinea’s words, however, Dioneo would know this to be false: women are judged by their reputations, which are not always true reflections of their actions, intentions, or capabilities. Dioneo confirms this when he warns that if it were to be discovered that the women refused to accept the day’s theme, they could be suspected of licentiousness: “E a dirvi il vero, chi sapesse che voi vi cessaste da queste ciance ragionare alcuna volta forse suspicherebbe che voi in ciò non foste colpevoli, e per ciò ragionare non ne voleste” (6.conc.13).

14. Of course, both men and women risked contracting the plague, as Boccaccio himself points out: “Per la qual cosa a coloro, de’ quali era la moltitudine inestimabile, e maschi e femine, che infermavano” (1.intro.28). There are many indications in the Introduction, however, that women suffered disproportionately during this deadly epidemic, a result of their subaltern status. For a detailed and thought-provoking comparison between themes of enclosure in the proem and the isolation, particularly of women, during the plague as described in the Introduction, see Jessica Levenstein, “Out of Bounds: Passion and the Plague in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*,” *Italica* 73, no. 3 (1996): 313–35, 314–20.

Many scholars gloss over the threatening undertones of this passage, considering it playful banter. I agree instead with Sherberg, who observes that “[Dioneo’s] tone here becomes decidedly less jocular, as his defense of women’s interests slides into a veiled accusation against them.”¹⁵ What is more, Dioneo seems to renege his former assertion that if the ladies behave with decorum, what they say cannot jeopardize their honor. He in fact demonstrates the opposite: regardless of how they behave, the ladies will be met with suspicion if they do not follow his demands. We again see women trapped between contradictory, scrutinizing gazes, risking scandal regardless of whether they speak honorably or dishonorably. When the ladies finally tell Dioneo that they will do as he pleases, the irony of such a statement is clear. He has demonstrated that they have no choice.¹⁶

In response to their chaperone’s treachery, Elissa leads the women in an unprecedented act of rebellion: an unchaperoned foray to the Valley of Women. Notably, she confesses that she had wanted to take the women there since the first day, but that she had not had the opportunity until now, adding that this is not because of distance: “Poi che noi fummo qui, ho io disiderato di menarvi in parte assai vicina di questo luogo, dove io non credo che mai alcuna fosse di voi, e chiamavisi la Valle delle Donne, né ancora vidi tempo da potervi quivi menare se non oggi, sí è alto ancora il sole” (6.conc.18). Her words certainly do not exclude an interpretation of the “right moment” (tempo) as the loss of faith in men to protect women from the violence of patriarchal systems. Their journey, which they make without informing the men (“senza farne alcuna cosa sentire a’ giovani”) (6.conc.19), may be viewed as enacting what the *Decameron* would have looked like had the women left without their male guides. This is an alternate universe; to borrow the words of Elsa Filosa, an “imaginary upside down world, under the sign of Venus, in which the women are ‘superior’ to the men, not only sexually but also in cunning and determination.”¹⁷ It is clear that this “upside down world” may only exist within the realm of the “imaginary.” The ladies ultimately realize the moment of duty (indicated by the verb *dover*) has come; they must and do go back: “parendo lor tempo da dover tornar verso casa . . . in cammino si misero” (6.conc.32).

15. Sherberg, *Governance*, 156–57.

16. A similarly ironic (and troubling) comment on female compliancy for the benefit of men may be found at the conclusion of the tale of Nastagio degli Onesti: “[Filomena:] ‘E non fu questa paura cagione solamente di questo bene, anzi sí tutte le ravignane donne paurose ne divennero, che sempre poi troppo piú arrendevoli a’ piaceri degli uomini furono che prima state non erano’” (5.8.44). See Olivia Holmes, “*Decameron* 5.8: From Compassion to Compliancy,” *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 22, no. 1 (2019): 21–36.

