

The Invisibility of Rape in Boccaccio's *Decameron*

To discuss the topic of rape in a fourteenth-century text like Boccaccio's *Decameron* is to venture onto an uncertain terrain. The medieval notion of rape shows an unstable meaning on multiple levels — linguistic, juridical, cultural — and in the last forty years it has been the subject of new and intense attention, leading to a debate that can be contentious and difficult to navigate. First of all, in the Middle Ages, there existed no unequivocal term to define rape. In canon law, whose most important codification occurs in the twelfth century with the *Decretum Gratiani*, the term *raptus* means either abduction of a woman without her parents' consent or nonconsensual sex with an abducted woman.¹ Although Gratian strove to disentangle the notion of abduction from that of rape to account for situations in which these acts occur individually,² canon law lacks a specific term to denote forced coitus. Similarly, medieval vernacular languages have many periphrastic expressions to describe forced coitus — thus signaling at least the circulation of the concept — but not a univocal word to capture it. As Kathryn Gravdal observes in *Ravishing Maidens*, old European languages favor “periphrasis, metaphor, and slippery lexemic exchanges, as opposed to a clear and unambiguous signifier of sexual assault.”³ In the *Decameron*, for instance, the most common and straightforward verb to signal sexual assault is “sforzare,” whose first meaning is “to strive” or “to make an effort.” In the seventeen occurrences that “sforzare” has in the *Decameron* in various forms, only four refer to sexual assaults, making the use of this term for rape largely secondary if not metaphorical. The invisibility of rape in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which I will analyze through a close reading of some of the novellas, is thus first and foremost rooted in a

¹ Brundage 1987, 249.

² Sarah Russell carefully unravels Gratian's discussion to distinguish between forced coitus, abduction, forced marriage, and consensual marriage not approved by the family (Russell 2010, 17–30).

³ Gravdal 1991b, 2.

broader cultural context that is unable, or unwilling, to talk about rape unequivocally.

The second difficulty in talking about rape in the Middle Ages comes from the deep contextuality that this notion acquires in legal practice and consequently in culture. In *Law, Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, James Brundage observes that while medieval academic lawyers and legislators maintained that forced coitus was to be punished with equal penalties,⁴ royal and local courts and municipalities systematically failed to apply this principle. Between the twelfth and fifteenth century, each Italian city had completely discordant and disproportionate provisions for the crime of rape.⁵ The only consistent pattern was the significant variation of sentences depending on the class of origin of the victim and perpetrator, and the age and marital status of the victim. In his analysis of sex criminality in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Venice, Guido Ruggiero observes that “the victimization of children (*puellae*) was treated with a stern hand,” “wives, though much less important, were more valued than widows by the measure of penalties,” while “unmarried girls of marriageable age found their rapists penalized with little more than a slap on the wrist.”⁶ Furthermore, there was a stark asymmetry based on class⁷: “when rape struck down the social hierarchy, it could virtually disappear as a crime,” but “rapes that crossed social boundaries upward were quite another matter and entailed penalties of unique severity.”⁸ In Boccaccio’s Florence, the 1325 statute that prescribed the penalties for rape indicated that the penalty should be graduated according to the “*qualitatem et conditionem*” of the victim, namely her social status and reputation.⁹ Furthermore, although most secular legislation prescribed the death penalty for rape crimes — apparently stressing the gravity of the deed — light sentences were far more common in the actual practice of the courts. Many accused rapists were acquitted,¹⁰ which

⁴ Brundage 1987, 531.

⁵ Brundage describes in detail the difference in rape legislations in individual Italian cities (Brundage 1987, 531–32).

⁶ Ruggiero 1985, 96.

⁷ See also Brundage 1987, 530. In “Donne medievali tra fama e infamia: *leges e narrationes*,” Dinora Corsi explores the correlation between *famia/infamia* and social class, and the way in which the extension of the institute of *infamia* to lower classes struck hard against women who reported rape (Corsi 2010, 109).

⁸ Ruggiero 1985, 96.

⁹ Dorini 1916, 69.

¹⁰ Brundage writes that “in any event, punishment of convicted rapists was often much less severe than the statutes prescribed. Fines, imprisonment for brief periods, or some combination of the two were the commonest penalties [...] When compared with the savage

suggests that, outside law books, rape “was a minor crime of little importance to government or society.”¹¹

Rape in the Middle Ages was a circumscriptive and ambiguous concept, whose meaning could rapidly shift in time and space. In light of the renewed interest that feminist studies have brought to issues of the body, gender identities, and women’s voices and representations, in recent decades a fertile debate has developed among literary scholars around the notion of rape in the Middle Ages. On one hand, many feminist works¹² have juxtaposed the ambiguity of the medieval notion of rape with “the omnipresence of images of rape”¹³ in literature and the arts, arguing that legal laxness in protecting women from sexual violence is reflected, and at the same time produced, by pervasive representations of rape that rhetorically disfigure its violence, eliding women’s perspective and turning rape into a cultural fetish. On the other hand, this wave of feminist analyses has been contrasted by works that stress the incommensurability between contemporary and medieval notions of rape, casting all politically engaged discussions of medieval rape as anachronistic.

A brilliant archetype of the latter approach is Evelyn Birge Vitz’s “Re-reading Rape in Medieval Literature,” which argues against the critical trend of looking for ‘hidden’ rapes in medieval literary texts in order to denounce (male) distortions of the violent, immoral nature of the event.¹⁴ Vitz claims that the demand to represent rape “in a serious and straightforward fashion [...] ignores fundamental aspects of medieval esthetics”¹⁵ because it disregards that in medieval literature “the entire array of human suffering” — war, castration, sickness, death, rape — was “frequently treated comically and casually.”¹⁶ Arguing that “our radical dichotomy between compulsion

mutilations and death sentences routinely handed down for robbery and other kinds of assault, these were very mild punishments indeed” (Brundage 1987, 530). In Venice “a full 50 percent of all rape penalties fell into the minimal or mild categories; that is, the majority of such cases did not involve jail sentences of more than six months plus a 100-*lire di piccoli* fine. In fact, only 14 percent of the penalties required more than two years in jail or some major corporal punishment” (Ruggiero 1985, 93). In Florence, acquittal occurred in 50 percent of cases of consummated or attempted rape from 1325 to 1383 (Dorini 1916, 69).

¹¹ Ruggiero 1985, 93, 95.

¹² In considering the participants in this debate, I will mainly focus mainly on Higgins and Silver 1991; Gravdal 1991; Randall 1993; Robertson and Rose 2001.

¹³ Robertson and Rose 2001, 2.

