

## Mute Lips Cannot Tell: Alatiel and Philomela

Among the hundreds of stories that make up two masterpieces of frame narrative literature, Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, some have attracted the attention of critics more reliably than others.<sup>1</sup> The story of Alatiel in the *Decameron* (2.7) and that of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela in Book 6 of the *Metamorphoses* are undoubtedly two of these. Critics agree that Philomela is set up in the tale as an unequivocally innocent victim. Furthermore, her story has often been appropriated in feminist criticism as a symbol of male oppression, both physical and cultural. The opinions on Alatiel's tale, by contrast, are anything but in agreement.

An example of this wide range of opinions could be summed up in a comment by Cesare Segre in his *Structures and Time*: "if one were to set out to show that the history of literary criticism has been both an exciting and a discouraging chase within a twisting labyrinth, from the many examples available he might select studies devoted to the tale of Alatiel."<sup>2</sup> Since 1974, the year of Segre's work, the emergence of feminist criticism has only intensified the diversity of opinions on Alatiel. In "Filoginia/Misoginia," Claude Cazalé Bérard maintains that Boccaccio enacts his project of creating a polysemic, critical, and non-dogmatic vision of literature by focusing on the controversial interpretation of the female role.<sup>3</sup> According to Cazalé Bérard, Alatiel's story is a perfect example of a controversial female character who gives way to a plurality of interpretations. Proof of this is in the diversity of the critics' responses.<sup>4</sup> Such contradictions range from Alatiel's silent acquiescence, or even complicity, with the world of her kidnappers,<sup>5</sup> to the view

---

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Regina Psaki, Marilyn Migiel, Kathleen Perry Long, Irene Eibenstein-Alvisi, Julia Karczewski, Giulia Andreoni, and Madeline Saxton for their valuable feedback on this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Segre 1979, 122 (orig. Segre 1974).

<sup>3</sup> Cazalé Bérard 1995, 122–23.

<sup>4</sup> Cazalé Bérard 1995, 130–31.

<sup>5</sup> Benedetti 1992, 250.

of her as a strong and active woman who embraces a new language of the body as a means of control over man.<sup>6</sup>

In my opinion, all these opposing views derive from two main reasons: Alatiel's silence for the vast majority of the story and Panfilo's continuous contradictions in narrating the events.

I do not intend to add a further personal judgment on Alatiel's behavior, by portraying her either as a proto-feminist hero or as a wanton woman as many critics have asserted. Rather, I shall offer a reading of the story that takes into account Alatiel's limited commentary, as well as an intertextual analysis between her story and the Ovidian tale of Philomela. Drawing on the many semantic and rhetorical similarities, I claim that Boccaccio deliberately shadows Ovid's tale, allowing readers to consider Alatiel's (mis)adventures as equally tragic and gruesome as those of Philomela, despite being narrated in a far lighter tone. In my view, the many contrasting interpretations of Alatiel's story are the result of Boccaccio's decision to portray Panfilo as an unreliable narrator. Finally, I will show how the character of Panfilo might have a close relationship with other Panfilos found in other works by Boccaccio, as well as from a well-known literary tradition, each of them sharing similar ideas on how to interpret women's consent.

Boccaccio's mirroring of the tale of Procne and Philomela begins in the introduction to the story of Alatiel. The incipit of the two stories shares an analogous pattern: a king/sultan promises his own daughter to a foreign king as a reward for his help in vanquishing the enemies. In *Decameron* 2.7, the Babylonian<sup>7</sup> sultan Beminedab, "in una grande sconfitta, la quale aveva data ad una gran moltitudine d'arabi che addosso gli eran venuti, l'aveva meravigliosamente aiutato il re del Garbo, a lui, domandandogliele [Alatiel] egli di grazia speciale, l'aveva per moglie data" (2.7.9)<sup>8</sup> 'had been attacked by a great army of Arabs, but with timely assistance of the king of Algarve, he managed to rout them; in return, as a special favor to the King, who had asked for his daughter's [Alatiel's] hand, he promised her to him as his wife' (110).<sup>9</sup>

At the beginning of Ovid's story, the situation appears notably similar. What follows here is the episode that leads to the marriage of Tereus with Procne, Philomela's sister:

---

<sup>6</sup> Cavallero 1998, 166.

<sup>7</sup> Babylon here refers to the contemporary capital of Egypt, Cairo. For a detailed geography of *Decameron* 2.7 see Kinoshita and Jacobs 2007, 163–95.

<sup>8</sup> Boccaccio 1976.

<sup>9</sup> All the translations of Boccaccio's *Decameron* are by Musa and Bondanella (in Boccaccio 1982).

barbara Mopsopios terrebant agmina muros.  
 Threicius Tereus haec auxiliaribus armis  
 fuderat et clarum vincendo nomen habebat;  
 quem sibi Pandion  
 [...]
   
 conubio Procnes iunxit (6.423–26, 428)<sup>10</sup>

Barbarians  
 From overseas had besieged the city. Tereus,  
 Bringing relief from Thrace, routed them  
 And by this victory made a name for himself.  
 [...]

So Pandion,  
 Athens' king, formed an alliance with him  
 By wedding him to his daughter Procne.  
 (6.482–85, 487–89)].<sup>11</sup>

Here the king is the ruler of Athens, Pandion, and the invaders are not Arabs but unspecified barbarians. However, just like Alatiel, Procne, the daughter of the king, is used as a reward for aid in battle.

Moreover, both introductions focus on the impossibility of knowing the outcome of our own actions and desires. In the incipit to his novella, Panfilo affirms that what we think is a great advantage for us may turn out to be the cause of our own misfortune: men who appeal to God for their riches may then perish as a result, and women who vainly adorn themselves in jewels may suffer therefrom. The opening words to Panfilo's narration, "malagevolmente [...] si può da noi conoscer quello che per noi si faccia" (2.7.3) 'It is most difficult [...] for us to know what is in our own best interests' (109), are almost a translation of Ovid's ominous comment about a supposedly happy event, the wedding between Procne and Tereus: "usque adeo latet utilitas" (6.438) 'we never know where our true advantage lies' (6.500–01). Both narrators' emphasis on the impossibility of knowing where our true advantage lies, and the similarity of the introductions — a war, aid from a foreign king, and an alliance established through a marriage — are a clear invitation to look for further intertextual connections.

One such connection is the resemblance of the narrators' portrayals of the two women. In Panfilo's story we repeatedly hear how beautiful Alatiel is, possibly the most beautiful woman in the entire world. For instance, we read that Alatiel "era la più bella femina che si vedesse in que' tempi nel mondo" (2.7.9) 'Alatiel who was, according to everyone who saw her, the most beautiful woman ever seen in the world in those times,' and 'pareano

<sup>10</sup> Ovid 1998.

<sup>11</sup> All the translations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are by Lombardo 2010.

le sue fattezze bellissime a Pericone' (2.7.21) 'she nevertheless seemed most beautiful to Pericone' (111–12). In both cases the narrator emphasizes her beauty and stresses the fact that she is the object of the masculine gaze. In the latter sentence she is the object of Pericone's gaze, while in the first, the *si passivante* that precedes the verb *vedette* "to look," implies an undefined subject who is looking at her, someone or everyone, or better, some-male or every-male. Additionally, the adjective *bella* to describe her (including variations *bellissima* or *bellezza*) occurs thirty-one times and, towards the second half of the story, the narrator starts using the syntagmatic expression *la bella donna* to refer to her. Not only do her personality traits become absolutely irrelevant, but so too does her own name, which reduces Alatiel to a purely ornamental object for male pleasure.