17. Filosa, “Venus,” 343.

Upon their return, it is Pampinea (who, until now, has silently borne the king's distortion of her words) who addresses Dioneo, laughingly exclaiming, "We have really tricked you today" (*Oggi vi pure abbiám noi ingannati*) (6.conc.33), to which he replies, "What? . . . Have you really begun to do deeds even before you say words?" (*E come? . . . cominciate voi prima a far de' fatti che a dir delle parole?*) (6.conc.34). With an ironic nod to his kingship ("Yes, Your Majesty" [*Signor nostro, sí*]), Pampinea reveals what they have done (6.conc.35). I propose the following reading of this passage: Pampinea tells Dioneo, We have deceived you—you thought that we could not leave without you, but we can, and we have. In so doing we have interpreted my words as I meant them—that is, we have transformed them into action. But unlike you, we have remembered our duty, and we have returned.¹⁸ We may thus understand Pampinea's words as a final petition to Dioneo to fulfill his charge to rule and guide women in a way that earns praise (6.conc.2). The king, however, fails again, and sees only the threat of female self-sufficiency. In a frantic dance to reestablish hegemony, he orders dinner immediately and leads the men to the valley, leaving behind the women (6.conc.36). While this last detail may be read as a playful (or petty) retribution for the ladies having abandoned the men, it also demonstrates that Dioneo ignores the implicit challenge to fulfill his obligation as chaperone; rather, he deserts the ladies, essentially reversing his retort to Pampinea, performing now in deed what he had already committed in words. Only upon the men's return does Dioneo make arrangements for the entire *brigata* to indulge in lewd storytelling in the valley the next day, and his colonization of this feminine space is thus complete.

We finally arrive at Day 7's central tale, whose narrator, Fiammetta, directly engages with Dioneo. The ladies have already attempted to "speak his language," if you will, through action, the so-called male mode of communication. Since this has failed, Fiammetta will now confront Dioneo with the "female" language of verbal narration. And as Dioneo manipulated Pampinea's words in order to coerce the ladies into fulfilling his desires, Fiammetta will now turn Dioneo's own command against him: she will indeed tell a scandalous story, but not for "the pleasure of herself and others" (*per dare diletto a voi e a altrui*) (6.conc.10). Instead, she tells a parable, in which she reclaims from him the themes of Pampinea's speech—the breakdown of secular and

18. Two excellent studies on the gendered differences between words and deeds, specifically as they relate to this exchange, may be found in Barolini, "Parole," 176–79; and Stefano Giovannuzzi, "Le parole e le cose: La settimana giornata del *Decameron*," *Lingua e stile* 32 (1997): 471–503, 471–73. Though both scholars note the correlation to Day 1, neither explicitly remarks on the significance of Pampinea as the one announcing the ladies' defiance to Dioneo.

ecclesiastical laws, the right to self-preservation, and the license to pursue one's pleasure—and restores to them the female perspective.

The three topics under discussion—lawlessness, self-preservation, and freedom—are united by the overarching theme of confinement. In the preface to her tale, Fiammetta demonstrates how forced isolation transgresses both secular and sacred law and, in the tale itself, how the patriarchy—both civic (represented by the husband) and ecclesiastical (represented by the chaplain)—actively works against a woman's well-being. First, she maintains that, had legislators been more meticulous, the actions of wives against jealous husbands would be considered legally equivalent to any carried out in self-defense: “Nobilissime donne, la precedente novella mi tira a dovere similmente ragionar d'un geloso, estimando che ciò che si fa loro dalla lor donna, e massimamente quando senza cagione ingelosiscono, esser ben fatto. E se ogni cosa avessero i componitori delle leggi guardata, giudico che in questo essi dovessero alle donne non altra pena aver costituita che essi costituirono a colui che alcuno offende sé difendendo: per ciò che i gelosi sono insidiatori della vita delle giovani donne e diligentissimi cercatori della lor morte” (7.5.3). Fiammetta's statement reflects a historical reality (women, while subject to the law, were never participants in its creation) as well as the obscuration of a female perspective seen in the Conclusion to Day 6.