¹⁴ In particular, Vitz refers to Gravdal 1991 and 1992, and to the works that inspired Gravdal’s positions, such as Coats 1993; Barnett 1993; and Higgins and Silver 1991.

¹⁵ Vitz 1993, 3.

¹⁶ Vitz 1993, 3.

and consent cannot, without anachronism, be applied to the medieval period,”¹⁷ Vitz maintains that exposing the intercourses of medieval literature as rapes is a historical stretch that overlooks medieval humor and sexuality.

Although I share Vitz’s caution in applying the contemporary category of rape to the *Decameron*, I believe that her interpretation of feminist analyses as a “demand for realism”¹⁸ is ungenerous.¹⁹ Studying the way in which “the literal violence against women was so often represented and too often easily passed over as merely metaphoric”²⁰ is not a demand for realism but rather a critical gesture worthy of interest. The fact that medieval people had a propensity to laugh at or enjoy the crudities of life does not mean that the literary, rhetorical and narrative devices employed to make laughter and titillation possible are not worthy of our attention. Although the contemporary West obviously has a greater, and different, sensitivity to certain themes than medieval culture, this does not imply that to speak facetiously of controversial topics is so foreign to us — think of stand-up comedy, mostly based on the principle of laughing at what you should not find funny — that we cannot even conceive of medieval erotism and humor, and therefore analyze the subjects rhetorically.

Furthermore, in this essay I shall argue that the *Decameron*’s treatment of non-consensual sex seems to contradict Vitz’s idea that in the Middle Ages “the entire array of human suffering was frequently treated comically and casually.”²¹ Indeed, in the *Decameron*, sexual violence, unlike other serious or scabrous topics, seems to undergo a very specific narrative reworking to be turned into laughter or erotic circumstance. In the first part of my essay, I consider the novellas in which Boccaccio’s narrators recount instances of rape. Only two novellas (1.9 and 3.7) describe sexual assaults by defining them as such, and they do so in a strangely concise and almost fleeting way, relegating rapes to unremarkable details. Considering that the *Decameron* is a text that deals mostly with amorous matters, and with a characteristic licentiousness that often overflows into the erotic and does not neglect crude topics (pestilence, suicide, murder, necrophilia), it is significant that the theme of rape is barely mentioned. The way sexual violence is (not) represented in these novellas allows us to identify in the *Decameron* a certain discomfort in calling rape by its name, an uneasiness that hardly

¹⁷ Vitz 1993, 23.

¹⁸ Vitz 1993, 3.

¹⁹ In their introduction to *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, Robertson and Rose offer a fine historically grounded response to some of Vitz’s arguments against feminist studies of medieval rape (Robertson and Rose, 2000, 6–7).

²⁰ Robertson and Rose 2000, 7.

²¹ Vitz 1993, 3.

resonates with Vitz’s idea that “Middle Ages laughed at just about everything.”²² The strange inconspicuousness of rape in the *Decameron* is even more glaring when juxtaposed with the abundance of detail and narrative centrality of the second category I consider, that of false rape allegations. Two stories of the Second Day (2.8 and 2.10) feature unfounded allegations of rape, giving the impression that threats of rape accusations are an easier, more agreeable, and less problematic topic than rapes themselves. Finally, in the last part of my essay I analyze the very wide spectrum of stories that feature non-consensual sexual intercourse, focusing in particular on three novellas of the Third Day (3.2, 3.6, 3.10). By supplementing the close reading of these novellas with legal sources, I will argue that although the sexual scenes in these novellas could not have fallen under a legal definition of rape, several tropes and narrative devices intervene to meticulously dispel the label of rape for the events narrated. The non-consensuality of these instances of sexual intercourse, rather than flaunted lightly and casually, seems to have to be expertly elided in order to produce erotic and comic situations.

My inquiry aims to show that in the *Decameron* nonconsensual sex can be enjoyed at a textual level only when its representation meets specific conditions. In all the novellas I consider, the violence and crudity of rape remains somehow absent, unpalpable, unreadable, while the notion of consent undergoes a constant reworking. Against Vitz, I want to prove that the medieval ambiguity of the notion of rape is not a reason to refrain from investigating its representation in the *Decameron*, but rather an incentive to do so. Boccaccio’s *Decameron* is written at the very beginning of a pivotal period — ranging from the Black Death of 1348 to the Reformation — for the conceptualization and legal definition of sex crimes, in which secular courts began for the first time to question the power of ecclesiastical courts over sexual behaviors.²³ Boccaccio studied canon law for approximately six years,²⁴ and he was thus aware of the power dynamics between ecclesiastical and secular courts as well as the legal issues surrounding the definitions of *raptus* and *consensus*. The *Decameron*, a work in which women, amorous themes and sexuality are foregrounded, is thus a privileged space for experimentation and negotiation of the boundaries between seduction and rape, between non-consensuality and erotic play. It is precisely the absence of a clear codification — both cultural and legal — of what did and did not constitute rape that allows us to look at Boccaccio’s novellas as a terrain in

²² Vitz 1993, 3.

²³ Russell 11; Brundage 546–47.

²⁴ Delmolino 208, 134.

which these notions find a narrative and literary counterpart and the ambiguity of these concepts is strategically employed for literary purposes.

Rape is a collateral detail of the plot in Elissa's extraordinarily short novella on the first day. Her story features a woman who is assaulted in Cyprus on her way back from Jerusalem and tries to seek justice from the King of Cyprus. Elissa recounts the incident with these succinct words: "avvenne che una gentil donna di Guascogna in pellegrinaggio andò al Sepolcro, donde tornando, in Cipri arrivata, da alcuni scellerati uomini villanamente fu oltreggiata" (1.9.4) ("It happened that a gentlewoman of Gascony made a pilgrimage to the Sepulchre, and having arrived in Cyprus, on her return journey, she was brutally assaulted by a pack of ruffians," 62).²⁵ As Amedeo Quondam observes in a footnote to the word "oltreggiata," in Elissa's formulation the nature of the outrage the woman suffered remains opaque. "[Lei viene] oltraggiata," Quondam writes, "ma non è detto come, ma considerando gli attori ('scellerati uomini') e il modo ('villanamente'), potrebbe essere una violenza carnale"²⁶ ("[she is] assaulted, but it is not said how, but considering the actors ('dastardly men') and the manner ('cravenly'), it could be rape").

