Historicizing Maternity in Boccaccio’s *Ninfale fiesolano* and *Decameron*

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation explores the representation of maternity in two of Boccaccio’s works, the early idyllic poem, the *Ninfale fiesolano*, and the author’s later *magnum opus*, the *Decameron*, through readings in the social history of women and the family and medieval medical literature of obstetrics and gynecology. I create a dense historical context from which to examine the depiction of generative processes, maternity, and mother-child interactions in these works, allowing us to better understand the relationship between Boccaccio’s treatment of these subjects and the author’s larger stance on women and gender.

In Chapter One, I explore Boccaccio’s uncommon interest in the events between conception and birth in the *Ninfale fiesolano*; I demonstrate the conformity of the *Ninfale’s* literary depictions of conception, pregnancy, and childbirth to the medical literature of obstetrics and gynecology and social practices in the late Middle Ages. In the second chapter, I explore how the *Ninfale*, traditionally seen as an idyllic, mythological poem, reflects the practices and ideologies of the normative form of family structure in fourteenth-century Tuscany, the patrilineage. I first show how the poem’s pervasive discourse on resemblance exposes, and undercuts, the importance of the paternal line; I then consider how Mensola’s joyful maternity – her beautifully rendered interactions with baby Pruneo - contains an implicit critique of the role and function of maternity in patrilineal society. With Chapter Three, I turn to Boccaccio’s prose works; I explore how
Boccaccio incorporates specific and historicized beliefs about generative physiology - the biological pre-conditions for maternity - into commonplaces of the misogynistic tradition in the *Corbaccio* and *Decameron* V.10. Chapters Four and Five focus specifically on the *Decameron*. In the fourth chapter, I consider how Boccaccio uses a distinctly gendered language of generation in *Decameron* III.8, V.7, X.4, and, most spectacularly, X.10 to underscore the marginality of women to family and line. In the fifth, and final, chapter, I explore the profound cultural embeddedness of Boccaccio’s treatment of maternity by placing the *Decameron*’s depictions of motherhood - whether unwanted, farcical, or affective - within the greater social context of Renaissance natalism. Throughout this project, I consider how representations of maternity and generative processes in Boccaccio’s texts comment on the realities of motherhood - and womanhood - in the patrilineal society of fourteenth-century Tuscany.
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Introduction

Over the years, much critical ink has been spilled over Boccaccio’s approach to women’s issues; critics have debated the nascent proto-feminism of the Decameron or Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta, and sought to understand the later openly anti-feminist Corbaccio. Yet one aspect of women’s lives has been largely ignored by Boccaccian scholars: motherhood. This project aims to deepen our understanding of Boccaccio’s stance on gender by focusing on the representation of maternity - understood as the biological processes of conception, gestation, and birth, as well as more socially-determined mother-child interactions - in two of the author’s works, the Ninfale fiesolano and the Decameron. In this project, I use history as a lens to see motherhood in Boccaccio’s texts. Through readings in social history of women and the family, the medical literature of obstetrics and gynecology, and the material culture of reproduction in fourteenth-century Tuscany, I consider how Boccaccio’s representation of generative processes and maternity in the Ninfale and Decameron exposes, or complicates, discourses about women and the family in the patrilineal society of fourteenth-century Tuscany.

In seeking to connect the representation of maternity in the Ninfale fiesolano or the Decameron to the realities of fourteenth-century women, I am navigating largely uncharted critical waters with respect to both focus and methodology. There have been no full-length studies of maternity – in either its biological or social aspect - in Boccaccio’s works of which I am aware; comments on pregnancy or mothers are typically folded into
critical studies of the ‘family’ in Boccaccio.\(^1\) When critics do address pregnancy or motherhood in Boccaccio’s work, they tend to rely either on biographical readings (as in Muscetta’s claim that Griselda is an ideal re-creation of Boccaccio’s mother) or offer deracinated, essentialist evaluations of maternity that, while telling the reader much about the critic’s own view of motherhood, do little to shed light on that of Boccaccio or his contemporaries.\(^2\)

Critics have long noted the poetic prominence of familial, or domestic, cares in the *Ninfale fiesolano* and the “new figure” of Mensola as mother.\(^3\) Historically, however, they have failed to put this new focus into any sort of context, content, instead, with simply having drawn attention to it. The *Ninfale’s* critical reception, in the main, has

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1. See, for example, Thomas G. Bergin, “Boccaccio and the Family,” *Rivista di studi italiani* I, 1 (1983): 15-30, where the critic examines depictions of the family in Boccaccio’s entire corpus and speculates about the importance of family in the author’s personal life, in order to draw conclusions about Boccaccio’s conception of ‘family’. Giuseppe Chiecchi’s monograph, *Giovanni Boccaccio e il romanzo familiare* (Venice: Marsilio, 1994), also explores the theme of ‘family’ in Boccaccio’s works, focusing on an Ovidian model for conflictual relationships with fathers, and relying on biography to explain what the critic terms the “topos” of the family in Boccaccio’s works.


Pier Massimo Forni is the only critic I have encountered who imports Freudian psychoanalysis to make Africo’s fear and terror at Mensola’s “mancato ritorno” (her broken promise to meet him) that of a child’s fear that a mother who goes out of sight may not return again, an innovative, if not, to my eye, convincing take on Mensola’s “maternity”. See Forni, “Introduction” to Giovanni Boccaccio, *Ninfale fiesolano*, ed. Pier Massimo Forni (Milan: Mursia, 1991), 14.
tended toward two predominant notes, both of which I find problematic in that they inhibit social historical contextualization and any meaningful exploration of gender: an insistence on the a-historicity or pre-historicity of the world described within, and essentialist, deracinated evaluations of Mensola’s maternity. Traditionally, critics have perceived a distinct split between the world described in the poem – mythical, idyllic, pre-historic – and contemporary Florentine society. As a result, the Ninfale, even more than the Decameron, has suffered from a marked critical disattention to social historical context. This critical lacuna is especially notable in the context of Mensola’s maternity, with critics, like Armando Balduino, tending to soaring, sentimental, quasi-Crocean songs of praise considering the nymph’s maternity as a beautiful – and, it goes without saying, dehistoricized - universal ideal.\(^4\) As a result, the critical tradition has ignored the implications – literary, social, gender - of Boccaccio’s focus on maternity in this work.

In the Decameron, motherhood has also suffered from a lack of critical attention, if for different reasons than the Ninfale. While it is a platitude of Boccaccian criticism to note the amount of sex that occurs in the work - Thomas Bergin writes that in roughly sixty-seven percent of the one hundred tales “a sexual relationship…is central to the action”\(^5\) – critics, and, frequently, readers, have tended to view all this sex as primarily


\(^5\) See Bergin, Boccaccio, 289-90. While not as statistically precise, Aldo D. Scaglione similarly stressed the work’s sexual focus; he writes: “in the Decameron the love adventure is always sensual, the final aim is almost invariably one and the same, and sex is never left out of it – when, exceptionally, it is not explicitly mentioned, we have no reason to assume that it is really absent.” See Scaglione, Nature and Love in the Late Middle Ages (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963), 77.
erotic, not procreative. It has been a tenet of critical thinking that the *Decameron* presents “the total surrender to the erotic instinct”, not the consequences thereof.\(^6\)

Even critics who explicitly employ ‘gender’ as an interpretive tool with which to approach the *Decameron* tend to view the work as predominantly interested in non-procreative sexual activity.\(^7\) In *The Rhetoric of the Decameron*, Marilyn Migiel notes what she considers a disconnect between sexual activity and female fertility in the text.\(^8\) According to her gendered reading of the frame characters’ narrative voices, the *Decameron*’s male narrators highlight women’s carnality and sexual availability, which they explicitly divorce from procreation (she cites Alatiel), whereas the female narrators show a greater awareness and acceptance of pregnancy and children, and present female sexuality as directed toward the creation of long-term relationships and an ethics of care.\(^9\)

While Migiel refutes the notion that the *Decameron* offers an undifferentiated celebration of eros, she argues that as the days proceed, the male perspectives - in her view, those that celebrate non-procreative sexuality - become dominant.\(^10\) Her observation, when examining the male-narrated stories of Day Two, that, “As these beautiful women are having sex, none of them, curiously enough, ever gets pregnant” is therefore extended to

\(^6\) For the quotation, see Scaglione, *Nature and Love in the Late Middle Ages*, 73. Giovanni Getto is singular in noting pregnancy as one of the many aspects of reality that Boccaccio weaves into his work. See Giovanni Getto, *Vita di forme e forme di vita* (Turin: G.B. Petrini, 1992), 264-66.

\(^7\) Teodolinda Barolini is one of few who have noted the importance of reproductive sexuality for the text’s presentation of gender. Her astute analysis of the old woman’s speech in V.10 notes how the tale acknowledges that a woman’s value (or capital) is closely tied to her childbearing ability. See Barolini, “Le parole son femmine e i fatti son maschi: Toward a Sexual Poetics of the *Decameron*,” in *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture*, 294-5.


\(^9\) See Migiel, Chapter Three: “Boccaccio’s Sexed Thought,” in *A Rhetoric of the Decameron*, 64-82.

the entire work: there is a lot of sex in the *Decameron*, and not much reproduction, because the men’s perspective is adopted by the female narrators as the days go on.\textsuperscript{11}

While in no way contesting that there is a good deal of sex contained within the pages of the *Decameron*, I believe the critical attention paid the text’s erotic aspects has blinded critics to the presence of reproductive sexuality in the work. Migiel’s statement that sexuality is divorced from procreation is certainly accurate within the confines of Day Two – she rightly notes the improbability of the fact that Alatiel “who had ‘lain with eight men perhaps ten thousand times’” does not conceive – yet it is less convincing when applied to the rest of the *Decameron*.\textsuperscript{12} Women do conceive in this text (III.1; III.8; III.9; V.7; X.10) - or are already pregnant (II.6; VII.3; X.4) - and they give birth (II.6; III.8; III.9; V.7; X.4; X.10). These tales contain a wealth of information about male and female sexuality, reproductive practices, and the social history of childbirth and childrearing; its presence complicates the critical paradigm of the *Decameron* as concerned with sexuality understood only as “unbridled nature” or “unfettered eros”.

At the same time, however, as the *Decameron* depicts procreative sexuality, it admittedly does so only infrequently and in a manner that is, at best, somewhat ambiguous. In the *Decameron*, pregnancy is often the unwelcome result of sexual activity, explicitly described as a ‘mal’ or ‘sventura’, for which recourse is sought either by the *gravida* herself (or himself, as in the case of Calandrino in IX.3) or by the *gravida*’s lover or father.\textsuperscript{13} The specter of illegitimacy – the fear, so colorfully expressed

\textsuperscript{11} See Migiel, *A Rhetoric of the Decameron*, 68.

\textsuperscript{12} See Migiel, *A Rhetoric of the Decameron*, 68.

\textsuperscript{13} The exception would be III, 9, where Giletta actively seeks to conceive a child so as to force her husband to accept her as his legitimate wife.
in the *Corbaccio*, that another man is the cause of one’s wife’s tumescent belly (“altri vengono che fanno il ventre gonfiare” [242]) - hangs over several tales, implicitly and explicitly. Compounding this problematic treatment of maternity is the fact that the terms with which Boccaccio discusses the process of procreation in the work are imprecise and formulaic.

For these and other reasons related to the critical tradition, critics have tended to dismiss maternity or reproduction as topics of inquiry in the *Decameron*. Thomas Bergin writes: “Aside from Madonna Beritola, good mothers are not ‘played up’ in the *Decameron*”. Giovanni Getto states that when the figure of the mother is not necessary, Boccaccio does without: “dove la figura della madre non è necessaria sarà senz’altro trascurata dal Boccaccio”. Migiel notes a disconnect between sexual activity and female fertility in the text. Leaving aside the validity of these statements for the moment, I

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14 The emphasis afforded the *Decameron*’s eroticism is perhaps the most significant factor inhibiting exploration of maternity in the work; other tendencies in the critical tradition, however, have also disfavored the examination of motherhood and limited contextualized readings. Ascensional and/or allegorical readings, of the type favored by Kirkham and Branca, limit social historical contextualization by viewing characters as “exemplary” or searching for meaning in a plane above contemporary reality. A longlasting, if currently out of favor, view of the *Decameron* as “escapist literature”, as well as deconstructionist readings that stress the marginal relation of literature to reality, have, I believe, discouraged connections between Boccaccio’s representation of maternity and the realities of fourteenth-century women.


In *The World at Play in Boccaccio’s Decameron* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), Giuseppe Mazzotta claims that the *Decameron*’s “mode of being is one of marginality in relationship to existing literary traditions, cultural myths and social structures, to that, which, in one word, we call history” (49). For varying views of the *Decameron* as escapist literature, see also Charles S. Singleton, “On Meaning in the *Decameron*,” *Italica* 21 (1944): 117-124; and Bernard S. Chandler, “Man, Emotion and Intellect in the *Decameron*,” *Philological Quarterly* 39 (1960): 400-412.

15 See Bergin, “Boccaccio and the Family,” 27.

16 See Giovanni Getto, *Vita di forme e forme di vita*, 222.

believe the more important, and interesting, question is why. Why are ‘good’ mothers not played up in the Decameron? How are we to understand the few occasions when they are “played up”, as in II.6 or V.9? Is reproductive sexuality really given little emphasis in this text, and if so, why?

In this project, I seek to answer these questions by combining close readings of Boccaccio’s texts with readings in the social history of women and the family and medieval and Renaissance medical literature. I aim to restore to Boccaccio’s depictions of maternity the multiple resonances which these passages would have carried for his contemporaries. By carefully considering the terms with which Boccaccio narrates reproductive processes, the valences with which those processes are imbued, and the socio-historical context in which these texts were written, I seek to understand how Boccaccio’s treatment of maternity comments on the complex mix of discourses and practices that made up the reality of motherhood in fourteenth-century Florence.

In Chapter One, I seek to counter the reigning critical reception of the Ninfale fiesolano as an idyllic, mythical, and prehistoric text with little relation to fourteenth-century Florentine society by exploring how the poem faithfully reflects contemporary medical and societal writings and beliefs about pregnancy and childbirth. I argue that the specificity of the Ninfale’s references to conception, pregnancy, and childbirth and the work’s consideration of the female experience of these processes are exceptional and may be seen as early proof of Boccaccio’s anomalous attention to “women’s issues”, to be more fully developed in the Decameron.18

18 My reading of the Ninfale is greatly influenced by Teodolinda Barolini’s work on the importance of “women’s issues” to Boccaccio’s work. See Barolini, “Notes Toward a Gendered History of Italian Literature”, in Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture (New York: Fordham University Press,
In the following chapter, I continue to argue for the close connection of the *Ninfale fiesolano* to its cultural context, but I shift my focus from obstetrics and gynecology to late medieval family structure; I explore how the poem reproduces both the customs and practices and the ideologies of the normative form of family structure in fourteenth-century Tuscany, the patrilineage. I consider how an authorial focus on female subjectivity in pregnancy and birth coexists in this text with an acknowledgment of the utility of those processes for male line and society. I argue that Boccaccio structures the ideology and customs of the Tuscan patrilineage into the *Ninfale* in order to expose the logical inconsistencies of a society that while strictly associating women with reproduction, downplays female contributions to family and bloodline.

With Chapter Three, I turn to two texts explicitly rooted to, and set in, fourteenth-century Tuscany, the *Decameron* and the anti-feminist dream vision, the *Corbaccio*. In this chapter, I consider how Boccaccio incorporates beliefs about generative physiology into commonplaces of the misogynistic tradition in the *Corbaccio* and in *Decameron* V.10. I begin by exploring the presence of specific and historicized beliefs about the physiology of sex in the *Corbaccio*, an overtly anti-female text, before considering how Boccaccio draws upon the same underlying biology in *Decameron* V.10, but twists it into a “female-friendly” argument.

Chapters Four and Five specifically address motherhood in the *Decameron*. My aim in these chapters is to root, or reconnect, the depiction of maternity in Boccaccio’s *magnum opus* to its social and cultural milieu, thereby allowing us to see levels of significance that previously have gone unnoticed. In Chapter Four, I closely examine the

2006) and “Le parole son femmine e i fatti son maschi: Toward a Sexual Poetics of the *Decameron,*” in *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006 [1993]).
language - the verbs, phrases, and tropes - used by Boccaccio when describing or indicating the biological processes that lead to maternity - impregnation, gestation, and birth - and connect that language to beliefs about reproductive processes and blood kinship in fourteenth-century Tuscan society. I argue that in tales III.8, V.7, and X.4 Boccaccio uses a gendered language of generation to underscore the marginality of women to male-dominated kin relationships and family structures. In the latter part of the chapter, I explore how the *Decameron*’s hermeneutically-freighted last tale, the story of Griselda, takes to the extreme the privileging of paternity seen in contemporary theories of generation and patrilineal ideology and makes explicit the passive functionality of the maternal body.

With Chapter 5, I turn from biological or physiological discussions of procreation and maternity to explore the realities of motherhood in late medieval and Renaissance Tuscan society. In this chapter, I consider the relationship between the restricted lives of the *Decameron*’s purported audience - fourteenth-century women - and the *Decameron*’s depiction of motherhood. I argue that the omnipresence and gender-specificity of Tuscan society’s promotion of procreation is a necessary context when considering the way motherhood is treated in the *Decameron*. I consider how Boccaccio’s literary portrayal of motherhood - whether depictions of unwanted motherhood, as in V.7 or IX.3, or affective portraits of mother-child interactions, such as Monna Giovanna’s solicitude for her ailing son in V.9 - comment on, or provide solace with respect to, the ideology and reality of motherhood in fourteenth-century Tuscany.
Chapter I: Conception, Pregnancy, Childbirth: Maternity in a Nymph’s Tale
(Ninfale fiesolano)

1.1 Introduction

I begin my examination of maternity with one of Boccaccio’s early, or so-called
“minor”, works, the Ninfale fiesolano, for reasons both chronological and thematic.
Composed shortly before the Decameron, in the years 1344-1346, the Ninfale fiesolano is
a narrative poem in octaves that anticipates and looks forward to the oft-cited realism and
psychological depth of Boccaccio’s masterpiece; most critics agree the Ninfale represents
Boccaccio’s last vernacular work prior to the composition of the Decameron.19 But apart
from its chronological proximity, and more to the point of this study, the work
thematically anticipates and rehearses some of the discourses on maternity and its role in
the patrilineage that will become major concerns in the later magnum opus.

In this poem, Boccaccio thematizes and highlights maternity in a singular and
unusual way: he makes pregnancy the result of an amorous tryst, considers the effects of
gravidity on Mensola’s body and psyche, and deems motherhood worthy of poetry. While
family affect - parental or filial - is certainly a prominent theme in the Ninfale, I would
argue the poem is specifically attentive to maternity; Alimena’s imploring of son Africo
through reference to her maternal activities of nursing and gestation – “i’ son la madre
tua che t’allattai, / e nove mesi in corpo ti portai” (134, 7-8) – is but one example of the

19 Most critics today accept the traditional dating of the work to 1344-1346. Balduino points to the
distinctly Tuscan atmosphere of the work (which would imply the author’s Tuscan, and not Neapolitan,
residence) and the descriptions of family affect, which he believes indicate a more “mature” author. See
Armando Balduino, “Sul Ninfale fiesolano”, In Boccaccio, Petrarca, e altri poeti del Trecento (Florence:
Leo S. Olschki, 1984) 258-9; 261. In the early 1970’s, the work’s dating was a subject of debate. In “Dubbi
the most compelling reasons for and against attributing the Ninfale to Boccaccio; he concluded that if the
Ninfale is Boccaccio’s, it must be a very early work (roughly to the Neapolitan period), based on the
work’s “lack of compositional unity”. Ronnie H. Terpening, in “Il mito di Calisto e l’attribuzione del
‘Ninfale fiesolano’.” Studi e problemi di critica testuale (1973): 17-23, sought to disprove Ricci precisely
by demonstrating unifying elements in the work.
Ninfale’s concern for the particularities of motherhood, encompassing both biological processes and nurturing behaviors. In this poem, Boccaccio manifests an uncommon interest in the events between conception and birth, deigning to put into verse the traditionally-neglected subject of pregnancy and to consider a woman’s experience of gravidity.

As a narrative poem, the Ninfale is something of a hybrid and marks a departure from Boccaccio’s earlier heavily erudite works, both in argument and style. Part courtly love lyric, part etiological fable, with subtle mythical reminiscences of Statius’ Achilleid, and Ovid’s Heroides and Metamorphoses, the poem is recounted in, in Auerbach’s famous formulation, an “intermediate style”, a low or popular language owing much to the cantari.20 The poem is, depending on one’s critical orientation, a hymn to Nature, a battle between Venus and Diana, “a cautionary moral tale”, a tragic love story, a foundational tale, or, by some dubious accounts, an autobiographical rendering of a love story between Boccaccio and a lapsed Benedictine nun.21

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20 Erich Auerbach, Mimesis (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991 [1946]), 217. Critics are generally in agreement that the Ninfale’s low style represents a conscious choice on Boccaccio’s part to adapt the language and style of the poem to the social condition, education, and culture of the characters in the poem. For this view, see Sapegno, Storia Letteraria d’Italia – il trecento, 323 and, more generally, Bruni, Boccaccio: l’invenzione della letteratura mezzana, 228 and Bergin, Boccaccio, 187. Balduino instead believes the low style may respond to the needs of the “vasto e non dotto pubblico” to whom the work is addressed. (Balduino, “Sul Ninfale fiesolano”, 253). On the indebtedness of the poem to the cantari, see Balduino’s fundamental study, “Tradizione canterina e tonalità popolareggianti nel Ninfale fiesolano.”

The story, in the main, is as follows: set in the Fiesolan hills in a pre-Christian era, the poem tells of a young shepherd, Africo, who falls in love with one of Diana’s nymphs, Mensola. Given Mensola’s vow of chastity to Diana, Africo’s love is unwelcome and remains unrequited; he suffers mightily from lovesickness, causing his parents, Girafone and Alimena, great worry. Finally, aided by Venus, Africo dons his mother’s dress and, in female guise, succeeds in infiltrating the nymphs’ company. When the maidens engage in a communal bath, Africo undresses to join them and his manhood is exposed. In the ensuing fracas of fleeing nymphs, Africo catches Mensola, affording him the long-hoped-for chance to take her “per forza”. He rapes her once, then declares his love for her in the traditional terms of lyric poetry which convinces her to have consensual sex with him a second time. During this second “pleasurable” encounter, Mensola becomes pregnant. Both Mensola and Africo meet unhappy ends: shunned by Mensola, Africo kills himself for love. Mensola hides during her pregnancy, gives birth to baby Pruneo, and enjoys brief moments of maternal bliss before Diana discovers her transgression and transforms her into a stream. The nymphs return Pruneo to Africo’s loving parents. In the last section of the poem, historically considered an awkward appendix, aesthetically inferior to the first half, Pruneo grows up to marry, have ten (male) children, and play an epic role in the founding of Fiesole and Florence.22

The two sections of the poem are, in a sense, sutured together by Mensola’s pregnancy and Pruneo’s birth: the end-result of the amorous tryst becomes the starting

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22 Robert Hollander calls it “hardly great literature”; for Natalino Sapegno it constitutes “le parti più sorde” of the poem. For these judgments, see Hollander, Boccaccio’s Two Venuses, 70 and Sapegno, Storia letteraria del trecento, 311.
point for the etiology of Fiesole and Florence. In this respect, Mensola’s maternity is a functional element; without it, the foundational tale would be lacking a point of origin. Yet maternity and, as we will see in Chapter Two, paternity, enjoy a textual prominence in the poem far outweighing etiological considerations.

**Brief critical review**

The critical tradition, while noting the importance of “familial” themes in the *Ninfale*, has historically been little interested in deepening our understanding of these themes or in relating them to fourteenth-century Tuscan society. This radical detachment of text from context can be traced to the late nineteenth century, when Francesco De Sanctis famously characterized the *Ninfale* as a ‘hymn to Nature’ (“Questo mondo mitologico primitivo è un inno alla Natura”), in a reading that stressed the work’s heavily mythological and idyllic qualities and located its inspiration in the ‘irresistible force of nature’.²³ Although critics today are less concerned with identifying the soul of the tale in *il dolce peccato* of sexual love - Hollander perhaps being the exception – elements of De Sanctis’s reading continue to exert influence on the critical reception of the poem: critics tend to emphasize pre-historic, mythological, or idyllic aspects of the poem to the exclusion of other considerations. Francesco Bruni describes a textual world populated only by nymphs, divinities, and humble people, set beyond the limits of history and myth: “oltre il limite della storia e anche del mito, e solo il finale si salda alle origini remote di Fiesole e Firenze.”²⁴ According to Attilio Momigliano, the poem, set in “un tempo

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imprecisato e remoto” - a bit like the Golden Age, but without the rivers of milk and oaks that sweat honey - occupies a liminal space between myth and reality (“non è più mito e non è ancora realtà”).

For Natalino Sapegno, the reigning atmosphere in the Ninfale is, again, idyllic and mythic, with a little “remote fable” mixed in.

The unfortunate corollary to these critical views has been that the Ninfale - a pastoral idyll, a mythological love story – must, by necessity, contain little relation to, or reflection of, contemporary Florentine society. While critics, following Ricci, will readily admit that the geographical setting of the poem faithfully respects the topography of the Fiesolan hills, they see a clear distacco, or neat separation, between fourteenth-century Tuscan society and the world described in the poem; the work’s mythical and pre-historical setting precludes any reflection of the socio-historical realities of Boccaccio’s world.

Bruni typifies this approach by discounting any contact between “il mondo mitico della favola” and “la realtà” of Boccaccio’s times; the poem’s references to different forms of architecture (“non crediate che vi fosson palagi o casamenti,” Ninfale 40, 1-2) and lower population levels (“E forse quattro era n gli abitatori che facevano stanza nel paese” Ninfale 41, 1-2) only underline the dissimilarity between those long-ago times and contemporary Florence: “Boccaccio…osserva che quei tempi lontani erano

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26 Sapegno notes, however, that the realism and humanity of the situations depicted in the poem contradicts the idyllic tone, more closely resembling a “maliziosa cronaca borghese” (Sapegno, Storia letteraria del Trecento, 311).

molto diversi, per condizioni di vita, dal presente.”

Although employing a different critical approach, Giuseppe Chiecchi also maintains the divide between contemporary Tuscan society and fictional world: he theorizes that Boccaccio takes refuge from the realities of the fourteenth-century bourgeois family, and its “impeding fathers”, by recreating, in the *Ninfale*, the “original” or “primordial” family, not subject to societal pressures, laws, or ties of kinship. In Chiecchi’s reading, this “original” family can only exist outside the flow of time and is, therefore, an impossibility: “sull’esempio della prima e miglior famiglia Boccaccio può solo deporre il suo sogno familiare, senza illudersi che da quell’origine possa derivare qualche cosa oltre il racconto, con la coscienza cioè che quel sogno non ha alcuna possibilità di avverarsi.”

By stressing the dreamy, primordial qualities of the *Ninfale’s* family, and placing it outside the flow of time, Chiecchi essentially effects a radical separation of the text from its cultural and historical context. It is the thesis of this and the following chapter, however, that despite its pre-historical setting and population by nymphs and shepherds, the *Ninfale* reflects, and is informed by, the socio-historical realities of Boccaccio’s world, and, moreover, that this reflection is especially significant, and notable, in the poem’s depiction of women and gender.

**“Il sentimento della maternità”**

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29 See Chiecchi, “*Ninfale fiesolano: La famiglia alle origini.*” While Chiecchi considers the *Ninfale’s* family unit of Girafone, Alimena, and son Africo the antithesis of the contemporary family, fulfilling an implicitly critical function, he never explores in what ways it differs, or just what it may be criticizing.

The second predominant note in critical appraisals of the *Ninfale* results, to some extent, from the critical tradition’s insistence on the a-historicity, or pre-historicity, of the poem. It is a commonplace to note the new poetic motifs of maternity and family in this text. In the past, however, critical attempts to deepen understanding of these new poetic directions have been plagued by essentialism, or de-historicized and male-centered statements about motherhood, or have veered quickly into biographical positivism, looking to Boccaccio’s personal life for sources for the realistic descriptions of Mensola as mother and baby Pruneo.

Balduino typifies the critical tendency to view maternity as an essential, unchanging, de-historicized ideal when, in discussing the *Ninfale*, he groups the “Sentiment of Maternity” (“il sentimento della maternità”) in with Beauty, Love, and the Miracle of Birth as the most “authentic and pure” values of human life: “la passione che travolge il pastore adolescente e si insinua nell’anima ingenua della ninfa quindicenne conduce alla scoperta della vita nella sua pienezza, nei suoi valori più autentici e puri (la bellezza, l’amore, il miracolo di una creatura che nasce, il sentimento della maternità).”

But even Sapegno, who rightly notes the novelty and originality of the inclusion of maternity in the poem - “Questa poesia, così delicata e viva, della maternità è un motivo nuovo nell’ispirazione finora così esclusivamente, e un po’ angustamente, amorosa del Boccaccio” – reflects his critical moment and culture by disconnecting the representation of motherhood in the poem from the realities of fourteenth-century Tuscan women. In describing the genesis of maternal love in the poem - “l’amor materno… sboccia come un

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“Fresco istinto e un improvviso dono della natura” - he manifests the critical tendency to view maternity as an essential condition, not a historical or cultural construct. In his reading, maternal love “blooms forth”, implicitly understood as both innate instinct and gift from nature to the female sex. Biographical readings that connect the depiction of maternity and infancy in the poem to Boccaccio’s personal life are, to my eye, preferable to the “idealistic” readings, in that they at least seek to relate the work to Boccaccio’s times, but they ignore the wider ramifications of these representations by focusing so narrowly on the poet’s life.33

I argue that neither essentializing readings nor readings that resort to the poet’s biography are fruitful approaches for examining maternity and gender in this work. In their examination of pregnancy and maternity in the *Ninfale*, the following two chapters aim to reconnect this literary work to the fourteenth-century Tuscan society from which it has been divorced. Taking inspiration from Teodolinda Barolini’s reconstruction of an enriched historical context for Francesca da Rimini, I intend to use history - specifically theoretical and medical writings on conception, pregnancy, and childbirth, and social history of women and the family - as a lens for interpreting Boccaccio’s choices in the *Ninfale*.34 My aim is always to demonstrate that the points of contact between this work and fourteenth-century Tuscan society are both meaningful and multifaceted.