Women's confinement within the domestic space constitutes a form of abuse against which they are justified in defending themselves. While the duties of their social station require that they stay indoors during the week, Fiammetta maintains that women deserve to “leave the work place,” so to speak, on their days off: “Esse stanno tutta la settimana rinchiusa e attendono alle bisogne familiari e domestiche, disiderando, come ciascuno fa, d'aver poi il dí delle feste alcuna consolazione, alcuna quiete, e di potere alcun diporto pigliare, sí come prendono i lavoratori de' campi, gli artefici delle città e i reggitori delle corti, come fé Idio che il dí settimo da tutte le sue fatiche si riposò, e come vogliono le leggi sante e le civili, le quali, allo onor di Dio e al ben comune di ciascun riguardando, hanno i dí delle fatiche distinti da quegli del riposo” (7.5.4). This personal freedom, represented by the right to “consolation” (consolazione), “peace” (quiete), and “diversion” (diporto), is enjoyed by members of various strata of fourteenth-century Italian society—farmers, artisans, magistrates—who are, however, male. The Sabbath also sanctifies rest, which Fiammetta again interprets not necessarily as immobility, but as a hiatus from work.¹⁹ Fiammetta's definition of the purposes of sacred and civil law—“the honor of God”

19. Of course, the seventh day of storytelling is also, itself, a sort of Sabbath.

(l'onor di Dio) and “the common good of all” (il ben comune di ciascun)—implies once more that legislature ignores the interests of women: God in the Catholic context is, naturally, male, and the masculine *ciascun* accurately identifies the benefactors of secular law.

Fiammetta implicitly challenges Dioneo's image of the liberating force of anarchy by revealing the female perspective on “the silence of the law.” While Dioneo assigns such silence to a particular *stagione* (the “season” of social liberality due to the plague), Fiammetta demonstrates in her tale how the law ordinarily does not “speak up” in defense of female citizens. The protagonist of *Decameron* 7.5 is betrayed by the male gatekeepers of secular and ecclesiastical law: her husband abandons his duty as her protector and instead acts as her jailer, and the chaplain entraps her in the husband's deceptive scheme by desecrating the sacred rite of confession.²⁰ Nearly all of the wife's actions are a direct response to one or both of these acts of treachery. She initiates the affair that her husband sought to prevent through confinement and conducts it within the domestic space that serves as her prison.²¹ Additionally, she uses the deceitful confession as a means of advancing her affair. Dioneo's words thus undergo another transformation, now that Fiammetta has the floor: while he had interpreted “ampia licenza per conservar la vita” as permission to tell scandalous stories that bring pleasure (and as pretext to strong-arm his female companions into accepting his theme), Fiammetta demonstrates that preservation of the self is the only option for women who have been betrayed by the very laws that should have protected them. Barred from doing so outside the context of fiction, she now uses her power as narrator to “rewrite” the law, a notion that is amplified by the pseudo-legal pronouncement “I judge” (*giudico*) in her preface (7.5.3).²²

20. Fiammetta makes an explicit analogy between the husband as jailer and the wife as prisoner: “E così ingelosito tanta guardia ne prendeva e sí stretta la tenea, che forse assai son di quegli che a capital pena son dannati, che non sono da' prigionieri con tanta guardia servati” (7.5.8). She also clarifies that the husband reveals at least part of his plot to the chaplain, who subsequently shirks his duty as confessor, lies to the wife, and sends her to his “companion”—the husband in disguise (7.5.20–21). For a discussion of the enclosed spaces in this scene, as well as the shifting between secular and clerical boundaries, see Katherine A. Brown, “Confession and Social Space in the *Decameron*,” *Quaderni d'italianistica* 38, no. 2 (2017): 41–63, 57–60.