The vagueness, almost reticence, with which the novella presents the incident is reflected in the way this sentence has been translated into English. McWilliam translates this line as "she was brutally assaulted by a pack of ruffians" (62), thus keeping the nature of the crime vague. A thief can be "brutal," and "ruffians" can be general criminals. The same semantical neutrality is found in Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella's and J. G. Nichols' translations, that respectively provide "she was villainously attacked by some wicked men" (Boccaccio 2002, 63) and "she was viciously attacked by a gang of thugs" (Boccaccio 2009, 53). In Guido Waldman's translation, "some blackguards took the basest advantage of her" (Boccaccio 1993, 57), a veiled reference to sexual violence can be inferred. Indeed, what can be "the basest advantage" if not a sexual assault? Only Wayne Rebhorn's translation makes the nature of the assault utterly unambiguous. With an explicitness that clearly goes against the intentions of the text, but that helps to see through it, Rebhorn translates "[she] was raped [...] by a band of ruffians" (Boccaccio 2013, 66).

The ambiguous language employed by Elissa is not the only reason why this novella's rape remains invisible. Also contributing to the opacity of the assault's meaning is the way Elissa's narration diverts attention from the

²⁵ The Italian text of the *Decameron* is drawn from Branca's edition (Boccaccio 2010); unless otherwise noted, the English translation is that of G. H. McWilliam (Boccaccio 1995).

²⁶ See the edition of the *Decameron* by Quondam *et al.* (Boccaccio 2016).

incident. First, the story does not develop the woman as a character at all. We do not know her name; she is just an anonymous “gentlewoman from Gascony” (62). Her utter insubstantiality as a character prevents us from identifying with her and thus lingering on her perspective of events. In fact, the novella does not dwell at all on the woman’s experience of violence, but rather focuses on her attempt to receive revenge from the king of Cyprus. As the author’s rubric suggests, Elissa’s tale is ultimately a story about a man: “Il re di Cipri, da una donna di Guascogna trafitto, di cattivo valoroso diviene” (1.9.1) (“The King of Cyprus is transformed, on receiving a sharp rebuke from a lady of Gascony, from a weakling into a man of courage,” 61). The fulcrum of the story, indeed, lies in the woman’s clever ability to stimulate the indifference and weakness of the king of Cyprus. In the development of the narrative, sexual violence is potentially replaceable with any other crime; its specific nature has no bearing on the unfolding of the story. Because there is no sustained attention to the perpetrators of the rape or to the woman’s response to the attack, and because the woman could have sought redress for a crime other than rape, the sexual violence of this novella remains strangely immemorable and out of sight.

The same role of irrelevant detail belongs to a rape described in *Decameron* 3.7, told by Emilia. While the story of the gentlewoman of Gascony is so lightning fast that the happening of the rape remains utterly out of focus, the novella about the adventure of Tedaldo is so long and complex that the mention of sexual violence dissolves into the narrative. Tedaldo has a happy relationship with the married Madonna Ermellina, when one day the woman suddenly stops returning his attention. Tedaldo is distraught and leaves Florence for a period, but upon his return he discovers that he is believed to be dead and that Ermellina’s husband Aldobrandino has been sentenced to death for his murder. Once returned to his inn, Tedaldo witnesses the involuntary confession of those who believe they killed him:

Vide una giovane assai bella tener questo lume, e verso lei venir tre uomini che del tetto quivi eran discesi; e dopo alcuna festa insieme fattasi, disse l’uno di loro alla giovane: “Noi possiamo, lodato sia Idio, oggimai star sicuri, per ciò che noi sappiamo fermamente che la morte di Tedaldo Elisei è stata provata da’ fratelli addosso a Aldobrandino Palermini, e egli l’ha confessata e già è scritta la sentenza: ma ben si vuol nondimeno tacere, per ciò che, se mai si risapesse che noi fossimo stati, noi saremmo a quel medesimo pericolo che è Aldobrandino.” (3.7.25)

[He] caught sight of a very pretty girl carrying the light and being met by three men who had descended from the roof. They all exchanged certain greetings, then one of the men addressed the girl as follows: “We’ve nothing more to fear, thank God, because we’ve learnt for certain that Tedaldo Elisei’s brothers have proved he was killed by Aldobrandino Palermini,

who has made a confession. The sentence has already been signed, but all the same we'll have to keep this thing quiet, because if it ever leaks out that we did it, we'll be in the same sorry plight as Aldobrandino." (564–65)

Only after about ten pages of convoluted dialogues and events, in which Tedaldo has a very long conversation with Madonna Ermellina, delivers a long-winded invective against priests, speaks with her husband, and finally reveals the deception to the senior official of the law court, does the reader learn that probably the “very pretty girl” Tedaldo saw from the window had been raped. The three murderers of the fake Tedaldo, interrogated about the reason of the crime, “dissero per ciò che egli alla moglie dell’un di loro, non essendovi essi nell’albergo, aveva molta noia data e volutala sforzare a fare il voler suo” (3.7.77) (“said it was because he had been pestering one of their wives whilst they were away from the inn, and that he had tried to ravish her,” 580). No details are added to this brief description of the violence, which is told by unnamed characters about an equally nameless woman. In retrospect, the “very pretty girl” could therefore be the wife of one of the murderers, whose abuse prompted the crime. The character of the “very pretty girl” is introduced in the span of a few lines as a mere prop to build the scene in which Tedaldo discovers the deception behind the arrest of Aldobrandino. She does not speak and does not perform any action; only her prettiness is mentioned. The absolute vagueness of the event is reinforced by the fact that we do not know for certain that the woman glimpsed by Tedaldo is indeed the molested wife. In a game of telescopic distancing, the sexual assault is increasingly removed from the reader’s focus, faded into an overlapping of voices and missing information.

The murderers of the fake Tedaldo are quickly executed — without any mention of reparation for the woman, who in addition to the ravishment is now also a widow. Aldobrandino is released and Tedaldo is reunited with Ermellina and her family. In the last lines of the novella the mystery of the mistaken identity that led everyone to believe Tedaldo dead is rapidly revealed. One day a group of soldiers from Lunigiana addresses Tedaldo as “Faziuolo.” The soldiers are asked to describe this Faziuolo and “costoro il dissero, e trovossi appunto così essere stato come costoro dicevano; di che, tra per questo e per gli altri segni, riconosciuto fu colui che era stato ucciso essere stato Faziuolo e non Tedaldo” (3.7.100) (“their description fitted the facts so precisely, that what with this and other indications, it became quite obvious that the murdered man was not Tedaldo, but Faziuolo,” 586). The episode is then quickly dismissed as a curious coincidence, in which the fact that Faziuolo — labeled as a “murdered man” and not a rapist — forced himself on a woman seems to have vanished from the narrative fabric.