In this chapter, I explore how Boccaccio makes his literary representation of conception, pregnancy, and childbirth conform to accepted societal beliefs and medical

33 Thomas Bergin puts forth two potential autobiographical sources for the realistic descriptions of Pruno playing with his mother and grandparents: Boccaccio’s observation of his half-brother or of one of his own illegitimate children (Bergin, *Boccaccio*, 187). Chiecchi offers the same autobiographical sources (Chiecchi, “*Ninfale fiesolano*: La famiglia alle origini,” 105).

teachings about gravidity in the late Middle Ages. In the following chapter, I examine how the poem reflects the reigning form of family structure in late medieval Florence, the patrilineage. In both chapters, I hope to redress what I see as a lacuna in the critical tradition by considering Mensola’s maternity as something that relates to and reflects contemporary ideologies of women and motherhood in Tuscan society. Throughout this project, I will insist upon the historicity of maternity, viewing maternity not as an essential condition, but as a cultural construct, the significance and experience of which changes from century to century. In doing so, I am following a dominant trend in the social history of women. In their introduction to Medieval Mothering, John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler differentiate between the biological fact of maternity and the culturally constructed nature of mothering, an activity or institution “grounded in specific historical and cultural practices.” 35 Clarissa W. Atkinson considers motherhood a “historical phenomenon subject to development and change” and highlights the interplay of gender and motherhood: “gender arrangements play a crucial role in organizing the institution of motherhood and shaping its ideologies.” 36

In a recent article on concepts of childhood, Margaret King highlighted Philippe Ariès’s signature contribution to the study of the history of childhood: his insistence on the historicity of childhood. King notes Ariès showed that “if childhood itself, bound by biologically- and psychologically-determined phases of development, is constant, then the understanding of it differed, as did the way it was experienced by both adults and


children.”37 I believe this statement is equally applicable to the study of maternity; while the processes of conception, gestation, and birth can be seen as biologically-determined, the understanding and experience of these processes are profoundly influenced by society’s interpretation and use of maternity. The distinctly patrilineal society of fourteenth-century Florence, of which Boccaccio was part, highly valued a woman’s fertility and her ability to create heirs for the male line at the same time as it devalued her biological contribution to the bloodline.38 The following two chapters explore how the Ninfale reflects and incorporates contemporary discourses on women’s procreative role and maternity, and examine the implications of Boccaccio’s decision to carve out a space in this work for the poetry of pregnancy and motherhood.

The Literary and Social Context of Maternity

In writing verses that consider not just conception, but pregnancy, prenatal care, labor, and a mother’s experience with her child, Boccaccio makes an unorthodox move in the Ninfale, with respect to his earlier work, the courtly genre, and medieval literature in general. To appreciate the singularity of his decision, I would like to briefly situate the poet’s attention to and inclusion of pregnancy and motherhood in this work in a literary and social context.

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37 Margaret L. King, “Concepts of Childhood: What We Know and Where We Might Go.” Renaissance Quarterly 60 (2007), 372.


With regard to the devaluation of the female contribution to the bloodline, Klapisch-Zuber has argued that fourteenth-century Florentine men believed their blood, transmitted during the act of generation, was superior to the blood with which the mother nourished the child. She bases her argument on the widespread practice of wetnursing, as well as Aristotelian ideas of conception and heredity (see Klapisch-Zuber, Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy, 162).
I will start by making a seemingly obvious observation, although few critics have commented on it: in the *Ninfale*, Boccaccio recycles the language and emotions - in other words, the tropes – of the love lyric for a narrative with a decidedly un-courtly outcome: conception, labor, birth.\(^{39}\) This is entirely non-normative: in the Italian lyric tradition, any reference to pregnancy or motherhood is a major code breaker. While courtly poetry implicitly refers to sexual intercourse under the rubric of the ‘*guiderdone*’ a vassal hopes to receive from his lady, any mention of a possible consequence of that reward – conception - is strictly avoided. Courtly ladies were not described in terms we, or medieval society, would consider motherly, nor were they subject to the processes – menstruation, conception, gestation - associated with biological motherhood.\(^{40}\) Courtly poetry’s focus was on the male poet and his emotional experiences; the courtly lady existed as a projection – positive or negative - of the male mind, the woman herself, as historical personage, was given little consideration. She was largely an abstraction: her blonde locks and angelic face might be praised, but she rarely spoke and her subjectivity was wholly ignored.\(^{41}\) Boccaccio’s decision to have Mensola conceive, to describe her

\(^{39}\) I owe my own observation of the dissonance between form (courtly conventions) and content (pregnancy) in this poem to the lectures of Teodolinda Barolini, to whom I am indebted. For stilnovist and Dantean echoes, Balduino, “*Sul Ninfale fiesolano*”, 253; and Sapegno, *Storia letteraria d’Italia – Il trecento*, 322. While a full examination of the courtly aspects of the *Ninfale* is outside the scope of this project, Boccaccio makes frequent recourse to the language and situations of love lyric in this poem, from the very first octaves’ dedication to Love.

\(^{40}\) Shulamith Shahar makes this point: “courtly literature, which places women on a pedestal, did not attribute to her those qualities of tenderness, delicacy and self-sacrifice which are usually regarded as pertaining to motherhood” (Shahar, *The Fourth Estate* [London and New York: Routledge, 2003 (1983)], 99).

pregnancy and birth, and to consider her subjective experience of these processes quite dramatically upends the conventions of this genre; the juxtaposition of these elements with the conventions of courtly lyric - the deviance from the norm - is significant.

While interlacing pregnancy and tender mother-child scenes with the conventions of love lyric is non-normative, Boccaccio’s very focus on maternity in this poem is, in and of itself, exceptional. Historians have pointed out that ordinary mothers and motherhood - the Virgin’s motherhood, of course, a notable exception - played a decidedly minor role in medieval literature, whatever the genre; maternity received little emphasis in courtly poetry, but was also underrepresented in medieval prose works, religious lyric, legal treatises, and pedagogical tracts. 

In Not of Woman Born, Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski observes: “Aside from hagiography and miracle collections the literature of the time gives almost no place to mothers – or fathers for that matter – except to dramatize the tragic birth of a hero….or to depict families in connection with the creation and perpetuation of a lineage”; she notes that while medieval texts of many genres discuss women’s rights and duties as wives, “they strangely neglect women’s role as mothers.”

This “neglect” of motherhood has been attributed to the realities of male-authorship. As Claudia Opitz notes, most medieval writers were men “who possessed

or “an alien presence”, a destructive image left in the poet’s mind (Ferrante, Woman as Image in Medieval Literature, 123). Barolini notes courtly poetry’s strict focus on the male: “Poetry based in a courtly logic is always fundamentally narcissistic and centered on the male lover/poet; the female object of desire serves as a screen on which he projects questions and concerns about himself” (Barolini, “Notes Toward a Gendered History of Italian Literature,” 362).


43 Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Not of Woman Born, 14, 12.
little or no knowledge of the subject”; because motherhood was seen as “an expressly female domain”, male authors were little interested “in the details of the maternal role”.

Historians point out that medieval vernacular literature contained little consideration of the events between coitus and birth. In this context, it is, therefore, remarkable that Boccaccio, notwithstanding his male sex, is notably interested “in the details” of motherhood in the *Ninfale*: he discusses specific material related to gestation, prenatal care, and infant care, and dramatizes the moments of conception and childbirth.

His inclusion of this material is even more remarkable if we consider the predominantly allegorical context in which motherhood was discussed in medieval literature. Historians have highlighted the marked lack of gender specificity in medieval representations of mothering. When motherhood made an appearance in medieval texts, it was frequently metaphoric, divorced from the (messy) historical and biological realities of medieval women. Caroline Bynum has shown that while maternal imagery was used in the twelfth century to talk about male religious figures, the most commonly utilized

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44 Opitz, “Life in the Late Middle Ages”, 284. Although Opitz believes it is better explained by the masculine nature of the sources, the absence has also been related to differing conceptions of ‘family’ in the late Middle Ages. According to Philippe Ariès, the idea of childhood, or the awareness of a particular nature of children, and the idea of family as an emotionally charged entity were interrelated concepts in the Middle Ages. Because medieval people were not aware of a special nature of children, the idea of family as “value”, “theme of expression”, and “occasion of emotion” did not exist. See Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962 [1960]), 10. Blumenfeld-Kosinski develops Ariès’s thesis to argue that the undervaluation of childhood resulted specifically in a concomitant devaluation of motherhood: “In rejecting a separate space for children, society may have effectively denied the special domain of the mother” (Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Not of Woman Born*, 163n21). In *The Fourth Estate*, Shulamith Shahar also argues that the underestimation of the maternal role resulted, in part, from medieval attitudes toward children (Shahar, 103). In her later work, *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), however, she rejects the Arièsian view of medieval childhood, which would seem to invalidate her earlier statement.


image was not the maternal behavior of “giving birth or even…conceiving or sheltering in a womb”, but “nurturing, particularly suckling” (breasts being symbols of the pouring forth of affection or instruction).47 Celebrations of the Virgin’s maternity also tended to emphasize the nurturing aspects of her behavior over the actual biological processes of menstruating, conceiving, and giving birth.48

Although the “biological” aspects of maternity tended to be ignored in late medieval prose or poetry (medical literature is the notable exclusion), female fertility was nevertheless a topic of great concern for fourteenth-century Tuscans.49 The female sex had always been closely identified with its reproductive role: Thomas Aquinas, picking up where Aristotle, and later, Augustine, left off, argued that women were defective creatures, valuable to men - and included in Creation - solely for their ability to bear children.50 However, as the work of historians Christiane Klapisch-Zuber and David Herlihy has demonstrated, the patrilineal society of late medieval Tuscany was unique in the extent to which it promoted female fertility – prizing women for their ability to provide heirs for the male line – while contemporaneously devaluing women’s

47 Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1982), 115, 149-150. Bynum notes that when birth and the womb were the dominant metaphors, “the mother is described as one who conceives and carries the child in her womb, not as one who ejects the child into the world, suffering pain and possibly death in order to give life.” (150).


49 For a deeper exploration of the promotion of female fertility in Tuscan society, see Chapter Five.

50 For any other work, men were preferable (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 13). For this oft-cited passage, see Opitz, “Life in the Late Middle Ages”, 284; Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation*, 37; Ferrante, *Woman as Image in Medieval Literature*, 3; Warner, *Alone of all her Sex*, 186.
contribution to both embryo and bloodline. Boccaccio’s decision to dwell on the
particularities of Mensola’s pregnancy and wrap her experience as new mother in verses
of poetic beauty is extraordinary in a culture that elides the maternal from its literature at
the same time as it strictly identifies women with, and devalues, their procreative
capacity.

**Intertexts**

Before we explore the incorporation of social historical material into the *Ninfale*’s
depiction of pregnancy and childbirth, we must acknowledge the intertextuality of these
passages. In crafting a story about a nymph who conceives, and for whom pregnancy is a
cause of downfall, Boccaccio had several classical sources upon which he could draw:
critics note clear Ovidian echoes in the octaves detailing Mensola’s rape, pregnancy,
labor, and eventual metamorphosis. The three most significant – and oft-cited - classical
intertexts for these passages are the story of Callisto in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the
eleventh letter of Ovid’s *Heroides*, and, albeit to a lesser extent, Statius’s *Achilleid*.52
The myth of Callisto is without a doubt the most obvious intertext: both Boccaccio’s and
Ovid’s stories center on one of Diana’s nymphs, and include transvestment, rape,
pregnancy, and punitive metamorphosis. In Boccaccio’s text, Mensola explicitly likens
her fate to that of Callisto at octave 334: “I’ posso esser annoverata omai, / O Caliston,
con teco, che com’io / già fosti ninfa,…” (334, 1-3).53 Differences between the two tales

51 See David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and their Families* and Klapisch-Zuber’s
*Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*.
52 For a classic source study, see F. Maggini’s “Ancora a proposito del Ninfale fiesolano,” Giornale Storico
53 All citations of the poem are from Giovanni Boccaccio, *Ninfale fiesolano*, ed. Armando Balduino (Milan:
Mondadori, 1997 [1974]).
– in the *Ninfale*, Mensola is raped shortly *after* a communal bath, while in the *Metamorphoses*, Callisto’s pregnancy is exposed *during* a communal bath – often seem to prove rather than disprove Boccaccio’s recycling of the Ovidian material.54

If Callisto is a clear, and, indeed, authorially-cited, intertext with regard to Mensola’s pregnancy, Boccaccio appears to have also drawn heavily upon *Heroides* XI in the *Ninfale*, reemploying material related to pregnancy and childbirth, and making a baby’s cries result in discovery.55 The eleventh letter of the *Heroides* tells of Canace’s incestuous love for her brother and its tragic outcome. Similarities between Mensola’s and Canace’s fates are striking. Canace, like Mensola, suffers an unwanted pregnancy to which she owes her eventual death.56 Both Ovid and Boccaccio consider the effects of pregnancy on their heroines’ bodies - Boccaccio, however, seems much more interested in this “natural metamorphosis” than Ovid - and stage the childbirth scenes. The mechanism of discovery is the same in both texts also: when Canace’s nurse attempts to smuggle her baby from the house, the child’s cries alert Canace’s father, just as Pruneo’s cries alert Diana. Canace’s story also reaches a doubly tragic end, but it is mother and child, not mother and lover, who die: Canace’s baby is left as prey for “dogs and birds” and she takes her own life, on her father’s orders.57

54 The Ovidian Diana is also, on the whole, gentler than the Boccaccian: Callisto is merely banished, not transformed, by Diana and must await jealous Juno’s wrath for her transformation into a bear. Years later, both she and her son are transformed into a constellation by Jupiter.

55 A roughly contemporaneous work of Boccaccio’s contains an explicit reference to the Ovidian heroine: *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta* recalls “la dolente Canace a cui, dopo il miserabil parto mal conceputo, niuna altra cosa che ‘l morir fu conceduto.” (Boccaccio, *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*, VIII 3, 2.)

56 Unlike Mensola - but as Violante will do in *Decameron* V, 7 – Canace seeks recourse in abortifacient herbs, all of which, however, fail to evict the burden growing in her womb.

57 In an article exploring the presence of the Ovidian myths Callisto and Canace in the *Ninfale* and *Decameron* V, 7, N. Piguet argues that Canace is the predominant myth in *Ninfale* (over Callisto) and that
While, to my eye, the Ovidian echoes are the most fruitful, analogies have also been drawn between certain passages of Statius’s *Achilleid* and the *Ninfale*. In the *Achilleid*, as in Boccaccio’s text, male transvestment leads to the successful rape of female object of desire, pregnancy results, and Lucina, the goddess of childbirth, makes her appearance. Unlike the *Ninfale*, however, the *Achilleid* ends on an, if not happy, then neutral note: Achilles leaves for battle and Deidamia, his new wife, remains behind on Scyros with their baby boy.

While I would be remiss not to mention these intertexts, as the parts of the *Ninfale* that interest this study are so obviously patterned off of them, their existence does not preclude further investigation of their sister passages in Boccaccio’s text. Historically, the only substantive critical attention paid these passages in the *Ninfale* has been to point out Ovidian echoes in the language or situations. This approach, however, has done little to deepen our understanding of this work. For one, Boccaccio’s use of Ovidian material in the *Ninfale* is never slavish or repetitive: he plays with the constituent elements – transvestment, rape, pregnancy, childbirth, discovery – in novel ways; the result is, in Sapegno’s words, “un Ovidio tutto travestito e rinnovato.” But the historical “source” approach has also completely overlooked the fact that incorporated into these supposedly “Ovidian” passages are late medieval physiological theories of sex and social practices.

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58 See Maggini, “Ancora a proposito del *Ninfale fiesolano,*” 36.

By so strictly connecting these passages to their classical forbears, critics have ignored their relationship to their social and cultural milieu.

I am considerably less interested in the fact that Boccaccio recycled classical source material in this text, than I am in how – and why - he makes this literary representation of pregnancy and motherhood reflect Tuscan society. The following two sections explore how these passages in Boccaccio’s text closely conform to contemporary theory and practice and probe the implications of the author’s incorporation of this material.

1.2 The Pleasure Principle

Turning specifically to Boccaccio’s text, I take as my point of departure the act which sets Mensola’s motherhood and the later foundational story in motion: the sex scene. I should say ‘sex scenes’: there are, in fact, two distinct occasions of sexual intercourse, one, an act of aggression, and one, consensual. And, as Boccaccio makes a point to tell us, it is the second “pleasurable” act that results in Pruno’s conception.

When Africo applies to Venus for aid and counsel for his unrequited love, the goddess’s advice is effective but it is decidedly unsentimental. Pleased by his sacrifice of a lamb, Venus promises Africo a “good reward”, the love lyric’s sexually coded guiderdone: “Lo sacrificio tuo e l’orazione / che mi facesti fu da me accettata, / per modo che n’arai buon guiderdone” (199, 1-3). To attain this reward, Venus counsels a combination of inganno and forza: Africo should assume female dress to gain admittance
to the nymphs’ company, after which he should turn to sexual violence to satisfy his desire.  

Africo follows Venus’s advice, and the resulting sex scene is a riot of bawdy sexual metaphors - Sir Stock taking Black Hill, entering the castle with much battle and yelling, and maybe even blood shed - the metaphoric language for sex (linguaggio allusivo) that critics see leading to the Decameron. And yet it is not this act of sexual intercourse that leads to Mensola’s pregnancy, for Africo, after showering the nymph with blandishments, and hyperbolic stilnovist praise, persuades her to have sex with him a second time, and it is only during this second consensual act that Mensola conceives. Boccaccio goes out of his way to separate the non-generative rape from the pleasurable, procreative sexual act: he spatially separates the two occasions of intercourse by placing sixty-three octaves between them, and he - or his omnipotent stand-in - explicitly attributes the pregnancy to the second consensual coupling. The second sexual climax is followed by an unambiguous acknowledgment of Mensola’s gravidity:

“-Attienti bene! Omè, omè, omè, aiuta aiuta, ch’i’ moio ’n buona fé! (310, 7-8)

L’acqua ne venne, e ’l foco fu ispento, il mulin tace, e ciascun sospirava; e come fu di Dio in piacimento, d’Africo Mensola s’ingravidava” (311, 1-4)

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60 The two strategies are explicitly coupled at the end of octave 202 and the start of 203: 202 ends with “ché non ti varria poi più lo ’ngannarla” (202, 8) while 203 contains Venus’s sage advice, “Non temer di sforrzarla” (203, 1). Further instances of this pairing include Mensola’s story to Sinedecchia at 388, 4-6, “si come un giovinetto la ’nganno, ed in che modo è ’l fatto tutto quanto, e come ultimamente la sforzo” and the nymphs’ report to Diana at octave 419, 1-4: “Poi ogni cosa a Diana ebbe detto, come Mensola era stata sforzata, e ’l dove e ’l come, da un giovinetto, e ’n ché modo da lui fu ingannata” (my emphasis).

61 See Giovanni Boccaccio, Ninfale fiesolano, ed. Forni, 126-7n244-5; Ninfale Fiesolano, ed. Balduino, 217n244-45. For a study of the importance of these sexual metaphors within the economy of the Decameron, see Barolini,“Le parole son femmine e i fatti son maschi: Toward a Sexual Poetics of the Decameron”, 1993, rpt. in Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).
While the attribution of Pruno’s generation to the second pleasurable act of lovemaking may strike us as curious, or highly implausible, today – even with all of our modern reproductive technologies, it would be impossible to know which sexual act, separated by a matter of minutes, resulted in a pregnancy – it is consistent with some medieval theories of conception. In the Middle Ages, many believed that a woman could only conceive if she experienced pleasure during intercourse. According to these theorists, female pleasure was necessary and functional: it ensured the release of her “seed”, or “semen”, without which conception was impossible. William of Conches, in his twelfth-century work the Draggmaticon (Dialogue of Natural Philosophy), stated that conception cannot result from male seed alone: women must experience pleasure, or orgasm, to emit seed.¹⁶² Hildegard of Bingen, in Cause et cure, similarly stressed the role of pleasure in reproduction. She writes, “When a woman has intercourse with a man, a warm pleasurable feeling in her brain announces the sensation of this pleasure in intercourse and the outpouring of semen.”¹⁶³ In the early-fifteenth-century Treatise on the Womb, Anthonius Guainerius highlighted the role of pleasure in conception, going so far

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¹⁶² William’s argument, far from being pro-female in its advocation of female pleasure, is quite dark. In response to his interlocutor’s objection that rape victims sometime conceive, yet their cries and protestations are surely signs that they have no pleasure, William says that while the raped woman’s rational will does not assent, her natural will feels pleasure, and this is why she conceives. William of Conches: A Dialogue on Natural Philosophy, 136-138. Cited in Gender and Sexuality in the Middle Ages, Ed. Martha A. Brozyna (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland & Co., Inc., 2005).

as to provide a “how to” manual instructing men the best method to pleasure their female partners to ensure release of their seed.\textsuperscript{64}

In keeping with these theories, Boccaccio insists upon the pleasure that Mensola experiences during the second procreative sexual encounter and contrasts it, frequently, with the pain of the rape. The first explicit mention of the pain experienced during the first act of violence – besides the bloodshed – is Mensola’s post-rape retort to Africo that she is dying of pain: “Poi c’hai fatto la tua voglia / ed hai ingannata me, fanciulla stolta, / usciàn dell’acqua almen, / ch’i’ muo’ di doglia” (246, 4-6). The contrast between pain and pleasure, however, manifests itself most clearly in Africo’s arguments and Mensola’s considerations in the interval between rape and consensual lovemaking.

Curiously, since moments earlier he was little concerned with questions of consent, the second time around Africo wants to persuade Mensola to cede to his desire. His arguments for seduction are couched in language that specifically opposes the pain of the first act of violence and the anticipated pleasure of the second coupling. He begins by urging Mensola to let him take some pleasure with her: “or, per piacerti, mi convien lasciarti; / però ti priego sia di tuo volere, / ch’io teco prenda un poco di piacere” (296, 6-8), assuring the nymph that, this time, he will do something that will prove delightful to both parties: “or dammi la parola, ch’io farò / cosa, che fia diletto a te e a me” (297, 3-4, my emphasis). An octave later, Africo explicitly contrasts the dolor, or pain, of the first sexual act with the hoped-for pleasure – alternately referred to as piacer, diletto, and

\textsuperscript{64} Helen Rodnite Lemay, “Anthonius Guainerius and Medieval Gynecology,” in \textit{Women of the Medieval World}, eds. Julius Kirshner and Suzanne F. Wemple (New York and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 331-3. Guainerius dedicates two chapters to the subject. To give pleasure to his partner, a man should embrace and kiss her and “utter tender words that bring on ardor”. He should “handle the nipples delicately with his fingers” and “lightly rub the area between the anus and the vulva”. When the women’s eyes shine and she has difficulty speaking, the man should then chew pepper (or, alternately, the bile of a she-goat or the dust from a seed of a stinging nettle) and “lubricate the penis with the saliva”. These measures are designed to specifically bring pleasure to the woman and cause the release of her seed. See Rodnite Lemay, 332.
dolzore - of the second: while admitting that he did experience some pleasure the first time, it was mixed with much pain, as Mensola well knows:

\[
\begin{align*}
tu & \text{ sai ben che } \text{`l diletto ch’i’ ho avuto} \\
di & \text{ te, insino a qui chent’egli } \text{ è stato,} \\
e & \text{ qual che tra noi due } \text{ è addivenuto,} \\
e & \text{ con quanti dolor } \text{s’è mescolato,} \\
& \text{ che } \text{`n verità poco piacer m’è suto;} \\
ma & \text{ or ch’ognun di noi } \text{ è consolato,} \\
sarà & \text{ il nostro diletto assai maggiore} \\
e & \text{ più compiuto e con maggior dolzore (299, emphasis mine)}
\end{align*}
\]

The opposition of pain and pleasure continues at octave 305, when Mensola, whose heart is not made of steel – “che d’acciaio non avea il core” (305, 1) – relents, basing her decision on a hypothetical pleasure-pain ratio:

\[
\begin{align*}
ed & \text{ avendo ella il suo dolce sapore} \\
prim & \text{ a assaggiato con alquanta offesa,} \\
pensò & \text{ portar quel poco del martire} \\
mescolat & \text{ o con si dolce disire (305, 5-8, emphasis mine)}
\end{align*}
\]

The placement of the words sapore, offesa, martire, and dolce disire at the end of each line stresses the antithetical relationship between non-generative rape and pleasurable procreative sex; the verses even evidence a pleasure-pain “rhyme” scheme of “ABBA” whereby A = pleasure and B = pain.

It is no coincidence that interwoven with these oppositions of pain and pleasure are concrete references to conception. Immediately following octave 305’s pleasure-pain quartet is a stanza dedicated to the result of the pleasurable sex Mensola contemplates. The nymph does not suspect this act of conjoining can result in man’s creation:

\[
\begin{align*}
E & \text{ tant’era la sua semplicitade,} \\
che & \text{ non pensò che altro ne potesse} \\
addivenir; & \text{ come quella che rade} \\
fiate & \text{ o forse mai niuna avesse} \\
giammai & \text{ udito per qual degnitade} \\
l’uom & \text{ si creasse, e poi come nascesse (306, 1-6)}
\end{align*}
\]
The tacit acknowledgement of Mensola’s pregnancy, cited above - “e come fu di Dio in piacimento, / d’Africo Mensola s’ingravidava” (311, 1-4) - is followed by lines that, yet again, stress the pleasure experienced by each party (note the repetition of “ciascuno”): “quando ciascuno i suoi fatti ha fornito, / e preso quel piacer che ciascun vuole” (312, 3-4). Two octaves later, Mensola remarks that the second (procreative) time was not so painful: “non le fosse sì gravosa, / come la prima volta,” (314, 3-4); it was much sweeter and less corrosive: “molto più dolce, sanza risalgallo” (314, 6).65

From an examination of these passages, it is clear that Boccaccio is intent to differentiate between the two sexual acts. The first act of violence, referred to as dolor, offesa, martire, gravosa, risalgallo, is opposed to the second consensual act, described as piacere (three times), diletto (three times), dolzore, dolce sapore, dolce disire, and più dolce. Scholars regularly note the poet’s separating out of the two sexual acts, one rape, the other, seduction,66 but Tobias Gittes is the only critic, to my knowledge, who has acknowledged the indebtedness of this separation to medieval theories of reproduction.67 According to Gittes, the erotic anaphora “omè, omè, omè” (310) leaves no doubt as to the consensual and pleasurable nature of the second sexual encounter.68 But, as we have seen,

65 Per Balduino’s notes, ‘risalgallo’ was a potent corrosive; as used in this verse, he believes the expression signifies “senza bruciore, senza dolore.” See Giovanni Boccaccio, Ninfale fiesolano, ed. Armando Balduino [Milan: Mondadori, 1997 (1974)], 229.

66 Hollander writes, “If Mensola was blameless by any but Diana’s harsh standards in her deflowering, she can not be said to be so in her second and sweeter taste of love. This time she is seduced, not raped” (Boccaccio’s Two Venuses, 70). Forni also differentiates between rape and seduction; he believes Mensola’s admission that she landed in trouble “pel mio peccato e per la mia follia” (Ninfale 394, 4) distinguishes between the first time (peccato) and the second (follia) (“Introduction”, 180).


there can be no doubt: the pleasurable nature of the second act of intercourse is explicitly referred to no less than ten times in six different octaves.

What is at stake for Boccaccio in so emphasizing the pleasurable nature of the procreative sex? Gittes believes the attribution of conception to the second act of love, while demonstrating Boccaccio’s adherence to contemporary theories of reproduction, is primarily significant due to its salutary effect on Africa’s future lineage: the attribution “imbues the schiatta africana with a somewhat more benevolent air”, as it avoids making Pruneo the result of rape.69 I agree that the desire of Boccaccio to assign Pruneo’s conception, and thereby the future inhabitants of Florence, a genesis in love, not violence, is at play here. But Boccaccio’s repeated references to pleasure, interlaced with discussions of conception, betray an attention to medieval physiological theories of sex that I believe supersedes etiological concerns. To fully appreciate the significance of Boccaccio’s insistence on female pleasure we must situate it within the context of medieval debates on male and female roles in reproduction. The following section explores the implications of Boccaccio’s incorporation of contemporary theories of procreation not only in the verses on Mensola’s pleasure, but also in those discussing Pruneo’s conception and gestation.

1.3 One seed, two seed

As we have seen, the Ninfale’s sex scenes - and their insistence on Mensola’s pleasure - are interwoven with lines that either implicitly or explicitly refer to conception. These are not, however, the only passages concerned with procreation: discussions of

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Pruneo’s generation and gestation are also found further on in the poem in the stanzas dedicated to Mensola’s pregnancy. The language Boccaccio employs in all these discussions of conception is specific at the same time as it is repetitive: the predominant metaphor is that of seeds, the locus of their flowering, Mensola’s ventre, or abdomen.

The seed metaphor first appears after Mensola, swayed by Africo’s desire, contemplates the second act of intercourse: Boccaccio’s narrator is quick to interject that the nymph is ignorant such a joining could be the ‘seed’ of man: “né sapea che quel tal congiugnimento / fosse ’l seme dell’uomo e ’l nascimento” (306, 7-8). When Mensola begins “to show” in octaves 379 and 380, the metaphor is again employed: Mensola becomes pale due to the ‘seed’ which has already flowered in her belly: “per quella semenza / che nel suo ventre già era fiorita” (379, 4-5). Octave 380 substitutes ‘creature’ for ‘seed’ but maintains the nymph’s ventre as the place of generation: “in capo di tre mesi incomincioe / a manifesto far la creatura / che dentro al ventre suo s’ingeneroe” (380, 2-4).

When considering these passages, it is important to remember that these analogies with plant life are not value-free: in the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, the seed was consistently privileged over the soil. Ian MacLean points out that for medieval and renaissance theorists, seed and soil existed in a hierarchical relationship that mirrored masculine and feminine nature: “Just as the seed is more noble and perfect than the earth in which it is planted and from which it draws nourishment, so also is the male more noble and perfect than the female.”70

The seed and soil language employed by Boccaccio both reproduces societal views of female physiology and succinctly expresses the widespread devaluation of the female role in reproduction. The gendered nature of medieval physiological theories of sex and procreation has been ably explored by historians who point to a marked anti-female bias. While contradictory and conflicting theories of procreation coexisted in the late Middle Ages, an element common to all was a lack of value assigned a woman’s contribution to the embryo. Buttressed by ‘scientific’ proof of women’s inferiority, medical writers assigned a passive or nurturing role to the mother and a generative or creative role to the father in the formation of the embryo, mirroring - and reinforcing - views of male and female in society at large. While partly due to a dearth of practical experiments and dissections (the ovaries had been discovered by Herophilus in 300 B.C.E. but knowledge of their existence was not widespread and they were often considered just a female form of testicles), the devaluation of the female role in reproduction was also the result of these writers’ heavy reliance on classic Greek and Arabic medical texts.


72 Medieval discussions of women’s role in reproduction were framed by debates over whether woman provided “a mere vessel to carry a man’s children”, whether she supplied material for the fetus, which the male seed formed, or whether she furnished both material and an active seed. See Vern L. Bullough’s “Medieval Medical and Scientific Views of Women.” In terms of the relative progressiveness of these theories from today’s standpoint, the latter is the most “woman-friendly”, while the view of woman as mere receptacle is obviously the least “pro-female”.

73 Atkinson, The Oldest Vocation, 49. MacLean observes that the major developments in embryology and gynecology occur after the mid-1600s (The Renaissance Notion of Woman, 30).

74 Maclean, The Renaissance Notion of Woman, 29-30. MacLean writes that a “conceptual framework inherited from the ancients” informed medieval and renaissance debates about women’s role in reproduction (30).
In the late Middle Ages, the two dominant, and contending, theories of reproduction were the Aristotelian one-seed theory and the Galenic two-seed theory; both reflected, to some extent, society’s views of women as inferior creatures, but they differed in their views on the existence, and efficacy, of female semen, or seed. As we will see, their differences have implications for our text.

Aristotelian biology held that there was only one active principle of creation: the male who generates. During reproduction, women provided undifferentiated matter, the menstrual blood, upon which the male’s seed, or semen, acts. In Aristotelian biology, the woman brought very little to the table: she provided only material, which the male seed imbued with form and power.