Considering all the time that Panfilo spends emphasizing Alatiel's beauty, we might expect that we should be able to imagine a clear portrait of the woman. On the contrary, we are left grasping for a mental image of this *bella donna*. Boccaccio seems at a loss for words to describe Alatiel, whereas in other works, he is perfectly adept at portraying a beautiful woman. As an example of his abilities, we can look at Boccaccio's extremely detailed representation of Helen of Troy, the enduring embodiment of feminine beauty, in his *De mulieribus claris*. In what looks like a cross-disciplinary challenge among painters, sculptors, and writers, Boccaccio gives proof of his talent and of the superiority of the written art with his portrait of Helen. He mentions

sydereum oculorum fulgorem, [...] insignem faciei candorem aureamque come volatilis copiam, [...] et lepidam sonoramque vocis suavitatem nec non et gestus quosdam, tam cinnamei roseique oris quam splendide frontis et eburnei gucturis ac ex invisibilibus delitiis pectoris assurgentis. (37.6)<sup>12</sup>

the starry splendor of her eyes [...] the marvelous whiteness of her complexion; her mass of golden hair [...] the charming and resonant sweetness of her voice; certain movements of her scented and rosy mouth; her dazzling forehead and ivory throat rising above the hidden delights of her breast.<sup>13</sup>

We can almost see Helen's physical appearance: blonde hair and white skin with bright eyes, even her dazzling forehead; we can imagine how her voice sounds, how she moves, and even what her personality is like if we think the words *sweetness* and *charming* refer not only to her voice but also

---

<sup>12</sup> Boccaccio 1994, 148.

<sup>13</sup> Boccaccio 2003, 71.

to her entire persona. All this creates a stark contrast with the meager adjective *beautiful* that Panfilo employs for Alatiel: despite the number of times this adjective recurs in the story, Alatiel’s non-description seems to leave the reader wanting more. At a closer look, as Mark Taylor points out in his essay, “The Fortunes of Alatiel,” “it is curious that we know absolutely nothing about what she looks like unless, because she ‘had the body of an angel,’ we know what an angel looks like.”<sup>14</sup> Such a *femme fatale* who makes men fall in love at first sight, as the narrator leads us to believe, does not even have a body or a face. All we know is that she is a woman, that she is a noble Saracen, and that she is beautiful.

In a very similar way, Ovid does not expound much on Philomela’s appearance. The narrative voice introduces her to the reader — and to Tereus the male protagonist — when she enters her father’s court “magno dives [...] paratu, / divitior forma; quales audire solemus / naidas et dryadas mediis incedere silvis, / si modo des illis cultus similesque paratus” (6.452–54) ‘richly dressed / But richer in beauty. She was like the naiads / We hear about, or dryads walking in the wood / If only they had elegant clothing like hers’ (6.517–20). The same comment Taylor makes about Alatiel also applies to Philomela; we need only replace the Christian angel with the pagan naiads and dryads. In both cases it is left to the reader’s imagination to reconstruct the appearance of the two women.

The narrator’s comment on Philomela’s luxurious clothing seems to indicate a connection between Tereus’ reaction and how she is dressed; the fact that she looks like a naiad and that she is richly dressed are the only remarks on her appearance before Tereus becomes inflamed with passion. We do not know if Ovid implies that Philomela’s rich and attractive clothing is the ultimate cause of Tereus’ reaction, but it certainly seems as though this is how Panfilo interprets it, since, just like Ovid, Panfilo makes some comments on Alatiel’s dress before men go mad with desire for her. The prince of Morea, for instance, “vedendola oltre alla bellezza ornata di costumi reali” (2.7.46) ‘[seeing] that besides her beauty she had royal [clothing]’ (115),<sup>15</sup> doubles his passion for her. Her rich, regal clothes seem to play a major role in the prince’s infatuation. Whereas in Ovid we can only assume

<sup>14</sup> Taylor 2001, 326.

<sup>15</sup> The original translation by Musa and Bondanella uses *manners* instead of *clothing*. The word *costumi* has both meanings and Musa and Bondanella translate it interchangeably. E.g., they translate “per li costumi avvisando che tra cristiani era” (*Dec.* 2.7.23) as “she guessed by the clothing worn by those around her that she was among Christians” (112). Most translators agree with Musa and Bondanella. While of course *costumi* can mean *manners*, we should not dismiss the possibility that the word refers also to her clothing.

a link between Philomela's attire and Tereus' reaction, Panfilo makes his stand explicitly.

In his introduction to Alatiel's story, Panfilo delivers a long tirade about the danger of desires, which can be summarized with the common saying "be careful what you wish for." In particular, he addresses his speech to women who, "sommamente [peccano] [...] nel disiderare d'esser belle" (2.7.7) 'sin in a most particular way: that is, in desiring to be beautiful' (109) and, not satisfied by the attractions bestowed upon them by nature, "con maravigliosa arte quelle [cercano] d'accrescere" (2.7.7) 'go to astonishing lengths to improve upon [their looks]' (109). According to Panfilo, women should be careful about wanting to be more beautiful because this could be "[cagione] di morte o di dolorosa vita" (2.7.5) 'cause of their death or unhappiness' (109). Philomela and Alatiel are not only beautiful, but also richly dressed, and this, according to Panfilo, could be part of the *maravigliosa arte* with which women who try to look more beautiful provoke their own misfortunes. Simply put, Panfilo's comment on what happens to Philomela and Alatiel is something like: "well, they were asking for it!"

Were they really, though? Considering the two texts closely, we find no evidence that these women play an active role in the males' arousal.<sup>16</sup> As soon as Philomela enters her father's court, Tereus immediately burns with passion "quam si quis canis ignem supponat aristis / aut frondem positasque cremet faenilibus herbas" (6.456–57) 'as if one were to set fire to a field of grain / Or a pile of leaves, or to hay in a loft' (6.522–23). The simile is clear: as we often see in Ovid's male characters, there is no rationality behind Tereus' actions; his passion starts as suddenly and as immediately as a field of grain set on fire. Up to this moment our focalization is only Tereus' point of view: he sees Philomela, he finds her beautiful, and he burns with passion for her. From his perspective her beauty was *digna* (6.458) ["reason enough" (6.524)]; in his mind her appearance is what gave rise to everything.

---

<sup>16</sup> Although as modern readers we cannot perceive how Alatiel's beauty could have instigated all the subsequent violent actions against her, Kathryn Gravdal reminds us that in medieval literature the beauty of women often triggers a violent male response. For more on the connection between beauty and rape see Gravdal 1991 (particularly the introduction "The Archeology of Rape in Medieval Literature and Law," 1–20, and chapter 2, "The Poetics of Rape Law: Chrétien de Troyes's Arthurian Romance" (42–71).

For a modern reader it is hard to blame Philomela for what happens to her.<sup>17</sup> Until this point in the story, she still has not done anything: not a word, not a smile, not a gesture. She has only entered the room, and she happens to appear beautiful in Tereus' eyes. From an external perspective, there is absolutely nothing for which she could be held responsible; rather, from the perspective of Tereus, her beauty is what triggers his reaction. This contrast between the point of view of the external narrator and that of Tereus as the focalizer creates the perfect space for the ironic intervention of the narrator. In response to Tereus' opinion that "her beauty was reason enough" for everything that happened and that will happen in the future, the narrative voice replies: "sed et hunc innata libido / exstimulat, pronumque genus regionibus illis / in Venerem est: flagrat vitio gentisque suoque" (6.458–60) 'but with Tereus / His own libido and the passionate nature / Of men from his region were also factors. / Nature and race both caused him to burn' (6.524–27). Introduced by a strong adversative conjunction (*sed* or *but*), the narrator's use of the interjection makes us aware that there is more to know beyond Tereus' opinion: his libido and his passionate nature also played roles in the turning of events. As a matter of fact, the narrator affirms in the last verse that the cause of everything that happens is *nothing else but* Tereus' nature and race. The sentence structure moves from Tereus' view of Philomela's own fault, to the idea that he may somehow also be responsible for his actions, and on to the clear statement the sole responsibility was his, his *nature* and *race*. The narrator openly contradicts Tereus, blatantly exposing his responsibility for the evil he later perpetrates on Philomela.