21. Fiammetta clarifies that it is the wife's frustration at her husband's unjust behavior, not passion for another man, that prompts her to begin an affair: “Per che, veggendosi a torto fare ingiuria al marito, s'avvisò a consolazion di se medesima di trovar modo, se alcuno ne potesse trovare, di far sí che a ragione le fosse fatto” (7.5.10).

22. Sherberg writes of *Decameron* 7.5.3: “Her hypothetical implies that the lawmakers were not thorough, and that a female perspective, clearly excluded from the normative process, would have resulted in a different set of laws,” in *Governance*, 172. I suggest that Fiammetta's tale is her attempt to present “a different set of laws,” an idea supported by Branca's analysis of the same line: “Due endecasillabi di seguito danno solennità a questa dichiarazione, quasi una sentenza,” in *Decameron*, 1375 n. 7.

At first glance, the wife's initiating an affair with her attractive neighbor may not seem to reflect the urgency or gravity of self-preservation. Fiammetta, however, implies that the stakes are higher in this tale than may be initially supposed, when she introduces the notion of death in her preface. After naming jealous husbands as "plotters against the lives of young women" (*insidiatori della vita delle giovani donne*) and "diligent seekers of their deaths" (*diligentissimi cercatori della lor morte*), Fiammetta offers a sole example of their crimes: forced isolation (7.5.3). Fiammetta insists that the cruelty of jealous husbands serves as grounds for young women to act against them with the impunity of self-defense. Returning to Pampinea's speech in Day 1, we see that she ominously reveals that such a defense may include the warranted killing of men ("*senza colpa alcuna si sono uccisi degli uomini*") (1.intro.53). Through this intratextual reference Fiammetta suggests an apt *contrapasso* for the imprisonment of women, leaving little doubt on her view of the heinousness of such treatment.

The notion of death also emerges in an intertextual reference, appearing in the description of the unnamed husband, whom Fiammetta identifies as a rich merchant from Arimino, or Rimini (7.5.7). The pronouncement of this city's name inevitably provokes a comparison to the famous Paolo and Francesca episode in the fifth canto of Dante's *Inferno*, which, like *Decameron* 7.5, features an unsympathetic, brutish husband and an extramarital affair. Especially revealing is each husband's reaction upon discovering his wife's infidelity. In Fiammetta's tale, the jealous husband attempts to covertly obtain information about his wife's activity. She, however, turns his own trick against him, and plants false information about her adultery that will eventually allow her to safely carry out an actual affair. Fiammetta tells us that, upon hearing that his wife is sleeping with another man, the husband "feels as if he has been stabbed in the heart with a knife" (*e' gli parve che gli fosse dato d'un coltello nel cuore*) (7.5.25). The husband thus experiences the sensation of violence, rather than violence itself. Conversely, Francesca's husband, Gianciotto, discovers Paolo and Francesca *en flagrante* and stabs them both to death through the heart.²³ Are we to understand that this would have been the fate of the wife in Boccaccio's tale, had her trick failed to secure her salvation?²⁴ After all, the husband's determination "to do a bad turn"

23. This detail is implied, but not made explicit in Dante's original text. Boccaccio himself, however, in his exposition of *Inferno* V, clarifies that Gianciotto, when discovering his brother as his wife's lover, attempts to stab him with a rapier. Francesca throws herself in front of Paolo in an attempt to save him, and Gianciotto stabs her through the bosom, together with Paolo, in a single thrust (*Esposizioni sopra la commedia di Dante, Inferno* V, Esposizione Litterale 97–99). Boccaccio maintains this "accident" (*accidente*) greatly grieved Gianciotto; intentional or no, Francesca is nevertheless a casualty of male violence.