In contrast to Aristotle, Galen postulated a two-seed theory in which both male and female actively contributed to the formation of the embryo; he argued that conception required the mixing of male and female seed. As Clarissa Atkinson observes, Galen, in direct opposition to Aristotelian thought, argued that women had a

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77 While Aristotle was not aware of Herophilus’s discovery of the ovaries, Galen was, a fact that may explain his emphasis on the active role of both male and female in procreation; see Atkinson, The Oldest Vocation, 49 and Bestor, “Ideas about Procreation and Their Influence on Ancient and Medieval Views of Kinship,” 152-3.
seed and that it provided both matter and “a source of movement”. Yet despite this comparably progressive stance, Galenic biology was not free from anti-female bias: although Galen believed the mother produced a seed, he considered it inferior - colder and therefore weaker and less perfect - to the male seed, and attributed it a facilitating, and not generative, role. According to Jane Fair Bestor, Galen believed the main role of the female seed was “providing the male seed with nourishment in the initial stages of growth”, thereby continuing the Aristotelian identification of women with matter or nourishment.

Boccaccio’s repeated references to Mensola’s pregnancy in terms that conceptualize the fetus’s growth as that of a seed – un seme, una semenza - flowering or generating itself in the female ventre, or abdomen, reproduce the identification of the female with nourishment and the male with form or action seen, to varying degrees, in both Aristotelian one-seed and Galenic two-seed theories of procreation. The

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78 Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation*, 49; MacLean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman*, 36-7; Wood, “The Doctor’s Dilemma,” 716-7. In both Galenic and Aristotelian biology, the role of menstrual blood was “the provision of matter”; however, in the Galenic system, both male and female seed also provide matter to the fetus (MacLean, 37).


81 The Trotula, a collection of materials on women’s medicine purportedly written by a female physician in the eleventh or twelfth century, also employs the seed and soil metaphor: God created man and woman so that “by his stronger quality the male might pour out his duty in the woman just as seed is sown in its designated field, and so that the woman by her weaker quality, as if made subject to the function of the man, might receive the seed poured forth in the lap of Nature.” Trotula, however, turns women’s weakness into a mandate for providing them with help in childbirth and for tending to their illnesses. See The Trotula, ed. and trans. Monica H. Green (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 71. Green notes the Trotula was translated into the Florentine dialect in the fourteenth century. See Monica H. Green, “From
descriptions of Pruneo’s generation and gestation consistently align Mensola with either material or with a receptacle, or vessel. The lines “per quella semenza / che nel suo ventre già era fiorita” (379, 4-5) identify Mensola with nourishment or matter: a seed flowers in the soil of her ventre. The following lines’ statement about the manifestation of the creature that generates itself within her abdomen - “in capo di tre mesi incomincioe / a manifesto far la creatura/ che dentro al ventre suo s’ingeneroe” (380, 3-4) – also imply a passive (and not generative) view of the female in reproduction; significantly, the creature (or seed) generates itself – “s’ingeneroe” – within the vessel of Mensola’s abdomen, she does not generate it.

While a gender bias was inherent in both the Galenic and Aristotelian system, this passage seems to suggest Boccaccio’s subscription to a more Aristotelian view of the female reproductive role; no specific references are made to Mensola’s “seed” and the language hews closely to the Aristotelian form-matter binary. Earlier lines relating Mensola’s wonder at the force that wills her to satisfy Africo’s sexual desire – “i’ non so qual destino o qual fortuna / vuol pur ch’io faccia tutto ’l tuo disio” (307, 2-3) – also provide support for this view. According to Aristotle, the imperfect desires the perfect. In Physics I.9 he wrote, “matter desires form as the female the male,” and, as Ian MacLean notes, up through the Renaissance the statement was taken as proof that “the uterus makes woman eager to procreate” and that women desire “completion” through sexual intercourse with a man.\(^82\) While the supernatural force that compels Mensola to engage in sexual intercourse with Africo, the destino or fortuna of the lines cited above, probably has some etiological aspect to it – after all, it is this act that leads to Pruneo’s conception

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2 MacLean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman*, 40-1 and 30, respectively.
and thereafter to the foundation of Florence and Fiesole – it may also obliquely reflect views of female desire in the Aristotelian system.

However, while Boccaccio’s literary descriptions of conception largely reproduce Aristotelian binaries, his earlier connection of female pleasure to conception destabilizes the very binary these verses set up. Aristotelian and Galenic systems disagreed over the respective roles of male and female in reproduction and the existence of female seed; much more significantly for the Ninfale, they also differed with respect to their views on the necessity of female pleasure. For Galen, female pleasure was functional: it ensured the release of a woman’s seed, or semen, which made conception possible. On this point Galen was in direct conflict with Aristotelian teachings that held that female pleasure had no functional role.\(^{83}\) Ian Maclean writes, “In the Aristotelian understanding of fertilization, only the male seed needs to be aroused, as the female does not contribute to the generation of the foetus; for Galen, sexual pleasure in both male and female is functional (i.e. both woman and man must be aroused for them to be fertile and emit semen).”\(^{84}\)

We have seen that Boccaccio repeatedly stresses Mensola’s pleasure and connects it to Pruneo’s conception, while linking her pain to non-procreative sex. In the context of medieval debates on procreative roles, this emphasis on female pleasure accrues significance, for it implies the author’s adherence to a Galenic, and not Aristotelian, theory of reproduction. Indeed, the “acqua” in octaves 310 and 311’s sexual

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\(^{84}\) Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman*, 105n54.
climax - “All’acqua all’acqua, ché il foco s’accende /….L’acqua ne venne, e ’l foco fu ispento, / il mulin tace, e ciascun sospirava; / e come fu di Dio in piacimento, / d’Africo Mensola s’ingravidava” (310, 4; 311, 1-4) - may well be a reference to the female semen Galen thought was emitted during intercourse (of course, it is also easily read in a male key, but, regardless of whether we understand the acqua as female semen or seed, we cannot deny that Boccaccio makes it a point to underline the pleasure experienced by Mensola in the second consensual act of intercourse).\(^85\) The insistence on Mensola’s pleasure makes no sense in the Aristotelian system: according to Aristotle, women do not need to feel pleasure because they do not contribute to the formation of the fetus. The progressiveness of Galenic theory lies not only in its insistence on the functionality of female pleasure but on its elevating claim that women supply an active seed, and not just passive matter, during the reproductive process.\(^86\) By so emphasizing Mensola’s pleasure in the Ninfale, Boccaccio aligns himself with a more progressive two-seed system in which women contribute biologically to the embryo and female satisfaction is a necessary part of the procreative process.

To appreciate the progressiveness of this view, we need only compare it to the discussion of conception found in Dante’s Commedia. Statius’s account of the generation of man in Purgatorio XXV conforms to a strict Aristotelian template, aligning the female blood, likened to a receptive vasello, or vase, with passivity (“disposto a patire”) and the

\(^85\) Aristotelians also held that women emitted a liquid “half-way between water and sperm” during sexual intercourse, analogous to the prostatic liquid; in contrast to Galenists, however, they held that this female sperm had no active role in conception. See Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset, Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988 [1985]). While it is not inconceivable that the water referred to in octaves 310 and 311 could be this non-functional liquid, the emphasis given to female pleasure in the poem supports a more Galenic reading.

\(^86\) Even if the female seed is merely “facilitating” in Galenic theory, it is still imbued with its own source of movement.
superior male blood (“sangue perfetto”) with action (verbs like “fare”, “operare”, and “avviva”), even using the trope of coagulation seen in Aristotle’s cheese-making metaphor: the male blood “comincia ad operare coagulando prima, e poi avviva/ ciò che per sua matera fe’ constare” (Purg. XXV. 49-51). At no time does Dante mention the pleasure of either party, nor do his descriptions of male and female reproductive roles in these verses transcend the active-passive binary. While Boccaccio’s use of seed-soil imagery betrays the gender bias in medieval physiological theories of sex and society at large, his insistence on the pleasure Mensola felt during the procreative sexual encounter, in the context of medieval debates on reproductive roles, betrays a comparably pro-female view. This should not come as a particular surprise, for in Boccaccio’s later work, the Decameron, as in Galen’s theory, women are redeemed from passive bystanders to active – and therefore necessarily sexually satisfied – participants in the sexual act.

1.4 “Più pesante e fatta tutta svogliata e cascante”: The Signs of Pregnancy

In the Ninfale, Boccaccio’s interest in the female role in reproduction is not limited to lofty, philosophically-intoned discussions of the generation of man but also includes an attention to the distinguishing signs and prescribed regimen of the gravid woman; his discussion shows a sympathetic attentiveness to a pregnant woman’s lived experience at the same time as it reflects contemporary medical writings and ideas.

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87 It is not, however, inconceivable that two conflicting theories (Aristotle and Galen) might coexist in Boccaccio’s text. Historians observe the (not always happy) coexistence of contradictory thought systems with regard to reproduction throughout the premodern period; surely this state of conflict, or confusion, could be reflected in a literary context.
After her encounter with Africo, Mensola returns to her nymphal way of life; she hunts with her companions and endeavors to keep her indiscretions a secret. Soon, however, her body betrays her. Boccaccio dedicates three octaves to the identification of the somatic and mental “signs” of Mensola’s pregnancy: stanzas 379-381 relate the physical and psychological changes that the nymph undergoes as a result of her sin. Mensola becomes pale (“alquanto nel bel viso impalidita / era venuta, per quella semenza/ che nel suo ventre già era fiorita” [379, 3-5]), she starts to show (“Ma faccendo suo corso la natura, / in capo di tre mesi incomincioe / a manifesto far la creatura / che dentro al ventre suo s’ingeneroe” [380, 1-4]), her body and hips become larger (“veggendosi ingrossare il corpo e’ fianchi” [380, 7]), she is filled with a heaviness and fatigue (“di gravezza pieni e fatti stanchi” [380, 8]), she gains weight (“ogni giorno vengo più pesante” [381, 7]), and becomes lazy and listless (“fatta tutta svogliata e cascante” [381, 8]).

The octaves, while primarily dedicated to the external manifestations of Mensola’s gravid state, also consider the nymph’s subjective experience of those changes. Boccaccio twice stresses Mensola’s wonderment at her change in state - “Mensola forte si maraviglioe” (380, 6); “Di questo si facea gran maraviglia / Mensola, la cagion non conoscendo” (381, 1-2) – and has Mensola speculate about the cause of changes in her body and energy level: she wonders, “-Saria, questo, difetto, che mi piglia / si la persona, ch’ognor va crescendo” (381, 5-6).

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88 Being betrayed, revealed, or brought down, by one’s pregnant body is something of a literary *topos*, seen also in the story of Pope Joan in Boccaccio’s later work, *De mulieribus claris*: Joan, able to conceal her identity and rule as (male) pope, is revealed to be an imposter when she gives birth in public during a religious procession (Giovanni Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, ed. and trans. Virginia Brown (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2001.) In both Joan’s story and the *Ninfale*, pregnancy reveals the heroines’ transgressions, although the authorial tone in the two works is notably different. The thematic of pregnancy revealing one’s sin is also at work in *Decameron* V, 7.
The poet’s attentive description of the identifying signs of Mensola’s pregnancy and his intuition of her thoughts during this time betray an unusual attention to (and, perhaps, first-hand acquaintance with\textsuperscript{89}) the experience of the gravida. Such attention is anomalous in the Italian literary tradition - we need only think of Dante or Petrarch to appreciate just what it means that Boccaccio is contemplating, and interested in, what it feels like to be pregnant – but it is also not part of the received narratives on which Boccaccio models at least some aspects of his poem, Heroides XI and the tale of Callisto in the Metamorphoses. Ovid’s texts contain little consideration of physical or psychological changes to which his heroines are subject during their pregnancies. The only potential “sign” of Callisto’s pregnancy would be her frequent blushes, which are probably better linked to the nymph’s transgression of Diana’s vow. Canace evidences many signs of lovesickness (cannot eat, paleness, weight loss, uneasy sleep, groaning) but few signs of pregnancy.\textsuperscript{90} She, too, blushes when confessing her sin to her nurse; the only

\textsuperscript{89} Boccaccio had five illegitimate children and it appears that he spent some time with at least one, his daughter Violante, whose death he laments in an epistle to Petrarch (1367) and to whom he dedicates Eclogue 14. See Bergin, Boccaccio, 348n12&13. While it is impossible to say whether the poet also spent time with Violante’s mother during her pregnancy (or with the mothers of his other children), it seems at least possible that he may have had some close experience of women during pregnancy; the hypothesis is as intriguing as it is difficult to prove.

\textsuperscript{90} Piguet interprets two of these symptoms as signs of Canace’s pregnancy: paleness and thinness (“maigreur, paleur”), which he groups in with (a later verse’s) weight gain. See Piguet, “Variations autour d’un mythe ovidien dans l’oeuvre de Boccace,” 32. In Heroides XI, however, discussion of Canace’s weight gain and abortive attempts are at a distance from the references to pallor and thinness, which follow an explicit acknowledgment of the god of Love (Canace writes, “Burning with love I felt that god in my heart and knew him to be what I had heard”). Moreover, they appear in a passage describing symptoms that result not from pregnancy but from the presence of Love (cannot eat, uneasy sleep, time has stopped, groan with pain). See Ovid, Heroides, trans. Harold Isbell (Penguin Classics, 2004 [1990]), 98. I would note, as has Maggini, that in the Ninfale, the symptomatology of Africa’s lovesickness is remarkably similar to Canace’s in this passage in the Heroides. See F. Maggini, “Ancora a proposito del Ninfale Fiesolano”, 38-9.
directly relevant sign of her pregnancy is weight: “Quite soon, the burden of my erring body grew; my weakness felt its secret weight.”\(^9^1\)

In the *Ninfale*, however, Boccaccio far surpasses a generic mention of additional weight: he is quite specific in recounting both external physical signs - lack of color, increased weight, larger hips, heaviness – and internal psychological signs, signs that would be part of Mensola’s experience of being pregnant, not necessarily discernible to an observer: fatigue, laziness, listlessness, wonder at her state, a lack of force (“Saria, questo, difetto, che mi piglia si la persona”). While not a part of the literary tradition in which the poet worked or the classical sources that, directly or indirectly, inspired his poem, the *Ninfale*’s description of the physical and psychological manifestations of pregnancy has much in common with the medical literature of the time.

*I segni de la impregnatione*

In the late Middle Ages, there existed a rather extensive literature dedicated to identifying the signs of gravidity. The proliferation, and popularity, of this literature was due to the lack of reliable diagnostic methods (a common pregnancy test was inserting a clove of garlic in the vagina: if the next day one could smell garlic on the woman’s breath, she was not pregnant, if her breath was sweet, she had conceived) and irregular menstruation patterns resulting from frequent pregnancies, prolonged lactation, and malnutrition, as well as society’s interest in ensuring and promoting fertility.\(^9^2\)


\(^9^2\) For the garlic test, see Michele Savonarola, *Il trattato ginecologico-pediatrico in volgare*, ed. Luigi Belloni (Milan: Società italiana di ostetricia e ginecologia, 1952) 52; the test is also cited by Jacques Gélis
Gynecological and obstetrical texts carefully listed the “signs” of pregnancy that a doctor, midwife, or lay-person might detect through examination or observation of a patient.

The signs cited in these primary medical texts run the gamut from what I will term ‘technical’ signs of conception (the neck of the uterus is closed tightly, the vagina is not moist, menstruation is withheld), to more ‘visual’ clues (the woman’s loins become heavy, her body or abdomen swell, her face and eyes change color), as well as comprising ‘psychological’ or digestive afflictions (anxiety, laziness, nausea and vomiting). Boccaccio’s literary description of the manifestations of Mensola’s pregnancy in octaves 379 to 381 possesses notable affinities with many of these signs of conception; several of the ‘visual’ signs, as well as some of the more specifically ‘psychological’ signs are represented in these stanzas (for obvious reasons, the poet does not dwell on the ‘technical’ signs).

As part of the general transformation of her body, Boccaccio tells us that Mensola’s body and hips become larger (“veggendosi ingrossare il corpo e’ fianchi” [380, 7]) and she gains weight (“ogni giorno vengo più pesante” [381, 7]). While seemingly obvious, these signs are nonetheless reflected in the medical literature. The

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93 This splitting of the signs into technical, visual, and psychological is an effort on my part to impose order on these texts, and is not in any way reflected in the source material. The signs are listed without any differentiation as to their quality or verity: ‘yellow eyes’ is on the same plane as ‘withheld menstruation’.

94 That said, Boccaccio’s insistence on Mensola’s pleasure during Pruno’s conception may indicate one ‘technical’ sign of conception. The first sign of pregnancy was believed to be a shivering sensation experienced by the woman at insemination. Soranus claims that such “shivering” is a sure sign of conception. Savonarola, citing the authority of Avicenna, refers to a titillation in all members – “una titilatione in tutti i membri suoi”. I do not believe we can confidently correlate Mensola’s diletto with this titillation, but the connection is intriguing. See Soranus’ Gynecology, trans. Oswei Temkin (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), 43, and Michele Savonarola, Il trattato ginecologico-pediatrico in volgare, ed. Luigi Belloni (Milan: Società italiana di ostetricia e ginecologia, 1952), 46.
writings of second-century Greek physician Soranus, one of the most important, and oft-cited, sources of obstetrical knowledge in the Middle Ages, name “heavy loins” and a “swelling of the abdomen” as signs of pregnancy. Thirteenth-century encyclopedist Bartholomaeus Anglicus, citing the authority of Aristotle and Galen, lists expansion of the uterus as a “sign of impregnation”. Michele Savonarola, a prominent physician in the Este court, lists a rounding of the gravida’s body – “[il] corpo se incomencia a rotundare per la elevatione di la matrice” – as one of the “Segni de la impregnatione” in his early fifteenth-century vernacular treatise dedicated to the women of Ferrara.

Clearly, describing pregnancy through reference to weight gain and a swelling abdomen does not require Boccaccio’s acquaintance with medical texts. The poet, however, also weaves what we might consider less predictable signs of pregnancy into his description of Mensola’s state; these, too, find counterparts in the obstetrical literature. As Mensola’s body and abdomen enlarge, her face thins and grows pale: Boccaccio explicitly attributes the pallor of her face to conception in stanza 379 (“alquanto nel bel viso impalidita / era venuta, per quella semenza / che nel suo ventre già era fiorita” [379, 3-5) and the nymphs later notice a new gauntness to Mensola’s face (“veggendola si magra nella faccia” [400, 7]) which causes them concern. In modern thought, pallor and thinness in no way correlate with pregnancy, yet in the late Middle

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95 Soranus’ *Gynecology*, 44. Soranus’s teachings were readily available through various translations and compilations from the early Middle Ages. See Mary M. McLaughlin, “Survivors and Surrogates: Children and Parents from the Ninth to the Thirteenth Centuries,” in *The History of Childhood*, ed. Lloyd de Mause (New York: The Psychohistory Press, 1974), 113 and 146n42.

96 Bartholomaeus writes, “It is a sign of impregnation, according to Aristotle and Galen, that mothers desire different things, the coloring changes, the area under the eyes turns black, the breasts are enlarged, and the uterus grows in size.” Cited in Michael Goodich, “Bartholomaeus Anglicus on Child-Rearing,” *History of Childhood Quarterly* (Summer 1975, Vol. 3, no. 1): 75-84.

97 This is Savonarola’s sixth sign of pregnancy. The *pregnante* should also experience a pain behind her belly button as part of this rounding. (*Savonarola, Il trattato ginecologico-pediatrico in volgare*, 48.)
Ages, changes in facial color and fullness were believed to be clear indications of pregnancy. Bartholomaeus Anglicus notes that during pregnancy a woman’s “coloring changes”. Savonarola is more specific: the color of the gravida’s face and body change: “se altera il colore di la faza e di tuto il corpo de la pregnante”. Soranus believed that “pallor” and “the appearance of undernourishment”, or thinness, indicated pregnancy. My point is that to a medieval reader the pallor and thinness of Mensola’s face (“nel bel viso impalidita”; “si magra nella faccia”) would not have been considered generic detail or indication of some psychic ailment, but clear manifestations of her gravid state.

Critics detect an Ovidian echo in verses describing Mensola as tired or heavy - “di gravezza pieni e fatti stanchi” (380, 8); Balduino and Piguet point to similarities with Heroides, XI 39-40: “Iamque tumescebant vitiati pondera ventris / Aegraque furtivum membra gravabat onus”. This verse, however, as well as the following description of Mensola as lazy and listless (“tutta svogliata e cascante” [381, 8]), is also fully consonant with the medical literature. Describing pregnancy through reference to fatigue, laziness, or a feeling of heaviness may seem banal or predictable to us, and we may dismiss these lines out of hand. Yet, in the late Middle Ages, these conditions were considered the physiological effects of the weight of the fetus on the mother and appeared frequently in medical writings. Bartholomaeus writes, “Because of the size of the growing foetus,” a pregnant woman “feels heavy and unable to work”. He also connects the mother’s fatigue

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99 Savonarola, Il trattato ginecologico-pediatrico in volgare, 49.

100 Soranus’ Gynecology, 50.

to the fetus’s movement: “The closer the birth comes, the more the mother suffers and is 
fatigued by the motion of the foetus.” Similarly, Savonarola draws attention to the 
fetus’s encumbering effects on the mother: due to the child’s weight, the gravida feels 
weighted down and becomes heavier, or slower, in her movements: “E per lo cargo dil 
feto se fano più grave nei suoi movimenti.” According to him, laziness and a feeling of 
heaviness are ‘signs’ of pregnancy: pregnant women are “pegre” and “grave dil 
corpo”.  

When Boccaccio refers to the gravid Mensola as heavy and fatigued (“di gravezza 
pieni e fatti stanchi” [380, 8]) and lazy and listless (“tutta svogliata e cascante” [381, 8]) 
he is, therefore, reproducing contemporary medical thought. His later statement that 
Mensola’s size, as she nears parturition, impedes her movement - “e ’l peso del fantin 
tanto aggravato, / ch’andare attorno omai più non potea” (399, 4-5) – also bears 
similarities with this literature, by connecting the weight of the fetus (Boccaccio: “il peso 
del fantin”; Savonarola: “per lo cargo dil feto”) with the restriction of the mother’s 
 mobility (“andare attorno omai più non potea”; “se fano più grave nei suoi movimenti”). 

The affinities between the Ninfale’s description of the manifestations of 
Mensola’s pregnancy and the signs of pregnancy listed in this literature are striking. 
While Boccaccio may not have had first-hand acquaintance with these medical texts – 

102 Goodich, “Bartholomaeus Anglicus on Child-Rearing,” 80. Soranus also mentions “a feeling of 
 heaviness”; although he appears to be referring primarily to maladies of the stomach (Soranus’ Gynecology, 
50). 

103 Savonarola, Il trattato ginecologico-pediatrico in volgare, 48. 

104 Savonarola, Il trattato ginecologico-pediatrico in volgare, 48-9. This is part of his “ninth” sign of 
pregnancy, comprised of a mixed bag of conditions he believes indicate gestation: pregnant women are 
anxious (“angustiose”), lazy (“pegre”), weighted down (“grave dil corpo”), their head hurts (“il capo gie 
duole”); they suffer changes in appetite and imagination (“apetere le cose stranie”; “hanno cative 
imaginatione”); their eyes may become yellow (“Hanno lo biancho di l’occhio citrino”) and their pupils 
may diminish (“le pupille si sminuisse”); and, as mentioned above, their face and body change color.
and I am in no way arguing that he did - we may assume that the ideas they promoted had some circulation in society at large. Comparison of the passages in the *Ninfale* with the medical texts suggests that the poet endeavored to make his literary representation of pregnancy conform to contemporary thought on the signs and symptoms of conception; as we will see in the next section, his description of Mensola’s prenatal care also reflects, if to a lesser extent, contemporary beliefs about gravidity.

### 1.5 “Quando compiuti i nove mesi arai”: Prenatal Care

What I refer to, perhaps anachronistically, as Mensola’s prenatal care comprises Sinedecchia’s advice and counsel to Mensola in octaves 390-395 as well as the nymph’s subsequent behavior prior to parturition. The fact that Boccaccio saw fit to include this material in his poem is, again, unusual; he might have easily skipped over this prenatal period and moved right to the dramatic labor scene, as Ovid does in *Heroides* XI. In both Canace’s story in the *Heroides* and Callisto’s in the *Metamorphoses*, little weight, or indeed mention, is given the heroines’ actions in the interval between conception and birth, besides a generic notice of the passage of nine lunar cycles. Boccaccio, however, dedicates over twenty octaves to Mensola’s prenatal care and confinement, dwelling on both the particulars of her prescribed prenatal regimen and her thoughts and activities during this period.

After wondering at the changes in her body and psyche, Mensola seeks the help of an old nymph, Sinedecchia, who immediately perceives her pregnancy, and stresses the

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105 Ovid’s only reference to the prenatal period is his narration of Canace’s efforts to dislodge the fetus from her uterus with abortifacient herbs. No mention is made of any regimen that Callisto follows during this period.
impossibility of keeping the sin hidden: “Figliuola mia, tu hai con uom peccato, / e non puoi più tener questo celato” (383, 7-8). The sage nymph reproaches Mensola, to ensure that she will never fall victim again (389, 5-8), before turning to practical prescriptions for the nymph’s prenatal care and labor.

N. Piguet sees similarities between Sinedecchia’s accusation and Mensola’s reaction in the Ninfale, and those of Canace’s nurse and Canace in Heroides XI. In common with Ovidian heroine Canace (and, also, Callisto), Mensola blushes when confronted with her sin: “nel bel viso venne rossa” (384, 1). Yet while both Sinedecchia and Canace’s nurse diagnose their charges’ malady, the emphasis is different in the two tales: Canace’s nurse tells her she must be in love (“Aeoli, dixit, amas”, Heroides XI, v. 36) while Sinedecchia tells Mensola she sinned (“tu hai con uomo peccato” [383, 7]), a more explicit reference to sex. I also disagree with Piguet that similarities exist between the aid and counsel offered by Sinedecchia to Mensola and Canace’s nurse to Canace: in Ovid’s tale, the nurse’s prenatal aid and advice is solely restricted to the provision of abortifacients. While agreeing that analogies between the two texts can be made, I believe Boccaccio’s verses put more emphasis on sex and pregnancy while their Ovidian forerunners are more generally concerned with love and lovesickness.

Sinedecchia’s first piece of advice, concerning the labor, is both facts-of-life lesson and birth plan: she tells Mensola that nine months from the day of her encounters with Africo she will give birth; when the day comes, she must invoke the help of the goddess Lucina. After the birth, everything will be looked after:

    Quando compiuti i nove mesi arai,
dal giorno che peccasti cominciando,

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una creatura tu partorirai;
allor la dea Lucina tu chiamando,
il suo aiuto l’addomanderai,
e la pietosa tel darà; e poi, quando
nato sarà, quel che fia noi ‘l vedremo,
e ben ad ogni cosa provedremo. (391)

Sinedecchia then addresses Mensola’s care in the months leading up to the birth. While partly focused on avoiding detection - Mensola should stay hidden and not go out (“fa’ che tu fuor di questo sentiero / non vadi ‘n questo mezzo, che ’l peccato / non sia palese a quelle che nol sanno” [392, 5-7]; “Ma sola ti starai alla caverna” [393, 1]; “tien’ pur celato il peccato commesso” [395, 4]) and wear large clothes, without a belt (“e’ panni porta larghi quanto puoi, / sanza cintura, che non si discerna / il corpo grande pe’ peccati tuoi” [393, 2-4]) – her prescriptions also address the nymph’s mental and physical health during the period. Mensola is instructed to remain peaceful and calm, and visit Sinedecchia often, so that she may further aid her: “e quivi pianamente ti governa,/ dandoti pace, sì come far suoi,/ e spesso vieni a me, ed io ti dirò / ciò che far tu dovrai intorno a ciò” (393, 4-8).

Sinedecchia’s instructions – stay hidden, wear big clothes, come see me often, stay calm and peaceful – might strike us as imprecise or abstract, and perhaps lead us to consider this passage an authorial flight of fancy with little relation to its cultural context. However, at least one of Sinedecchia’s recommendations is directly reflected in the pregnancy regimens promoted by the medical literature of the time.107 The same

107 Sinedecchia’s recommendation that Mensola visit her often so that she may advise her further (“e spesso vieni a me, ed io ti dirò / ciò che far tu dovrai intorno a ciò”) may be an, admittedly imprecise, reference to the role of a midwife. However, most historians point out that prenatal care, as we would understand it (medical supervision), was non-existent in the premodern period. Midwives were frequently called during the labor, but had little visibility in the months leading up to it. See Shahar, _Childhood in the Middle Ages_, 39 and Haas, _The Renaissance Man and His Children: Childbirth and Early Childhood in Florence, 1300-1600_ (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 51.
obstetrical and gynecological texts that so carefully laid out the signs of pregnancy also commonly included sections on the prescribed care of the pregnant woman, the so-called *De regimine pregnantium*. These regimens codified beliefs and fears about a woman’s effect on the fetus; while differing in approach and focus, they commonly identified foods beneficial, and dangerous, to the gravida, and warned against the physical and emotional dangers of pregnancy. Sinedecchia’s advice to Mensola that she comport herself slowly and peacefully (“e quivi pianamente ti governa, / dandoti pace, si come far suoi” [393, 4-5]) reflects two of these supposed dangers: the hazards of psychic excesses and vigorous exercise during pregnancy.

The belief that a gravida should maintain an even mental state was commonplace in the late Middle Ages. Classical texts warned that strong emotions could adversely affect fetal development or cause miscarriage. In the *Politics*, Aristotle advised a woman’s mind be idle during the prentatal period: “As regards the mind… it suits them

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109 MacLehose, “Nurturing Danger: High Medieval Medicine and the Problem(s) of the Child,” 11. Because reproduction was so closely linked to the menses in the medieval imagination, these regimens had much in common with behaviors thought to ensure regular menstruation (good food, adequate rest and sleep, avoidance of excessive anger, sadness, and worry). See Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation*, 44; Helen Rodnite Lemay, “Anthonius Guainerius and Medieval Gynecology,” 334.

110 MacLehose, “Nurturing Danger: High Medieval Medicine and the Problem(s) of the Child,” 10-11. Jacques Gélis, working primarily with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France, notes the persistence of earlier classical prescriptions restricting exercise and warning against psychic excesses in the literature of that time period. See Gélis, *History of Childbirth* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991 [1984]), 76-83 The Trotula’s regimen is an exception from this general tendency in that it contains no consideration of exercise or the gravida’s mental state; instead, it advises frequent baths, anointings with oil, and light and digestible foods, and warns against naming things the gravida cannot have in front of her, which can cause miscarriage (The Trotula, ed. Monica H. Green, 95-7).
to pass the time more indolently…for children before birth are evidently affected by the mother just as growing plants are by the earth.” Soranus warned against excesses or changes in psyche; these could lead to miscarriage since the seed was evacuated “through fright, sorrow, sudden joy and, generally, by severe mental upset.” According to him, it was, therefore, important to “divert [the gravida’s] mind”.