In other passages, some readers may point an accusing finger at Philomela for her alleged desire to participate in Tereus' lustful and impious plan. These uncharitable readers, however, can find fault with Philomela's actions only if they interpret her gestures from Tereus' point of view. What Ovid, or the narrator, says blends together with Tereus' personal perspective. Only

---

<sup>17</sup> The same cannot be said for readers of the Middle Ages. Several authors wrote commentaries on this Ovidian story showing a very unsympathetic view of Philomela. The anonymous author of the *Ovide moralisé*, for example, reads Philomela as an allegory of deceptive love: "Amour decevable et faillie" (6.3756). On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that Boccaccio in the *Genealogie deorum gentilium* does not comment negatively on Philomela and attributes all the blame to Tereus. Following Barlaam's interpretation, Boccaccio states that Tereus was "homo impius et ferox" 'a wicked and ferocious man' (my translation) and that "in upupam versum dixere, quia [...] stercora cibus [eius]" 'they said he was turned into a hoopoe [...] because its food is excrement' (9.8.3, my translation).

in this way can Philomela's desire to see her sister take on a sexual connotation. Philomela does not in any way act ambiguously, but the passage proves ambiguous because of its connection to Tereus' inner thoughts. Immediately following Tereus' peroration on his motivations, the narrator introduces Philomela's actions: "quid, quod idem Philomela cupit, patriosque lacertis / blanda tenens umeros, ut eat visura sororem" (6.475–76) 'And what about this? Philomela herself / Has the same wish. She drapes her arms / Upon her father's shoulders and coaxes him / to let her go and visit her sister' (6.544–47). In shifting the focus from Tereus to Philomela, the narrator retains a glimpse of Tereus' point of view in that first expression of surprise, "Quid" 'And what about this?' When Tereus sees Philomela try to convince her father to let her go with him, his heart must have skipped a beat. In his excitement he must have confused the words he actually pronounced in front of Philomela and her father, with his own inner monologue of sexual desire. Did he just ask Philomela to go visit her sister, or did he also already confess his lustful plan? He can no longer be sure. When the narrator says that Philomela has this same wish, Tereus, and the readers caught up in his perspective, think that Philomela is returning his sexual attention. However, if we do not get entangled in his excitement, we remember that he has never vocally expressed his passion and Philomela cannot know his inner thoughts. The desire she shares with Tereus is to go with him to visit her sister.

In addition, the narrator constantly insists on Philomela's virginity and on Tereus' impiety in wanting to possess her; he sees through Tereus' scheme and connotes it as impious. After Tereus' deceitful speech, the narrator comments, "pro superi, quantum mortalia pectora caecae / noctis habent! ipso sceleris molimine Tereus / creditur esse pius laudemque a crimine sumit" (6.472–74) 'Gods above, / men's minds are pitch black! In the very act / of constructing his crime, Tereus is believed to be pious<sup>18</sup> / and is praised for his sin' (6.541–43). Philomela and Pandion, completely oblivious to what is happening, believe that Tereus is a very pious man for wanting to grant Procne's wish. When Pandion addresses Tereus in direct speech, he reinforces such a perception. He entrusts Philomela to him because he interprets his intent as a pious act ("pia causa," 6.496). In contrast, the narrator emphasizes the discrepancy between Pandion's and Philomela's perception, and Tereus' actual intention by referring to him as extremely impious: "neque enim minus inpius esset" (6.482) 'nor would he be

---

<sup>18</sup> Here I have modified Lombardo's translation which says that Tereus is "credited with a kinder heart." My rendering, "is believed to be pious," is a more literal translation of "creditur esse pius."



/ any less impious' (6.554–55). Playing on the opposition between the pious perception of Tereus' actions and his impious inner intentions, the narrator highlights Philomela's and Pandion's obliviousness. Readers can interpret Philomela's actions as malicious and sexually connoted only if they themselves have taken on Tereus' point of view, sharing with him his own scheming and malevolent nature.<sup>19</sup>

The same happens with Alatiel, who does not appear to actively make any conscious move to attract the sexual appreciation of her viewers. Let's consider, for instance, what happens to two of her lovers, Marato and the Duke of Athens. First Marato, the second man to fall in love with Alatiel:

[A]vendo costei veduta e essendogli sommamente piaciuta, parendogli, secondo che per gli atti di lei poteva comprendere, essere assai bene della grazia sua e estimando che [...] niuna cosa gliele toglieva [...] cadde in un crudel pensiero. (2.7.32)

---

<sup>19</sup> A similar argument could be made about Pandion's responsibility. In his speech (6.496–503) he seems to offer Philomela to Tereus in a manner reminiscent of a wedding ceremony. The ambiguity is undeniable, but it is difficult to blame Pandion for anything specific; this scene takes on a negative connotation only because of Tereus' actions and thoughts. Pandion's speech works on two levels. On the first level, Pandion's words have a literal meaning: he asks Tereus to take care of Philomela "patrio [...] amore" (6.499) 'with a father's love' (6.575). However, he is not giving her away to Tereus indefinitely as in a marriage. He wants his daughter back and pleads Tereus "[ut] quam primum [...] [Philomelam] remittas" (6.501) 'to send [Philomela] back as soon as possible' (6.577). He reasserts his wish by telling the same to his daughter: "quam primo [...] redito!" (6.503) 'return as soon as you can' (6.580). On a second level his speech acquires a figurative meaning, but he cannot be blamed because he himself is unaware of it. It is only in retrospect that this idea of the marriage between Philomela and Tereus takes on an ominous undertone. Pandion's image of marriage becomes tainted only after Tereus rapes Philomela and she refers to the rape as a marriage ceremony that makes of them husband and wife: "paelex ego facta sororis, / tu geminus coniunx, hostis mihi debita Procne!" (6.537–38) 'I've become my sister's whorish rival, and you / A husband to us both' (6.620–21). Similarly, Pandion's request to treat Philomela with paternal love becomes corrupted only because Tereus, in his filthy mind, has imagined the exchange of affection between Philomela and her father in an incestuous way: "videndo / osculaque et collo circumdata brachia cernens [...] / esse parens vellet: neque enim minus inpius esset" (6.478–79, 482) 'As he sees her kisses, and sees her arms / around her father's neck [...] / He wishes he were her father' (6.550–51, 554). How can Pandion imagine that Tereus has a completely perverted idea of what love between a father and a daughter entails? It is true that the passage is ambiguous, but only Tereus is aware of, and responsible for, this ambiguity.

[W]hen he saw the lady, he was immensely attracted to her, and judging from the signs he got from her, he saw that he was in her good graces and decided that nothing stood in his way [...] [H]e devised a cruel plan. (113)<sup>20</sup>

First, we read that he sees her but we do not know if she looks at him at all. Then we notice the repetition of the indirect pronoun *gli* – *essendogli*, *parendogli*, *glielle* – that establishes an insistence on male subjectivity. Lastly, her supposed good disposition towards him is attenuated by *parendogli* and *secondo che [...] poteva comprendere*. He imagines that she likes him not from her behavior, but from what he can infer from her behavior. The narration does not report the actions of Alatiel directly; rather her movements appear through the filters of Marato’s mind and sight. More than just casting doubt on his impression of the girl’s reaction, it appears to be an ironic statement implying that everything he perceives comes solely from his own imagination.