24. The reader will remember that this is one of the two objectives, other than love, of the tricks described in Day 7.

(fare un mal giuoco) (7.5.37) to his wife and her lover, menacingly implies physical abuse.²⁵

The themes of confinement and women's suffering naturally evoke the proem. Itself a literary convention, the opening section of the *Decameron* is entrenched in the lexicon of *aegritudo amoris*, or the topos of lovesickness.²⁶ Here Boccaccio famously describes his own struggle with lovesickness (*noia*, to be understood as pain or suffering), of which he would have certainly died if not for the remedy—the “consolations” (*consolazioni*) of human interaction: “Nella qual noia tanto rifrigerio già mi porsero i piacevoli ragionamenti d’alcuno amico le sue laudevoli consolazioni, che io porto fermissima opinione per quelle essere avvenuto che io non sia morto” (*Proemio* 4). He subsequently illustrates how access to or denial of consolation is gender dependent. He acknowledges the *consolazione* to which all men are privy by simply having opportunities to engage in the public sphere (*Proemio* 12), and juxtaposes it to the lovesickness (again identified as *noia*) experienced by homebound, lovesick ladies (*Proemio* 11). The parallel structure with which Boccaccio describes the male and female experience of suffering implies that these ladies, “restricted” (*ristrette*) and “confined” (*racchiuse*) by their social superiors (their fathers, mothers, brothers, and husbands) (*Proemio* 10), would have died without the author's serendipitous offer of “comfort” (*conforto*) (*Proemio* 8).²⁷ Similarly, Fiammetta's protagonist suffers from *noia* (7.5.9) and, like Boccaccio's imagined female readers, is *rinchiusa* (7.5.18). Additionally, as discussed earlier, Fiammetta frames the wife's misery as a violation of her legal and sacred right to *consolazione* (7.5.3). The restoration of this right, “self-consolation” (*consolazione di se medesima*) (7.5.10), is the objective behind her deciding to begin an affair, and, when considered within the frame of the proem, proves to be an act of survival. Fiammetta thus not only engages with Dioneo in her tale, but with the male authorial voice of the *Decameron* itself, strategically reevaluating

25. The violence implied by this expression is confirmed in its other appearance in the *Decameron*, in the eighth tale of Day 7. The merchant Arriguccio discovers his wife's infidelity, and in retribution severely beats and cuts off the hair of a woman he believes is her. He then runs to the house of his brothers-in-law, reveals to them their sister's treachery, and challenges them to punish her for her dishonor (7.8.25). The brothers, “incensed” (*cruciatiforte*), light torches and set off for their sister's house, “with the intention of doing her a bad turn” (*con intenzione di farle un mal giuoco*) (7.8.26).

26. This topos is prevalent throughout the *Decameron*. See Massimo Ciavolella, “La tradizione dell' ‘aegritudo amoris’ nel *Decameron*,” *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 147 (1970): 498–517. Considering that the *Decameron* is set during the Black Death pandemic, it seems natural that Boccaccio would reconsider this use of figurative language concerning disease.

27. Such “comfort” is later revealed to be the “tales, fables, parables or stories” (*novelle, o favole o parabole o istorie*) of the *Decameron* itself, which the author offers as reparation for the “support” (*sostegno*) not granted to women by Fortune (*Proemio* 13).

the terminology of the proem in order to expose the violence masked by its hyperbolic, literary language.²⁸

In her insightful study on gender and the “translation of words into deeds” in the *Decameron*, Teodolinda Barolini identifies Dioneo as the “chief instigator” of this process, which she equates with the movement “from the sequestered world of women to the engaged world of men.”²⁹ Barolini maintains that the tales of Day 7, “although made of words, *parole*—serve as vicarious *fatti* encouraging the *Decameron*’s ladies to progress from *parole* to real *fatti*. . . . Words can be liberating, words can lead to deeds . . . women can become men.”³⁰ I suggest that by reestablishing the circumstances described in the proem and allowing them to “play out” in the narrative of her tale, Fiammetta responds to Dioneo’s distinction between *parole* and *fatti* and demonstrates that, for women, dodging death is not a question of figurative language or literary convention. Rather than illustrating how Dioneo has been a champion for women’s entrance into the “world of men,” in tale 5 Fiammetta exposes how he represents the division, imposed by men, between words and deeds. Such division is essentially an act of violence, as it deceptively separates female suffering from the world of deeds—and from male agency—and marginalizes it to the “feminine” realm of words.