Vigorous exercise was also believed to have negative effects on the fetus, for it too could cause the seed to be expelled. Soranus’s regimen contains numerous prescriptions for exercise, all of which restrict the gravida’s physical activities to some extent: in the first stage of pregnancy, passive exercise, such as swinging in a hammock or riding in a chariot, and short easy walks are advised, during the ‘pica’ (a period spanning the 40th day to 5 or 6 months) passive exercise, walks, and voice exercises are recommended, in the third stage, from pica to parturition (more or less, the last trimester), only passive exercises are allowed. In a specifically fourteenth-century Tuscan context, Paolo da Cerlaldo repeats the belief that excessive exertion by the mother has a nocent effect on the fetus: if men want their child to be carried a bene, they must ensure the


112 It could also be expelled by “forced detention of the breath, coughing, sneezing, blows, and falls, especially those on the hips; lifting heavy weights, leaping, sitting on hard sedan chairs, by the administration of drugs, by the application of pungent substances and sternutatives; through want, indigestion, drunkenness, vomiting, diarrhea; by a flow of blood from the nose, from hemorrhoids or other places; through relaxation due to some heating agent, through marked fever, rigors, cramps.” See Soranus’ *Gynecology*, trans. Oswei Temkin, 45-6.


mother does not overwork: “A ciò che la donna grossa porti il suo filgliuolo a bene, si si
dée molto guardare, però ch’è di grande rischio; e però guardisi di troppa fatica”.

Boccaccio’s literary description of this prenatal period reflects these accepted
beliefs about gravidity: Sinedecchia advises Mensola to be peaceful and calm and
Mensola, in turn, restricts her activities. No longer able to roam freely through the woods
or hunt, she remains in her cave, with occasional visits to Sinedecchia:

Quivi si stava pensosa e dolente
sanza gir mai, come soleva, attorno,
e per compagno tenea nella mente
Africo sempre col suo viso adorno;
e perché sempre continovamente
il corpo suo più crescea ogni giorno,
sanza cintura i panni suoi portava;
e assai sovente a Sinedecchia andava. (396)

The affinity between Sinedecchia’s advice and Mensola’s behavior in the Ninfale
and the prescriptions of the medical regimens suggests that Boccaccio took care to ensure
that Mensola’s prenatal care and behavior conformed to at least some of the accepted
precepts. Interestingly, however, in this and the following octaves, he complicates his
incorporation of the material by considering the effects of conformance to these regimens
on Mensola’s mental state. Contrary to Sinedecchia’s counsel, Mensola is not calm and
peaceful during this period; she is described as pensive and regretful or distressed, the
result, it is implied, of the prescribed restriction of her activity: “Quivi si stava pensosa e

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116 Paolo da Certaldo, Il libro di buoni costumi, ed. S. Morpurgo (Florence: Felice Le Monnier, 1921),
n.154. He also advises that pregnant women avoid drinking wine, and sitting or lying on the ground, which
might cause them to become cold, at great risk to the fetus. In his Régime du Corps, Aldobrandino of Siena
advises that pregnant women avoid worries and work: “Et leur estuet garder de courous, de travail, de
pensees, de paour, de batures, et user totes coses de joie et soulsas.” See “Comment la femme se doit garder
dolente / sanza gir mai, come soleva, attorno” [396, 1-2]). Cloistered in her cave, having lost the once-held freedom to move around freely, her only companion is a mental picture of Africo (“e per compagno tenea nella mente / Africo sempre col suo viso adorno” [396, 3-4]). The following two stanzas describe the effects of such constant and sole companionship: Mensola develops a burning love for Africo, the father of her child, whose name she tearfully calls. She regrets having not gone away with him the day they made love and visits the site of their lovemaking - and, once, his home - to see if she may still find him and live with him:

E cominciolle a crescer si nel core, per la creatura ancora non partorita, contro ad Africo un si fervente amore, che volentier ne vorrebbe essere gita con esso lui a starsi a tutte l’ore, il giorno ch’ella si tenne tradita; e ’l di se ne pentea mille fiate, chiamando lui, con lagrime versate.

Questo pensier la fe’ più volte andare al loco ov’ella fu contaminata, sol per saper s’Africo può trovare, per essersene a casa con lui andata; ma non si seppe mai tanto arrischiare, per la vergogna, d’andar sola nata a casa sua; e pur presso v’andoe, alcuna volta, e poi ’ndietro tornoe. (397-8)

When considering these octaves, we should keep in mind that the focus of premodern pregnancy regimens was not the mother’s health, but the child’s; the regimens existed to safeguard the fetus from the potentially negative effects of his mother’s

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117 According to the De Mauro dictionary, ‘dolente’ can have the sense of regretful, afflicted, distressed, or tormented. As used by Boccaccio in Decameron V,7, it carries a connotation of severe distress mixed with regret (as in spiacente): Violante’s mother is “dolente senza misura” when she learns of her daughter’s pregnancy out of wedlock; Amerigo is described as “il più dolente uom del mondo” when he discovers he could have made an socially advantageous marriage for his daughter, Violante (he has ordered her killed).
behavior or mental state on his development. In these octaves, however, Boccaccio is decidedly less interested in the hypothetical effects of Mensola’s prenatal behavior on her child – the focus of medical regimens - than he is in the adverse effects of the regimen on her: he repeatedly draws attention to the lack of mobility experienced by Mensola as the result of her pregnancy and connects it, and the resulting solitude, to doleful feelings (pensosa e dolente) and obsessive thoughts (the imaginary company of Africo, the sì fervente amore, the frequent trips to the place of her contamination). The first four lines of octave 396 tie Mensola’s thoughtful, distressed state - and communion with mental images of Africo - to the loss of her ability to gir attorno, strongly suggesting causality. Octaves 397 and 398 relay her teary regrets and attempts to escape this imposed solitude. Octave 399 acknowledges her failure and makes explicit her immobility: too large to go around, she awaits the birth in her cave, on a sort of premodern bedrest - “E già il corpo si cresciuto avea, / e ’l peso del fantin tanto aggravato, / ch’andare attorno omai non potea; /…si stava alla caverna, ed aspettava / del parto il tempo ch’omai s’appressava” (399, 3-5, 7-8).

As we have seen, Mensola’s immobility during this period is consistent with contemporary medical thought, but her mournful thoughts and feelings are distinctly contraindicated. Her despondency may result from her broken vow to Diana (and accompanying fear of punishment) and necessary separation from her fellow nymphs, but

118 William MacLehose, “Nurturing Danger: High Medieval Medicine and the Problem(s) of the Child”, has stressed that medieval medical writers believed the mother’s body and desires were potentially corrupting to the child and could harm the fetus in many ways.

119 Although in the passage discussed above Boccaccio seems more interested in the effects of Mensola’s prenatal activities on her own mental state than he is in any adverse effect on her unborn child, her activities during this period do have consequences. As we will see in Chapter Two, Mensola’s constant meditation on Africo’s face and invocations of his name will have a profound effect on baby Pruneo, whose “perfect” resemblance to his father both comments on and complicates the preeminence given male lineage in late medieval Tuscan society.
I would argue that these stanzas have a resonance that is meant to reach beyond the particulars of the narrative. In so closely connecting Mensola’s distressed state to the restriction of her activity – in other words, by incorporating and then complicating medieval beliefs about gravidity - Boccaccio may be expressing his sympathy for the confinement – understood as the loss of mobility - of the gravida. By highlighting the nocent effects of restrictive solitude on a human being, these octaves may be seen as prefiguring the Proem to the Decameron’s acknowledgment of the constraints on women. As Teodolinda Barolini has shown, in the Proem, Boccaccio contrasts male freedom and activity with enforced female immobility, linking that immobility to heightened melancholy.\(^{120}\) The same causality is on display in the Ninfale: Boccaccio closely ties the loss of Mensola’s once-held freedom to gir attorno with feelings of distress and regret. Whether that immobility is caused by pregnancy or by the wishes of family members is perhaps not the issue; in the Ninfale, as in the Decameron, Boccaccio appears to be making the argument that the restriction of female activity produces a harmful and sorrowful mental state.

1.6 “Veggendo aversi fatto una si bella creatura, ogn’ altra pena fu alleggiata”:
A Literary Account of Labor

If Boccaccio incorporates accepted beliefs about gravidity in late medieval society into the signs of Mensola’s pregnancy and her prenatal behavior, his account of her labor

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seems, at first glance, to have little relation to social history. Short on detail and
formulaic, Mensola’s labor progresses quickly, to use a modern term:

Avvenne adunque in questi giorno, un die,
ch’alla caverna sua Mensola stando,
per tutto ’l corpo doglie si sentie;
per che, la dea del parto allor chiamando,
un fantin maschio quivi partorie,
il qual Lucina di terra levando
gliel mise in collo e disse: - Questi fia
ancor gran fatto – e poi isparì via. (403)

The labor described in this octave seems little more than literary convention: there is the
pain of childbed, a standard since Genesis, the birth of a male child assisted by a goddess,
and the issuing of a prophecy. Notwithstanding the formulaic nature of this passage,
however, the verses do contain reflections of the social history of childbirth, if refracted
through a male consciousness. Although the octave may seem marked by imprecision and
abstraction, the narrative elements of Mensola’s labor – the pain, the invocation of divine
help, the obscure delivery, the lifting up of the child – actually mirror the experience and
knowledge of childbirth that many people - male or female – possessed in the Middle
Ages.

The medieval period was characterized by a rather startling lack of information
about the process of childbirth. Medical texts had much to say about conception and
pregnancy, but contained little material about labor.121 Premodern birth, as historians
have pointed out, was “a purely female domain”: deliveries were attended by midwives

121 Male authors had little practical experience and did not find much guidance in the classical texts to
which they turned: in the classical and Moslem medical tradition, physicians did not attend births (Shahar,
*Childhood in the Middle Ages*, 33).
or female relatives and men were not present at births. Yet the mystery surrounding childbirth was not just the result of male-exclusion from the birthing chamber. In a period with little anatomical understanding and a prevalence of superstition, women were not much better informed than men: although they had likely witnessed or experienced a birth, they had little detailed information about the process and there was little help or assistance should complications arise.

While the actual process of childbirth remained wreathed in mystery, the pain and suffering of labor were evident to all. The pain of childbirth was both a topos and an unavoidable reality, referred to in all accounts of childbirth. Hildegard of Bingen observes that a woman is overcome by “fright and trembling” during childbirth and that, in keeping with Genesis 3:16, “the fastenings of her members are aching and are released

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122 Male physicians were occasionally called to a birth, but they relied on midwives for examinations and it was midwives who generally delivered children. As a result, historians know little of what happened inside the birth chamber since it was men who wrote medical texts, encyclopedias, and ricordanze. See Opitz, “Life in the Late Middle Ages,” 289; Jacqueline Marie Musacchio, The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 17-33; Haas, The Renaissance Man and His Children, 40; and McLaughlin, “Survivors and Surrogates”, 113. In the iconography of the time, the man is usually depicted standing outside the door to the birth chamber, never within. See Haas, The Renaissance Man and His Children, 40, 48, 219-220n.63, and also Musacchio, The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy.

123 One of the few women to write about the subject, Hildegard of Bingen, describes birth in diluvial terms - “the child comes out with a strong flow of blood, like an overflowing of waters that sweeps along stones and wood” – that, while poetic, provides few details of the process (Hildegard of Bingen, Cause et Cure, trans. Margaret Berger, 84). Opitz believes medieval women and midwives knew little about childbirth and the related questions of fertility and contraception (Opitz, “Life in the Late Middle Ages,” 289). See also Musacchio, The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy, 21-22.

124 The helplessness of medieval people when faced with complications is well illustrated by the fact that, frequently, recourse to sympathetic magic or exorcism was made during difficult labors. Guainerius describes various substances (like the feather from left wing of an eagle) that can be placed on a woman’s hip to accelerate labor. Avicenna’s Canon of Medicine recommends that women be rubbed with the ashes of a donkey’s foot, the logic being that since the foot comes last on the donkey’s body it will draw the fetus down and out. (See Helen Lemay, “Women and the Literature of Obstetrics and Gynecology,” in Medieval Women and the Sources of Medieval History [1990], 194-5, 198.) These remedies could not have been very effective: one-fifth of all married women who died in Florence in 1424, 1425 and 1430 died in childbirth or from puerperal complications (Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, Tuscans and Their Families, 277).
with tears and lamenting”. Bartholomaeus Anglicus states: “During the birth, [the
mother] is forced to cry out from pain, and is easily endangered.” Guainerius also
writes about the “sharp pains and great weight” which “cruelly, ceaselessly and
powerfully molest” the parturient woman, making her cry out. With prolonged labors
and little medical intervention in the event of a complication, these cries were likely
experienced by most medieval people at some time; Louis Haas believes the sounds
constituted “part of the normal cacophony that made up the premodern city of
Florence.” Two of the Decameron’s novelle provide support for his view: in V, 7,
Violante’s father discovers her pregnancy when he, in passing, overhears her parturient
cries; in IX, 3, Calandrino, tricked into thinking he is pregnant, is willing to pay a large
sum of money to avoid giving birth, so fearful has a past experience of the screams of
laboring women made him. The pain of childbirth had, of course, been a topos since
biblical times; nonetheless, the Ninfale’s verse “per tutto ’l corpo doglie si sentie;” (403,
3) would have strongly correlated with medieval people’s impressions of childbirth. We
cannot, therefore, write it off as just banal or pedestrian; its appearance in the text may
reflect in equal measure literary convention and Tuscan social history.

125 Hildegard of Bingen, Cause et Cure, trans. Margaret Berger, 81-2.
128 He writes, “With Florence’s narrow streets and the prolific merchant elite, passersby as well could feel
pathos for the travail the mother was going through – mothers would be reminded of their own labor; men
would be reminded of something they were not really privy to, and perhaps were glad not to be” (Haas, The
Renaissance Man and His Children, 45-6).
129 The language used in V, 7 supports the view that women’s parturient cries were a commonplace in late
medieval Florence - “sopra venuto il tempo del partorire, gridando come le donne fanno” (Dec. V, 7, 24 –
my emphasis). See also Dec. IX, 3, 27: “io odo fare alle femine un si grand romore quando son per
partorire.” Louis Haas believes these novelle illustrate Boccaccio’s powers of observation (Haas, The
Renaissance Man and His Children, 45).
The invocation to and presence of Lucina in this octave – “la dea del parto allor chiamando, / un fantin maschio quivi partorie, / il qual Lucina di terra levando / gliel mise in collo” (403, 4-7) – while an Ovidian echo, would also have been familiar to medieval readers. Lucina, the Roman goddess of childbirth, is referred to twice in the Ninfale: in Sinedecchia’s instructions for labor – “allor la dea Lucina tu chiamando, / il suo aiuto l’addomanderai” - and again during the actual childbirth scene. Her appearance in these passages links the poem to its classical forbears - Lucina is mentioned in childbirth scenes in Heroides XI, the Metamorphoses, and Statius’ Achilleid - but it also mirrors fourteenth-century childbirth practices.\(^{130}\)

Mensola’s request for divine help finds a direct counterpart in a contemporary childbirth ritual, albeit in a Christian, not pagan, context. Throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, women in labor invoked divine aid through prayers and appeals to the Virgin Mary and patron saints of childbirth.\(^{131}\) The Virgin’s role as protectress of women in childbirth was well-established by the late Middle Ages; often figured as a midwife in miracles, her help was invoked for a safe and easy childbed.\(^{132}\) Mary is referred to twice in this context in Dante’s Commedia: in Purgatorio 20, the souls call her name “così nel pianto / come fa donna che in parturir sia” (Purg. XX, 20-1) and Cacciaguida’s mother

\(^{130}\) In Heroides XI, Lucina denies Canace aid during her labor; her brother helps her instead. In the Metamorphoses, Lucina hinders Alcmenè’s delivery by interlacing her fingers and crossing her legs until she is tricked by Alcmenè’s servant-girl. In the Achilleid, Lucina presides at the birth of Achilles’ and Deidamia’s son.


\(^{132}\) See Warner, Alone of all Her Sex, Chapter 18. In medieval miracles, the Virgin frequently plays the role of midwife. Evidently, stories of the Virgin’s midwifery were also popular subjects for fourteenth-century miracle plays: the actor would cry out in pain and the “Virgin” would assist him, pulling a doll out from between his legs (see Warner, 277).
invokes Mary during his birth ("Maria mi diè, chiamata in alte grida" Par. XV, 133). In late medieval Florence, the legend of St. Margaret, popular due to both her symbolism (she escaped unharmed from the dragon that swallowed her whole) and her self-designated role as protectress of women in labor, was also read aloud to women during labor, at times even placed on their stomachs. While the Ovidian influence of Lucina’s presence in this scene cannot be denied, Mensola’s invocation of divine help during childbirth would have been a familiar and realistic aspect of medieval childbirth, constituting, as it did, a widespread and accepted practice.

Lucina’s presence at Mensola’s side during her labor also reproduces most medieval women’s experience of childbirth. Women typically gave birth at home assisted by either a midwife or female relatives and neighbors. The midwife was expected to “sooth[e] a woman in labor, so that she can give birth more easily and the child will not incur any danger at the moment of birth.” By representing Lucina attending to Mensola, therefore, Boccaccio reproduces the midwife – parturient dynamic so common to medieval childbirth, even depicting Lucina in the traditional pose of the midwife “lifting up” the child (“di terra levando” [403, 6]); in the Tuscan vernacular, a midwife

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134 For birth as a female-centered event, see Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages*, 37 and Haas, *The Renaissance Man and His Children*, 41. Paolo da Certaldo’s few comments on labor illustrate the view that birth was women’s business: a man’s only role in birth is to ensure his wife is accompanied in labor by good nurses and women: “quando partoriscie, faccia che sia achonpangniata di buone baglie di donne che ne sieno use” (Paolo da Certaldo, n.154).

135 For a midwife’s duties see Goodich, “Bartholomaeus Anglicus on Child-Rearing,” 81. See also Haas, *The Renaissance Man and His Children*, Chapter 2; and Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages*, Chapter 3.
was called “levatrice” because she lifted the child up after delivery. Thomas Bergin astutely likened Lucina to a humble Italian midwife, but he, understandably, did not explore how her invocation and presence in this scene both mirrored a widespread social and theological practice – the request for divine (Christian) help during childbirth – and recreated a familiar childbirth scenario. Boccaccio’s seemingly fantastic literary account of labor – assisted by a goddess – thus reflects many medieval people’s experience and knowledge of childbirth.

Apart from (paradoxically) lending an aspect of verisimilitude to this scene, Mensola’s delivery under the auspices of goddess Lucina may be imbued with another more portentous significance. It has been suggested that the pagan cult of Lucina was absorbed into the Virgin Mary’s role as intercessor for women in childbirth; whether or not this was the case, both Lucina and the Virgin played corresponding roles protecting and ensuring the safe delivery of parturient women. Given the association of the pagan deity with the Virgin mother, Mensola’s request and receipt of Lucina’s aid assumes a new miraculous connotation. If Lucina prefigures Mary, then the goddess’s presence at Pruneo’s birth – her delivery of the child – marks the birth as extraordinary and special, on the level of Mary’s midwifery in miracle tales. The parallel roles played by Lucina and Mary and the association of the two figures in the medieval imaginary would have reinforced the sense that Pruneo’s birth was a wonderful and exceptional event,

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136 For the midwife’s equivalent in the Tuscan vernacular, see Haas, *The Renaissance Man and His Children*, 41, 217n19.

137 “Lucina, summoned from above to serve as midwife, does her duty as she might in any Italian hamlet and departs with no halo of divinity about her” (Bergin, *Boccaccio*, 187).

something entirely in keeping with the prophecy of his greatness and his later raising on animal milk.

In the context of a widespread lack of knowledge about childbirth, Boccaccio’s literary account of labor faithfully reproduces the fundamental elements of medieval birth: the pain, evident to man and woman alike; the invocation of divine help; the midwife-parturient dynamic; and, perhaps, the wonder associated with the Virgin’s appearance at childbirth. Interestingly, his description of Mensola’s passage from the pain of labor to post-partum bliss, while seemingly quixotic, also conforms to societal beliefs about labor and maternal bonding.

Having safely delivered Mensola’s child, Lucina departs, leaving Mensola alone with her child. When Mensola sees the *sì bella creatura* she has produced, the great and inordinate pain of labor is eased, or lightened, and the painful experience transmuted into a thousand kisses.

Come che doglia grande e smisurata
Mensola avea sentita, come quella
ch’a tal partito mai non era stata,
veggendo aversi fatto una si bella
creatura, ogn’altra pena fu alleggiata;
e subito gli fece una gonnella,
com’ella seppe il meglio, e poi lattollo,
e mille volte quell giorno baciollo. (404)

The transformation of the extreme pain of the nymph’s labor into the bliss of the postpartum period may reproduce familiar, if unsubstantiated, modern accounts of post-labor euphoria; it may also, in the context of prolonged medieval labors and no pain medication, seem highly implausible. However we receive these verses, for a medieval reader they would have echoed a common sentiment: Boccaccio’s description of
Mensola’s postpartum joy neatly echoes Bartholomaeus Anglicus’s statement that the more a mother suffers during a labor, the more she loves and enjoys her child. The fact that medieval women might have had experiences to the contrary does not erase the fact that this belief had currency in late medieval society (and, indeed, continues to have currency today). Boccaccio’s description of the transformation of Mensola’s labor pains into abounding maternal love reproduces the causality believed to exist between parturient suffering and maternal attachment. Just as she felt great and inordinate pain during labor – “Come che doglia grande e smisurata / Mensola avea sentita” (404, 1-2) - so does she enjoy her baby more: she makes him a tiny dress, nurses him, and kisses him a thousand times a day - “mille volte quel giorno baciollo” (404, 8).

The crossing over, or transition, from the pain of labor to maternal love is, necessarily, an experience had only by women, much like pregnancy and birth. The very fact that Boccaccio dedicates textual space to the description of these female processes is remarkable given the lack of attention paid the details of motherhood in vernacular literature, but what I find significant about Boccaccio’s literary depiction of these processes is that he is interested in how they are experienced by women. It would be foolhardy to assume that his literary account of labor – or even pregnancy - accurately portrays a fourteenth-century woman’s experience, but the very fact that Boccaccio makes a concerted effort to make these depictions of childbirth and pregnancy verisimilar

139 “The more the mother suffers during the birth of the child, the more she enjoys it and loves to teach it more” (Goodich, “Bartholomaeus Anglicus on Child-Rearing,” 80).

140 Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (New York: W.W. Norton &Co., 1976), notes the appearance of this belief in a medical text as late as 1929: “the suffering which a woman undergoes in labor is one of the strongest elements in the love she bears her offspring” (cited in Rich, 169).

141 For a more in-depth consideration of Mensola’s motherhood, see section 2.6 of Chapter Two.
and reflective of accepted beliefs and practices related to gravidity is significant, for it indicates his privileging, or non-dismissal, of this material. I would argue that even his failures, caused by his necessary exclusion from these processes, paradoxically illustrate this poet’s uncommon openness to “women’s issues”; for many of his contemporaries the “details” of pregnancy and birth are something better left out of literature.
Chapter II: Ideological and Social Reflections of the Patrilineage in the Ninfale fiesolano

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I argue that patrilineage, the prevailing form of kinship system in late medieval Tuscany, is writ large in the Ninfale, at the level of ideology as well as at the more concrete level of social custom and practice. The poem reflects the concerns and imperatives of patrilineal society - anxieties about legitimacy, as well as the discounting of female contributions to bloodline, can be detected in the work’s insistence on perfect paternal resemblance – and incorporates historically specific practices, like patrilocality and the custody of children by the male line, associated with this kinship system. I contend that Boccaccio deliberately structures the ideology and customs of the Tuscan patrilineage into this work in order to expose the logical inconsistencies of a society that while strictly connecting women to reproduction, removes them from procreative processes and devalues female contributions to family and bloodline.

Here, as in the previous chapter, I seek to bring history into our reading of this poem. Whereas in Chapter One I contextualized the representation of conception, pregnancy, and childbirth through readings in obstetrical and gynecological literature, here I consider such varied topics as writings on male and female roles in generation; heredity and family resemblance; genealogy, lineage strategies, and conceptions of blood kinship; fourteenth-century marriage practices; and child custody and child rearing. While my sources are different, my aim is unchanged: I place the literary representation of motherhood and family in its social and historical contexts in order to gain further insight into Boccaccio’s treatment of women and gender.
2.2 The Patrilineage in Late Medieval Tuscan Society

It has become something of a commonplace when writing about late medieval Tuscany to stress the imperatives of patrilineage and its formative influence on the lives of men and women.\footnote{142} Before exploring how the Ninfale reflects the ideologies and practices of patrilineal Tuscan society, I will briefly outline the salient traits of this form of kinship system, with particular attention to women’s position therein.

Prior to the twelfth century, the predominant kinship system in Western Europe was not patrilineal, but cognatic, or bilineal.\footnote{143} In the bilineal system, “relationships traced through women were equally important as those traced through men” and women, considered authentic kin, enjoyed rights of inheritance.\footnote{144} During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, however, a new patrilineal system, restricting descent to males, developed that was gradually superimposed upon the older bilinear system.\footnote{145} Families traced descent strictly through the male line and claimed a common male ancestor, often


\footnote{145} See David Herlihy, “The Making of the Medieval Family: Symmetry, Structure, Sentiment,” 198-202. Herlihy is careful to stress that the new patrilineal system did not replace the earlier bilinear system, but was superimposed upon it. Families, while giving precedence to patrilineal ties, still sought to cultivate and maintain matrilineal ties through marriage alliances and other means. Herlihy sees these two sets of interests (matrilineal and patrilineal) as the source of tensions within elite families.
a mythical hero; women, no longer considered full members of the lineage, were divested of the rights of inheritance and their offspring excluded from their natal lineage.146

By the fourteenth century, the patrilineal kinship system was well established among the upper levels of Tuscan society.147 Families dowered daughters and passed property exclusively through the male, or paternal, line. Elite Tuscan families were patrinomial, designating themselves through reference to paternal ancestry, and patrilocal, with married couples residing with the husband’s kin group.148 In this masculine system, “marked”, as David Herlihy notes, “by solidarity by males”, women occupied a necessarily marginal position.149

Christiane Klapisch-Zuber is the historian who has perhaps most emphatically underlined the marginality of women’s existence in patrilineal Tuscan society. In Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy, she argues that “men were and made the ‘houses’” in late medieval and Renaissance Florence; in her reading, women were “passing guests” and “transitory visitors” in both the physical residences and lineages of men.150 Historian Louis Haas has countered Klapisch-Zuber’s harsh judgment with the


149 See David Herlihy, “The Making of the Medieval Family: Symmetry, Structure, Sentiment,” 201: “The position of women, central in the cognatic system of the early Middle Ages, clearly deteriorated as the lineage took on a pronounced agnatic cast.”

150 See Klapsich-Zuber, Women, Family, and Ritual, 74, 117-8. Klapisch-Zuber refers to a woman’s “floating status” between two lineages and notes that her life was punctuated by exits and entrances from one male lineage to the next. She cites an entry in the Niccolini family record book in which a son notes his mother’s death and, after identifying her family of origin, gives a meticulous account of the time she spent
claim that “women were and made the house in premodern Florence”; his is perhaps the most sanguine vision of women’s lives in the patrilineage. But differences of opinion exist as to the relative “bleakness” of actual women’s lives in patrilineal Tuscany (the bleakness is more or less accepted from an ideological standpoint). Historians following Klapisch-Zuber highlight the social, economic, and legal disadvantages faced by women and the discounting of female contributions to family and offspring. Others, like Ann Crabb, argue that the status of women was “better in practice than theory” and

in “our” house: 67 years, 2 months, and 26 days (Women, Family, and Ritual, 74). Similarly, Margaret King describes a woman’s place in patrilineal Tuscan society as “at the intersection of two lineages….belonging to none” (King, Women of the Renaissance, 48).

See Louis Haas, The Renaissance Man and His Children, and “Women and Childbearing in Medieval Florence,” in Medieval Family Roles, ed. Cathy Jorgensen Itnyre (New York and London: Garland, 1996). I believe Haas’s claim, like much of his work, glosses over the pronounced anti-female tendencies of late medieval Florentine society: the simple fact that birth was a female-centered event in premodern Florence – the rationale behind his quote above – does not belie the fact that women’s reproductive role was appropriated by a masculine society desirous of male heirs (Haas admits that girl children were less valued than boys) nor that the legal system did not recognize a mother’s kinship ties to any children that her “female-centered, female-oriented, and female-controlled” childbirth produced (“Women and Childbearing in Medieval Florence”, 97).

Historians have questioned Klapisch-Zuber’s reliance on male-authored family record books to trace a picture of women’s lives. In his introduction to the English translation of Klapisch-Zuber’s Women, Family, and Ritual, David Herlihy criticized Klapisch-Zuber’s use of these agnatically-biased family records to demonstrate women’s marginal place in Florentine family and society; he urged research into other, less visible forms of kin organization in which women played a more important role (see Women, Family, and Ritual, ix-xi). Similarly, Giulia Calvi argues that further research into motherhood in terms of agency and choice would “redeem women (and wives) from the marginal, ‘token’ position” they possess in family memoir. See Calvi, “‘Cruel’ and ‘Nurturing’ Mothers: The Construction of Motherhood in Tuscany (1500-1800),” L’Homme, vol. 17 (2006), 79. In The Renaissance Man and His Children, Louis Haas contests Klapisch-Zuber’s overly marginalizing view of women, although he often glosses over anti-female bias in Florentine society. Elaine Rosenthal provides a cogent overview of the situation in “The Position of Women in Renaissance Florence: neither Autonomy nor Subjection,” in Florence and Italy: Renaissance Studies in Honour of Nicolai Rubinstein, eds. Peter Denley and Caroline Elam (Committee for Medieval Studies, Westfield College, University of London, 1988): 369-381. Working with the Giovanni, Parenti, and Petrucci families, Rosenthal highlights instances in which inheritance decisions or living arrangements do not fit Klapisch-Zuber’s analysis, arguing for a higher valuation of women in Tuscan families than traditionally seen.

hold that women were valued for their personal contributions to family life and their own matrilineal kinship ties. Thomas Kuehn has astutely pointed out the limits of the “ideological” vision of women; he notes that, despite very real constraints, Florentine women exercised economic and social influence “within the realms left to them by the men.”

Regardless of their position on the “bleakness” question, most historians agree that fourteenth-century Tuscan society was marked by a strong anti-female bias. While rooted in a long tradition of misogynistic writings on women’s innate inferiority from Aristotle up through Thomas Aquinas, this bias was, to a great extent, reinforced by the structural characteristics of the patrilineal kinship system. Because descent was traced exclusively through males in patrilineal society, women were disparaged for their inability to transmit property or carry on the line. Tuscans valued girl children less than boys: in the idiom of the day, girls “unmade” a house, due to their departure, with dowry, from the paternal line and home, while boys ensured the continuation of the lineage and

154 See Ann Crabb, The Strozzi of Florence, 17-18, 247, and, also, Crabb, “‘If I could write’: Margherita Datini and Letter Writing, 1385-1410,” Renaissance Quarterly 60 (2007): 1170-1206. Crabb’s work on fifteenth-century widow Alessandra Strozzi provides a potent example of a Florentine woman whose life does not fit the Klapisch-Zuber paradigm. Jane Tylus’s work on Catherine of Siena (Reclaiming Catherine of Siena: Literacy, Literature, and the Signs of Others [Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009]) also suggests that the range of female experience may be wider and more varied than Klapisch-Zuber has portrayed. In her earlier work with David Herlihy, Klapisch-Zuber provided a more positive, or measured, view of women’s role by attributing women an active and mediating (peace-keeping or affective) role between her natal family and the family into which she had been received at marriage (Tuscans and their Families, 355).

155 See Thomas Kuehn, Law, Family, & Women: Toward a Legal Anthropology of Renaissance Italy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 233-237. While aware of the limitations and restrictions facing Florentine women, Kuehn contends that they are not as marginalized, nor their lives as harsh, as Klapisch-Zuber makes out; his work with legal sources leads him to conclude that “the picture regarding women” is not “quite as neat as Klapisch-Zuber’s analysis would make it seem” (1-6).