The violence narrated by Emilia, therefore, is not only in itself completely secondary and irrelevant to the main plot, but its fundamental atomic elements — the subject, the action and the object — are chaotically dispersed in the course of a very long novella. We encounter the character of a “very pretty girl,” which is barely sketched out, and whose cursory entrance is easily forgotten after an interminable sequence of dialogues. Suddenly, we come to know that the “very pretty girl” was, perhaps, the victim of a rape that is described several pages after her appearance. Finally, the assailant appears at the end of the story, already dead for some time and therefore similarly unsubstantial. The narrative of the rape is fragmented, temporally disordered and dispersed in shreds into a prolix story. Again in *Decameron* 3.7, rape is narrated so flimsily and haphazardly as to be barely noticeable.

The *Decameron* thus openly mentions the act of rape exclusively in two novellas, and it does so in a strangely concise, oblique way. The succinctness of Boccaccio’s description of rape is remarkably akin to the language of rape persecution in the court records of the time. In *The Boundaries of Eros*, Guido Ruggiero observes that in fourteenth-century Venetian court records, “the language of rape was curiously distant and antiseptic.”²⁷ This laconicity is neither a form of discretion nor a general feature of court writing. Rather, there is a stark asymmetry between the records of sodomy trials, in which “the sexual aspects of the deed were recorded with considerable physical details,”²⁸ and descriptions of rape that are so vague that “the records are unclear whether the rapist actually succeeded.”²⁹ The same phenomenon is recorded by Gravdal in the ecclesiastic court of Cerisy, in which the scribes “minimalize the representation of rape almost to the point of dismissing its violent character, through clinical and distant summary”³⁰ and the vagueness of these records is “so consistent that it eventually raises the suspicion that the resulting ambiguity is deliberate.”³¹ These courts’ language to describe rape cannot but recall the vagueness with which Elissa recounts the misadventures of the woman of Gascony, reflected in the discordance of the English translations of 1.9, and the role of insignificant detail that rape plays in 3.7. Rather than being recounted, the rapes mentioned by Elissa and Emilia seem to be obscured by the text itself, kept at a germinal state of a narrative that finds no true fulfillment.

²⁷ Ruggiero 1985, 90.

²⁸ Ruggiero 1985, 90.

²⁹ Ruggiero 1985, 89.

³⁰ Gravdal 1991a, 216.

³¹ Gravdal 1991a, 217.

Ruggiero and Gravdal agree on the fact that concision and vagueness collaborate to “make minimal penalties easier to impose,” because “a close physical description of what individual rapes entailed might well have added considerable weight to [...] the penalties.”³² Similarly, it could be argued that the unusual reticence that Boccaccio shows in discussing rape in the *Decameron* is motivated by a desire not to burden the readers’ experience with something that would ruin the delightful, amusing character of the work. While suicide, murder, violence and prevarication of all kinds fit nimbly and gracefully into the work’s pleasantness, rape seems to be completely unassimilable. Rape alone threatens to crumble the literary illusion and produce an aesthetic failure of the work. The invisibility of rape in the *Decameron* is thus first and foremost the impossibility — which Boccaccio shares with contemporary courts — of accounting for what rape is, describing it, making it the center of a story.

The strange inconspicuousness of rape in the *Decameron* is even more glaring when juxtaposed with the second way in which the theme of sexual violence appears in the *Decameron*, namely as a fiction used by women to threaten men or punish them. False accusations of rape appear in two novellas of the Second Day, dedicated to “chi, da diverse cose infestato, sia oltre alla sua speranza riuscito a lieto fine” (2.11.9) (“those who after suffering a series of misfortunes are brought to a state of unexpected happiness,” 311). In *Decameron* 2.8, the “misfortune” that befalls the extraordinarily talented, beautiful and courteous Count of Antwerp, utterly destroying his status and the lives of him and his loved ones, is precisely a false rape allegation. Elissa recounts that at the height of his career and success, the Count arouses the amorous passion of the wife of the king’s son. Once rejected by the faithful Count, the woman retaliates by shouting at the top of her voice “Aiuto, aiuto! Ché ’l conte d’Anguersa mi vuol far forza” (2.8.22) (“Help! Help! The Count of Antwerp is trying to ravish me!, 435). This speech act has extremely dire consequences for the Count: his honor is ruined, his possessions confiscated, and a bounty placed on his head. Forced to flee and reduced to poverty, the Count is obliged to abandon his children and live a life of misery and loneliness. The unfounded accusation of rape represents not only the Count’s “misfortune,” but also what brings the Count to “a state of unexpected happiness.” After many years and vicissitudes, indeed, the woman who accused the Count falls seriously ill and confesses “ciò che per lei a gran torto il conte d’Anguersa ricevuto avea” (2.8.88) (“the great wrong that had been perpetrated on the Count of Antwerp,” 447). Again, her words completely change the Count’s life, bringing him to a better position than

³² Ruggiero 1985, 90.

that of the beginning of the tale: he is “in ogni suo ben rimesso, e maggior fattolo che fosse già mai [...] E esso infino alla morte visse in Parigi più gloriosamente che mai” (2.8.10) (“reinstated in all his lands and property, and granted higher rank than he had ever had before,” and he ends his days “covering himself with ever greater glory,” 451).

In *Decameron* 2.10, Dioneo playfully reverses the dramatic story of the Count of Antwerp, employing a mock accusation of rape as a tactic that brings a character to “unexpected happiness.” Here we do not have a knight faithful to his master at the cost of his own life, but a woman, Bartolomea, dissatisfied with the sexual performance of her husband Ricciardo da Chinzica. Captured by the dashing pirate Paganino, Bartolomea devises a stratagem to stay with him and enjoy the pleasures of sex. When Ricciardo shows up at Paganino’s house to get his wife back and asks to speak with her in private, Bartolomea explains to him in detail why she does not wish to return home and concludes with these words: “e per ciò, come più tosto potete, v’andate con Dio, se non che io griderò che voi mi vogliate sforzare” (2.10.41) (“Now, good-bye, and go away as quickly as you can, because if you don’t, I’m going to scream that you’re trying to rape me”).³³ This is, again, a rape accusation that has the power to leave a man completely powerless. Ricciardo is forced to go back without his wife and the two lovers live together happily until the end of their days.³⁴

The differences at the narrative level between the two actual rapes (1.9, 3.7) and the two (threatened or actual) allegations of rape (2.8, 2.10) allow us to further understand how sexual violence remains invisible in the *Decameron*. If in *Decameron* 1.9 and 3.7 rape is strangely absent in its presence, in *Decameron* 2.8 and 2.10 rape is openly present only in its absence, as a pretense. Whereas in the former novellas’ case, the female characters experiencing violence are barely sketched and their experience of violence is completely left out, in the two stories on the Second Day long dialogues delve into the reasons why the two women decide to feign a sexual assault. The two characters are carefully drawn and characterized physically and psychologically. Furthermore and more important, if the two real rapes are

³³ Rebhorn trans. in Boccaccio 2013, 195. For the translation of this passage, I rely on Rebhorn’s version because in McWilliam’s translation the idea of sexual violence is significantly scaled down. McWilliam translates “and if you don’t clear off quickly I shall scream for help and claim you were trying to molest me” (482), therefore inaccurately turning “sforzare” (“raping”) into “molesting.”