Equally telling is the description in our second example: the infatuation of the Duke of Athens who, “non acorgendosi, riguardandola, dell’amoroso veleno che egli con gli occhi bevea, credendosi al suo piacer sodisfare mirandola, se stesso miseramente impacciò, di lei ardentissima mente innamorandosi” (2.7.50) ‘not realizing that with his eyes he was drinking the poison of love, thinking that he was merely satisfying his [pleasure]<sup>21</sup> by looking at her, he found himself totally ensnared by her charms, and he fell deeply in love with her’ (116). It is significant that this passage portrays the completely solipsistic and self-absorbed demeanor of the Duke whose only desire is to satisfy his own pleasure (*sodisfare il suo piacere*). Almost all of the verbs are reflexive, even those that usually are not, such as “to believe” (*credendo*). On the contrary, none of the actions refer to Alatiel. She might not have even turned her sight toward him, but he poisons himself with his own action of looking. He does not drink the poison of love *from* her eyes, but *with* his own voyeuristic gaze. The entire passage clearly implies that the Duke’s infatuation derives solely from his own doing, which absolves Alatiel from any supposed act of seduction.

---

<sup>20</sup> A more literal, yet clunky, translation to reflect Marato’s insistence on subjectivity could be: “when he saw her, such a sight pleased *him* immensely and, judging from *his* understanding of her actions, it seemed to *him* that he was in her good graces, and considering that nothing [...] could keep her away from *him* [...] he devised a cruel plan.”

<sup>21</sup> Here I have modified the translation. Musa and Bondanella translate the word *piacere* as *curiosity*. The Italian word *piacere*, however, more closely resembles the English *pleasure*. The sexually connoted nuance of the Duke’s gaze gets lost next to the more neutral *curiosity*.

After the infatuation, in both of the stories, the men immediately start to make their moves. In Ovid’s tale, after seeing Philomela, Tereus can no longer contain his lust and the situation escalates quickly: “Inpetus est illi comitum corrumpere curam / Nutricisque fidem nec non ingentibus ipsam / Sollicitare datis totumque inpendere regnum, / Aut rapere et saevo raptam defendere bello” (6.460–64) ‘His first impulse was to corrupt her attendants, / Or her nurse, and then to tempt the girl herself / With lavish gifts, even if it costs his kingdom, / Or perhaps just to carry her off and rape her / And then defend his rape with a bloody war’ (6.528–32). The distance from simple passion to the impulse to bribe Philomela with gifts, and to the final decision to rape her, is incredibly short. *Rapere* literally means to seize or to take with force, but it is often connected with women’s abductions and sexual abuse. The verb *rapere* is also preceded by the conjunction *aut*: in Tereus’ wicked mind, rape is just as normal as persuading or bribing the girl. Moreover, he is ready to defend his rape “saevo bello” (6.464) ‘with bloody war’ (6.532): nothing can make him desist from his intentions, neither the loss of his wealth, nor that of his kingdom, nor the loss of his life.

The male mating pattern — first the primitive passion, then the desire to possess the woman, and at last bloody war — seems all too familiar in Alatiel’s tale. In fact, it is repeated nine times by all her ‘lovers,’ with only minor variations. We can take as an example Pericone, a nobleman and the first who burns with passion for Alatiel. As soon as he sees her, he notices that “le sue fattezze [pareano] bellissime [...] per la qual cosa subitamente seco diliberò, se ella marito non avesse, di volerla per moglie, e se per moglie aver non la potesse, di volere avere la sua amistà” (2.7.21) ‘she [...] seemed most beautiful to [him]; and because of this he immediately decided to take her for his wife, if she had no husband, or to have her as his mistress, if he could not have her as wife’ (111–12). Although the translation says that Pericone wants Alatiel as his mistress, the Italian word *amistà* does not necessarily suggest a sexual overtone. He sees her, he finds her beautiful, he immediately decides that he wants her as a wife, or at least as a *friend*. After a very short time, he discovers, as in the most typical of clichés, that the friendship between a man and a woman does not really satisfy his desires. He wants more but, “veggendo che le sue lusinghe non gli valevano, dispose lo ’ngegno e l’arti riserbandosi alla fine le forze” (164) ‘[realizing] that his flattery was of no avail [he turns] to cunning and deceit, reserving force as a last resort’ (112). Just as happened with Tereus, his mind quickly switches from using deception to using violence, in the span of a single sentence. As in Ovid’s story, the passion for the woman is almost always connected with

malicious thoughts, including those of using force on the woman and being prepared to face anything to have her.

In the case of Pericone, *lo 'ngegno e l'arti* were sufficient to obtain the woman, although the relationship appears far from being consensual. Alatiel clearly understands the troublesome situation she is in, and she knows that “a lungo andare o per forza o per amore le converrebbe venire a dovere i piaceri di Perdicon fare” (2.7.26) ‘sooner or later she would have to give in to Pericone’s desires either by force or love’ (112). Pericone wants her, and there is nothing she can do to avoid his advances. Because she is in his house, in a foreign land, and unable to communicate with anybody, the line between guest and prisoner is very thin. Between the two options, being taken by love or by force, she refuses to give herself to Pericone *per amore*, and she is resolved to resist. Talking with her servants, she encourages them to “conservare la loro castità, affermando sé avere seco proposto che mai di lei se non il suo marito goderebbe” (2.7.24) ‘preserve their chastity, declaring that she herself had decided never to let anyone but her husband enjoy her’ (112). She appears resolute in saving her servants’ and her own chastity, as she repeatedly wards off Pericone’s sexual advances. In this first encounter, force is not necessary; Pericone, knowing that as a Muslim Alatiel is not accustomed to alcohol, slips her “varii vini mescolati” (2.7.26) ‘various mixed wines’ (112). After this drink, she no longer seems to be aware of her situation. We do not know whether she undresses in front of him because wine released her from her inhibitions or because she is completely unaware of the male’s presence and thinks he is one of her servants. Nonetheless, given the very short time between her adamant resolution to maintain her chastity and this subsequent event, it would be safe to assume that the relationship was not at all consensual.

The episode in *Decameron* 2.7 that has the most similarities with that of Tereus and Philomela is the one involving the Duke of Athens. The very fact that the Duke comes from Athens, just like Philomela, is no coincidence. To better highlight the connections between the two stories, we must take a step back to the tale of Tereus. In order to visit her beloved sister Procne, Philomela expresses to her father her desire to leave with Tereus and, after convincing Pandion, the two of them set sail towards Thrace. As Tereus disembarks from the ship, the situation quickly deteriorates. Wanting to hide Philomela from his wife, he, “rex Pandione natam / in stabula alta trahit, silvis obscura vetustis, / atque ibi pallentem trepidamque et cuncta timentem / et iam cum lacrimis [...] / includit” (6.520–24) ‘[drags] the daughter of Pandion / To a hut in the gloom of an ancient forest / Where he [shuts] her in, pale, trembling, afraid / Of everything’ (6.599–602). Throughout

the whole passage, Ovid portrays Tereus as the hunter and Philomela as his powerless prey. The verb *traho* evokes more closely the action of a hunter or a predator with prey, rather than that of a man leading a woman; even the background setting immediately switches from the nautical journey to the forest, the site of the typical hunt. The hunter-prey relation becomes clearer as soon as Tereus commits his bestial action: Philomela “*tremet velut agna pavens, quae saucia cani / ore excussa lupi nondum sibi tuta videtur, / utque columba suo madefactis sanguine plumis / horret adhuc avidosque timet, quibus haeserat, unguis*” (6.527–30) ‘[tumbles] like a quivering lamb, who, / After it has been wounded and then spat out / By a grey wolf, cannot yet believe it is safe; / Or like a dove whose feathers are smeared / With its own blood and who still shudders with fear / of those greedy talons that pierced her skin’ (6.607–12). Philomela is a lamb or a dove, two of the prey animals most commonly associated with innocence and purity. Furthermore, both similes recall Philomela’s virginity: the lamb is a juvenile sheep, inexperienced and too immature to mate, while the dove is smeared with its own blood. Of course, Philomela fought against her predator and was injured, but this specific image also brings to mind her own virginal blood.