156 Klapisch-Zuber, Women, Family, and Ritual, 55.
provided an heir for estate and property. A deep-seated gender bias can be seen in contemporary letters that consoled parents at the birth of a girl and in medical literature counseling midwives to tell parturient women they are having a boy as encouragement and incentive during difficult labors. Preference for males was not, however, limited to an epistolary or hortatory context. In late medieval Tuscany, girls constituted over two thirds of the population at foundling hospitals; they were more frequently placed with out-of-home wetnurses and nursed for a shorter time; and they were underreported – or, in the eyes of some historians, “forgotten” – in tax surveys.

Yet, as St. Thomas stated in the *Summa theologiae*, women, even if inferior to men, were still necessary: the female was “ordained for the purpose of generation by the

157 Margherita Datini sends a consolatory letter to a friend who has borne another girl, and sends her wishes for a male child the next time (along with a keg of wine thought to be good for producing male babies), reminding her, “As you know, girls do not make families but rather ‘unmake’ them” (cited in James Bruce Ross, “The Middle-Class Child in Urban Italy,” in *The History of Childhood*, ed. Lloyd De Mause [New York: The Psychohistory Press, 1974]).

158 For an example of a consolatory letter, see the previous. Sixteenth-century physician Girolamo Mercurio’s counsel to midwives: “Faccia sempre buono animo alle gravide col prometterle che partoriranno un figlio maschio al sicuro.” See *Medicina per le donne nel Cinquecento: Testi di Giovanni Marinello e di Girolamo Mercurio*, eds. Maria Luisa Altieri Biagi, Clemente Mazzotta, Angela Chiantera, Paola Altieri (Turin: UTET, 1992), 33, 104.

159 For the years 1404-1413, 61.2 percent of children admitted to the foundling hospital of San Gallo were girls, while 70 percent of the foundling population at La Scala was female (for infants under the age of one, 77 percent were girls). See *Tuscans and their Families*, 145; and also, Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual*, 104.

For the tendency of girl children to be sent out to nurse, and boys to be nursed at home, see *Tuscans and their Families*, 147-8, and Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual*, 105. For the faster weaning of girl children, see Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual*, 155, and Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages*, 82-3.

Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber’s work on the 1427 Florentine catasto, or tax survey, has shown a marked gender imbalance (males consistently outnumber females). They believe the skewed sex ratios cannot be attributed solely to negligence or fraud – documentary distortions reflecting a general discounting of the female sex – but must reflect “demographic, social, and economic factors” that reduced the numbers of women in the first half of the fifteenth-century (*Tuscans and their Families*, 132-4). Klapisch-Zuber, in her own work, has argued that families were apt to “forget” their girls due to the scant value attributed them and their more frequent absences from the home (*Women, Family, and Ritual*, 111).
intention of nature”. In patrilineal family and society, a woman’s value was closely connected to her potential as wife and mother: while she could not carry on her natal line, she could be used to cement an alliance with another lineage through marriage, and, once married, she could perpetuate her husband’s line by bearing him male heirs. Yet despite the strict connection of women to procreation, mothers had little claim to the children they bore. Children were considered the property of the male line: the legal system in fourteenth-century Florence did not recognize a mother’s kinship ties to the offspring she bore.

160 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, bk. I, q. 92, art. 1: “Sed per comparationem ad naturam universalem, femina non est aliquid occasionatum, sed est de intentione naturae ad opus generationis ordinata.” Cited in Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 134. Aquinas is here entering into the debate (of Aristotelian genesis) over whether woman is a *mas occasionatus*, or a ruined or defective male.

161 Giovanni Morelli’s memoirs clearly illustrate the relationship between a woman’s perceived worth and her arrival on the marriage market: in his ricordi he names all the sons of a cousin, but dismissively says of the daughters, “There is no need here to make mention of the females, since they are very young; when they are old enough to marry, if they reach that age, then we shall mention them, if it pleases God” (cited in *Tuscans and their Families*, 135n13). For Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, Morelli’s statement is further proof of Tuscans’ tendency to forget or ignore daughters. The control of a woman’s sexuality both before and after marriage had as its objective the preservation of this value. A young woman’s chastity was strictly guarded by her natal family, lest she transgress and lose value as an alliance-making tool; after marriage, the task of ensuring her virtue fell to her husband, who was keen to preserve the honor of his line and the legitimacy of its births: no man wanted to unknowingly raise another man’s child as his own. On the control of women’s sexuality and the importance of ensuring legitimate male heirs, see Opitz, “Life in the Late Middle Ages,” 277; King, “Daughters of Eve: Women in the Family,” in *Women of the Renaissance*, particularly 23-4, 29-32; Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, 263; and Kuehn, *Illegitimacy in Renaissance Florence*, 17-18, 25, and chap. 3, “Honor and Illegitimacy.”

It was not, however, uncommon for a man’s bastard children, the result of extramarital affairs, to reside in his home beside legitimate offspring. Margherita Datini raised her husband’s illegitimate daughter in their home; she made a coverlet and an offering for his illegitimate son who died as an infant. See Joseph P. Byrne and Eleanor A. Congdon, “Mothering in the Casa Datini,” *Journal of Medieval History*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (1999): 35-56. Paolo di Lupo fathered three illegitimate children by his slave Lucia (circa 1430), all of whom continued to live in his house after he married. See Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual*, 73.

As the work of so many historians has shown, late medieval Florence was not a “tenderly feminine city”.\textsuperscript{163} It was a society in which material interests and cultural values conspired to discount the female sex and devalue female contributions to domestic family life and bloodline. Its members were preoccupied with male lineage and male heirs; its families, male-dominated and male-centered. In the following sections, I explore how the \textit{Ninfale fiesolano} reproduces the dominant ideologies and concerns of this society. I begin by examining how the work incorporates specific and historicized social practices related to late medieval family structure, ranging from patrilocal residence to the male branching of genealogies, before turning, in later sections, to more ideologically-based reflections of the patrilineage.

2.3 \textit{Reflections of Social Practice}

As noted in the previous chapter, there has been a marked critical tendency to dismiss contact between the \textit{Ninfale} – often viewed as fantastic, quixotic, and/ or prelapsarian escapist literature - and fourteenth-century Tuscan society. This trend is particularly notable in discussions of family or maternity in the poem, where a critical bias has led scholars to explicitly separate the family in the \textit{Ninfale} from the concerns of contemporary Tuscan families. In his monograph on the family in Boccaccio’s works, Giuseppe Chiecchi argues that Boccaccio purposefully depicts a pre-class, pre-law family in the \textit{Ninfale} - a family \textit{anteposta}, or set before, social and class norms (indeed, in his reading, even set before time) - in contrast with families in the author’s earlier works.\textsuperscript{164}

\textsuperscript{163} For the quotation, see Klapisch-Zuber, \textit{Women, Family, and Ritual}, 118.

\textsuperscript{164} See Chiecchi, “\textit{Ninfale fiesolano}: la famiglia alle origini,” 105-121.
According to Chiecchi, Girafone, Alimena, and Africo are the ‘prototypical’ or ‘embrionic’ family, endowed with simple affects and simple living and far removed from “le leggi e i terrori della stripe aristocratica e borghese”, concerns which the critic feels stiffen or reify l’argomento familiare. Other critics, while perhaps not as openly or dogmatically as Chiecchi, also tend to isolate the family in the Ninfale from the concerns, anxieties, and imperatives – the ragione di famiglia - of contemporary patrician families.

Yet, as we will see, the Ninfale is not so easily, or neatly, separated from fourteenth-century society: far from being free from social and class norms, it reproduces widespread customs and practices associated with late medieval family structure, and is suffused with the very ragioni di famiglia from which these critics would isolate it. Fourteenth-century Florentine patrician families were patrilineal, patrinomial, and patrilocal; all of these characteristics – defining traits of late medieval family and society - are reflected in some form in the Ninfale. The appearance of this material in the poem calls into question the strict disconnect critics have seen between mythological text and historical context.

The Paternal House: Patrilocality

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166 Chiecchi, “Ninfale fiesolano: la famiglia alle origini,” 110.

167 Sapegno, while noting the Ninfale’s etiological focus, which he rightly attributes to Ovid (“una favola eziologica, di stampo ovidiano”), is one of few critics who also sees within the tale a reflection of Boccaccio’s time and geographic locale. See Sapegno, Storia letteraria d’Italia - Il Trecento, 323 and Storia letteraria del trecento, 311.
I will start by examining the way the *Ninfale* reproduces fourteenth-century marriage practices specifically associated with the Tuscan patrilineage. It is, perhaps, surprising to find the civil and religious institution of marriage in a poem set in a prehistoric and “pre-law” era, yet matrimony is explicitly and implicitly referenced a number of times. Early in the poem, Africo expresses his wish to have Mensola for his bride: “Qual saria / di me più grazioso e più felice, / se tal fanciulla io avessi per mia / isposa?” (27, 1-4). In commenting on these verses, Robert Hollander rightly notes that the shepherd’s first impulse upon seeing Mensola is not unbridled *lusuria*, but rather a strongly civil desire for marriage. During the chase scene which ends with the nymph’s arrow narrowly missing him, Africo promises Mensola that if she waits for him, he will take her for his wife: “Se tu m’aspetti, Mensola mia bella, / i’ t’imprometto e giuro sopra i dèi / ch’io ti terrò per mia sposa novella” (102, 1-3). In the interlude between the rape and the second consensual instance of intercourse, Africo makes good on his promise, and while not explicitly asking her to be his bride, pleads with Mensola to return home with him in terms that strongly denote marriage:

Ma poi che tu non vuogli che con teco rimanga qui, venirtene potrai qui presso a casa mia, con esso meco, e con la madre mia lì ti starai: la qual, mentre che tu sarai con seco, sempre come figliuola tu sarai da lei trattata, e da mio padre ancora, e potrai essere d’ammenduo lor nuora – (289)

Chiecchi reads Africo’s appeal to Mensola in this octave to return to his father’s house as caused by an ‘impossible desire’ to continue “dentro l’origine, di rimanere nella

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casa del padre, fuori dal tempo.” For Balduino, Africo’s request represents the dream of a tranquil domestic life passed alongside Mensola in his modest family home: “il sogno – subito infranto – di tutta una tranquilla vita domestica da trascorrere, nella modesta casa paterna, accanto alla sua Mensola.” Both these readings – one, ahistorical and psychoanalytical, the other, idealizing and value-laden – ignore the strict conformity of Africo’s appeal to the marriage customs of fourteenth-century Tuscany. In making his appeal to Mensola, Africo explicitly mentions both the physical locale in which the couple will reside (“casa mia”) and the company they will keep: Mensola will live with Africo’s mother and father, who will treat her as a daughter (“sempre come figliuola tu sarai da lei trattata, e da mio padre ancora”); in this home, she will be a daughter-in-law – nuora – to both. His request neatly encapsulates the dynamics and realities of fourteenth-century marriage, both in its stress on Mensola’s assumption into his family line and in its positing of patrilocal residence for the newly married couple.

The strongly patrilineal nature of filiation in late medieval Tuscany dictated that a newlywed couple reside not with the bride’s family but with the groom’s. Earlier in the Middle Ages, the bilineal kinship system allowed couples to choose neolocal or even matrilocal residence, but by the late Middle Ages, patrilocality was the rule among the privileged urban classes. Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber’s examination of the Florentine catasto of 1427-1430 found that marriage nearly always brought the wife into the


residential group of her husband. Resident sons-in-law were extremely rare in the cities: out of more than ten thousand households, fewer than ten contained a son-in-law. In rural Tuscany, too, newlyweds tended to live in the house of the groom’s father; Klapisch-Zuber finds only two sons-in-law in 4,000 Pisan homes. While the positing of patrilocal residence may respond to narrative exigencies - after all, Mensola and Africo cannot live with the nymphs - Boccaccio never raises the possibility of the couple living with Mensola’s biological family (matrilocal residence) or on their own (neolocal residence).

In addition to proposing patrilocal residence, Africo also specifies the new family ties to be formed and the new identity Mensola would assume as a result of the marriage: she would be treated like a daughter by Africo’s father and mother, and would be a daughter-in-law to both. In the late Middle Ages, it was common practice for a woman who wed to become part of her husband’s family. In marrying, a woman moved from one lineage to another: as a result of the widespread practice of patrilocality, she exchanged her father’s home for her father-in-law’s, thereby physically joining her husband’s family. But she also moved in a less-corporeal sense: by “exiting” her natal lineage and “entering” the lineage into which she married – something seen clearly in contemporary genealogical tables – she left behind her identity as one man’s daughter.

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174 See *Tuscans and their Families*, 290. Their data covers the cities of Arezzo, Pisa, and Florence.


176 Instead, Mensola explicitly spells out the impossibility of returning to her biological family after the loss of her virginity in octaves 337-8.

and assumed a new set of family relations. Klapisch-Zuber argues that “the determination of a woman’s identity…depended on her movements in relation to the ‘houses’ of men.” In fourteenth-century Tuscany, female identity was largely subsumed within male lineage: prior to marriage known as her father’s daughter, a woman saw her own identity fade, as Margaret King notes, “to anonymity within the marriage bond.”

In this context, the verses describing Mensola’s new family ties both reproduce the dynamic process by which a woman left her natal lineage and joined another through marriage and allude to the redefinition of female identity within male lineage. The stress placed in these verses on patrilocal residence and Mensola’s assumption of a new identity in the lineage into which she would marry suggests that the passage is meant to evoke, if not explicitly, then implicitly, the standard experience of a fourteenth-century Tuscan wife. Mensola’s rejection of Africo’s offer in the following octaves provides support for this claim, for she explicitly frames her decision to join Diana as a rejection of the traditional role of wife:

“I’ non mi misi a seguitar Diana
per al mondo tornar per niuna cosa
ché, s’i’ avessi voluto filar lana
con la mia madre, e divenire sposa
di qui sarei ben tre miglia lontana

178 See Klapisch-Zuber, “The ‘Cruel Mother’: Maternity, Widowhood, and Dowry in Florence in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries,” 118-9; and, also, Kuehn, Law, Family, and Women, 199.

179 See Klapisch-Zuber, “The ‘Cruel Mother’: Maternity, Widowhood, and Dowry in Florence in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries,” specifically, 118-9, and also “The Name ‘Remade’: The Transmission of Given Names in Florence in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries,” both in Women, Family, and Ritual.

180 See King, Women of the Renaissance, 47.

181 For an even more explicit acknowledgment of this redefinition, see Decameron V.7, discussed below in section 4.4 of Chapter Four.
col padre mio, che sopra ogni altra cosa
m’amava e volea bene; ed è cinqu’anni
che mi fur messi di Diana i panni” (291)

In addition to echoing similar discourses in the Proem to the *Decameron* and *novella* X.6, linking female labor to gender-specific tasks like spinning, the verses suggest an alternative to Africo’s offer, albeit one not taken.¹⁸² Had Mensola wanted to become a bride, she would still be living with her biological family - her natal lineage, so to speak. The way in which Mensola refers to her family in these verses is revealing: she connects the performance of (undesired) activities – spinning as preparation for wifedom – with her mother, while fixing the physical location with respect to her father: “di qui sarei ben tre miglia lontana / col padre mio” (291, 5-6). By metonymically equating Mensola’s father with her family home, the verses position Mensola’s existence “in the world” (“al mondo”) as a choice between two paternal homes, Girafone’s and her own father’s, thereby replicating the male-dominated family structure common to fourteenth-century patrilineal society.¹⁸³

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¹⁸² In connecting the instruction of womanly tasks like spinning to eventual marriage, these verses echo Paolo da Certaldo’s advice on the appropriate education for young girls: “E nsengniale fare tutti i fatti de la maserizia di chasa, cioè il pane, lavare il chapone, aburattare e chuociere e far buchato, e fare i’ letto, e filare, e tesere borse franciesche o rechamare seta chon agho, e tagliare panni lini e lani, e rinpedulare le chalze, e tutte simili chose, si che quando la mariti non paia una decima, e non sia detto che vengha del boscho…” (Paolo da Certaldo, *Il libro di buoni costumi*, n.155). The verses are similarly reflected in Gianozzo’s account of his young wife’s education with her natal family in Alberti’s *I libri della famiglia*: “Dissemi la madre gli avea insegnato filare, cucire solo, ed essere onesta ancora ed obediente” (cited in Kuehn, *Law, Family, and Women*, 343n2).

¹⁸³ Mensola’s way out of *il mondo*, of course, is to join Diana. *Decameron* V, 10 replicates this choice, albeit with a different intention: Pietro’s sexually unsatisfied wife reasons that if she had not wanted to live *al mondo*, she would have become a nun – “Se io non avessi voluto essere al mondo, io mi sarei fatta monaca” (V, 10, 12); she did not, and this is why she deserves sexual compensation from her husband. In this novella, female existence *nel mondo* is explicitly contrasted to life in the convent. The employment of similar language in the *Ninfale* (“I’ non mi misi a seguitar Diana / per al mondo tornar”) could offer further support for those critics who see in Diana’s company a reflection of the nunnery (see Hollander, *Boccaccio’s Two Venuses*, 67; and Forni, *Giovanni Boccaccio ‘Ninfale fiesolano’*, 32).
Africo’s depiction of Mensola’s possible married existence is also neither ahistorical nor idealized: it hews closely to fourteenth-century marriage custom and family structure. Mensola would be “assumed” into Africo’s house, both in the sense that she would live in the physical residence of his lineage, thereby reproducing the widespread practice of patrilocality, and in the sense that her identity would in the future be defined by her relation to his family: isposa to Africo, figliuola and nuora to his parents. These accurate reflections of the dynamics of fourteenth-century marriage are harbingers of a continued incorporation of the realities of the patrilineal family into the *Ninfale*. As we will see, Boccaccio weaves other practices and defining characteristics of the Tuscan patrilineage into the narrative of this idyllic, mythological poem. Just as Boccaccio makes Africo’s proposal to Mensola reflective of the marriage practices of fourteenth-century patrilineal families, so too does he make the description of the couple’s eventual descendants consonant with ideas about lineage and filiation in patrilineal family and society.

*La schiatta africhea: patrilineal, patrinomial*

I noted earlier that the fourteenth-century Tuscan family, in addition to being patrilocal, was also patrilineal, tracing descent through male heads from a male ancestor, and patrimonial, designating itself through reference to paternal ancestors. A focus on male lineage and paternal ancestry is evident in many passages of the *Ninfale*, most dramatically in the work’s treatment of heredity and the resemblance of children to parents, to be discussed in the following section. Yet the genealogical principles of patrilineality - the tracing of descent through male heads - are nowhere as explicitly
illustrated as in Boccaccio’s discussion of Africa’s future line in the etiological coda to the poem. The specific terms the author employs to refer to the line, la schiatta, are revealing of, and consonant with, contemporary beliefs about lineage in Tuscan society.

The etiological end to the Ninfale has historically been viewed as an awkward addition, with little connection to the “body” of the poem. Frequently characterized as “hardly great literature”, the last forty octaves of the work are often dismissed out of hand due to aesthetic prejudice or seen as an ill-suited appendage, an add-on of material favored by chroniclers but mismatched to the poem’s love story. The end of the poem, however, while perhaps less compelling than the body, is far from a disjointed addition. As we will see, it continues, and makes explicit, a preoccupation with male origin and lineage found throughout the Ninfale. The presentation of an exclusively male genealogy in the poem’s etiological coda is the culmination of a process begun much earlier in the text whereby an authorial focus on female experience, and subjectivity, in pregnancy and birth is transformed into a textual emphasis on the utility of those processes for male line and society.

In the etiological end of the poem, Boccaccio recounts the founding of Fiesole by Atalante and his men, who civilize the countryside through a process of forced marriage: Diana’s nymphs are cacciate e maritate (437). Into this historical tale, Boccaccio
weaves his protagonists: Girafone becomes Atalante’s counselor and Pruneo, Atalante’s servant, and, eventually, seneschal. When Pruneo is twenty-five, Atalante gives him Tironea, the daughter of a noble baron, in an arranged marriage. Pruneo and Tironea have ten sons, to whom Pruneo gives each a wife; their children have children thereby growing the line or “schiatta”: “egli a ciascun moglie dato, / in molta gente questa schiatta crebbe” (452, 5-6).

Pruneo’s schiatta is referenced in four out of the next eight octaves, significantly, however, in all but the first instance with the modifier “africhea”: in octaves 454 and 456, Pruneo’s descendants are referred to as l’africhea schiatta, while octave 460 reverses the order for la schiatta africhea (460, 1). The language makes clear that although these are Pruneo’s (and, of course, Tironea’s) children, the fundamental point of origin for the line is Africo.

The point is made explicitly four octaves later when Boccaccio refers to la schiatta africhea as “quei d’Africo nati” (464, 1): ‘those who are of Africo born’. My translation is intentionally awkward to show the masculine bias in this verse: earlier qualified as “Africo’s line” (la schiatta africhea), Pruneo’s descendants are now described as those - “quei” (in Italian, of course, grammatically masculine) - who are born of Africo. We find a similar emphasis on male origin in the introductory rubric to these octaves, where, after Pruneo’s death, ten sons remain of him: “Dopo molt’anni ch’è

__compression of time in the last octaves of what is traditionally considered the body of the text – Pruneo grows up in two octaves: in octave 433, he is suckling animal milk, by the end of 435, he is eighteen years old – and by the entry onto the scene of historical actors like Atalante and Appollinus. Boccaccio appears to have relied on contemporary chronicles for the story of the foundation of Fiesole; both Atalante, the mythical founder of Fiesole, and Appollinus, his astrologer, are mentioned by Villani in Cronica I 7, although it is unclear who influenced whom. Most commentators read the fourth verse of octave 436 as a reference to the widespread nature of Boccaccio’s sources: “Passò poi Atalante in questa parte / d’Europa con infinita gente; / e per Toscana ultimamente parte, / come scritto si trova apertamente” (436, 1-4). See Boccaccio, Ninfale fiesolano, ed. Armando Balduino, octave 436n1.__
Girafon morto, / e Alimena, e po’ Pruno con duoli, / di lui rimason dieci be’ figliuoli”
(rubric between 450 and 451, my emphasis). In the etiological portion of the poem,
children are born ‘of Africo’ and remain ‘of Pruno’.

It is somewhat surprising that an author who pays so much attention to female
reproductive processes and who dramatizes an actual birth would choose to employ such
male-biased terms to describe the children resulting from those processes. By describing
la schiatta africcia exclusively through reference to its male members – those who are
born of Africo and those who remain of Pruno – the verses effectively elide the maternal
contributions of Mensola and Tironea out of the foundational narrative. Mensola is never
mentioned in these octaves; Tironea surfaces just long enough so that Pruno may have
ten children by her: “Pruno rimase in grandissimo stato / con la sua Tironea, della qual
ebbe / dieci figliuol” (452, 1-3). While naming descendants through reference to male
origin may seem an incongruous fit with this author’s interest in pregnancy and childbirth
– an interest in women’s role in the production of children – it is in keeping with
traditional beliefs about lineage as expressed and codified in contemporary family
histories.

According to David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, a lineage’s solidarity
and prestige in the Middle Ages and Renaissance depended on “the consciousness
possessed by its members of descent from a specific common ancestor, through a line of
ancestors of the same sex”; the longer the line, the more distinguished.186 A crucial way
of fostering lineal consciousness or memory during this period was through the practice
of genealogy. From the end of the thirteenth century, Tuscan patricians were increasingly

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186 Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, Tuscans and their Families, 343.
interested in genealogy; Tuscan men constructed detailed family histories and sought to prove the validity of their line by tracing it far back into time.\textsuperscript{187} Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber note that “origin myths” were popular throughout the fourteenth century, particularly with Florentines, who “took as one of their characteristic pastimes the construction of family trees.”\textsuperscript{188}

Because, however, the fourteenth-century Tuscan family was “defined by descent through male heads from a male ancestor”, and filiation was constituted through men only, women had little visibility in these family trees.\textsuperscript{189} Klapisch-Zuber argues that memory of women, who were not considered permanent elements in the lineage, “was short.”\textsuperscript{190} She found that while family chroniclers noted alliances formed with other lineages through marriage, they tended to forget, within a few years, the name of the women on whom the alliances were built: “In the male branching of genealogies drawn up by contemporaries....little importance was given, after one or two generations, to kinship through women.”\textsuperscript{191}

In the etiological portion of the \textit{Ninfale} discussed above, memory of women is not only short, it is quite nearly non-existent. The focus in these octaves is on Africa, Pruneo, and Pruneo’s ten not-coincidentally-male children; the roles of Mensola and Tironea in

\textsuperscript{187} Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, \textit{Tuscans and their Families}, 345-6.

\textsuperscript{188} Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, \textit{Tuscans and their Families}, 345-6.


\textsuperscript{190} Klapisch-Zuber, \textit{Women, Family, and Ritual}, 118. She finds evidence for her statement that women were not considered permanent elements in the lineage in the fact that they were often categorized under “exits” and “entrances”, uscite and entrate, in contemporary genealogical tables (\textit{Women, Family, and Ritual}, 118n3).

propagating the lineage and their own (matrilineal) kinship ties are wholly ignored. The octaves present a genealogy, appropriately understood as the history of the male members of a family, that would have been familiar to fourteenth-century Tuscans: they describe descent from a common male ancestor (Africo), through a line of ascendants of the same sex (quei di Africo nati, Pruneo’s dieci be’ figliuoli); they create a distinguished origin myth for contemporary Florentines by tracing their line back to pre-historic times; and, like contemporary genealogies, they occlude the necessary contributions of females to the line. The consonance of these verses with the distinctive traits of fourteenth-century genealogy as manifested in Tuscan family histories suggests that Boccaccio intended these verses to resonate with his contemporaries by stressing the importance of male origin and lineage.

The particular language Boccaccio employs to refer to Africo’s line provides further support for this connection between foundational text and social context. By referring to Pruneo’s descendants as “quei di Africo nati”, Boccaccio reflects his society’s preoccupation with male ancestry and, perhaps, alludes to the customs of family designation in late medieval Tuscany. By the mid-fourteenth century, the use of a family name was increasingly common among the Tuscan urban elite;¹⁹² the most common family name was the patronym, either in the genitive (as in Francesco di Marco) or in the plural (Francesco Marchi).¹⁹³ Cognomens were typically formed out of the given name of

¹⁹² See Herlihy and Klapsich-Zuber, Tuscans and their Families, 347-52. Family names were, however, still developing in the merchant and lower classes: by the beginning of the fifteenth century, one in six Tuscans has a collective family name. The adoption of a family name was “a mark of the wealthy and powerful”: in the 1427 catasto, eighty-eight percent of the hundred wealthiest Florentine households bear a family name compared to only twelve percent of households without taxable property. See Tuscans and their Families, 351.

a male ancestor; Giovanni Morelli attributed the family name “de’ Morelli”, formed from the given name of his great-great-grandfather, Morello, to all of his ancestors, going back a (logically impossible) distance of eight generations. While we have no indication that Boccaccio is purposefully attributing a cognomen to Africo’s line, the phrase “quei di Africo nati” would have been familiar to medieval readers who would have recognized it the most common form of family name, the patronymic. Such an identification would be in keeping with the genealogy built around Africo in these octaves, the mythical ancestor to whom la schiatta can trace its origin.

In the preceding paragraphs, I have argued that Boccaccio incorporates both historically specific practices and the prejudices of the patrilineal Tuscan family into the Ninfale. By proposing patrilocal residence for couple Mensola and Africo, and by alluding to the new identities Mensola would assume in Africo’s household, Boccaccio subtly reproduces the dynamics of marriage in patrilineal society. By focusing exclusively on male origin and descent in the etiological portion of the poem, the poet mirrors popular contemporary genealogies that attributed men the determining role in kinship and elided women, and their maternal contributions, out of the family narrative. In the following section, I turn to more ‘ideological’ reflections of the Tuscan patrilineage, less based in practice or custom and more expressive of the value system of this kinship system. I consider how female contributions to family and line are elided out of this poem not only from a genealogical standpoint, but from a hereditary one.

194 See Herlihy and Klapsich-Zuber, Tuscans and their Families, 347.
2.4 Resemblance, or the Importance of Paternity: the child as ‘specchio’

The etiological end of the *Ninfale* focuses explicitly, and exclusively, on paternal ancestry, a focus in keeping with the male-focused genealogies of fourteenth-century Tuscans; in the last forty octaves of the poem, paternity is stressed, maternity is ignored, and children are “born” of men. I would now like to consider how an emphasis on paternal ancestry manifests itself earlier in the poem in a specifically medical or hereditary context. This section examines baby Pruno’s perfect resemblance to Africo, and Africo’s role as “mirror”, or *specchio*, to his own father, Girafone, through the lens of writings on male and female reproductive contributions to the embryo and ideas about heredity. I consider how the *Ninfale*’s discourse of “perfect” male reproduction reveals what the later genealogy makes patently clear: the importance of male origin and lineage in fourteenth-century Tuscany.

Before turning to the complicated and contentious problem of family resemblance as seen in the writings of late medieval medical authors, I would like to start by simply noting how this poem describes the physical appearances of Mensola, Africo, and, most importantly, their child, Pruno. Boccaccio supplies few physical descriptions of his protagonists in the *Ninfale*, and tends to rely on stereotype and the stock imagery of love lyric: the golden locks, lucent eyes, and angelic or heavenly face. He depicts Mensola as fifteen years old, with long blonde hair, gleaming eyes of such beauty that those who behold them forget their troubles, and an angelic face:

Avea la ninfa forse quindici anni:  
biondi com’oro e grandi i suoi capelli,  
e di candido lin portava i panni;  
du’occhi in testa rilucenti e belli,  
che chi li vede non sente mai affanni;
Africo is described as approximately twenty years of age, with no beard but curly blonde hair, and a visage resembling a lily or a rose, or a fresh fruit: “forse venti anni o meno avea, / sanz’ancor barba avere, e le sue chiome / bionde e crespe, ed il suo viso parea / un giglio o rosa, over d’un fresco pome” (22, 3-6); his face is later described as “fatto in paradiso” (111, 4).

Similarly conventional terms are employed for this couple’s child, Pruneo. After describing Mensola’s experience of post-partum bliss, Boccaccio dedicates an entire octave to her baby’s physical appearance:

Il fantin era si vezzoso e bello
e tanto bianco, ch’era maraviglia,
e ’l capel com’òr biondo e ricciutello,
e ’n ogni cosa il padre suo somiglia
si propriamente, che parea, a vedello,
Africo ne’ suoi occhi e nelle ciglia,
e tutta l’altra faccia si verace,
ch’a Mensola per questo più le piace (405)

Up through the third verse of this octave, the description of Pruneo varies little from the earlier conventional and imprecise language used to describe his mother and father: the babe is charming, beautiful, and wondrously fair, with hair of a curly golden blonde. But from the fourth verse on, Pruneo’s physical appearance is qualified in a

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195 Diana is described in similarly conventional terms (“gli occhi e ’l viso / lucevan più ch’una lucente stella, / e ben pareva fatta in paradiso”), although she is charged with more eroticism – she wears a thin silk tunic that just covers her skin - and her physical appearance dwelt upon for over three octaves (11-13).

196 With regard to the description of Africo’s face in verses 5 and 6 of octave 22, I have translated ‘pome’ not as apple but as the more generic “fruit” following Joseph Tusiani (see Tusiani, Giovanni Boccaccio’s ‘Nymphs of Fiesole’, 30). The term “fresco pome” is also used to describe Pruneo in octave 425: Sinedecchia refers to Pruneo as “quel bello e fresco pome” (425, 6).