The protagonist of Fiammetta’s tale makes contact with her lover Filippo through a hole in the wall.³¹ By initiating her affair through an architectural weakness in her prison, the wife also symbolically rebels against patriarchal confines and the frameworks that represent them. After all, the walls of the fourteenth-century domicile both define the boundaries of a woman’s space and are also quite literally structures designed and erected by men. Not permitted to utilize the standard outlets of such a

28. For other ways in which Boccaccio exposes the violence inherent in literary topoi, particularly those pertaining to the courtly love tradition, see Brittany Asaro, “Unmasking the Truth about *Amor de Lonh*: Giovanni Boccaccio’s Rebellion Against Literary Conventions in *Decameron* I.5 and IV.4,” *Comitatus* 44 (2013): 95–120.

29. Barolini, “Parole,” 178.

30. Barolini, “Parole,” 179.

31. Regarding this topos, I will mention briefly another allusion to one of Boccaccio’s literary influences: Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*; specifically, the Pyramus and Thisbe myth. Boccaccio in fact dedicates a chapter to Thisbe in *De mulieribus claris*, in which he affirms that she is famous solely for the end of her unhappy love; that is, for her death: “Tisbes, babilonia virgo, infelicis amoris exitu magis quam opera alio inter mortales celebris facta est” (XIII.1). Fiammetta’s protagonist, of course, does not meet her end in this tale, nor is her love “unhappy” (infelicis)—she will describe the wife’s life with her lover as “happy” (*lieta*, 7.5.59). However, her association with Ovid’s tragic heroine—like her association with Dante’s, explored earlier—implies that she has only narrowly avoided becoming a Thisbe or a Francesca. For Boccaccio’s treatment of the Thisbe myth in *Decameron* 7.5, see Filosa, “Venus,” 337–38; as well as Elsa Filosa, *Tre studi sul “De mulieribus claris”* (Milan, 2012), 110–11. In both studies, however, Filosa focuses on the differences between Pyramus and Thisbe’s “innocent love” and the wife’s *eros*, rather than explore the latter’s associations with a character famous for her violent death.

structure, such as a door or window (“ella non osava farsi a alcuna finestra né fuor della casa guardare per alcuna cagione”) (7.5.9), the wife devises her own means of contacting her lover through a fissure, which she finds after careful examination (“E venendo ora in una parte e ora in una altra, quando il marito non v’era, il muro della casa guardando, vide per avventura in una parte assai segreta di quella il muro alquanto da una fessura esser aperto”) (7.5.13). The (literal and figurative) violation of structural norms climaxes when the wife, aware that her husband is guarding the front door, invites her lover in through the roof.

After a few more steps in a fascinating dance of entrances and exits in various places in the house, the wife finally lectures her husband on his foolishness and her own sagacity, after which Fiammetta concludes with the so-called moral of the story: “And so the wise woman, almost given license to her pleasures, without making her lover go through the roof like female cats do, but right through the door, was able to, by working discreetly, have many good times with him and a happy life” (Per che la savia donna, quasi licenziata a’ suoi piaceri, senza far venire il suo amante su per lo tetto come vanno le gatte ma pur per l’uscio, discretamente operando poi più volte con lui buon tempo e lieta vita si diede) (7.5.59). With the modifier “almost” (quasi), Fiammetta suggests that the wife’s victory—her being “licensed to [pursue] her pleasures” (licenziata a’ suoi piaceri)—is not as complete as it may first seem. Moreover, it stands in direct opposition to Dioneo’s use of the term “ampia” when he describes the “ample” freedom of speech supposedly granted to all during the plague.³² Just as the Valley of Women is ruled by a king, it is clear here that a space supposedly belonging to women—the private sphere, the home—is under male jurisdiction, and woman is thus prisoner of her own domain.³³ Indeed, the tale’s ending with the lover coming in through the door indicates that the wife has been compelled to comply with normalized usages of the domestic space—confirmed by the term “discreetly” (discretamente),³⁴ connoting an adherence to social behavioral codes. Moreover, her creative negotiation around patriarchal boundaries—initially bringing in her lover through the roof—is trivialized to the way of female cats. And while the wife has achieved the “consolation” (consolazione) and “diversion” (diporto) that Fiammetta