³⁴ Russell provides a reading of *Decameron* 3.7 in light of the concept of *raptus* as forced abduction and rape. In line with the third category of rapes I analyze, she points out how Dioneo retrospectively constructs Bartolomea’s consent to the abduction and sexual act with Paganino, turning their relationship into a happy marriage (Russell 2010, 65–68).

nothing more than details of no value to the development of the story, the two threats of rape accusations are real narrative pivots, turning points that allow the plot to develop from luck to misfortune and vice versa. The discomfort and reluctance with which Elissa and Emilia talk about actual rape disappears entirely in the case of rape allegations. Reading these four novellas in juxtaposition, one gets the impression that only when rape does not happen can it become successfully integrated into the narrative. But in this way, the very meaning of rape is completely displaced: turning from a man's deed into a woman's weapon, rape becomes something else, and its phenomenality is meticulously obfuscated.

Between the two instances in which rape is signaled as such and the two novellas featuring false rape allegations, the *Decameron* offers a vast and nuanced range of sexual scenes that contemporary readers would find problematic because of their lack of consent, but that are not presented or defined as rapes by Boccaccio's narrators. In particular, I will focus my analysis on three novellas from the Third Day (3.2, 3.6, 3.10), dedicated to "chi alcuna cosa molto da lui desiderata con industria acquistasse o la perduta ricoverasse" (3.intro.1) ("people who by dint of their own efforts have achieved an object they greatly desired, or recovered a thing previously lost," 488). Interestingly, the *objects* or *things* mentioned in the topic of the day turn out to be exclusively bodies, that constitute the objects of the characters' desires and efforts. Sexual desire is the real protagonist of these mischievous stories, and the ten narrators present it as a natural, joyful and essentially harmless drive that circumnavigates social and institutional boundaries such as marriage and celibacy. Despite the playful and innocent character that these stories attribute to carnal love, in some of the Third Day's novellas it is possible to identify 'stratagems' to satisfy sexual desire that nowadays we would not hesitate to define as rape. In 3.1 some nuns decide to take sexual advantage of a man they believe is mentally handicapped, in 3.2, 3.6 and 3.9, the protagonists resort to the expedient of pretending to be someone else to sleep with the desired person, while in 3.10 the fourteen-year old Alibech is deceived into believing that sexual intercourse is a means of pleasing God. In all these cases, the sexual act is planned and architected as non-consensual and it is by successfully overcoming the resistance of their objects of desire, that the characters prove their wit.

Wondering whether these sex scenes would or would not be perceived as rapes by their medieval readers is fruitless, since it would mean applying a contemporary understanding of the issue to a cultural body which rejects the question as alien. As medieval literary examples, legal definitions and

their historical applications show, the fact that an instance of sexual intercourse is not consensual is not always (and is not often) a sufficient reason to recognize it as rape. As argued above, rape in the Middle Ages is a deeply contextual notion, whose meaning changes according to the age, social class, and marital status of the victim, and which has much more to do with the system of relationships and kinship that rape outrages, than with the idea of violence towards a legal person. However, the circumstantial nature of the medieval notion of rape offered a fertile terrain for developing, both in legal and literary fictions,³⁵ a prolific and multifaceted tradition of texts that linger in the representation of equivocal sexual intercourse, and, as feminist critics claim, naturalize, rationalize, and make enjoyable non-consensual sex.³⁶ It is precisely by playing with ambiguous, or misplaced, depictions of consent, that the novellas on the Third Day produce genuine *delectatio*. The erotic pleasurability and the comic effect of the text arise from

³⁵ The codification of sex crimes is marked by a fascinating contamination between literary and legal texts. Analyzing the *Registre de Saint-Martin*, Gravdal observes that in the recording of rape trials, “the scribes cast their text in the stylistic and narrative codes available to them in their culture” achieving “a poetic troping of rape reminiscent of that of the [genre of the] *pastourelles*” (Gravdal 1991a, 221). Delmolino recognizes the literary quality of the “highly improbable (but decidedly memorable) confluence of scandalous events” (Delmolino 2018, 135) in Gratian’s *causae*, hypothetical scenarios that serve to highlight legal conundrums. Furthermore, both Delmolino and Russell discuss the influence of Gratian’s legal fictions on Boccaccio’s representation of marriage and consent (Delmolino 2018; Russell 2010, 31–69).

³⁶ “Medieval law, like medieval literature, creates a generous space for the cultivation of discursive strategies that rationalize male violence against women” (Gravdal 1991a, 223); “One of the feminist strategies evident in this collection is to show how art and criticism share the well-documented bias of rape law, where representations of rape after the event are almost always framed by a masculine perspective premised on men’s fantasies about female sexuality and their fears of false accusation, as well as their codified access to and possession of women’s bodies” (Higgins and Silver 1991, 2); “Medieval literature borrows from legal laxness regarding rape, legitimizing narrative reliance on sexual violence. Similarly, legal transcriptions imitate in style and content the formulation of the rape scenario as it is fictionally evoked [...] Rape becomes construed as seduction, a semantically-acceptable scenario. The male ability to appropriate and manipulate language imposes rape as acceptable, even titillating, seduction” (Randall 1993, 218); “Male writers have altered the importance of rape in their texts by rhetorically eliding women’s protests and resistance, by replacing women’s voices with the words of male discourses on female sexuality, and by deflecting the violence of the act itself — letting it hide under a rubric of playfulness, seduction or the euphemism ‘ravishment’” (Barnett 1993, 145); “We urge the readers to face squarely the literal violence against women so often represented and too often easily passed over as merely metaphoric in Western art, while stressing our need to scrutinize the ways in which these representations reveal the deep structures of cultures that tolerate rape” (Robertson and Rose 2001, 7).

sexual scenes that, on the one hand, allude sufficiently to rape to offer its exciting prohibition to the readers' palate, but that, on the other hand, meticulously dispel the possibility of being read and recognized as rapes.