197 Forni and Balduino see Cavalcanti’s pastorella “In un boschetto” as a likely source for the description of Pruneo’s hair: “In un boschetto trova’ pasturella / più che la stella – bella, al mi’ parere. / Cavelli avea
way that will be extremely significant for this text. Lest we think that Pruneo’s beauty and golden hair come from this mother – a plausible supposition given Mensola’s blonde hair (*biondi com’oro*) and angelic face - the second half of the octave makes clear that the child resembles his father in ‘every thing’: “e ’n ogni cosa il padre suo somiglia / si propriamente” (405, 4-5). So precisely, in fact, does Pruneo resemble Africo that he appears to be him: “parea, a vedello, / Africo ne’ suoi occhi e nelle ciglia, / e tutta l’altra faccia si verace” (405, 5-7). The following octave also draws attention to the striking resemblance between father and son: when Mensola looks at Pruneo, it appears to her that she is looking at Africo – “parendo a lei, mentre che lui vedea, / Africo veder proprio” (406, 4-5). Coming so shortly after the conventional description of the infant (“si vezzoso e bello e tanto bianco”), we might be tempted to consider Pruneo’s perfect paternal resemblance a trope – a medieval version of the modern “spitting image”. Yet, we would do well not to write these verses off so quickly, for the text insists upon this child’s “perfect” resemblance on several other occasions, to the point that its very repetition becomes reason for remark.

When Girafone and Alimena first encounter baby Pruneo, they too, like Mensola, are struck by his startling likeness to Africo. When Alimena meets the child, she recognizes her son’s features and exclaims, “Omei, / questo fanciul propriamente somiglia / Africo mio!” (426, 6-7). The following octave draws attention to the strength of the likeness: not only does Pruneo resemble (“somiglia”) Africo, he appears to be him and, in a sense, incarnates him – “mirando quel fantin, le par vedere / Africo proprio in ogni sua fattezza, / e veramente gliel par riavere” (427, 2-4). When Girafone meets Pruneo, he,

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too, is struck by the close resemblance: “mirando ’l fanciul, veracemente / Africo gli pareva” (429, 3-4).

In these octaves, Pruneo’s likeness to Africo is noted in semantically homogenous terms. The verb ‘parere’, to ‘seem’ or ‘appear’, is employed five times: “parea, a vedello, Africo” (405, 5-6); “pandro a lei, mentre che lui vedea, Africo veder propio” (406, 5-6); “mirando quel fantin, le par vedere Africo proprio in ogni sua fattezza, e veramente gliel par riavere” (427, 2-4); “mirando ’l fanciul, veracemente Africo gli pareva” (429, 3-4) – while the exactitude or truth of the resemblance is underlined by the repetition of the words ‘propio’ or ‘propriamente’ (in 405, 5; 406, 6; 426, 7; 427, 3) and ‘verace’, ‘veracemente’, or ‘veramente’ (in 405, 7; 427, 4; 429, 3). Taken together, the verses insist upon the fact that baby Pruneo appears - pare - to be his father, while continuously stressing the verity - verace, proprio - of the observation.

Even when Pruneo sheds his babyhood and becomes a young adult, Boccaccio continues to stress the likeness; once grown, it seems Pruneo is an even more perfect replica of Africo. No longer just ‘appearing’ to be his father, he has so ‘become’ his father (note the substitution of venire for parere in the following) that he would not be known from him:

E crescendo Pruneo venne sì bello della persona che, se la natura l’avessè fatto in pruova col pennello, non potre’ dargli sì bella figura; e venne destro più ch’un lioncello, arditissimo e forte oltre misura, e tanto proprio il padre era venuto, che da lui non si saria conosciuto (434)

Clearly, the description of the adolescent Pruneo has something of the superlative to it – the boy is so beautiful that Nature herself could not have drawn him better, more
nimble than a lion cub, strong and brave *oltre misura*. What interests me, however, is that both when Pruneo is an infant and when he is grown, Boccaccio takes care to underline, and assert the verity of, his likeness to Africo. The resemblance of son to father is remarked upon seven times, by three different characters (Mensola, Alimena, and Girafone), and by the narrator himself, in terms that stress the exactitude of the replication (“propio”, “verace”, “in ogni sua fattezza”). What is at stake for this author in so consistently and repetitively drawing attention to Pruneo’s paternal resemblance?

To a certain extent, the resemblance of Pruneo to his father heightens the emotional charge of the narrative. Boccaccio presents the likeness as delightful to, and as having positive effects on, all parties who behold it. The resemblance causes Mensola to love Pruneo more: in the last line of octave 405, Boccaccio explicitly attributes her growing affection for the child to his striking similarity to his father: “parea, a vedello, / Africo ne’ suoi occhi e nelle ciglia, / e tutta l’altra faccia si verace, / *ch’ha Mensola per questo più le piace*” (405, 5-8, my emphasis). The resemblance bestows upon Alimena the precious and fleeting sensation that she has her dead son back again: when she recognizes Africo in Pruneo, she takes the baby in her arms (426, 8), cries for joy (“lagrimando per grande allegrezza” [427, 1]), and tenderly kisses him (“e lui baciando con gran tenerezza” [427, 5]). Similarly, Boccaccio describes the resemblance as a cause of great joy for Girafone: “mirando ’l fanciul, veracemente / Africo gli pareva, *onde maggiore / allegrezza non ebbe in suo vivente*” (429, 3-5, my emphasis).

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198 Balduino relates the description of what he terms Pruneo’s “trionfante adolescenza” in octaves 434 and 446 to the cantari tradition. See Giovanni Boccaccio, *Ninfale fiesolano*, ed. Armando Balduino, octave 446n3. Similarly hyperbolic, if different, terms are utilized by the writers of consolatory letters after Valerio Marcello’s death to describe the child’s unusual precocity. See Margaret King, *The Death of the Child Valerio Marcello*, 7.
In light of these verses, Pruneo’s close paternal resemblance might be considered a way of textually bringing back the dead, an authorial strategy to allow characters to continue their various relationships with Africo after his demise, thereby playing up the pathos of his loss. This explanation, while plausible, does not, however, explain the privileging of paternal over maternal resemblance. We will remember that Mensola dies in this poem too; a close resemblance of Pruneo to his mother could be construed as equally delightful and solace-giving to the nymphs or equally pathetic to the reader.

From a narratological point of view, Pruneo’s perfect paternal resemblance can be considered a functional element in that it allows Girafone and Alimena to recognize Pruneo as Africo’s son and their grandson; in the absence of a close likeness, the couple might be less inclined to believe Sinedecchia’s story and therefore less willing to take the child into their care. The resemblance of children to their parents often fulfills this legitimizing or authenticating role in Boccaccian narrative. In Decameron III, 9, Count Beltramo recognizes Giletta as his wife after she presents him with two male children very closely resembling him: “due figliuoli maschi simigliantissimi al padre loro” (III, 9, 55-6); his acceptance of her is predicated, in part, on the resemblance: “Il conte…riconobbe l’anello e i figliuoli ancora, si simili erano a lui” (III, 9, 59). In Decameron V, 5, when Bernabuccio sees his wife’s likeness in a young girl presented to him as the (two-year-old) child he lost when his house was ransacked and burned by soldiers - “La quale come Bernabuccio vide, così tutto il viso della madre di lei, che ancora bella donna era, gli parve vedere” (V, 5, 34) - he is more willing to accept her as
his daughter (for ultimate proof, however, he relies on a cross-shaped scar behind the
girl’s ear).\textsuperscript{199}

I would argue, however, that resemblance is given a textual prominence in the
\textit{Ninfale} not entirely consonant with narratological concerns, be they consolatory or
authenticating. In the \textit{Decameron} tales mentioned above, the resemblance of child to
parent is always remarked upon in the context of a recognition scene: the Count
recognizes Giletta’s children as his own due to their similarity to him, Bernabuccio
recognizes the girl as his daughter due to her resemblance to his wife. In the \textit{Ninfale}, the
resemblance of Pruneo to Africo is noted in six different octaves, only three of which
constitute true recognition scenes (two octaves for Alimena and one for Girafone).\textsuperscript{200}

Most significantly, however, the discourse of resemblance is not limited to Pruneo in this
poem, for not only is Pruneo repeatedly presented as the image of Africo, but Africo
himself is described as the ‘mirror’ of his own father. After pulling Africo’s lifeless body
from the river which it has stained red, Girafone cries out, “O son, mirror of your father”
- “O figliuol, del tuo padre specchio” (365, 4)\textsuperscript{201} - thereby setting up a pattern of perfect
male reproduction: Pruneo looks just like Africo who, in turn, looks just like his father.\textsuperscript{202}

\textsuperscript{199} This is the only example of maternal resemblance in the \textit{Decameron} of which I am aware.

\textsuperscript{200} Of the remaining three octaves, two describe Mensola’s perception of Pruneo’s likeness to Africo –
clearly there is no need for her to recognize the baby, after all, she just gave birth to him – and one
describes the adolescent Pruneo’s similarity to his father (in the narrator’s voice and without any
“recognition” function).

\textsuperscript{201} When translating this verse, Joseph Tusiani opts for the more poetic, “my son, who looked so much like
me” (Tusiani, \textit{Giovanni Boccaccio’s ‘Nymphs of Fiesole’}, 116). While Tusiani’s rendition ably captures the
resemblance between Africo and Girafone, I prefer the deliberately literal translation ‘mirror’ because it
better conveys the idea of an exact likeness: a perfect reproduction.

\textsuperscript{202} While it can be argued that Pruneo’s resemblance to Africo has both a consolatory aspect and
authenticating function in the text, there is no functionality and little consolation to be found in the
resemblance of Africo to his own father. The resemblance may, however, heighten the emotional charge of
the discovery scene.
To appreciate this discourse of perfect male resemblance, we must look beyond the structural function of resemblance in the *Ninfale*’s narrative to the society of this work’s composition; we will find that paternal resemblance is a trope, and not solely a literary one.

*One Seed, Two Seed: Part II*

To appreciate the value of resemblance in this literary work and in late medieval society, we must forget, for a moment, our inherited conceptions of reproductive processes and twenty-first-century knowledge of genetics and DNA and enter into a world in which the existence of female seed, the resemblance of children to their parents, and the power of the female imagination were impassioned and interrelated topics of debate. Prior to the discovery of the female egg in the seventeenth century, philosophers and doctors struggled with what Joan Cadden has called “the vast problem of family resemblance”. What was at stake in these discussions was not the simple fact of children’s likeness to their parents, but the etiology of that fact and its implications for male and female reproductive roles. If, as Aristotle had claimed, women contribute only undifferentiated and passive matter to the embryo - the menstrual blood - how and why does a child resemble his mother? If, as Galen maintained, women contributed both matter and an active, but inferior, seed, how does the female seed gain mastery over the formative male seed and imprint its image on the embryo? The question of family

resemblance was thus firmly intertwined with debates over reproductive roles and the existence and efficacy of female seed.

Yet it was not only the implications of family resemblance for male and female reproductive roles that gave these debates such urgency and topicality in late medieval and Renaissance society: resemblance - significantly, that of children to their fathers - played a crucial role in allaying social anxieties about illegitimacy and miscegenation. Marie-Hélène Huet argues that in premodern society “resemblance alone answers for paternity, it attempts to close an unbridgeable gap: the distance between fathering and childbirth”\textsuperscript{204}; she stresses that “short of relying on visible resemblance, paternity could never be proven”.\textsuperscript{205} Thomas Laqueur similarly points to the occult and uncertain nature of premodern paternity when he makes the simple, but just, observation that “the work of generation available to the senses is wholly the work of the female.”\textsuperscript{206}

If men could never be completely sure they had fathered the children borne them by their wives, they looked to resemblance to assure, or reassure, them of their offspring’s legitimate paternity. It is in this context that we must read references to resemblance, be they medical, literary, or epistolary. When Niccolò Machiavelli’s wife wrote her husband after the birth of their first child in 1503, she described their child’s physical appearance in the following terms: “The baby is well and resembles you. He is white as snow, but his head is like a bit of black velvet and he is hairy as you are. His

\textsuperscript{204} See Marie-Hélène Huet, \textit{Monstrous Imagination} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 34.

\textsuperscript{205} See Huet, \textit{Monstrous Imagination}, 33-4.

resemblance to you makes me think him beautiful” (my emphasis). In the consolatory letters examined by Margaret King, the child Valerio Marcello was repeatedly described as the “image” of his father: “in omnibus tibi simillimum” and “tue simillimam”. In late medieval society, men and women alike were invested in perceiving resemblance, for, as Huet stresses, “what is…at stake in resemblance and likeness is the fate of paternity itself.”

The virtue of the seed(s)

I leave aside, for the moment, the functionality of resemblance in late medieval society to examine its causality: the ways in which medieval philosophers, physicians, and theologians explained the likeness of children to their parents. In the late Middle Ages, learned men relied largely on ancient medical texts to understand how a child inherited the physical traits and temperament of his mother or father. The most frequently-cited and useful works for these discussions were Aristotle’s *De generatione animalium* and Galen’s *De usu partium*; a man’s view of family resemblance was

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209 Huet, *Monstrous Imagination*, 34. In this context, Bartholomaeus Anglicus’ statement that a child “is loved most of all by his father when he bears a close resemblance to him” takes on a new significance. See Goodich, “Bartholomaeus Anglicus on Child-Rearing,” 82.
profoundly influenced by the view he took – whether Aristotelian or Hippocratic/Galenic - of male and female reproductive roles.\textsuperscript{210}

As noted in the previous chapter, Aristotle perceived a strict active/passive binary at work in human generation; he claimed that there was only one active principle of creation, the male seed, which acted upon and formed the undifferentiated and passive female matter, the menses, into a fetus. According to Aristotle, the father’s seed determined both the sexual and individual characteristics of the child: as long as it was strong or virtuous enough (in medieval terms, possessed of enough heat), it would reproduce itself by creating a male child resembling the father,\textsuperscript{211} an outcome considered, as Joan Cadden notes, “the fullest and most successful actualization of the reproductive process.”\textsuperscript{212} In \textit{De generatione animalium}, Aristotle claimed that if “the movement” (the male seed) “gains the mastery it will make a male and not a female, and a male which takes after its father, not after its mother; if however it fails to gain the mastery….it makes the offspring deficient.”\textsuperscript{213} ‘Deficient’ offspring, according to Aristotle, were those

\textsuperscript{210} See Cadden, \textit{Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages}, 117-9.

\textsuperscript{211} The strength or heat of a man’s seed was thought to be affected by diet, climate, and physical constitution. See MacLean, \textit{The Renaissance Notion of Woman}, 37; Cadden, \textit{Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages}, 21-26, 117-119, 195-201; and Bestor, “Ideas about Procreation and Their Influence on Ancient and Medieval Views of Kinship,” 152. Girolamo Mercurio employs Aristotle’s analysis to explain why men tend to have female children with their wives and males with their mistresses or prostitutes: “il marito fa femine con la moglie, cioè o per il poco amore che si trova tra loro, secondo Aristotele, e per questo con la concubina amata fa maschi, o per la frigidità della moglie con lei fa femine, e per la calidità della meretrice fa con lei maschi.” See \textit{Medicina per le donne nel Cinquecento}, 95.

\textsuperscript{212} See Cadden, \textit{Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages}, 24. See also, \textit{Medicina per le donne nel Cinquecento}, 95n1, where the editors note that for Aristotle, a male child resembling his father represented “il miglior esito possibile”.

\textsuperscript{213} See Aristotle, \textit{Generation of Animals}, trans. A.L. Peck (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1943), IV 767b. Joan Cadden observes that “the premise that sex determination originates with the father’s semen (or, ultimately, with the father’s capacity to concoct semen, which resides in the heart) is….the basis of the Aristotelian notion that every female child is a failed male child”. See Cadden, \textit{Meanings of Sex Difference}, 133.
who were female – considered a “deviation” or “straying from the generic type” – and those who did not resemble the father.

Aristotle’s law of generative resemblance - like endeavors to produce like - was widely accepted in the premodern era. In the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas stated that the active male force aims to create “a perfect likeness in the male sex.” According to

The idea of female offspring as a miscarriage of, or defect in, the reproductive process also informs the perception of homologies between male and female sexual organs: up through the seventeenth century it was widely believed that women’s sexual organs were an exact copy, but inwardly directed, of male organs (i.e. ovaries are the testes; uterus is the penis, etc.). Because women lacked sufficient heat, they were unable to push their sexual organs outward. For Galen this defect had a purpose: it kept the uterus inside the body and provided the fetus an appropriately warm place in which to gestate. For information on homologies, see MacLean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman*, 32-33; *Medicina per le donne nel Cinquecento*, “Introduzione”, 26-27, and the stupendous (and incredibly phallic) contemporary illustration of female sexual organs, 79. For an exhaustive treatment of premodern conceptions of sexual difference and the perception of a one-sex model in which the female body was considered “a less hot, less perfect, and….less potent version” of the canonical male body, see Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, particularly Chapter Two, “Destiny is Anatomy”. Laqueur argues for a change from an isomorphic conception of male and female sexual organs to a “biology of incommensurability” in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in which the relationship between men and women was not, as in earlier centuries, that of equality or inequality but one of radical difference.

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214 See Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, IV 767b: “anyone who does not take after his parents is really in a way a monstrosity, since in these cases Nature has in a way strayed from the generic type. The first beginning of this deviation is when a female is formed instead of a male”. Aristotle does allow that women, while akin to monstrosities, are a necessity required by Nature to keep the human race going. This passage is often cited as an extreme example of classical, and, because of its repetition by later theologians and doctors, medieval, misogyny. See Valeria Finucci, “Maternal Imagination and Monstrous Birth: Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata*,” in *Generation and Degeneration: Tropes of Reproduction in Literature and History from Antiquity to Early Modern Europe*, eds. Valeria Finucci and Kevin Brownlee (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 49-50. Yet Aristotle’s statement by no means went unchallenged in the premodern era: sixteenth-century physician Mercurio openly disagrees with Aristotle’s classification of women as “mostri” and “animale occasionato” (interestingly, he hypothesizes that Aristotle was angry with his housekeeper - his “massara”) yet his refutation endorses the Aristotelian binary of active/passive by stating that Nature intended there to be both male and female, “l’uno attivo e l’altro passivo”. See *Medicina per le donne nel Cinquecento*, 68-69. Joan Cadden provides a nuanced view of the debate in *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*; she points out that when scholastic philosophers employed the term *mas occasionatus* they invoked it in a limited sense with the principles of natural philosophy in mind (133-4).


217 See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* pt. I, q. 92, art. 1: “the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the male sex”; and q. 96, art. 3: “likeness and equality are the basis of mutual love...Every beast loveth its like; so also every man him that is nearest to himself”. Joan Cadden references these passages in *Meanings of Sex Difference*, 192.
Bartholomaeus Anglicus, the father - the “origin of generation” - “produces a child similar to himself in species and appearance, especially when the virtue in the seed of the father overcomes the virtue in the seed of the mother, as Aristotle says.”²¹⁸ For Albertus Magnus, the creation of a male child closely resembling the father required “a total victory of male seed over female matter”²¹⁹; if the father’s seed was not strong enough, it would be vanquished by, in Albertus’s characterization, the “disobedient” female matter and fail to transmit either its sex or its characteristics.²²⁰ As the quotes of Bartholomaeus and Albertus indicate, a truly strong male would be able to imprint both his species (male) and his appearance (resemblance) on his offspring.

According to Aristotle, maternal resemblances resulted from either a weak paternal seed, the “intractability” of the mother’s material, or some other cause.²²¹ This explanation, however, raised the possibility that menstrual blood might contain a

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²¹⁸ Cited in Goodich, “Bartholomaeus Anglicus on Child-Rearing,” 81. Bartholomaeus would appear to be referring to the menses; there was a certain amount of flexibility in the use of the term ‘female seed’, thereby heightening the confusion of these discussions.


²²⁰ “…impediatur ex inobedientia materie…” Albertus Magnus, De animalibus, bk. XVI, tr. I, ch. 14, 73, cited in Cadden, Meanings of Sex Difference, 195. See also Jacquart and Thomasset, 139-141. Jacquart and Thomasset provide a table which charts out the factors Albertus saw as determining the sexual and individual characteristics of a child and the various scenarios possible (i.e. ‘daughter resembling the mother’ requires the vanquishing of both the male sperm bearing sexual characteristics and the male sperm bearing individual characteristics).

²²¹ See Cadden, Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages, 24; Jacquart and Thomasset, Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages, 65; and Bestor, “Ideas about Procreation”, 152. Aristotle writes, “since it is possible for the male sometimes not to gain the mastery either on account of youth or age or some other such cause, female offspring must of necessity be produced by animals” (Generation of Animals, IV 767b). He later attributes deviations (females or maternal resemblances) to a “deficient potency in the concocting and motive agent” (i.e. weak male sperm) or “the bulk and coldness of that which is being concocted and articulated” (i.e. intractable female matter). See Generation of Animals, IV, 768b.
modicum of form, thereby potentially upsetting the active/passive binary. Joan Cadden notes that late-thirteenth-century physician Taddeo Alderotti, while adopting Aristotle’s theory, was careful to clarify that the resemblance of children to their mothers was “due only to the passive resistance of the matter supplied by the female to the formative power coming from the male and does not imply any activity on the female side.”

In making this statement, Alderotti sought to counter the opposing Galenic view. In Galenic biology, women participated both actively and passively in generation: they provided (passive) menstrual blood and a seed containing both form and matter (thereby differentiated from the solely formal male seed). In De usu partium, Galen explicitly rejected Aristotle’s claim that the resemblance of children to their mothers was due to the menstrual blood; in his view, resemblance – whether maternal or paternal – was the result of a conflict between male and female seed, not male seed and female matter. By claiming a formative, if limited, role for the female seed, Galenic theory provided what was perceived to be a more satisfactory explanation for family resemblance: if the virtue of the mother’s seed overcame the father’s, the child would resemble the mother; if the father’s seed overcame the mother’s, the child would resemble the father; if maternal and paternal seed were equally strong, the child would resemble both parents.

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222 See MacLean, The Renaissance Notion of Woman, 36-7, and Cadden, Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages, 24.

223 Alderotti discusses this in the questio “Whether generative power is in the male’s sperm or the female’s sperm”. See Cadden, Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages, 122-3.

224 See Cadden, Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages, 34; MacLean, The Renaissance Notion of Woman, 36-7.

225 See Cadden, Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages, 34.

226 See MacLean, The Renaissance Notion of Woman, 37; Cadden, Meanings of Sex Difference, 34-5; Bestor, “Ideas about Procreation,” 157-8.
Seville echoed the Galenic view when he stated, “children are born similar to their fathers if the paternal seed is stronger, and likewise to the mother if the maternal seed is stronger…those who resemble both are conceived from a mix of maternal and paternal seed equally.” William of Conches also attributed (if obliquely) the resemblance of children to their mothers to the existence of female seed. Even Bartholomaeus, despite frequently citing the authority of Aristotle, presented a largely Galenic view of resemblance; he believed the child was made of seminal matter that came from all parts of the mother and father (pangenesis): the child resembles the mother if her seed is stronger, the father if his seed is stronger.

Those who subscribed to Galenic biology, therefore, tended to explain family resemblance as the result of a conflict between two active seeds, male and female, not as a conflict between a formative male seed and intractable or ‘disobedient’ female matter. The Galenic view of sex determination also rehabilitated the female - somewhat - from a solely passive role. For Aristotle, sex was determined by the father’s seed. Galen, however, thought sex was determined by the relative heat of the male semen and by the uterine environment. A child’s sex depended on where the fetus rested in the uterus.

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227 Isidore, *Etym.* II.1.145-146, cited in Bestor, “Ideas about Procreation,” 157. Isidore’s take on resemblance was influenced by the Epicurean Lucretius who claimed that children come from paternal and maternal seed and resemble the parent from whom they inherit more substance (Bestor, “Ideas about Procreation,” 153). For Isidore’s explanation for family resemblance, see also Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, 56.

228 See Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, 95-6.

229 Bestor, “Ideas about Procreation,” 158. The Hippocratic theory of pangenesis, the belief that seminal matter was derived from all parts of the body, was in conflict with Aristotelian ideas about semen; Aristotle held that semen originated in the heart. See Bestor, “Ideas about Procreation,” 153; and Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, 18, 32, 61, 91-2.

(the right, hotter, side of uterus favored the creation of the boys, the left side, of girls) and by the origin of the male semen (the right testicle was hotter and produced boys).\textsuperscript{231}

For both Aristotle and Galen, resemblance was conceptualized as a conflict, in which the male seed was either victorious, thereby imprinting the father’s image on the child, or was vanquished, with maternal resemblance as the result.\textsuperscript{232} The source of the conflict - passive female matter or active female seed - was the source of contention. As we have seen, Galen, unlike Aristotle, attributed the female a certain degree of agency in the reproductive process: her uterus could override the male sperm and determine the sex of the child, and her seed could actively imprint her image on the child.\textsuperscript{233} Yet in both systems, the creation of a male child represented the “victory” of the father’s seed over the female contribution: a strong male would produce boys; a stronger male would produce boys resembling himself.\textsuperscript{234}

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\textsuperscript{231} “See Cadden, \textit{Meanings of Sex Difference}, 35; Jacquart and Thomasset, \textit{Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages}, 50; and \textit{Medicina per le donne nel Cinquecento}, 35. Galenic theory informed this period’s many prescriptions for the production of male children: Michele Savonarola diligently lists the ‘causes’ of male babies: the heat of the male sperm (“la calidità del sperma di l’huomo”), the sperm’s origin in the right testicle (to ensure male children he suggests men tie up their left testicles), the sperm’s placement in the right side of the uterus, and the time of the month (shortly after a woman’s period when the “mestrui nuovi sono più purificati, più caldi”). See Savonarola, \textit{Il trattato ginecologico-pediatrico in volgare}, 54-55. He offers this information for those who ask him to teach them how to masculinare, or create male children: “Ma domanderà frontoso, ‘ensegnami, maestro, di far maschi’.”

\textsuperscript{232} See Jacquart and Thomasset, \textit{Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages}, 139-141.

\textsuperscript{233} In \textit{De usu partium}, Galen writes, “It sometimes happens that the female-producing semen, warmed by the right uterus, is made into a male fetus, or that the male-producing semen, chilled by the left uterus, changes into the opposite [sex]” (Galen: \textit{On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body}, trans. Margaret Tallmadge May, Vol. II [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968], 637). See also Joan Cadden, \textit{Meanings of Sex Difference}, 34-5.

\textsuperscript{234} Vern L. Bullough notes that medieval medical theorists believed “a really strong man would be more likely to have sons than daughters”; he notes that this placed medieval men in the discomfiting position where everyone could see how virile they were by the number of sons they produced. See Bullough, “Medieval Medical Views of Women,” 497.
Having outlined the (somewhat mystifying) ways in which medieval thinkers thought about family resemblance, let us return to the *Ninfale*. In this poem, as we have seen, Boccaccio repeatedly depicts Pruneo as the image of his father, Africo, who is, in turn, presented as the ‘mirror’ of his own father. By setting up this chain of perfect paternal replication, Boccaccio can be seen to reify the Aristotelian law of generative resemblance – like endeavors to produce like. He provides what both systems, and fourteenth-century society, would consider the best possible reproductive outcome: a male child closely resembling the father. To a medieval mind, this outcome would be proof of Africo’s strength and virility: in Aristotelian and Galenic biology alike, paternal resemblance requires the vanquishing of the female contribution (matter or seed) by a strong male seed.\(^{235}\)

Given Boccaccio’s earlier emphasis on the pleasure Mensola felt during the second procreative sexual encounter, and, therefore, on the necessity of female pleasure and seed for conception, we might assume that the author would subscribe to a similarly Galenic view of sex determination and resemblance. It is difficult, however, to detect any functional role for Mensola in these passages for, in the Galenic line of thought, if her seed or uterine environment were to have proven influential, Pruneo would either be a girl or bear a maternal resemblance. Instead, it is Africo who is imbued with all reproductive agency: just as his own father, Girafone, had done before him, he effects

\(^{235}\) It was also thought that a man’s libido played a role in sex determination (one would assume because of its relation to heat). Constantine the African (late eleventh century) named the male libido as a determinant of sex. See Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, 62. Mid-sixteenth-century Modenese physician Giovanni Marinello claimed that men who will have male children are possessed of “un ardente appetito carnale, il quale non diminuisca per coito usato” (Medicina per le donne nel Cinquecento, 58); his statement seems tailor-made for Africo, whose carnal appetite cannot be satisfied by just one instance of sexual intercourse, but requires two in short succession.
both a male child, and a male child resembling himself. (Pruneo, of course, goes on to father ten exclusively male children of his own.)

In the context of medieval beliefs about heredity and embryology, Pruneo’s perfect paternal resemblance takes on a dark cast: just as the description of Pruneo’s descendants in the etiological end of the poem occludes female contributions to the line, his physical appearance represents the complete vanquishing, or effacement, of the female contribution to the fetus. We could say that Pruneo’s paternal resemblance does biologically what the later lines extolling *la schiatta africhea* - men ‘born’ of Africo - do genealogically: both de-emphasize women’s role in, or reduce female influence over, the generation of children. The perfect likeness of Pruneo to his father may be considered a literal embodiment of the ideological prejudices of the patrilineage, a society that attributed males the definitive role in generation and filiation.

Despite displaying a marked and anomalous attention in this poem to female subjectivity and experience in pregnancy, it would seem that when discussing pregnancy’s result, Boccaccio more or less reflects the status quo: like produces like. Pruneo perfectly resembles Africo – “’n ogni cosa il padre suo somiglia” (405, 4) – as Africo specularly reproduces his own father, Girafone: “O figliuol, del tuo padre specchio” (365, 4). What is stressed in these passages is the exact replication of the male image, notwithstanding its realization in the female body. Before, however, we dismiss Boccaccio as just another medieval misogynist (something that I am in no way recommending), we should consider how this author undercuts the very paradigm that he sets up. At the same time as medical theorists and doctors debated the physiological mechanics of heredity, an alternate – and at times, contradictory – theory circulated in
medieval society: the belief that a mother, by virtue of her imagination, possessed a formative power over the fetus. As we will see, Boccaccio’s engagement with the theory of maternal imagination in this text complicates the seemingly straightforward reflection of the law of generative resemblance that Pruneo’s appearance implies.

2.5 The Power of Maternal Imagination: the child as wax

La forte imaginazione e il fisso pensiero della donna ha forza di segnare nel corpo della creatura la somiglianza e l’imagine della cosa desiderata.”

Girolamo Mercurio, La commare o riccoglitrice, 1596.