After the abuse, when Philomela threatens to tell everyone what has happened, “*talibus ira feri [...] commota tyranni [...] / est*” (6.549–50) ‘Tereus’ savage tyrannical wrath / was aroused by her words’ (6.636–37). *Commota*, aroused, grammatically refers to his wrath, but metonymically it extends to describe his entire emotional state: he is aroused by this terrifying moment. There is something quite perverse in his arousal at Philomela’s injurious words, though not as perverse and gruesome as in the scene that follows. To deny her any possibility of revealing his crime, Tereus cuts out her tongue, which, like the tail of a snake, quivers in spasms on the ground next to Philomela’s feet. The narrator’s description of the scene could make anyone nauseous, to say the least, but not Tereus, who “*saepe sua lacerum [repetivit] libidine corpus*” (6.562) ‘[went] back [...] / again and again to her torn body in lust’ (6.649–50). In the juxtaposition of *corpus lacerum* and *libidine*, the readerly discomfort in experiencing Tereus’ thrill in these repugnant scenes of violence is almost tangible. This binary structure — violence-arousal — is even more evident in the play on words in Latin: when Tereus decides to cut out Philomela’s tongue, the narrator says that he “*vagina liberat ensem*” (6.551) ‘he drew his sword from its sheath’ (6.638). With the evident double meaning of the word *vagina* — the organ and the sheath — Tereus’ action contains both sexual and violent nuances: he simultaneously seems to remove his sword and finally leave Philomela’s body.

From the comparison of this story with the tale of the Duke of Athens in *Decameron* 2.7, a striking resemblance emerges, even if Panfilo avoids going into as much detail as Ovid does. The Duke acts perfectly in accordance with the same pattern of the male ‘mating pattern.’ There is nothing to indicate or suggest that Alatiel played an active role, especially as the Duke cannot “di ragionar con lei prender piacere, per ciò che essa poco o niente di quella lingua [intende]” (2.7.50) ‘enjoy the pleasure of her conversation, for [he understands] little or nothing of her language’ (115–16). Alatiel, who speaks a different language, cannot possibly say anything to ignite the Duke’s passion. What follows is scripted: he burns with desire and, “di lei ardentissimamente innamorandosi” (2.7.50) ‘[falling] deeply in love with her’ (116), he is ready to do anything to have her. He kills her former possessor, the prince of Morea, with a knife and throws him out of the window. Then, with the help of an accomplice, he strangles the prince’s servant who happens to be in the same room. At this point,

per che, di più caldo disio accessosi, non spaventato dal recente peccato da lui commesso, con le mani ancor sanguinose allato le si coricò e con lei tutta sonnacchiosa, e credente che il prenze fosse, si giacque. (2.7.57)

burning now with even more desire and unconcerned with the crime he had just committed, with his hands still bloody, he lay down beside the lady, and made love to her while she, half-asleep, mistook him for the Prince. (117)

The morbid binary structure of violence-arousal in Ovid’s story also becomes a theme in the story of the Duke. He has just killed two men and his own hands are covered with blood: instead of making him feel repulsed, it arouses the Duke “di più caldo disio” ‘with even more desire.’ As a consequence, he decides to join Alatiel in bed — something that, according to Panfilo, she does not mind. However, one should notice that Alatiel is “sonnacchiosa,” *half-asleep*, and she is also under the impression that the Duke is her former possessor, the prince of Morea.

Soon after, the duke silently leaves the palace in the middle of the night on a secret path but, “per ciò che moglie aveva, non in Atene ma a un suo bellissimo luogo, che poco di fuori dalla città sopra il mare aveva, la donna più che altra dolorosa mise, quivi nascosamente tenendola” (2.7.59) ‘since he already had a wife, the grieving lady was not taken to Athens but rather to one of his very beautiful villas situated just outside the city above the sea, and there in secret he kept her’ (117). This event cannot help but recall what happens to Philomela: instead of taking her to Thrace, Tereus brings her to a hut in the middle of an ancient forest, since he already has a wife. Both

Philomela and Alatiel are locked in secluded places outside the city to remain hidden from their kidnappers' respective wives. What differs is the way in which the narrator describes the scene. Panfilo says it is a beautiful place, while the narrator of Philomela's story underscores its disturbing nature, one that corresponds well to her state of terror. Even if the events themselves are similar, Ovid presents them in all their tragic, gruesomely morbid essence, while Panfilo insists on the pleasure and comfort that sex offers to Alatiel in her (mis)adventures.

On the one hand, we know that Philomela experiences terrible suffering and has to endure all the brutality of Tereus' behavior. On the other, despite the fact that Alatiel goes through the same initial tragedy as Philomela — multiplied by nine — we are led to believe that, as Taylor says, “these adventures [...] gratify her” because “there is no evidence [...] that any of the thousands of different occasions of love making gives Alatiel anything but pleasure.”<sup>22</sup> And in one sense it is true: since Alatiel is never allowed to express her point of view or to be the focalizer of the tale, it might seem hard to find evidence in the text of anything other than pleasure. Behind this muting of Alatiel, as Sharon Kinoshita and Jason Jacobs notice, there is more than a simple touch of narrative realism, since “this marking of linguistic difference is in fact exceptional in the *Decameron*, in which characters from different political, cultural, and religious spheres typically communicate with no undue difficulty.”<sup>23</sup> If in other stories, like that of Zinevra or the one of Gerbino, communicating in different languages never poses a particular challenge to the protagonists,<sup>24</sup> here Alatiel's insurmountable incommunicability permeates almost the totality of her experience. This stark contrast with the rest of Boccaccio's work inevitably calls for a deeper questioning of this narrative choice.<sup>25</sup>

Alatiel's loss of speech inevitably echoes that of Philomela: Tereus physically cuts out Philomela's tongue, whereas Panfilo turns Alatiel into a mute person, or object. The way in which Panfilo occludes Alatiel's possibility of

---

<sup>22</sup> Taylor 2001, 320.

<sup>23</sup> Kinoshita and Jacobs 2007, 168.

<sup>24</sup> Communicating in different languages does not pose particular problems even in the fictive story Antigono crafts for Alatiel at the end of the tale. Following his instructions, Alatiel claims that she learned how to speak a foreign language in order to communicate with the Christian women of the monastery in which she lived (2.7.110).