It is essential to remark that my analysis does not develop around the novellas of the Third Day because of the lack of consent in the sexual acts they feature — in itself a detail that is neither striking nor significant — but rather because of the narrator's commitment to prove that these scenes *are not* rapes. A Latin medieval saying teaches that *excusatio non petita, accusatio manifesta* — unsolicited justification, manifest accusation. Precisely because of the narrative effort employed to dispel the label of rape, these novellas engage in a profound way with the debates, discourses, and tropes surrounding the medieval notion of rape. Indeed, every time a character uses a stratagem to have non-consensual sexual intercourse, the narrator intervenes to construct a sort of retrospective consent, to clarify that the victims are not really displeased by the situation, that they would have consented to the sensual act anyway. The retrospective construction of consent is certainly not a Boccaccian invention, but a well-established paradigm of medieval comic/erotic literature. Gravdal, for instance, analyzes the timing of the switch from forced coitus to a joyous and humoristic finale in the Old French lyric genre of the pastourelle:

Just as the text reaches the point at which the harshness of a literal depiction of rape could disconcert or culpabilize the listener and inspire sympathy for the female character, it veers off, changing tone to undercut the violence. In a slapstick ending, the panting shepherdess thanks the knight for raping her and asks him to return soon. The listener is never allowed to stop and contemplate the violation in any literal way. The joyous verses that follow the assault confuse the reader and render the rape scene wholly ambiguous.³⁷

While the novellas on the Third Day present much more ambiguous intercourses than the pastourelles, the two examples function according to the same narrative mechanism. Both in the pastourelles and in Boccaccio's tales, consent is not presented as a precondition of the sexual act, but, on the contrary, as a consequence of it. Although at the logical level the distinction between eroticism/comic gag and forced coitus is compromised, at the narrative level this surreptitious reversal remains imperceptible, leaving the text immaculate and exclusively pleasurable.

The reason why these narratives try to render non-consensuality illegible is linked to the literary aim of the text, that is, to amuse readers. In the universe of the *Decameron* (as well as in contemporary culture), a fine line

³⁷ Gravdal 1991b, 17.

separates what is recognized and judged as rape, and what belongs to the domain of sexual banter, of unconventional eroticism, of gendered performance play. However thin, often almost indistinguishable, the line separating the two domains may be, rape and pleasure, rape and laughter, are mutually exclusive. As the laconic treatment of rape in *Decameron* 1.9 and 3.7 suggests, what is openly recognized as rape cannot be harmoniously integrated into a text aimed at *delectatio*. Consequently, forbidden scenes of erotic pleasure can be enjoyed and presented as enjoyable only if non-consensuality is openly denied and disavowed, and thus at the same time hidden and made invisible.³⁸ These novellas therefore play carefully and cleverly with the medieval ambiguity of the notion of rape, and they erect their literary palatability on the interplay between forced coitus and erotic play.

The three novellas of the Third Day (3.2, 3.6, 3.10) share a crucial detail in the unfolding of events: the sexual encounters, although not consensual, are not induced through the use of violence. All medieval definitions of rape include an attestable use of force as a necessary condition. Brundage observes that the *Decretum Gratiani*, for instance, carefully distinguished between rape, “where violence was used to secure the attacker’s will,” and seduction, “where a girl was induced by guile and promises to agree to illicit sexual relations,” and he concludes that “violence was thus a necessary element in the offense of rape.”³⁹ Similarly, the French customary law writer Beaumanoit deems that “the victim must at least show that she had protested, that she has attempted to escape, and that her abductor had threatened her life.”⁴⁰ By describing stratagems that circumnavigate the use of violence — mistaken identity in 3.2 and 3.6, and a deception about the nature of the sexual act in 3.10 — Boccaccio immediately places the actions narrated outside of what is sanctioned by law as rape. However, these legal definitions of rape do not necessarily cover all cases that may be culturally perceived as problematic. In a passage of *Le Livre de la cité des dames* widely quoted in works on medieval rape, Christine de Pizan defends women from the accuse to desire rape with these words:

I am certain that there are plenty of beautiful women who are virtuous and chaste and who know how to protect themselves well from the *entrapments of deceitful men*. I am therefore troubled and grieved when men argue that many women want to be raped and that it does not bother them

³⁸ A psychoanalytical interpretation of literary mechanisms that make the enjoyment of taboos acceptable appears in Holland 1968.

³⁹ Brundage 1987, 250.

⁴⁰ In Brundage 1987, 470.

at all to be raped by men even when they *verbally protest*. (emphasis mine)⁴¹

Christine de Pizan discusses rape openly without resorting to any image of the use of force either by the perpetrator — who is “deceitful” and forces himself through “entrapments” — or by the victim — whose protest is simply verbal. This excerpt suggests again the blurriness and contextuality of the medieval ideas of rape, and partially explain why, in Boccaccio’s novellas, the lack of physical violence might not be enough to dispel the anti-aesthetic effect of rape on the text. *Decameron* 3.2, 3.6 and 3.10 describe situations so convoluted and far-fetched as to escape any legal definition. Nevertheless, the stratagems the narrators employ to remove the shadow of rape from the narrated facts suggest that Boccaccio plays precisely with the improbability of the situation he is recounting to create a virtual space in which to experiment with rape fantasies and test the boundaries between consensuality and non-consensuality.

In the second novella of the Third Day, Pampinea tells the story of the groom of Agilulf, the king of the Lombards, who, having fallen in love with his master’s wife, one night pretends to be Agilulf to be able to sleep with her. First, the groom’s decision is presented as having no alternative: Pampinea tells us that “più volte seco, da questo amor non potendo disciogliersi, diliberò di morire” (3.2.9) (“since he was unable to rid himself of his passion, he kept telling himself that he would have to die,” 506). The idea that the violent and irresistible nature of amorous feeling is a rationale for nonconsensual sex is a *topos* of medieval literature. Analyzing tropes that recur “almost obsessively” in medieval descriptions of falling in love (love as attack, prison, illness, madness, potion), Vitz argues that “in the Middle Ages, love was most often conceived of as a violent experience that happened to you against your will,” from which she concludes “that some lovers might, then, use a measure of ‘force’ to attain their ends — to carry out the desires that Love had ‘forced’ upon them — might not, in this assault-based concept of love, have been seen as altogether surprising.”⁴² Although Vitz purports to discourage the reading of rape in the Middle Ages as “troped,” her fine analysis of this specific example seems to have precisely the opposite effect. Gravdal defines a “trope” as “a literary device that presents an event in such a way that it heightens figurative elements and manipulates the reader’s ordinary response,” with the effect to make “the mimesis of rape

⁴¹ Christine de Pizan 1982, 160.