At the time that Boccaccio wrote the Ninfale fiesolano, and for centuries after, it was widely believed that a woman’s imagination could imprint or shape the fetus she was carrying in her womb. The power of a mother’s imagination was thought to start “a physiological process”, transforming the fetus’s nourishment, and changing its shape. As understood in the late Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, a woman, merely by gazing upon a present object or thinking of or desiring an absent object, could imprint the embryo with that object’s image; the object might be as innocuous as a strawberry, leading to a strawberry-shaped birthmark, as disruptive as a bear, producing a monstrous,

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hairy child, or as potentially problematic as a statue, creating a child dissimilar – racially or otherwise – from his genitor.²³⁸

The connection of female imagination to fetal plasticity had its origins in antiquity. Early Greek scientist Empedocles (495-435 BCE) first suggested that a mother’s imagination could shape the embryo she was carrying; he claimed that children could resemble statues or images upon which the mother had gazed during her pregnancy.²³⁹ The Hippocrates and Soranus also cited the effects of imagination on the procreative process; they recommended that women be sober during conception so they might concentrate their thoughts upon their husbands and create ‘similar’ children.²⁴⁰ For those who subscribed to Aristotelian biology, and, indeed, for many Galenists, the theory offered an alternate explanation for the resemblance of children to their mothers, maternal ancestors, or other people and things.²⁴¹

²³⁸ See Huet, Monstrous Imagination, 16-24; Bicks, “Planned Parenthood: Minding the Quick Woman in All’s Well,” 301, 305-309; Shildrick, “Maternal Imagination: Reconceiving First Impressions,” 243-244; Finucci, “Maternal Imagination and Monstrous Birth: Tasso’s Gerusalemme liberata,” 56-8. Black children born to white parents, or the reverse, figure frequently in the tradition dealing with maternal imagination. These discrepancies are explained by the mother’s contemplation of an image or statue of the race of the dissimilar child. See Huet, Monstrous Imagination, 22; Finucci, “Maternal Imagination and Monstrous Birth: Tasso’s Gerusalemme liberata.” Bicks, “Planned Parenthood: Minding the Quick Woman in All’s Well,” 307-308, 311; and also Mercurio, La commare o riccoglitrice, in Medicina per le donne nel Cinquecento, 92-94.

²³⁹ See Huet, Monstrous Imagination, 4-5, and Soranus’ Gynecology, trans. Oswei Temkin, 37-8n71. Genesis I:30 also contains a mention of the power of female imagination, if in the context of sheep: Jacob places spotted rods before Laban’s ewes to cause them to bear spotted lambs. Mercurio cites the biblical tale in La commare o riccoglitrice, in Medicina per le donne nel Cinquecento, 94.


²⁴¹ See Medicina per le donne nel Cinquecento, 15, 93n1; Huet, Monstrous Imagination, 15. Huet argues that for several thinkers, “imagination alone made it possible to understand how the female herself could be the agent of resemblances between parents and offspring” (15). The theory, however, was evidently current among both Hippocratic/Galenists and Aristotelians.
In late medieval and Renaissance Italy, the belief that a woman’s desires and thoughts could alter the physical makeup of the child she was carrying was widespread. In the early-fourteenth-century etiquette book for women, *Reggimento e costumi di donna*, Florentine Francesco da Barberino both cited maternal imagination theory and counseled women on how they might harness this creative power to their own ends: “In tutto questo tempo dato al formare e al partire e al divisare, dicon certi savi che le donne deono attendere a continuo guardare e pensar di coloro cui vogliano che somigliino le creature; altri sono che dicono che la similitudine si contrae nel primo avenimento cui vede dopo il dono. Onde certe maestre donne, quando ricevon il don dal marito, gli guardano in viso; e certe altre che, mentre che senton le creature, tutto tempo attendono a guardare e a pensar de’ mariti” (“During this time of forming and parting and dividing, certain wise men say that women should take care to continuously look at and think about those people whom they would like their children to resemble; there are others who say that likeness is contacted from the first event that women see after the ‘gift’. Whereby certain wise women, when they receive the ‘gift’ from their husband, look him in the face; and certain other women [say] that, while they feel the fetus move, during that time they take care to look at and think about their husbands”, my rough translation).²⁴²

Although Barberino allowed that the authorities (“certi savi”) and wise women (“certe maestre donne”) disagreed about the optimal timing to exercise the imaginative faculty - during gestation or immediately following conception – the formative power of the female imagination was considered a given. A reference to maternal imagination

²⁴² Francesco da Barberino (1264-1348), *Reggimento e costumi di donna*, ed. Giuseppe E. Sansone (Torino: Loescher-Chiantore, 1957), 226. Earlier, in the fifth part of the work, Barberino promises to tell women the actions they must take to make their children resemble their husbands: “e come ancor si puote adoperare / che quei figliuo’ simiglin li mariti” (Barberino, 109).
appears in the consolatory letters written after the death of eight-year-old Valerio Marcello in 1461: Marcello’s father is said to have attributed his child’s pulchritude to his wife’s contemplation of an ‘ideal’ of beauty: “I am convinced that when his mother conceived this son from me her husband, she was not imagining any human form or shape, which [the child] would resemble, but in her mind dwelled a certain excellent and unique pattern of beauty.”

For Roman doctor Girolamo Mercurio, the fact that a woman’s ‘strong imagination’ and ‘fixity of thought’ could mark the child she was carrying was an ‘open and manifest truth’, known by all the world to be true: “Ma per verità più aperta e manifesta piglio quello che da tutto il mondo è conosciuto vero, anzi certissimo….che la forte imaginazione e il fisso pensiero della donna ha forza di segnare nel corpo della creatura la somiglianza e l’immagine della cosa desiderata.”

Throughout this period, writers told of women who had marble statues made in the likeness of the child they desired or who adorned their bedchambers with paintings of beautiful gods or men to produce aesthetically-pleasing children.

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243 “Sic ego demum crediderum, quod ubi mater ex me viro filium hunc concipiebat, non formam aut figuram humanam aliquam contemplaretur, e qua similitudinem duceret, sed in ipsius mente species pulchritudinis eximia quaedam et singularis insidebat.” Cited in and translated by Margaret L. King, The Death of the Child Valerio Marcello (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 3, 332n9. Yet, in another passage, the wife’s active role is downplayed: “pater….magis quo principium paternae virtutis active et principaliter ad formationem prolis accedat, mater vero non nisi passive concurrat.” For this citation, see King, The Death of the Child Valerio Marcello, 16, 344n87.

244 Girolamo Mercurio, La commare o riccoglitrice (1596), in Medicina per le donne nel Cinquecento, 94. He makes this statement in a chapter dedicated to the effects of maternal imagination, Chapter XII, “Istoria narrata da Eliodoro: come la imaginazione possa fare le creature simili alla cosa imaginata”. Mercurio cites Heliodorus, San Girolamo, Saint Augustine, Alciato and Quintiliano to back up his claims on the power of maternal imagination.

245 In a section dedicated to the proper conditions for producing male children, Marinello advises that the bedchamber be scented with aromatic woods and resins and that “belle e di liete dipinture maschili raggardardevole” be hung on the walls; he counsels, “se desiderano figliuoli valorosi, ve li facciano dipingere tali, o se gli immagino”. See Giovanni Marinello, Le medicine partenenti alle infermità delle donne (1563), in Medicine per le donne nel Cinquecento, 57. Giambattista della Porta advises instead that images of gods be hung in men’s bedchambers so that women may look upon them during the sexual act, and after they have conceived, and bring forth beautiful children. See Giambattista della Porta, Natural Magick, first
The belief that a woman might, by passively or actively exerting her imagination, influence the physical appearance of the child she was carrying gave rise, however, to troubling possibilities and scenarios. An active, effective, female imagination put into question traditional gender roles. Huet argues that maternal imagination “challenged the respective roles of males and females in generation” by endowing “pregnant women with the active, otherwise male, power to give shape to their progeny”; to that extent, it represented a “usurpation” of the male role. A woman, by exercising her imagination, could transcend her passive or facilitating reproductive role and actively form her child; even if she lost the ‘conflict’ for resemblance (matter or female seed), she could still, theoretically, override the fetus’s male-given form and change, or imprint, the child into a likeness of her choosing. Margrit Shildrick highlights the danger inherent in a formative female imagination: “In admitting that an absent object – represented only by an image in the mother’s mind – can be inscribed as a trace on the body of the foetus, then reference to the primacy of the male principle is overwritten.”

By attributing women formative power over the embryo, maternal imagination theory challenged reproductive gender hierarchies; by granting women control over their offspring’s appearance, it destabilized – and some scholars would argue, effaced –

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246 Huet, Monstrous Imagination, 14, 16.

247 Shildrick, “Maternal Imagination: Reconceiving First Impressions,” 249. Shildrick, however, does not see maternal imagination as “a rare acknowledgment of female power”; she believes the theory, rather than causing women to be viewed with new respect, “opened up a chasm in which…in matters of sexuality, no woman was above suspicion”, because it raised the possibility that resemblance might not be such a good stand-in for paternity after all (249-50).
paternity. If women were able to imprint or mould the embryo by thinking of or looking at an object or person, they might use that power to hide extramarital infidelities, thereby obscuring natural paternity. Medical writings contain many allusions to the subversive possibilities of maternal imagination. After noting the power of female imagination (and its potentially beneficial aesthetic effects), Marinello matter-of-factly remarks that it is due to imagination that illegitimate children rarely resemble their natural fathers: “E quinci per aventura ne viene che i bastardi più somigliano coloro che non sono padri veri, ma imaginati, perciòché le moglie essendo in adulterio e temendo de’ lor mariti, di continuo mentre dura quello atto gli hanno nella mente.” Like fear, shame was also believed to cause a woman to think of her husband during adultery, thereby causing the children fathered by her lover to resemble her husband. As Valeria Finucci notes, in this tradition, the “mother carries a fetus that will look like her husband not because he is the genetic father of the baby but because she chooses, among a number of possibilities, to have her child look like what she finds desirable for herself – like the husband this time, like somebody else in the future.”

Caroline Bicks has noted the coexistence in this period of two very different notions of the maternal mind: in one model, the female mind is “a passive conduit for objects in the outside world”, in the other, “a woman consciously controls fetal

248 For Margrit Shildrick, maternal imagination “effaces” the father (Shildrick, “Maternal Imagination: Reconceiving First Impressions,” 249); for Huet, maternal imagination “erasers” a legitimate father’s image from his children (Huet, Monstrous Imagination, 1, 8). Valeria Finucci speaks of the “cancellation” of the father’s signature (Finucci, “Maternal Imagination and Monstrous Birth: Tasso’s Gerusalemme liberata,” 62).

249 Medicina per le donne nel Cinquecento, 57.

250 See Cadden, Meanings of Sex Difference, 85, 214n115.

resemblance with thoughts that she ‘conceives unto herself’”.\(^{252}\) It is in the context of maternal imagination as an expression of female desire and as a rare exercise of female reproductive agency - of women altering fetal resemblance through thoughts “conceived unto themselves” - that I would like to return to Pruneo’s perfect paternal likeness. As we saw in the last chapter, Boccaccio depicts the pregnant Mensola in the act of thinking of, longing for, and envisioning the companionship of Africo; by so doing, he complicates Pruneo’s paternal resemblance by hinting that the child’s appearance may be less the result of Africo’s generative actions than the consequence of Mensola’s gestational contemplations.

In the minds of medieval and Renaissance people, a woman’s thoughts at the time of conception and throughout pregnancy could alter the physical appearance of the embryo.\(^{253}\) Boccaccio gives us little indication of Mensola’s thoughts at the time of Pruneo’s conception, except for a generally doleful state of mind. Less than one day post-conception, however, Mensola is overwhelmed by thoughts of Africo; even though she has decided not to honor her promise to meet him, she cannot get him out of her mind (heart): “Non però le poté giammai del core / Africo uscir, che continovamente / non gli portasse grandissimo amore, / e che nol disiasse occultamente;….Così passò ‘l secondo e ’l terzo giorno” (351, 1-4; 352, 1). Months later, before Mensola is aware of her

\(^{252}\) Bicks, “Planned Parenthood: Minding the Quick Woman in All’s Well,” 301, 308. Into the first model fall all manner of birthmarks – Marinello mentions marks of “carne di porco, o di pomi, o di vino, o d’uva” – as well as children who accidentally resemble statues or images upon which the mother gazed during pregnancy (Medicina per le donne nel Cinquecento, 94). The second model is the more anxiety-producing for premodern men, for it meant that, as the editors of Marinello and Mercurio so rightly point out, “neppure una perfetta somiglianza poteva tranquillizzare gli uomini sulla loro effettiva paternità” (Medicina per le donne nel Cinquecento, 15).

\(^{253}\) The belief is related to pregnancy regimens’ frequent counsel that women remain calm and tranquil during pregnancy. See Chapter One above.
pregnancy, she continues to think of and long for Africo: “Né però Amor l’avea tratto del
petto / Africo, che ella non si ricordasse / del nome suo e del preso diletto, / e che
tacitamente nol chiamasse / quand’ avea ’l tempo, ed alcun sospiretto / assai sovente per
lui non gittasse; / sì come innamorata e paurosa, / tenea la fiamma dentro al cor nascosa”
(376). On hunting expeditions with the other nymphs, she pauses at the spot of her
encounter with Africo to remember him: “quand’ella arrivava / dove Africo la prese, di
lontano / quel luogo rimirando, sospirava, / dicendo infra se stessa molto piano: / ‘O
Africo mio, quanta gioia avesti / già in quel luogo, quando mi prendesti!’” (377, 3-8).

In these octaves, Mensola thinks of and longs for Africo in a sort of vaguely
lovesick way. It is only after she is visibly pregnant and cloistered in her cave that her
thoughts of Africo attain a level of obsessive fixity that, to modern minds, seems nearly
pathological. Forced to shun the company of her fellow nymphs, Mensola awaits the birth
of Pruneo with the mental image of Africo as her only companion: “Quivi si stava
pensosa e dolente / sanza gir mai, come soleva, attorno, / e per compagno tenea nella
mente / Africo sempre col suo viso adorno” (396, 1-4, my emphasis). Solitude and
pregnancy cause her desire for Africo to grow exponentially; the following octave details
her regrets at having not followed Africo and her tearful cries of his name:

E cominciolle a crescer si nel core,
per la creatura ancor non partorita,
contro ad Africo un si fervente amore,
che volentier ne vorrebbe esser gita
con esso lui a starsi a tutte l’ore,
il giorno ch’ella si tenne tradita;
e ’l di se ne pentea mille fiate,
chiamando lui, con lagrime versate. (397)
In the previous chapter, I discussed how Boccaccio’s depiction of Mensola’s activities during this prenatal period complicates prescriptions found in contemporary pregnancy regimens. I argued that Boccaccio is less interested in the hypothetical effects of Mensola’s prenatal behavior on her child – the traditional focus on pregnancy regimens – than he is in the adverse effects of those regimens on her: he connects her lack of mobility and solitude to doleful feelings and obsessive thoughts – the fervent love for and imagined company of Africo. Yet Mensola’s activities and thoughts during this period are not without consequence. When glossing these octaves, Balduino notes that this doleful waiting period causes Mensola’s feelings for Africo to grow – “la trepida, pudica attesa del figlio che via via accresce la nostalgia e l’amore per Africo”; he does not, however, consider the effects of this nascent love on her unborn child. Mensola’s constant meditation on, and desire for, Africo may well be an effect of her solitude and pregnancy, but it would, in the medieval mindset, dramatically affect the child she carried in her womb. To use Margrit Shildrick’s terms, Africo is the “absent object – represented only by an image in the mother’s mind” that Mensola ‘inscribes’ on the body of the fetus.

If we examine these octaves, we find that Boccaccio stresses both the constancy and consistency of Mensola’s thoughts of Africo during her pregnancy. Just as Francesco da Barberino reported that wise men and women advise continual meditation on the object or person which the mother wishes her child to resemble (“deono attendere a continuo guardare e pensar di coloro cui vogliano che somiglino le creature”; “mentre che senton le creature, tutto tempo attendono a guardare e a pensar de’ mariti”, both my emphasis), so does Boccaccio stress Mensola’s continual meditation on, and imagined

companionship with, the absent Africo. Octave 351 underlines the constancy of Mensola’s thoughts of Africo - “Non però le poté giammai del core / Africo uscir, che continovamente / non gli portasse grandissimo amore, / e che nol disiasse occultamente” (351, 1-4, my emphasis) – while octave 396 stresses the ever-present mental image of Africo: “e per compagno tenea nella mente / Africo sempre col suo viso adorno” (396, 3-4). The locating of this image in Mensola’s mind (“tenea nella mente / Africo”) is consonant with beliefs about the workings of the imaginative faculties: according to Marinello, a child will resemble an adulterous woman’s lawful husband because she keeps him ‘in her mind’ (“di continuo mentre dura quello atto gli hanno nella mente”, my emphasis).255

In these octaves, Boccaccio characterizes Mensola’s thoughts of Africo as marked by continuity and fixity, but also as heavy with desire. According to Mercurio, it was well known that a mother could mark the fetus with the image of an object she desired: “la forte imaginazione e il fisso pensiero della donna ha forza di segnare nel corpo della creatura la somiglianza e l’imagine della cosa desiderata.”256 In the case of Mensola, la cosa desiderata is most certainly Africo. Octave 376 details the love Mensola keeps hidden: “sì come innamorata e paurosa, / tenea la fiamma dentro al cor nascosa” (7-8); unable to freely express her feelings for Africo, she calls him quietly (“che tacitamente nol chiamasse”) and emits little sighs on his behalf (“alcun sospiretto / assai sovente per lui non gittasse”). After describing the imaginary companionship of Africo in octave 396, Boccaccio dedicates the entire following octave to the desire-provoking effects such as

255 Medicina per le donne nel Cinquecento, 57.

256 See Girolamo Mercurio, La commare o riccoglitrice (1596), in Medicina per le donne nel Cinquecento, 94.
mental image has on Mensola: Mensola develops so “fervent a love” – a *si fervente amore* – that she regrets her choice to return to the nymphs (“se ne pentea mille fiate”), wishes she could be with Africo (“volentier ne vorrebbe esser gita / con esso lui a starsi a tutte l’ore”), and calls his name (“chiamando lui, con lagrime versate”). According to Tommaso Campanello, “Le donne incinte esprimono nei loro parti l’immagine di quello che bramano”. These octaves do nothing if not underline the pregnant Mensola’s yearning for the absent Africo.

When read in the context of the widespread belief in the power of maternal imagination, passages in the *Ninfale* describing the gravid Mensola strongly desiring and constantly meditating on Africo (“per compagno tenea nella mente / Africo sempre col suo viso adorno” [396, 3-4]) and those repeatedly stressing Pruneo’s likeness to Africo (“parea, a vedello, / Africo ne’ suoi occhi e nelle ciglia, / e tutta l’altra faccia si verace” [405, 5-7]) imply a cause and effect: Mensola constantly thinks of Africo, so she imprints his image on the fetus she is carrying. Given a widespread societal belief in the power of maternal imagination – seen in texts ranging from Francesco da Barberino to contemporary medical treatises to the consolatory genre – it is likely that such a connection would have been made; for a medieval reader, Pruneo’s perfect paternal resemblance could have been construed as the logical consequence of Mensola’s fixed thoughts and desire during her pregnancy.

If, however, we read these passages as connected – in other words, if we see a causal relationship between Mensola’s thoughts and Pruneo’s appearance – then the

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standard, Aristotelian, reflection of generative resemblance that Pruneo’s perfect paternal likeness seemed to imply is suddenly placed into doubt. In the *Ninfale*, of course, Mensola’s thoughts are in line with the natural order of things, such that her imagination is not subversive but reproduces “the father’s form and face”: Pruneo looks just like his father. Yet the very inclusion of passages dwelling on the pregnant nymph’s contemplation of Africo puts into question the supremacy of the male contribution, to line and offspring alike, by raising the specter of an operative female imagination. Jane Fair Bestor notes that throughout the premodern period, “the dominant framework for thinking about procreation among theologians and philosophers was the theory associated with Aristotle that ascribed creative agency to only one source, the male”; Galenists, even while arguing for an efficacious female seed, tended to view that seed, and thus the female reproductive role, as primarily facilitating and/or nurturing, not creative. By playing up Mensola’s gestational contemplations of Africo and then repeatedly depicting Pruneo as the carbon copy of his father, Boccaccio undermines the dominant understanding of generation and heredity that ascribed a creative and formative role exclusively to the male and relegated females to the passive provision of matter; he suggests that the agent, or force, behind Pruneo’s form may be Mensola, not Africo.

In the *Ninfale*, of course, Mensola thinks not of a statue, or another man, but of Africo, the father of her child, thereby conforming to the natural hierarchy and making it difficult to identify the definitive cause behind Pruneo’s appearance. In the end,

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258 See Huet, *Monstrous Imagination*, 24. Huet argues that in the natural hierarchy, “the maternal imagination reproduces the father’s image”, as art imitates nature; however, the “unpredictable nature” of the female imagination could cause it to subvert the natural order of things by failing to reproduce the “father’s form and face” (*Monstrous Imagination*, 15, 24).

259 See Bestor, “Ideas about Procreation,” 153, 159.
Boccaccio’s treatment of resemblance in this poem is highly ambiguous, the textual equivalent of this author’s favored semantic construction “o…..o”: either Pruneo resembles Africo because ‘like produces like’ or Pruneo resembles Africo because Mensola moulds the child into the image of her desire. Or, perhaps, for both reasons: Mensola may be further imprinting Africo’s image onto a fetus that already resembles him. The fact, however, that Boccaccio includes lines stressing Mensola’s repeated contemplation of and desire for Africo puts the principle of “like produces like” into doubt by raising an alternate explanation for Pruneo’s perfect paternal resemblance. By leaving the question unanswered, Boccaccio both reflects the ideological prejudices of the patrilineage – a society for which marriage was, as Poggio Bracciolini noted, the opportunity for a man “to propagate a line of descendants….that bore his image”260 - and exposes the logical inconsistencies inherent in the trope - literary, medical, and societal - of perfect male replication.

2.6 Mensola’s Joyful Maternity, Revisited

In this chapter, I have made the case that Boccaccio structures the practices and ideology of the fourteenth-century Tuscan patrilineage into the Ninfale, an idyllic, pastoral poem. I would now like to briefly examine Mensola’s maternity - her beautifully-rendered interactions with baby Pruneo – by considering it with respect to the practices of motherhood in late medieval Tuscan society. I argue that these critically-celebrated verses depict a purposefully atypical and affective motherhood that slyly

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opposes the functional image of maternity propagated in patrilineal society. Whereas
Boccaccio’s description of Mensola’s pregnancy hewed closely to medical and societal
ideas about gravidity, his depiction of her mothering diverges from accepted custom and
practice in significant, and, I would argue, meaningful, ways.

The five octaves detailing Mensola’s post-partum experience as mother, before
her discovery by Diana and its tragic outcome, have been roundly, if repetitively, praised.
Critics laud the nymph’s “scoperta ed emozione della maternità” and praise the
“disarmata innocenza” and “inesperienza” with which she confronts her motherhood,
considered, by more than one critic, as a game – “una sorta di strano e dilettoso gioco” or
“un caro balocco.”

Yet for all the attention and acclaim these octaves have generated, there has been little substantive examination of Mensola’s maternity. Critical discussions
are marked by abstraction and romanticism; critics idealize Mensola’s motherhood by
praising it so unanimously - without acknowledgment of the overlaying of their own
modern set of values – and by considering it without reference to the position of women
and the function of maternity in the society of this work’s composition. By abstracting
and idealizing Mensola’s maternity, critics have ignored the ‘particulars’: the ‘what’, the
‘where’, and the ‘with whom’. The following section historicizes Mensola’s motherhood
to demonstrate its exceptional, atypical, and, even, quixotic nature.

261 See Chiecchi, Giovanni Boccaccio e il romanzo familiare, 105; Sapegno, Storia letteraria d’Italia: il
trecento, 328; and Balduino, “Sul Ninfale fiesolano,” 261. The Ovidian texts that likely served as sources
for the Ninfale, Callisto in the Metamorphoses and Heroïdes XI, contain no tender mother-baby scenes.
Most critics, however, see the scene in which Pruneo’s cries reveal Mensola’s sin to Diana as patterned off
of Heroïdes XI.

262 Critics have noted that motherhood increases Mensola’s love for the father of her child. Sapegno writes,
“mette alla luce un bimbo, e con l’amore materno rinasce nel suo cuore l’affetto già sopito e tenuto a freno
per l’uomo che l’ha fatto madre”. Balduino believes motherhood makes Mensola ‘relive’ or ‘wholly
discover’ “il suo amore di donna”. See Sapegno, Storia letteraria d’Italia: il trecento, 324 and Balduino,
“Sul Ninfale fiesolano,” 261.
Giulia Calvi argues that in both Tuscan religious literature and “agnatically-biased” family memoir, motherly experience is not acknowledged as “something which extends beyond the physiological process of birth and feeding”; she notes that representations of motherhood in these texts are confined “within a set of repetitive gestures.”

At first glance, Calvi’s statement seems to well describe the literary depiction of motherhood in the Ninfa: in the five octaves detailing Mensola’s motherhood proper (her postpartum activities with Pruneo), the nymph dresses, nurses, and kisses Pruneo (“e subito gli fece una gonnella, / com’ella seppe il meglio, e poi lattollo, / e mille volte quel giorno baciollo” [404, 6-8]); lovingly gazes at, plays with, and coddles him (“E tanto amore già posto gli avea, / che di mirarlo non si può saziare”; “ed a scherzare / cominciava con lui, e fargli festa, / e con le man gli lisciava la testa” [406, 1-2; 6-8]); and takes him to a riverside to play in the sun (“Ell’era andata col suo bel fantino / inverso ’l fiume giù poco lontana, / e ’l fanciul trastullava ad un caldino” [409, 1-3]). My list, of course, of this set of “repetitive gestures” does not take into account the beauty of these verses nor the affect with which they are imbued. Yet, these verses cannot be said to contain much specific information about premodern motherhood beyond the general activities of nursing, dressing, and playing. Mensola’s activities with Pruneo are very similar to those of Mary with the infant Jesus as described in the fourteenth-century Italian manuscript Meditations on the Life of Christ: Mary nurses her son with “concern and diligence”; she embraces, kisses, gently hugs, and delights in the

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263 Giulia Calvi, “‘Cruel’ and ‘Nurturing’ Mothers: The Construction of Motherhood in Tuscany (1500 – 1800),” 78. Calvi’s article, despite its chronological markers, contains much information on motherhood and the representation of motherhood predating the 1500s.
child with “happiness, confidence, and motherly authority”; she often and gently looks at his face and body, and swathes his tiny limbs with care.\(^{264}\)

The *Ninfale’s* verses interest me, however, not so much for the activities they describe, but for the setting in which they unfold. Despite having structured accurate reflections of the practices of the patrilineal family into this poem, when depicting Mensola’s motherhood Boccaccio subverts accepted practice by setting it in an all-female space, outside, I would argue, the strictures of the patrilineage.

To understand how Mensola’s idyllic and solitary motherhood may be read as a critique of the patrilineage, we must consider the power of the father in patrilineal Tuscan society and the physical and legal relationship of mothers to the children they bore. Historians have characterized premodern birth as an exclusively female-centered event, and it is certainly true that few men were present during labor and delivery; yet soon after a child made the transition from womb to world, men quickly reentered the picture.\(^{265}\) If the birth itself was female-controlled, the majority of postpartum activities were, in the words of Jacqueline Marie Musacchio, “male-orchestrated.”\(^{266}\) It was common practice for the father to name the child and arrange for his or her baptism.\(^{267}\) Florentine notary

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\(^{266}\) Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, 46.

\(^{267}\) For information on a father’s responsibility to choose a child’s given name, see Klapisch-Zuber, “The Name ‘Remade’: The Transmission of Given names in Florence in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries,” in *Women, Family, and Ritual*, particularly, 288-9. In *The Death of the Child Valerio Marcella*, King notes that Valerio’s mother attended to his naming and baptism because Valerio’s father was away from home and his duties prevented him from doing so, as would have normally been the case (King, 6).
Ser Girolamo da Colle described his activities after his first child had been delivered of his wife: “The baby was delivered by Monna Mathea…and Monna Lena, my mother-in-law; and because Mathea stayed about 22 hours and did a lot for us I gave her one large florin….And tomorrow at good hour I will baptize him and give him the name of my father, that is Giovanni.”

In addition to choosing a name and arranging baptism, men also decided upon and bestowed confinement gifts (silver fork and spoon sets, sweetmeats, candles) used to cement social and political ties and repay, or accrue, obligations. A child’s godparents were also carefully selected by the father to solidify or forge advantageous social and political connections.

In addition to orchestrating the immediate postpartum activities, men also participated in the traditionally-female “physiological process of feeding” by arranging for and selecting a wetnurse for the child. In late medieval and Renaissance Tuscany, the use of balie, or wetnurses, was particularly widespread. It was exceedingly rare for

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269 For the ritual and politicized nature of confinement visits and gifts, see Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, 42-6.


272 Although maternal breast-feeding continued to be advocated, the use of wetnurses was well-accepted by pedagogues, clerics, and by the aristocracy. For general information on wetnursing in late medieval
an upper class woman to nurse her own children; while some families employed in-home wetnurses, most children were sent out to nurse at the wetnurse’s home, a practice that entailed near complete separation from the child for up to two years. Historians have noted the prominent role played by men in this practice: a father selected a nurse for his child and signed the contract with the wetnurse’s husband, known as the *balio*; frequently, he also decided when to wean the child. These decisions and transactions appear to have been made with little consultation of either the child’s mother or nurse, leading Klapisch-Zuber to characterize wetnursing in fourteenth-century Tuscany as “men’s business.”

The postnatal appropriation of the child by the father— the naming, baptism, selection of godparents and nurse— can be considered a practical manifestation of the ideology that children belong to, and originate from, the paternal line. From a legal


273 See Klapisch-Zuber, “Blood Parents and Milk Parents: Wet Nursing in Florence, 1300-1530,” in *Women, Family, and Ritual*, and Shulamith Shahar, Chapter Four, “Nursing,” in *Childhood in the Middle Ages*. Klapisch-Zuber sees the practice of wetnursing as widespread among middle-class Florentines as early as the mid-fourteenth century; she finds a 1 to 4 ratio of in-home to out-of-home wetnurses (*Women, Family, and Ritual*, 133, 135).

274 See Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual*, 143-4, 153-4; Ross, “The Middle-Class Child in Urban Italy, Fourteenth to Early Sixteenth Century,” 190; and King, “Concepts of Childhood,” 384. King notes that “it was precisely the women of the elite, those who modern readers might otherwise suppose would be most committed to the early nurture of their infants, who most freely abandoned them to mercenary nurses; in this abandonment even of male heirs, they were supported—indeed, led—by their husbands” (384). Louis Haas, *The Renaissance Man and His Children*, has a more sanguine view of a mother’s role in selecting wetnurses; for him, the practice is a form of premodern daycare (7, 111-132).

275 See Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual*, 143. Klapisch-Zuber argues that the reigning values in this society were those of lineage: “such values minimized female roles and female contributions to the family group.” She writes that the decision to send away one’s child to be nursed by another woman promised the “successful maturation of the virtues inherited from the father and from his lineage. Basically, the qualities inherent in the wife did not count” (162).
standpoint, however, children truly were the ‘property’ of the male line. Calvi writes: “from a juridical standpoint, women brought up children who did not belong to them. Indeed, according to Roman law, all children, sons and daughters, legally descend and only belong to their fathers, and patria potestas, that is the power of the father over his offspring, generates the family.” In practical terms, this legal distinction meant that a woman could not pass property onto and had little legal claim over her children; if a widow remarried, she often took her dowry and left her children with their paternal relatives (“abandoning” them, in the language of the day) to join her new husband (and, perhaps, his children from a previous marriage) in his home. When examining family journals, Klapsich-Zuber found that children rarely remained with maternal kin. She cites several “tragically comic” illustrations of the ideology that children belong to the father’s lineage: when a pregnant woman is widowed, her family retracts her but lets her remain in her dead husband’s home until the child is born, after which they remarry her, without

276 See Kuehn, Law, Family, & Women: Toward a Legal Anthropology of Renaissance Italy; Sperling, “Dowry or Inheritance? Kinship, Property, and Women’s Agency in Lisbon, Venice, and Florence (1572)”; and Calvi, “‘Cruel’ and ‘Nurturing’ Mothers: The Construction of Motherhood in Tuscany (1500 – 1800),” 81. Klapisch-Zuber notes that “the descendants of a couple belong to the father’s lineage, whose name they bear and within which they remain even if the widowed mother leaves this lineage to remarry” (Women, Family, and Ritual, 74-5).