<sup>25</sup> Millicent Marcus offers a noteworthy explanation in regard to Alatiel's silence. According to her, silence unleashes uncontrollable passions, that can be subdued only through language and reason. However, I believe she attributes excessive agency to Alatiel in her supposed role of silent 'seducer' (Marcus 1979b, 1–15).

speaking is twofold: first, he sets her (mis)adventures in lands whose languages she cannot speak, and second, he silences any possibility of a first-person narration of her experience, as she never reveals a subjective voice. Alison Sharrock’s observations about women and silence in Ovid’s work might help us find meaning in Alatiel’s mutism: “women are meant to be silent. The suppression of women’s voices, bodies, and sexuality is an all too common story in (ancient) culture [...]. The loss of humanity, autonomy, and speech is tied in with sexuality for women.”<sup>26</sup> In connection with the suppression of their voices, both Philomela and Alatiel face a loss of humanity and autonomy. Shut away in a hut in the middle of the forest, Philomela is nothing more than prey. She is not a woman any longer but a lamb or a dove (and eventually a nightingale). Alatiel undergoes a comparable process of reification. She is passed from man to man as a mere ornamental object, even to the point at which her very name loses all relevance. Instead of calling her Alatiel, Panfilo consistently refers to her as “la bella donna,” an expression that fails to humanize her and, indeed, becomes the proper label of the object *Alatiel*.

One difference between the two stories is that, although Tereus silences Philomela by cutting out her tongue, he does not do so until after she gives a long speech condemning his violent and impious deed. It becomes difficult to doubt that she absolutely detests Tereus’ action, when the first thing she exclaims is “o diris barbare factis, / o crudelis” (6.533–34) ‘Oh, you horrible monster, what have you done!’ (6.616). In contrast, Panfilo silences Alatiel. Readers — like most of the novella’s other characters — will never hear her voice. As a result of Alatiel’s silence, everything we learn about her experiences, actions, and feelings will come from the words of Panfilo, her narrator.

Now, how can we be sure that Panfilo is a reliable narrator?<sup>27</sup> As often in Boccaccio, we must always be aware of the narrators’ personalities and their positions regarding the subject they describe. As Marilyn Migiel maintains in *A Rhetoric of the Decameron*, it would be erroneous to attribute all the rhetorical strategies of the *Decameron* to a single unifying Authorial voice; instead, it is fundamental to keep in mind that the frame narrators are characterized “by individually distinctive rhetorical approaches.”<sup>28</sup> The

---

<sup>26</sup> Sharrock 2002, 100.

<sup>27</sup> We are similarly unsure that the narrator of Philomela’s tale is reliable. However, in Ovid’s tale the reader can at least hear each character’s perspective in direct speech, an option that is not available to Alatiel for almost the entire tale.

<sup>28</sup> Migiel 2003, 13.



ten narrators have unique ways of telling stories that cannot be assimilated into one single overarching Authorial figure. And Panfilo is no exception.

To find some context regarding Panfilo's rhetorical approach, we can refer to the story he told the previous day, the only story he has told thus far. The novella of Ser Cepparello or Ciappelletto (1.1) is just as ambiguous as this one.<sup>29</sup> After an entire life lived as the worst of sinners Cepparello, on his deathbed, convinces the priest who gave him last rites that he has led a saintly life. In this way he protects his hosts from possible slanderous gossip for having housed such a terrible person. But why does this unapologetic sinner finally decide to be nice to someone? Is he really asking and receiving forgiveness from the priest? Is he just playing one last trick against the institution of the church? All these questions remain unresolved and Panfilo, from his very first appearance in the *Decameron*, is established to be a difficult narrator to trust. Millicent Marcus uses the ambiguousness of Cepparello's story to exemplify the novelty of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. According to Marcus, this innovation resides in the "abandonment of narrative authority" and the admission of "the contingency of the authorial voice."<sup>30</sup> In her view, Panfilo's novella — the opening novella of the *Decameron* — sets an example of the danger of trusting any written or spoken story too literally<sup>31</sup> and "suggests both the deceptive quality of fictive creation and the power of fiction to expose its deception."<sup>32</sup> Storytelling, and storytellers, might be deceitful, but within the context of the tale itself the reader has all the instruments and information to determine whether or not the story is trustworthy. At the opening of the *Decameron*, Boccaccio chooses Panfilo as the narrator who will transmit the message about the deceptive quality of storytelling. Given these circumstances, it is likely we should be cautious when reading any story of the *Decameron*, but Panfilo's stories in particular may challenge the concept of narrative authority and trustworthiness more persistently.

Alatiel's tale calls for greater attention to the way that Panfilo deals with issues of gender and sexuality. Besides noting that each narrator has a distinctive rhetorical approach, Migiel's research clearly shows that "the fictional storytellers of the *Decameron* are marked by their gender and by their

---

<sup>29</sup> For a wider look on the unsolved questions, ambiguities, and the various critical approaches on the tale of Ser Ciappelletto, see Fido 2004, 59–76.

<sup>30</sup> Marcus 1979, 14.

<sup>31</sup> Marcus 1979, 9.

<sup>32</sup> Marcus 1979, 23.

express views on sexuality and sexual difference.”<sup>33</sup> In particular, male narrators believe that women are always willing to engage in sexual intercourse and to please the males’ carnal needs.<sup>34</sup> The gender of the ten narrators may determine a discrimination on their view of life, and subsequently on the tales they recount and on the way they recount them.

To understand the position of Panfilo on the subject of sexuality and female consent, we must look outside the *Decameron*, to another “Panfilo” in a Boccaccian text: *L’Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*. This work presents a story with the same sexual ambiguity that we find in the tale of Alatiel. Fiammetta is a married woman whose extramarital lover, Panfilo, has just abandoned her. One of the episodes that has attracted more attention is her account of the first night with Panfilo, in which she claims that Panfilo raped her: “non io, ma tu se’ colpevole; il quale [...] me presa nella tacita notte sicura dormendo [...] prima nelle braccia m’avesti [...]. Io opposi le forze mie, come Iddio sa, quant’io potei”<sup>35</sup> ‘you are the culprit, not I, because you took me in the quiet of the night [...] when I was safely asleep [...] you took me first in your arms [...]. As god knows, I resisted as much as I could.’<sup>36</sup> She states she was sleeping, or half-asleep, similar to Alatiel, and that she tried to fight against Panfilo’s actions with all her strength. Notwithstanding her allegation, many critics have a different opinion on how the story really went. For instance, Michael Calabrese argues that in this text “Boccaccio has imagined a woman who imagines date rape, who tries to free herself of responsibility by depicting herself as the victim of male deceit and male force.”<sup>37</sup> According to Calabrese, Fiammetta is part of a tradition in which women could not overtly state their sexual desires, and the only respectable answer to a sexual offer is *no*.<sup>38</sup> Analyzing Fiammetta’s monologue, Calabrese claims that her *no* actually means *yes*, and that therefore she was consenting.

In making this claim, Calabrese compares Fiammetta’s monologue in the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta* with Galathea’s speech in the pseudo-Ovidian *Pamphilus, De amore*, widely popular in the Middle Ages and well-known to Boccaccio. While Fiammetta’s *no* means *yes*, Galathea’s *no* means *no*, and there are no possibilities for Pamphilus, the protagonist, to misinterpret it. There is no doubt that his actions are violent and that he uses

---

<sup>33</sup> Migiel 2003, 82.

<sup>34</sup> Migiel 2003, 72.

<sup>35</sup> Boccaccio 1994, 88.

<sup>36</sup> Boccaccio 1990, 63.

<sup>37</sup> Calabrese 1997, 34.

<sup>38</sup> Calabrese 1997, 37.

force to overcome Galathea.<sup>39</sup> To sum up, in the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*, Panfilo receives *no* as an answer, believes it might mean *yes*, and pushes his luck. In the *Pamphilus, De amore*, Pamphilus hears a *no*, he understands it as a *no*, but he decides to force himself on Galathea anyway. Now, it seems clear that whether the woman is willing or not, it doesn't make much difference for Panfilo/Pamphilus: in both cases he would act in the same way.