⁴² Vitz 1997, 22. Interestingly, this comment by Vitz is at odds with the emphasis on the use of force in the legal definitions of rape given above. This contradiction again illuminates the ambiguity of the notion of rape in the Middle Ages.

tolerable.”⁴³ Vitz’s examples of the metaphorical depiction of love as an overpowering, invincible force to which human will is totally subservient, falls precisely within Gravdal’s characterization of the tropes that rationalize and thus disfigure rape.⁴⁴ A similar presentation of the rationale for rape, even if inflected in religious terms, appears also in the legal language of rape persecution. Ruggiero reports that in mid-fourteenth century Venice rapists were described as “governed by an evil desire” and later by a “diabolical spirit.”⁴⁵ Commenting on the shift from one label to the other, he points out that “this substitution might seem to signal an attempt to diminish personal responsibility; in a way, an outside diabolic force had replaced the individual’s own evil desires.”⁴⁶ From the beginning, Pampinea’s story frames the groom’s passion within a literary trope aimed at rationalizing rape, which not only immediately disavows his accountability, but also signals Pampinea’s implicit necessity to justify the actions of her character. Presented as the only alternative to the groom’s suicide, the groom’s sexual intercourse with Teudelinga seems to find a sort of convincing justification even before it takes place.

Pampinea’s *excusatio non petita* for the groom’s deeds continues in the unfolding of the story. After discovering the groom’s ruse, the wise king considers the reasons why it is best not to reveal to the queen that she has been the victim of this horrible deception.⁴⁷ The King decides to keep her in the dark because “di che molte cose nate sarebbono, per le quali egli avrebbe a torto contristata la donna e datale materia di disiderare altra volta quello che già sentito avea” (3.2.19) (“this would only have led to complications, upsetting the lady when she was blameless and sowing the seeds of a desire, on her part, to repeat the experience,” 508). Although only in the form of the king’s assumption, the novella suggests that the queen may, in hind-

⁴³ Gravdal 1991b, 13.

⁴⁴ It is remarkable that even today, many media outlets use the same trope to talk about rape and femicide, putting at the center of the narrative the insane and uncontrollable passion of the perpetrator. Vagnoli 2022 addresses the Italian context.

⁴⁵ Ruggiero 1985, 90–91.

⁴⁶ Ruggiero 1985, 90–91.

⁴⁷ Observing that Pampinea introduces her novella as a tale about the importance of discretion to avoid shame, in *The Ethical Dimension of the Decameron*, Marilyn Migiel claims that “readers have missed the fact that this story is really about wisdom and discretion, and especially about the king’s wisdom and discretion” (Migiel 2015, 46). If the focus of the novella is indeed on the discretion (on the part of the king and the groom) to keep a problematic sexual intercourse secret, the novella itself seems to reflect meta-narratively on the power of narration to render events invisible and to argue for the necessity to bury and silence rape.

sight, consent to sexual intercourse with the servant. This suspicion is reinforced by the initial description of the groom as “da troppo più che da così vil mestiere, e della persona bello e grande così come il re fosse” (3.2.5) (“gifted out of all proportion to his very humble calling,” and, more importantly “as tall and handsome as the King himself,” 505). What is the point of describing the groom’s beauty, if not to suggest in advance that the queen might be happy, and therefore ideally consenting, to the deception against her? The strange expression “bello e grande così come il re” does not simply serve to lend credibility to the exchange between the two (how could an equal level of beauty convince the queen, in the dark, to be with her husband?) but rather to surreptitiously dispel the shadow of sexual abuse, to prompt the reader to find the novella pleasantly mischievous rather than disturbing.

The sixth and tenth novellas of the Third Day use the same narrative device to drive ambiguous sexual scenes into pleasurable and cheerful closure. In other words, these stories build ‘retrospective consent’ by showing the development of consensual relationship following the non-consensual intercourse. In the novella told by Fiammetta, Ricciardo Mutolo is in love with Catella, a married woman who is extremely jealous of her husband. In order to be able to sleep with her, Ricciardo invents that Catella’s husband Filippello is courting his wife, and that he has asked her to meet him in a bagnio. Ricciardo convinces Catella to try to catch Filippello red-handed by going to the appointment with Filippello and pretending to be his (Ricciardo’s) wife; Ricciardo then welcomes Catella into the darkness of the bath and has sex with her. Catella delivers a lively speech against what she believes to be her husband, in which, scolding him, she extensively reveals that she enjoyed the intercourse:

Can disleale che, credendosi in braccio avere una donna strana, m’ha più di carezze e d’amorevolezze fatte in questo poco tempo che qui stata son con lui, che in tutto l’altro rimanente che stata son sua. Tu se’ bene oggi, can rinnegato, stato gagliardo, che a casa ti suogli mostrare così debole e vinto e senza possa! (3.5.35–36)

A faithless cur, who thinks he has a strange woman in his arms, and lavishes more caresses and amorous attention upon me in the brief time I have spent with him here than in the whole of the rest of our married life. You unprincipled lout, I must say you have given a splendid display of manly vigour here today, in contrast with the feeble, worn-out, lack-lustre manner that you always adopt in your own house. (555–56)

This outburst has the comic effect of revealing Catella’s husband’s lack of “manly vigour,” while at the same time it begins to construct in retrospect the missed consent of their intercourse. How can Catella be a victim if she

enjoyed the intercourse more than she did in all the years of marriage, the text seems to ask cunningly. This ambiguous game of pleasure and non-consensuality continues until the end of the novella. Before revealing his identity to Catella, in fact, Ricciardo subdues her: “recatasela in braccio e presala bene sì che partire non si poteva” (3.5.42) (by “holding her tightly so that she could not escape” (557). When she tries to scream, he places a hand over her mouth. This suffocating physical overpowering persists until she agrees to forgive his deception and have sex with him again. In this juncture of the story Fiammetta dangerously plays with the border between rape and seduction, and she comes as close to painting the situation as rape as she quickly dispels its shadow soon after. In few lines we can literally see how from a horrible mixture of caresses and violence Catella’s consent is constructed and made explicit:

Ricciardo, che conosceva l’animo suo ancora troppo turbato, s’avea posto in cuore di non lasciarla mai se la sua pace non riavesse: per che, cominciando con dolcissime parole a raumiliarla, tanto disse e tanto pregò e tanto scongiurò, che ella, vinta, con lui si pacificò; e di pari volontà di ciascuno gran pezza appresso in grandissimo diletto dimorarono insieme. (3.6.49)

On seeing that she was still far from mollified, Ricciardo, who was determined not to leave her until she had recovered her equanimity, set about the task of appeasing her with a stream of honeyed endearments. And he exhorted and cajoled and beseeched her to such good effect that she eventually succumbed and forgave him, after which, by mutual consent, they tarried together at some length to their inordinate delight. (559)

And it is through this newly built “mutual consent” that the novella quickly proceeds to its happy ending. The novella tells us that “voltata la sua durezza in dolce amore verso Ricciardo, tenerissimamente da quel giorno innanzi l’amò,” (3.6.50) (Catella abandons “the stony attitude she had previously displayed to Ricciardo” and “begins to love him with all the tenderness in the world,” 559). Having obscured the threat that Catella’s reluctance posed to the pleasantness of the story, Fiammetta reassures us that from that day on, the two lovers continued to enjoy each other happily.