32. In addition, two other tales in this day also conclude with a woman receiving license to pursue her pleasures, but the modifier “every” (ogni) in each of these instances indicates an absolute freedom that is contradicted in Fiammetta’s tale: see 7.4.30 and 7.8.50.

33. For the historical limitations of woman’s power within the domestic sphere, see the section “Household Government” in Constance Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models* (Ithaca, NY, 1990), 40–54. See also Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual*, esp. chap. 6 (117–31). Klapisch-Zuber writes, “In these *case* [in Florence in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries], in the sense of both physical and the symbolic house, women were passing guests” (118).

34. We have seen this connotation in Day 1, in Filomena’s sobriquet (see above).

mentions in her preface (7.5.4), the original problem is unresolved. The wives of jealous husbands, Fiammetta clearly states, are “miserable” (*miseri*) and “sorrowful” (*dolenti*) because they are “locked in” (*serrate*) and “closed up” (*rinchiuse*) within their homes (7.5.5); and this is exactly where we find the wife at the end of the tale. “Ampia licenza,” Fiammetta has shown, does not grant a “wise woman” (*savia donna*) license ample enough to walk out her own front door.

The conclusion of Fiammetta’s tale is met with unanimous praise from the *brigata*; even the masculine subject “ciascuno” reappears to affirm the woman’s excellence in having given to her bestial husband exactly what he deserved: “Maravigliosamente era piaciuta a tutti la novella della Fiammetta, affermando ciascuno ottimamente la donna aver fatto e quel che si convenia al bestiale uomo. Ma poi che finita fu, il re a Pampinea impose che seguitasse; la quale incominciò a dire” (7.6.2). With an abrupt “ma,” Fiammetta’s triumph is interrupted by the king’s command to the next narrator: this is none other than Pampinea, whom Dioneo now bids speak. Whatever progress Fiammetta managed to achieve in restoring Pampinea’s words to the female perspective is now overturned by Dioneo’s reminder of his control over what she says and when she says it.

As for my own conclusion, I offer a last reflection on the function of the *Decameron*, as Boccaccio himself defined it, as *galeotto*: a go-between, an ambassador—a chaperone—to the male world. The *Decameron* is not an invitation to ladies to participate in those life-giving public activities enjoyed by the author and other men (*Proemio* 12) but an invitation to observe them being performed by fictional representations of men and women.³⁵ It is a window—or, perhaps better said, a hole in the wall—through which to gaze at such freedoms, but it is not an open door to engage in them. Women may find some comfort, perhaps—their own Filippo—as Boccaccio’s tales come to them through the cracks of their prison, but in the end, they are exactly where they were at the beginning: trapped inside.

35. Suzuki notes the contradiction between Boccaccio’s dedicating the *Decameron* to female readers and the work’s misogynistic undertones (“Gender,” 231). See also Migiel, who observes that “by ignoring the female perspective that the Author’s Preface led us to expect” the initial stories of the *Decameron* “displace woman just a wee bit more” (*Rhetoric*, 31). As we have seen, a similar pattern of displacement occurs in Day 7, where Dioneo imposes a male perspective on a day and theme that would seem to honor the female viewpoint.