It is hard to believe that Boccaccio did not have these characters in mind when he chose the name for the narrator of these tales. Therefore, if the Panfilo of the *Decameron* is modeled after these other two Panfilos, for whom women's consent plays no role in their decision making, and if the male narrators of the *Decameron* imagine and portray women as always willing to engage in sexual intercourse, we probably should not place much trust in Panfilo's thoughts on Alatiel's consent during her sexual (mis)adventures.

With these parallels in mind, several passages in *Decameron* 2.7 cast doubt on Panfilo's reliability. Panfilo clearly states that Alatiel always joins men in their beds “senza alcuna contraddizione” (2.7.30) ‘with no resistance’ (113) and that she not only feels pleasure, but

non avendo mai davanti saputo con che corno gli uomini cozzano, [...] senza attendere d'essere a così dolci notti invitata, spesse volte se stessa invitava non con le parole, ché non si sapea fare intendere, ma co' fatti. (2.7.30)

never before having felt the horn men use to butt [...] not waiting a second time to be beckoned to such sweet nights again, she often invited herself — not with words, since she did not know how to make herself understood, but with actions. (113)

Panfilo shows us an Alatiel content with all her (mis)adventures: she doesn't entertain her lovers because she is forced to, but because once she tries the men's *horn*, she just can no longer live without it. It must be noted however, that Alatiel never vocally expresses the desire to sleep with any of the men she encounters, though she supposedly initiates their libido *co' fatti*, some acts or gestures of which the reader is never made aware. While words are more explicit, gestures require interpretation and the key for their deciphering belongs to men. For example, if Tereus, Panfilo, and all the men Alatiel encounters believe that clothes and *la meravigliosa arte* with which women try to ameliorate their natural beauty are a clear invitation to sexual intercourse, one could imagine what any simple gesture could lead them to do.

---

<sup>39</sup> Calabrese 1997, 31–33.

To be clear, I am not arguing that women cannot enjoy sex just as much as men do, or that there is anything negative about sleeping with multiple men. However, it seems more than a bit uncanny that Alatiel is always so happy to be passed from kidnappers, to strangers who are much older than she is, to murderers who have sex with her with their blood-stained hands. If she likes her (mis)adventures so much, how do we explain that the first time she speaks in direct discourse, responding to Antigono’s belief that she had drowned during a shipwreck, she says, “io vorrei bene che così fosse stato più tosto che avere avuta la vita la quale avuta ho” (2.7.97) ‘I would have preferred for my life to have ended that way rather than to have led<sup>40</sup> the life I have lived’ (123)? Her desire to be dead closely resembles that of Philomela who, after being raped “iugulum [...] parabat / spemque suae mortis viso conceperat ense” (6.553–54) ‘when she saw the sword / [...] offered her throat, hoping for death’ (6.639–40). Both women see death as preferable to the life they had been forced to live.

After Alatiel tells Antigono the story of her life following the shipwreck, “Antigono pietosamente a piagnere cominciò” (2.7.101) ‘out of pity, Antigono began to cry’ (123). We do not know what she says to him, since Panfilo carefully occludes her version. However, from the reaction of her old acquaintance, we must hypothesize that Alatiel’s opinion of her own experience is not as pleasant as Panfilo would lead the readers to believe. This omission of her story from the narration follows, once again, the example of Philomela’s tale. Philomela, unable to speak because “os mutum facti caret indice” (6.574) ‘mute lips cannot tell’ (6.664), nonetheless succeeds in letting her sister know about her situation by weaving “purpureas[...] notas filis [...] albis, / indicium sceleris” (6.577–78) ‘purple signs / Onto a white background, revealing the crime’ (6.666–67). We do not know exactly what is depicted on it since, as Elissa Marder notes, “the text does not specify whether the weaving describes the rape through pictures or words,” and the use of *signa* in the Latin text leaves it unclear.<sup>41</sup> We can deduce the content of the message only from Procne’s famous reaction. Just as in Ovid, in Alatiel’s story we are left only with the reaction of the listener. We will never know what precisely she tells Antigono, but, given all the similarities to Ovid’s text, it is clear that if we could listen to her version, her (mis)adventures might not seem very different from those of Philomela.

---

<sup>40</sup> The English phrasing *leading the life* gives Alatiel a sense of agency that is not present in the Italian text. In Italian, her life is something that has befallen her.

<sup>41</sup> Marder 1992, 160.

One might argue that it is not Panfilo who is unreliable, but Alatiel who is a liar in narrating her heartrending account. It might be so. But, if Boccaccio wanted to play with the misogynous tradition of women and their deceptive arts, why ever would he decide to do it through a character who hardly says a word? For example, as Calabrese claims, it is precisely Fiammetta's free-flowing and unrestrained use of language that robs her speech of any credibility.<sup>42</sup> In Alatiel's story instead, Panfilo suppresses the woman's only chance to tell her version: if Boccaccio wanted to present her as a liar, why elide her speech from the narration? Why instead doesn't he make her linguistically stumble and trip while she cunningly recounts her encounters, thus exposing to the reader and the audience her deceitful intentions? As Marcus has argued, fictive creations in the *Decameron* often possess a deceptive quality, but also the means to expose this deception.<sup>43</sup> By denying Alatiel the power of creation, and thus of deceiving, Boccaccio is not playing with the misogynous tradition, nor is he trying to portray Alatiel as a liar.

Other than saying that she would have preferred to die rather than to live the life she led, there is a second time in which Alatiel speaks in direct discourse: when she returns to her father Beminedab. In recounting everything that had happened during the four years in which she was absent, she narrates to her father a completely different story: that she spent all her time in a convent and that she was always very respected and honored. And, true, she deceives her father in order to be reaccepted by him and marry the king of Garbo, to whom she was promised before the shipwreck.<sup>44</sup> It behooves us to notice, however, that it is Antigono who instructs her in what she should say to her father. The reader cannot miss this fact since the narrative voice reiterates it twice. The first time, the emphasis is on the teaching role of Antigono who, "domandato da lei" (2.7.102) 'when she asked him' (123) how to return to her father and marry the king of Garbo "ordinatamente ciò che da far fosse le dimostrò" (2.7.102) 'he explained in detail what she had to do' (123). The choice of the adverb *ordinatamente* suggests that Antigono must have explained step-by-step what she needed to say. But even more importantly, the verb *domandato* reveals that she explicitly asks him for this explanation, as she alone would not be able to think of story that could deceive anybody. To make sure that this point is clear, the narrator says before Alatiel delivers her performance that "la donna, la quale ottimamente gli

---

<sup>42</sup> Calabrese 1997, 29.

<sup>43</sup> Marcus 1979, 23.

<sup>44</sup> We do not know if marrying the king of Garbo is even her desire. Surely, however, she wants to put an end to the downward spiral of events that followed her shipwreck.

ammaestramenti d'Antigono aveva tenuti a mente, appresso al padre così cominciò a parlare" (2.7.106) 'the young lady, who had memorized Antigono's instructions very well, began to speak to her father in this fashion' (124). If the first sentence showed Antigono's careful and patient teaching, this second one, equally as important, conveys the fact that she remembered everything *ottimamente*. Only because of Antigono is Alatiel able to deliver a deceitful speech that is *ordinatamente dimostrato* and *ottimamente tenuto a mente*.