A final example from the Third Day shows Boccaccio’s ability, through Dioneo’s irony and malice, to turn a problematic story into laughter. The tenth novella tells the explicit misadventures of Alibech, a fourteen-year-old girl who goes into the desert to learn how to serve God. Dioneo recounts how the young woman runs into a hermit, Rustico, who, unable to resist temptation, convinces her that the sexual act is a form of religious service, in which the “devil” is taken back to “hell.” Before having sex with her, Rustico makes sure that the girl has no idea what the two are doing and is fully

convinced that she is serving God (“e tentato primieramente con certe domande, lei non aver mai uomo conosciuto conobbe e così essere semplice come pareo,” 3.10.10; “by putting certain questions to her, he soon discovered that she had never been intimate with the opposite sex and was every bit as innocent as she seemed,” 620). Therefore, the circumstances are such that the relationship between Alibech and Rustico is undoubtedly non-consensual. But to immediately avert the shadow of sexual abuse, the comic reversal of the story intervenes. Alibech becomes so passionate about sex, that she begins to ask Rustico more and more insistently to “put the devil back in hell,” until the girl “sì la bambagia del farsetto tratta gli avea, che egli a tal ora sentiva freddo che un altro sarebbe sudato” (3.10.28) (“took so much stuffing out of him that he eventually began to turn cold where another man would have been bathed in sweat,” 623). The comedy of the image proposed by Dioneo — of the little girl who goes from being tricked to being a tormentor, and of Rustico who goes from being a trickster to being persecuted — succeeds in constructing Rustico’s innocence in retrospect, and in converting the ambiguous happenings into pure pleasure.

Furthermore, Alibech’s impossibility to appear as a victim is deftly constructed in the characterization of the protagonists and in the unfolding of the narrative. Alibech reaches Rustico following the instructions of a “holy” and “good” hermit, who, recognizing the limits of his own continence, suggests that she visits “un santo uomo, il quale di ciò che tu vai cercando è molto migliore maestro che io non sono” (3.10.9) (“a holy man who is much more capable than I of teaching you what you want to know,” 619). Therefore, even before Rustico appears on the scene as “assai divota persona e buona” (3.10.9) (“a very devout and kindly fellow,” 620), he is already introduced as the pinnacle of a hierarchy of holiness and continence. At the same time, Alibech, notwithstanding the lack of significant character connotations, is immediately racialized on the basis of her Tunisian and non-Christian origin. Like Alatiel in 2.7,⁴⁸ her character mirrors a literary tradition that attributes an uncontrollable, exoticized sensuality to Arab women.⁴⁹ Despite her exclusive interest in religion and Rustico’s praised sanctity, there is something in her very ethnicity that “unleashes the worst

⁴⁸ Riccardo Samà analyzes the complex representation of consent in *Decameron* 2.7. By relating Alatiel’s story to the Ovidian tale of Philomela, and observing how Panfilo is recognizably an unreliable narrator, Samà argues that Boccaccio indirectly allows us to infer Alatiel’s lack of consent to the various sexual intercourses she stumbles upon in her misadventures (Samà 2021).

⁴⁹ Levarie Smarr writes that “Alibech and Alatiel represent the perceived sexual laxity of Islamic law, which was accused of seducing Christians and others who encountered it” (Smarr 2000, 34).

in the Christian male,”⁵⁰ who is therefore not accountable for his need to possess her carnally. In his book on criminal law in fourteenth-century Florence, Umberto Dorino reports that concubinage was very common and tolerated, provided that the “slaves” — as he defines them — were of non-Christian origin.⁵¹ He also specifies that in the event a concubine became pregnant by another man, the masters were entitled to compensation for “her deterioration” (“avevano diritto ad un indennizzo per il deterioramento di essa”).⁵² This startling glimpse into the customs of Boccaccio’s Florence offers another perspective for understanding the sexualization and objectification of non-Christian women. If it was common to have sexual relations with enslaved non-Christian women, Dioneo’s choice to feature a Tunisian character contributes to the normalization of her misadventures. Alibech is immediately presented as a rapable body through the signaling of her origin, but nonetheless every detail of the narrative contributes to portray her as a seductress. The fact that in her naivete and childishness she is not able to recognize her role of seductress — namely to interpret the real meaning of her interaction with older Christian men — is precisely the misunderstanding around which the comic effect of the story unfolds.

In conclusion, the *Decameron* is a text in which rape is rendered invisible at multiple levels. When rape is presented as such, various narrative devices intervene to divert attention from it, almost eradicating it from the experience of the text. On the other hand, the central narrative role that false accusations of rape play in some novellas cause the very concept of rape to undergo a semantic metamorphosis, blurring its true nature as a violent act. Analyzing the strategies through which rape is made invisible in the *Decameron* allows us an important reflection on the meaning and reasons of this invisibility. Indeed, the multiple ways in which rape is meticulously displaced, obfuscated, and neutralized, signals a deeper discomfort in integrating this topic into the narrative. By hiding rape, the *Decameron* reveals and reaffirms the taboo that lurks in the negotiation of what non-consensual sex is. Forced coitus circulates freely as an object of libidinal investment and cultural pivot only when its necessary and sufficient condition, i.e., non-consensuality, is somehow elided. Only when the text manages to produce an explicit or implicit form of consent — suggesting against all laws of logic that a ‘consensual rape’ is taking place — does the text offer a guilt- and shame-free enjoyability. As the comic and erotic success of the *Decameron*’s novellas attests, the hidden enjoyment of rape is inseparable

⁵⁰ Smarr 2000, 34.

⁵¹ Dorini 1916, 66–67.

⁵² Dorini 1916, 67.

from the discursive constructions employed to conceal it. Understanding how language manages to make sexual violence invisible, then, is the first step toward deconstructing rape as a pervasive, brutal, politically dangerous cultural fetish.

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