Migiel's argument about Boccaccio's unreliable narrators explains why Panfilo adds the fact that it was actually Antigono who fabricated the lie excusing Alatiel from any responsibility. In her essay "Boccaccio and Women," she reminds us that when Boccaccio portrays unreliable narrators, he also often sabotages them. In order to warn his readers, he includes numerous contradictions in the text and has the narrators trip over their own inconsistencies. In her view, Boccaccio "expects his readers to be aware of how he handles subtexts, which frequently cast doubt on the narrator's assertions,"<sup>45</sup> therefore the reader must always actively engage with the text and the subtexts the story presents. If we read *Decameron* 2.7 as a work of sabotage that Boccaccio operates to unmask the unreliability of his narrator, all these contradictory elements of Alatiel's story become clear. Boccaccio makes Panfilo trip up and contradict himself several times in his story. The tale's very introduction, which warns women about the mortal dangers of wanting to be beautiful, is not really coherent with the pleasure that Panfilo says Alatiel experiences during her (mis)adventures.<sup>46</sup>

These contradictions and ambiguities remain visible also in the reactions of the listeners of the tale. At the beginning of the following day, the Primary Narrator says that because of Panfilo's story,

sospirato fu molto dalle donne per li varii casi della bella donna: ma chi sa che cagione moveva que' sospiri? Forse v'eran di quelle che non meno per vaghezza di così spesse nozze che per pietà di colei sospiravano. (2.8.2)

the ladies breathed many a sigh over the beautiful woman's various adventures; but who knows what caused their sighs? Perhaps some of them sighed no less because of their longing for such frequent embraces than because of their compassion for Alatiel. (127)

No one can tell why the listeners sigh — is it because they believe Panfilo's version of a lucky Alatiel and they want the same fortune, or because they

---

<sup>45</sup> Migiel 2015, 175.

<sup>46</sup> Elsa Filosa also notices the incongruity between Panfilo's claims in the introduction and the way in which the story develops. See Filosa 2012, 120.

can perceive the subtext and feel all the pain of her case?<sup>47</sup> From this comment it is clear that Boccaccio is playing with his readers. The intervention of the Primary Narrator here does not serve to resolve the ambiguity that the story creates, but rather to warn the reader not to believe everything the narrator says.

There are two contrasting versions of the novella: that of the narrator Panfilo, and that of Alatiel — or the odd scraps that remain of it. Panfilo, in fact, has deployed all the rhetorical stratagems a narrator could use to silence Alatiel and to coax the readers into accepting his interpretation of female sexuality: in his mind, women are always available to fulfill men's carnal needs. As is usually the case in rape culture, victims are often regarded with an eye of suspicion, as if either they are lying and nothing really happened, or they must have subconsciously intended to encourage the attackers. Alatiel's assertion that she would have preferred to die rather than to have been passed from man to man has been disregarded by the many readers/listeners of the story, or at least explained away as part of women's stereotypically deceptive behavior. Although many critics have already commented on Alatiel's artful deceit,<sup>48</sup> no one to my knowledge has ever questioned Panfilo's reliability here as a narrator. For this reason, I have relied on the intertextual resonance that Alatiel's story creates with that of Ovid's Philomela, a well-known and trusted victim. In this way, Philomela becomes Alatiel's second voice, lending her more credibility. In the end, it is always important to keep in mind what is said by whom, and even more so, if they come from someone who may be revealing an agenda on female sexuality. For though it might be true that *mute lips cannot tell*, it is our responsibility to be aware of whatever they may try to tell us.

RICCARDO SAMÀ

CORNELL UNIVERSITY

---

<sup>47</sup> Evelyn Birge Vitz might suggest a third reason for the women's sighs. She claims that women in the Middle Ages found certain scenes of rape entertaining and fantasized about it. Following this idea, the seven women in the *Decameron* may have realized that the men in the story have taken Alatiel by force and sigh because they fantasize about rape. See Vitz 1997.

<sup>48</sup> Just to cite one example, Taylor claims that this novella should be moved to the seventh Day, among those in which women play tricks on their husbands (Taylor 2001, 320).

## Works Cited

- Benedetti, Laura. 1992. "I silenzi di Alatiel." *Quaderni d'Italianistica* 13: 245–55.
- Bérard, Claude Cazalé. 1995. "Filoginia/Misoginia." In *Lessico critico decameroniano*. R. Bragantini and P. M. Forni, eds. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri. 116–41.
- Boccaccio, Giovanni. 1970. *De mulieribus claris*. V. Zaccaria, ed. Vol. 10 of *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*. Milan: Mondadori.
- . 1976. *Decameron*. V. Branca, ed. Vol. 4 of *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*. Milan: Mondadori.
- . 1982. Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella, trans. New York: New American Library.
- . 1990. *The Elegy of Lady Fiammetta*. M. Causa-Steindler and T. Mauch, eds. and trans. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1994. *L'Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*. C. Delcorno, ed. Vol. 5.2 of *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*. Milan: Mondadori.
- . 1998. *Genealogie Deorum Gentilium*. V. Zaccaria, ed. Vol 7.1 of *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*. Milan: Mondadori.
- . 2003. *Famous Women*. V. Brown, trans. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Calabrese, Michael A. 1997. "Feminism and the Packaging of Boccaccio's *Fiammetta*." *Italica* 74.1: 20–42.
- Cavallero, Daniela. 1998. "Alatiel e Zinevra: Il 'peso' del silenzio, la leggerezza dei 'vestiti'." *Romance Languages Annual* 9: 165–70.
- Fido, Franco. 2004. "The Tale of Ser Ciappelletto (I.1)." In *The Decameron First Day in Perspective*. E. B. Weaver, ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 59–76.
- Filosa, Elsa. 2012. *Tre studi sul De mulieribus claris*. Milan: Edizioni Universitarie LED.
- Gravdal, Kathryn. 1991. *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Kinoshita, Sharon and Jason Jacobs. 2007. "Ports of Call: Boccaccio's Alatiel in the Medieval Mediterranean." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37.1: 163–95.
- Marcus, Millicent Joy. 1979. *An Allegory of Form: Literary Self-Consciousness in the Decameron*. Saratoga: Anma Libri.
- . 1979b. "Seduction by Silence: A Gloss on the Tale of Masetto (III, I) and Alatiel (II, 7)." *Philological Quarterly* 58: 1–15.



- Marder, Elissa. 1992. “Disarticulated Voices: Feminism and Philomela.” *Hypatia* 7.2: 148–66.
- Migiel, Marilyn. 2003. *A Rhetoric of the Decameron*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- . 2015. “Boccaccio and Women.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Boccaccio*. G. Armstrong, R. Daniels and S. J. Milner, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 171–84.
- “*Ovide moralisé*.” *Poème du commencement du quatorzième siècle*. 1915–38. 5 vols. C. De Boer *et al*, eds. Amsterdam: Johannes Müller.
- Ovidius Naso, P. 1998. *Metamorphoses*. Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter.
- . 2010. *Metamorphoses*. S. Lombardo, tr. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co.
- Segre, Cesare. 1974. *Le strutture e il tempo*. Turin: Einaudi.
- . 1979. *Structures and Time: Narration, Poetry, Models*. J. Meddemen, tr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sharrock, Alison. 2002. “Gender and Sexuality.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*. P. Hardie, ed. 95–107.
- Taylor, Mark. 2001. “The Fortunes of Alatiel: A Reading of *Decameron* 2.7.” *Forum Italicum* 35.2: 318–31.
- Vitz, Evelyn Birge. 1997. “Rereading Rape in Medieval Literature: Literary, Historical, and Rhetorical Reflections.” *Romanic Review* 88.1: 1–26.