277 See Calvi, “‘Cruel’ and ‘Nurturing’ Mothers: The Construction of Motherhood in Tuscany (1500 – 1800),” 81. A father’s active procreative power influenced, and was intertwined with, legal and social conceptions of kinship. See Bestor’s excellent study of the interrelation of notions of male and female reproductive roles and medieval views of kinship, “Ideas about Procreation and Their Influence on Medieval Views of Kinship.”

278 See “The ‘Cruel Mother’: Maternity, Widowhood, and Dowry in Florence the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries,” in Women, Family, and Ritual. For Klapisch-Zuber, this abandonment is as much economic as affective, because it meant that a mother removed her dowry from her children’s patrimony (128).

279 See Klapisch-Zuber, Women, Family, and Ritual, 32, 74-5, 124-5. Some widows did remain near their children after their husband’s death; of those who did not “abandon” their children, 25 percent raised their minor children independently, while only 3 percent of widows returned with their children to their natal home, and less than 3 percent remained with their children in the home of their family-in-law. See Women, Family, and Ritual, 32n30.
the child; in another case, a widowed mother sees her newborn child taken away by her brothers-in-law, snatched back from his nurse by her own family, restored to his paternal uncles by a court order, and then, finally, returned to her by those same uncles. The case of Maddalena Tornabuoni, a Florentine patrician widow, examined by Giulia Calvi, is perhaps less ‘tragicomic’, if only because of its common occurrence: widowed at age 25, and granted no guardianship or custody over her three young children, Maddalena was forced to abandon her children to paternal relatives to regain her dowry and remarry; in her new home, she became a stepmother to two young children from her husband’s previous marriage.

In the context, therefore, of the male-orchestration of the postpartum period and the male-‘ownership’ of offspring, Mensola’s joyful, solitary, and female-dominated motherhood is strikingly singular, in that it transpires in the absence of any sort of male figure or male authority. When compared to the experience of the average fourteenth-century mother, Mensola’s motherhood is idyllic, quixotic, exceptional, not because of its mythological overtones and setting, but because it takes place without the mediation of a father figure, the interference of a nurse, or the appropriation of paternal relatives: it is quite simply Mensola with her child. Perhaps therein lies the joy that critics have been

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281 See Calvi, “‘Cruel’ and ‘Nurturing’ Mothers: The Construction of Motherhood in Tuscany (1500–1800),” 83. She notes, however, that the second time Maddalena is widowed, twenty years and eleven children later, she is middle-aged, and has lost value as an alliance making tool for her kin; she is therefore able to gain guardianship over her children and stay on in her husband’s home.

282 At this point, of course, Pruneo’s father is dead, and his relatives have yet to discover the existence of his heir.

283 James Bruce Ross has argued that a child’s life in late medieval and early Renaissance Italy was marked by a series of harsh adjustments, both physical and emotional, beginning with the immediate separation from its mother and delivery to a wetnurse; “wholly dependent for food, care and affection upon a surrogate”, the child’s “return to its own mother was to a stranger in an alien home, to a person with whom
so quick to remark upon. The joyful and affective qualities of the scene may be due not to an essentializing view – whether Boccaccio’s or later critics - of women’s innate joy at fulfilling their natural maternal role, but rather to the freedom from patrilineal social structures which Mensola’s nymphal motherhood represents.284

Giulia Calvi has argued that affective female-centered motherhood, like that seen in the iconography of Mary with child, threatened patrilineal authority and redefined the family: “the model of a Virgin mother within a mother-centered family (baby Jesus is never seen on his father’s lap or in his arms) questions patrilineal social structures, symbolically undermining *pater familias* and *patria potestas* which define and originate the family in Roman law countries.”285 Mensola’s solitary, joyful maternity, like her fetally-effective contemplation of Africo, may fulfill a similar function by undermining traditional - male-dominated - conceptions of kinship and family. Her motherhood slyly opposes the largely functional image of maternity propagated by patrilineal society by placing the mother at the center, not the sidelines, of the family, just as passages describing her incessant thoughts of Africo upend reproductive gender hierarchies by suggesting she, not he, may be the agent of the child’s form.286 As Teodolinda Barolini

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284 While the lack of a male presence is partly due to the poem’s Ovidian roots - Mensola, like another of Diana’s nymphs, Callisto, is left to give birth after a rape - I would note that the joy of this scene is completely lacking from the Ovidian source material: the tale of Callisto in the *Metamorphoses* and *Heroïdes* IX contain no mother-child scenes, happy or otherwise.


286 I am indebted to Margaret King for the description of mothers as ‘sidelined’. She notes the exclusion of Valerio’s mother from the consolatory letters written after the child’s death; in these largely male-authored
has shown, Boccaccio is highly cognizant of the restrictions and limitations placed on women in medieval society; with Mensola’s motherhood, he may be presenting a positive, female-centered experience as counterweight to actual historical experience.\footnote{See Barolini, “Notes Toward a Gendered History of Italian Literature”, in Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006) and “Le parole son femmine e i fatti son maschi: Toward a Sexual Poetics of the Decameron,” in Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006 [1993]).}

In our poem, however, this brief idyll of female-centered and female-enjoyed maternity is short-lived: Mensola dies, turned into a river by an avenging Diana, and Pruneo is subsequently raised by Africo’s parents. This transfer of child custody is structured into the poem in such a way that Girafone and Alimena seem the only logical choice for Pruneo’s upbringing and it has received little critical comment.\footnote{But verses describing the nymphs’ response to the child suggest an alternative. After retrieving Pruneo from the bush in which Mensola had hidden him, the nymphs play with Pruneo, try to quiet his cries, and desire to keep him for themselves - “Molta festa le ninfe gli facieno, / veggendol tanto piacevole e bello, / e racchetandol, volentier vorrièno / con esso loro in que’ monti tenello” (416, 1-4); fear of Diana, however, induces them to bring the child to Sinedecchia. Sinedecchia then brings Pruneo to the men and women in the valley, who, evidently, know how to raise children better than woodland nymphs: “ti priego, almen, che tu mi doni / questo fanciullo, chè ’l vorrò portare / di qui lontano assai, ’n certi valloni, / ov’io ricordo anticamente stare / uomini con lor donne a lor magioni, / e a loro il donerò, che car l’aranno, / e me’ di noi allevare lo sapranno” (420, 2-8). The attraction of the nymphs for the infant may presage their later domestication (“cacciate e maritate”) by Attalante’s men, but it also raises the possibility of an alternate custody arrangement for Pruneo.}

I argue, however, that notwithstanding the fact that Pruneo’s return to Girafone and Alimena fits narrative exigencies - Pruneo is a boy and, therefore, an inappropriate companion for the nymphs – the child’s assumption by his paternal grandparents, and not the nymphs or his maternal relatives, conforms to contemporary child custody practices and reflects the ideology and unsparing logic of the patrilineal family. In fourteenth-century Tuscan society, as Klapisch-Zuber’s and Calvi’s earlier examples illustrate, children originated from, belonged to, and resided with the male line. Pruneo’s return to Girafone and

texts, she was “sidelined because all mothers were seen as lesser than all fathers” (The Death of the Child Valerio Marcello, 17).
Alimena restores the child to his origin, to the line to which he belongs and with which he would have habitually resided; it reinstates the male line’s ownership over this child, lost for a while in the maternal realm. Despite the temporary freedom from patrilineal social structures that Mensola’s motherhood represented, in the end the patrilineage is firmly re-established: Pruneo, returned to his father’s lineage, grows up to found la schiatta africhea, a male-dominated and male-defined kinship group – men born of men.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to demonstrate that the Ninfale is deeply reflective of the particular historical moment and locale of the work’s composition, fourteenth-century Tuscany; I have argued that this idyllic poem incorporates both concrete practices and the ideology of the reigning form of kinship system, the patrilineage. Boccaccio’s depiction of Mensola’s possible married existence reflects fourteenth-century marriage practices, like patrilocal residence and the redefinition of female identity within male lineage; the adoption of Pruneo by his paternal grandparents conforms to contemporary child custody practices; and descriptions of Pruneo’s descendants in the etiological end of the poem mirror the popular genealogical exercises of contemporary Florentines. In the latter part of this chapter, I have explored more ideological reflections of the patrilineage; I have considered how female contributions to family and line are elided out of this poem from both a genealogical and hereditary standpoint. The Ninfale’s pervasive discourse of ‘perfect’ paternal resemblance and its etiological coda - where children are born ‘of men’ and women are omitted from family narrative - are two sides of the same coin: both
minimize female contributions – to embryo, bloodline, and family– by placing mothers at the sidelines of procreative processes and filiation.

Yet, textual incorporation of the practices and ideology of the patrilineage - male-dominated kinship and family; children’s ownership by the paternal line; the effacement of the female from reproductive processes and family narrative - does not necessarily imply authorial endorsement. By pointing to the active, effective nature of Mensola’s maternity – the formative power of her prenatal imagination and her solitary, atypical (because not male-dominated) postpartum mothering - Boccaccio both undermines reproductive gender hierarchies and subtly questions traditional ideologies of family and kinship; he points to the necessity, and utility, of maternal processes for male line and society. In this context, we may see Mensola’s fetally-effective contemplations and affective, female-dominated maternity as the correction, or exposure, of the elision of the maternal from biology, genealogy, and the family in fourteenth-century Tuscan society.
Chapter III: “Per ciò che a questo siam nate”: Boccaccio and Generative Physiology (The Corbaccio and Decameron V.10)

3.1 Introduction

In previous chapters, I have sought to demonstrate Boccaccio’s unusual attention to - and specificity and historical accuracy in discussing - female physiology and reproductive processes. I have shown how in the Ninfale fiesolano, an idyllic, mythological poem, Boccaccio engages with some of the dominant theories on generation and reproduction of his time. By incorporating and complicating accepted beliefs about the female body and generative process, Boccaccio subtly comments on the gender system and the function of maternity in patrilineal Tuscan society.

With this chapter, I turn to two texts explicitly rooted to, and set in, fourteenth-century Tuscany: Boccaccio’s magnum opus, the Decameron, and the anti-feminist dream vision, the Corbaccio. Critics have highlighted the Florentine, or Tuscan, settings of these two works: as Branca suggests, the Decameron’s protagonist is contemporary society and, despite being a dream vision, most of the events reported in the Corbaccio take place in mid-fourteenth-century Florence.289

289 Branca highlights the Decameron’s profound linguistic, geographic, chronological, and thematic “contemporaneità”; he notes that roughly nine-tenths of the Decameron’s stories are set in the recent past. See Vittore Branca, “Una chiave di lettura per il Decameron: Contemporaneizzazione narrativa ed espressivismo linguistico,” in G. Boccaccio, Decameron, ed. Branca, vol. 1, vii–xxxix. Thomas Bergin also stresses the Decameron’s geographical and chronological proximity: “no fewer than seventy-nine of the narratives have an Italian background (twenty-nine are set in Florence – a proportion significant enough to assure a Tuscan flavor), and only twenty-five are set in times that can be called ancient or remote.” See Bergin, Boccaccio (New York: Viking Press, 1981), 288. The frame story is, of course, set in Florence in the mid-fourteenth century. Hollander notes that unlike in Dante’s Vita Nuova, Florentines are explicitly referred to by Boccaccio in the Corbaccio. See Hollander, Boccaccio’s Last Fiction: Il Corbaccio (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 47n16. In the passage to which he refers, the Spirit Guide describes the widow’s knowledge of what the Florentines are arranging for the state of the city (Boccaccio, Il Corbaccio, ed. Giulia Natali (Milan: Mursia, 1992) [379]).
In spite of a general critical consensus on the social embeddedness of these works, critics have tarried, for a variety of reasons, to connect the depiction of maternity and the narration of generative processes in the *Decameron* or *Corbaccio* to the realities of motherhood and reproduction in fourteenth-century society. In the following chapters, I seek to redress this lacuna by historicizing Boccaccio’s treatment of maternity and the ‘biological’ processes behind procreation in the *Corbaccio* and the *Decameron*. What I am advocating is a close and historicized reading of the way Boccaccio depicts, narrates, or indicates maternity and / or the physiological processes involved in generation.

Like much else in the *Decameron*, the representation of maternity is multifaceted and, often, polyvalent; in an effort to provide a nuanced reading, and one that does not insist on any unified representation of maternity, I explore not only the more ‘social’ aspects of motherhood - mother/child interactions, concerns about illegitimacy – but also the physiological, or in today’s terms, biological, processes leading to or involved in maternity. In this chapter, I explore how Boccaccio incorporates beliefs about generative physiology into commonplaces of the misogynistic tradition in the *Corbaccio* and *Decameron* V.10; I consider how the author’s treatment of generative fluids in the *Corbaccio* and gendered sexuality in V.10 wields the physiology of reproduction in the service of two different arguments. In later chapters, I seek to relate the depiction of maternity in the *Decameron* to the realities of fourteenth-century women. Chapter Four explores how the *Decameron*’s distinctly gendered language of generation downplays female contributions to family and line. Chapter Five highlights the profound cultural embeddedness of Boccaccio’s treatment of maternity by placing the *Decameron*’s depictions of motherhood - whether unwanted, farcical, or affective - within the greater
social context of Renaissance natalism. Throughout, as in earlier chapters, I consider how representations of maternity and generative processes in these texts comment on the realities of motherhood in a patrilineal society.

3.2 Digested and Superfluous Blood: Generative Physiology at the Service of Misogyny

I start this chapter by making a leap from a text that precedes the Decameron, the Ninfale fiesolano, to one that follows it, the Corbaccio. This leap, while perhaps counter-intuitive, possesses a certain thematic logic for it lands us at the very beginning - indeed, at the mere potentiality - of the procreative process, with the generative fluids, semen and menstrual blood. It is not only thematic considerations that lead us to this point, however. Exploring the presence of generative physiology in an overtly anti-female text - where women are vilified for their menstrual cycles and lust – will allow us to better appreciate how Boccaccio utilizes the same underlying biology in Decameron V.10, but twists it into a “female-friendly” argument.

The Corbaccio, Boccaccio’s last vernacular work, was likely written shortly after the Decameron. The critical reception of this overtly misogynistic work is fraught with conflict. While the view that the text arises from a slight suffered by Boccaccio (i.e. the

autobiographical explanation) has more or less fallen by the wayside; critics are still in disagreement as to whether the work is earnestly misogynistic (in other words, a conversion from the earlier philogynous Decameron) or whether it is a parody of the misogynistic tradition.

Whatever Boccaccio’s motivation for writing the text, there is no question that the author purposefully reutilized topoi, and frequently, passages, from misogynistic literature. Anthony Cassell is the critic who has perhaps done the most to shed light on Boccaccio’s familiarity with the antifeminist tradition. Cassell has shown how Boccaccio collected examples of antifeminist writing in his Zibaldone (Theophrastus, Walter Mapes, Jerome) and consciously modeled passages of the Corbaccio after these

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291 Autobiographical readings were forwarded by Henri Hauvette in “Une confession de Boccace: Il Corbaccio,” in Etudes sur Boccace (1894-1916) (Torino: Bottega d’Erasmo, 1968), and by Tauno Nurme, for whom the work was “un documento psicologico, come una confessione almeno indiritta dell’autore”. See Giovanni Boccaccio: Il Corbaccio (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, 1968), cited in Gian Piero Barricelli, “Satire of Satires: Boccaccio’s Corbaccio,” Italian Quarterly 18 (1975), 98. While noting that much of the Corbaccio’s invective is made up of direct quotations from medieval antifeminism, Thomas Bergin still believes an autobiographical interpretation is warranted: “even granting that many of the spices are borrowed, one cannot but wonder why a writer would go to the trouble of preparing such a sauce unless he had some good reason for it.” See Bergin, Boccaccio, 199-200.


293 So packed is the work with citations and references to other misogynistic texts that David Wallace calls it a “dramatized anti-feminist encyclopedia.” See David Wallace, Giovanni Boccaccio: Decameron (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 108. Similarly, for Guyda Armstrong the work is “an exhaustive compilation of classic antifeminist abuse” (“Boccaccio and the Infernal Body: The Widow as Wilderness,” 85).

works; he suggests that the work is less the result of personal experience than “the fruit of a long and studious familiarity with convention.”

Despite the overt citational mode in which the text was written, Cassell rightly notes that the *Corbaccio* is not a sterile, reductive compilation of passages from earlier authors: Boccaccio’s “own casting of images and commonplaces sets his production apart.”

It is Boccaccio’s original ‘casting’ of images and commonplaces belonging to the misogynistic tradition that I would like to explore here. In the *Corbaccio*, as in the work’s classical sources, female reproductive processes and practices are discussed inasmuch as they are symbolic or illustrative of the inherent inferiority of women: the Spirit Guide’s invective includes references to women’s menstrual cycles, “dirty” births, and various means - both pre- and post-partum - for dealing with unwanted pregnancies. Female sexuality, specifically, the insatiable nature of it, is also addressed repeatedly. These topics are, as so many critics note, timeworn topoi of misogynistic discourse; in including them in his work, Boccaccio is, as Cassell points out, consciously drawing upon a long and well-established tradition of antifeminist writing. What interests me is how Boccaccio updates these topoi by incorporating, and making them consonant with, beliefs about male and female physiology and contemporary social practices. As we will see, when excoriating women for their excessive lust or condemning them for their menstrual


297 See *Corbaccio*, 203, 231-232, 402.


299 In Chapter 5, I consider how Boccaccio incorporates contemporary practices related to abortifacients and abandonment into these topoi. Here I limit myself to the topoi’s reflection of reproductive physiology.
periods – two favored antifeminist commonplaces - Boccaccio incorporates specific and historicized views about generative physiology into his text. The incorporation of this material lends the passages in the *Corbaccio* a specificity that is lacking in the source material and, I will argue, sharpens, and makes more contemporary, the work’s openly gender-biased argument.

Recently, Regina Psaki has explored how Boccaccio uses eroticized landscapes as figures for the female body and genitalia in the *Corbaccio*; Guyda Armstrong has also dedicated an article to the author’s representation of the female form in the work. In these readings, the female form is represented through metaphors of landscape (in Armstrong’s reading, specifically Dantean landscapes) or landscape, such as the infernal valley with which the *Corbaccio* opens, functions as metaphor for the female body. While critics have ably explored the imagistic significance of the female body in the *Corbaccio*, the presence of reproductive physiology in the text has largely escaped critical notice. If at all noted, it is quickly glossed over with a reference to an earlier antifeminist source or dispatched with a brief explanation in a footnote, as when Giulia Natali glosses “sangue digesto” as blood digested or transformed into sperm (“secondo la scienza medievale…sangue digerito e trasformato in sperma”). Natali’s note is

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absolutely correct, but it does not tease out the implications of this language: packed into this phrase about ‘digested blood’ is a whole hierarchy of gender roles.

To understand the weight of this passage, we must re-situate this reference to ‘digested blood’ within the system of beliefs about male and female physiology from which it originally hailed. A little over halfway through the Corbaccio, the Spirit Guide, as part of his project of curing the narrator of his love for the widow, reveals the true nature of the ‘male prowess’ that the widow is said to so admire. (The narrator first become attracted to the widow upon hearing her qualities extolled by a friend, one of which was her delight in seeing male feats of bravery and vigor.) The guide explains that the widow is not so cruel that she takes pleasure in seeing men kill each other in jousts or war; she has little use for the blood men spill on the battlefield, her thirst is for the blood that is digested, or refined:

“E credo che tu credevi che ella volesse o disiderasse o le piacesse di vedere gli uomini pro’ e gagliardi, colle lance ferrate giostrando o nelle sanguinose battaglie tra mille mortali pericoli o combattendo le città e le castella o colle spade in mano insieme uccidersi. Non è così: non è costei né così crudele né così perfida come mostra che tu creda ch’ella voglia bene agli uomini perché s’uccidano. E che farebb’ella del sangue che, morendo l’uomo, vermiglio si versa? La sua sete è del digesto che vivi e sani corpi possono senza riaverlo prestare” (Corbaccio, 372).303

303 All quotations from the Corbaccio are from Giulia Natali’s edition (Giovanni Boccaccio, Il Corbaccio, ed. Natali [Milan: Mursia, 1992]). Cassell translates the passage as: “And what would she do with the blood which gushes forth red as a man dies? Her thirst is for the refined kind that living, healthy bodies can render without needing to have it back again.” See Giovanni Boccaccio, Corbaccio or The Labyrinth of Love, trans. and ed. Cassell, 2nd ed., 49.
In the economy of the text, this comment may be grouped under the general rubric ‘female lust’. The passage continues to describe the widow’s interest in exceptionally virile men (those whose lance does not bend even after ten jousts in one night) and concludes that it is this ability that constitutes the ‘prowess’ she prizes in men above all.\textsuperscript{304} In other words, the widow is lustful: she cares more for men’s prowess in bed than in battle; she wants their digested blood, or semen, not the blood lost in war.

This disparaging claim about the widow’s sexual appetite reflects contemporary beliefs about the production and release of generative fluids. The idea that a man’s semen originated in the blood in his heart, where it was concocted, or refined, into sperm, was widespread in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance.\textsuperscript{305} Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset note that in the Aristotelian medieval imaginary, blood was the “raw material” of sperm.\textsuperscript{306} In \textit{Generation of Animals}, Aristotle explained that semen was “a residue derived… from useful nourishment in its final form”; since “the final form of the nourishment” was blood, semen came from blood.\textsuperscript{307}

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\item\textsuperscript{304} \textit{Il Corbaccio}, 374-375.
\item\textsuperscript{305} Aristotle’s theory of seminal origin is, as noted in Chapter Two, in conflict with the Hippocratic theory of pangenesis, the belief that seminal matter arose from all parts of the body. For beliefs about seminal origin, see Jacquart and Thomasset, \textit{Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages}, 52-60; Jane Fair Bestor, “Ideas about Procreation and Their Influence on Ancient and Medieval Views of Kinship,” in \textit{The Family in Italy: From Antiquity to the Present}, eds. David I. Kertzer and Richard P. Saller (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 152; Joan Cadden, \textit{Meanings of Sex Difference}, 18, 32, 61, 91-2, 133; and Gianna Pomata’s excellent article “Legami di sangue, legami di seme: consanguineità e agnazione nel diritto romano,” \textit{Quaderni Storici} 86 (August 1994): 299-334, specifically pp. 312-320.
\item\textsuperscript{306} See Jacquart and Thomasset, \textit{Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages}, 54.
\item\textsuperscript{307} See Aristotle, \textit{Generation of Animals}, 726a, 726b: “In blooded animals, blood is the final form of the nourishment.” Jacquart and Thomasset suggest that this was more or less a formula in the Middle Ages: “as blood was itself a product of food, sperm derived from food could be nothing other than blood, a substance analogous to blood, or a product that came from blood.” See Jacquart and Thomasset, \textit{Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages}, 54.
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The belief that semen originated in a man’s blood - the theory of haematogenesis - was common to both Aristotelian and Galenic biology. In *De usu partium*, Galen detailed the process by which blood is made into semen, attributing, unlike Aristotle, a functional role to the testicles. According to Galen, blood and the additive ‘pneuma’ were concocted, or heated, as they passed through the vascular system and into the coil-like veins of the testicles: “In this interweaving the blood and pneuma passing to the testes are very greatly concocted, and it is possible to see clearly that the humor contained in the first coils is still like blood and that in the succeeding coils it keeps getting whiter and whiter until in the very last ones, the ones that end in the testes, it has been made absolutely white. The testes in turn, being porous and spongy, receive the humor given a preliminary concoction in the vessels and concoct it thoroughly, the male testes making it perfect for the generation of the animal.”

The Spirit Guide’s statement that the widow thirsts for ‘digested’ male blood - in other words, for semen – is thus a clever variation on the old misogynistic topos of female sexual lust or insatiability. What interests me about this passage is not only that Boccaccio incorporates current beliefs about seminal origin into the topos, but that he

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308 Jacquart and Thomasset note that although the theory haematogenesis was generally accepted from the twelfth century onwards, it continued to coexist with the theory of pangenesis and the older Greek encephalomyelic theory of seminal origin (the belief that seed originated in the brain and spinal cord). See Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, 53, 60; and Gianna Pomata, “Legami di sangue, legami di seme: consanguineità e agnazione nel diritto romano,” 312, 314.

309 Gianna Pomata notes that for Aristotle, the testicles play no part in the production of semen and instead act as weights that keep the seminal veins straight and better able to emit seed. See Pomata, “Legami di sangue, legami di seme,” 314-5. See also Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, 717a11.

310 See Galen, *De usu partium*, 641-642, and, also, Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, 54, 61.

311 As Giulia Natali’s notes indicate, this is a topos of some standing in misogynistic literature (*I Corbaccio*, ed. Giulia Natali, 57n451).
does so with such lexical and conceptual precision. In the *Canon*, a fundamental source for medical knowledge throughout the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, Avicenna described semen as “a better-digested and subtler blood” (my emphasis). Reflecting this idea, Petrus Gallegus, a thirteenth-century writer, refers to the non-generative emissions of prepubescent boys as insufficiently digested blood: “spermatizant sanguinem indigestum.” Besides the lexical echo, in drawing attention to the vermilion color of blood spilled on battlefields (“del sangue che, morendo l’uomo, vermiglio si versa” 372), one could argue Boccaccio is contrasting the red color of non-digested blood to the white color of digested blood, or semen, the progressive dealbation of which is described by Galen in the above-cited passage of *De usu partium*.


313 Cited in Jacquot and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, 55. This is the third book of the *Canon*; in the first book, Avicenna makes the contradictory statement that sperm has its origin in the humors. See Avicenna, *Canon*, tr. Gerard of Cremona, bk I, fen I, doctrine 4, ch. 1; and bk III, fen 20, tr. 1, ch. 3. I would have liked to have the Latin translation of this passage, but no modern critical edition exists.

314 Cited in Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, 145-6n112.

315 For an excellent discussion of this passage, see Jacquot and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, 50-51. While we have no indication that Boccaccio had read these medical texts, we may assume that he was acquainted, in some general way, with these medical teachings; Avicenna, Hippocrates, and Galen are all mentioned by name in the *Decameron*. Hippocrates and Galen are mentioned in the Introduction to the *Decameron* as the summa of medical knowledge (“Quanti valorosi uomini, quante belle donne, quanti leggiadri giovani, li quali non che altri, ma Galieno, Ipocrate e Esculapio avriono giudicati sanissimi, la mattina desinarono co’ lor parenti, compagni e amici, che poi la sera vegnente appresso nell’altro mondo cenaron con li lor passati!” *Introduzione*, 48). Avicenna, and Hippocrates again, is
Boccaccio’s use of the word ‘digesto’ in the *Corbaccio*, in addition to conforming to medical writings, also appears calculated to bring to mind an illustrious literary intertext. In notes to these verses, critics regularly point to Dante’s account of the transformation of blood into semen.\(^{316}\) In *Purgatorio* XXV, Statius describes the route traveled by the male blood (‘sangue perfetto’) on its transformation into semen: originating in the heart, the blood is refined, or ‘digested’, before it passes to the male genitals.\(^ {317}\)

\[
\text{Sangue perfetto, che poi non si beve}
\text{da l’assetate vene, e si rimane}
\text{quasi alimento che di mensa leve,}
\text{prende nel core a tutte membra umane}
\text{virtute informative, come quello}
\text{ch’a farsi quelle per le vene vane.}
\text{Ancor digesto, scende ov’è piú bello}
\text{tacer che dire; e quindi poscia geme}
\text{sovr’altrui sangue in natural vasello. (Purg. XXV.37-45, my emphasis)}
\]

I would note that in the *Corbaccio*, Boccaccio reutilizes, and in the process, resemantcizes, language from what had been a high philosophical discussion of the generation of man for the lowest of satire: the *sangue digesto* which, in Dante’s text, mixes with the female blood (“altrui sangue”) and gives form to the fetus before its divine ensoulment becomes, in Boccaccio’s work, the ejaculate for which the depraved widow thirsts.

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Dante’s mention of *altrui sangue*, or female blood, in the verses above brings us to our next point. The Spirit Guide’s joke about ‘digested blood’ is not the only time Boccaccio incorporates generative physiology into the *Corbaccio*: earlier in the work, the author mentions another sort of blood, not digested, but superfluous - the menses. When the *Corbaccio*’s guide inveighs against women’s inherent dirtiness or foulness - a state he describes as surpassing pigs – he points to, as proof thereof, women’s births and their menstrual cycles: “Niuno altro animale è meno netto di lei; non il porco, qualora è più nel loto convolto, aggiunge alla bruttezza di loro. E se forse alcuno questo negar volesse, riguardinsì i parti loro, ricerchinsì i luoghi segreti, dove esse, vergognandosene, nascondono gli orribili strumenti li quali a tor via li loro umori superflui adoperano” (202-203). References to women’s menstrual cycle had long constituted a staple of the misogynistic tradition: menstruation was widely believed to be a consequence of Eve’s sin.\(^{318}\) The *Corbaccio* contains at least two other mentions of menstruation: the guide’s

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\(^{318}\) Menstruation was a unique physiological feature of women, distinguishing them from men, and, as Joan Cadden notes, was widely considered “a specifically womanly mark of the Fall.” See Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, 174; Bullough, “Medieval Medical Views of Women,” *Viator* 4 (1973), 489; and Charles T. Wood, “The Doctors’ Dilemma: Sin, Salvation, and the Menstrual Cycle in Medieval Thought,” *Speculum* 56.4 (1981), 713. Ian MacLean notes that menstruation was “firmly associated with the malediction (Gen. 3:16), with uncleanness, and with certain deleterious effects, usually relating to the transmission of diseases (notably smallpox) by heredity or contagion” (*The Renaissance Notion of Woman*, 39). It is for this reason that Paolo da Certaldo warns men against having sexual intercourse with wives who are menstruating: “Molto ti guarda di non istare cho la donna tua quando ella à ’l tempo suo, però ch’è filgliuoli che’n quella ora ingienerassi chorono rischio d’essere malatti o tigniosi: si che vedi rischio che questo è, e però sempre te ne guarda. E anche puoi fare male a te grandissimo” (*Il libro di buoni costumi*, n.278).

Medieval medical writers, while retaining the idea that menstruation was a consequence of Eve’s sin and the Mosaic concept that a menstruating woman was unclean, added to it a positive, purgative function. As Bullough notes, menstruation was regarded as “a kind of cleansing operation” and “a way of ensuring good health in women.” See Bullough, “Medieval Medical Views of Women,” 489-490. For Albertus Magnus, the healthful effects of menstruation helped to explain why women live longer than men. See Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, 175-176.

For good syntheses of the topic of menstruation in medieval science, see Helen Rodnite Lemay, *Women’s Secrets: A Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus’s De Secretis Mulierum with Commentaries*, 35-49;
description of the widow at that time of the month - “Quale ella dovesse essere, quando i Pisani col vermiglio all’asta cavalcavano, con la testa lenzata e stretta, la doglia al capo apponendo, dove alle parte opposita era il male, pensalti tu” (402) – and a reference to the bloody rivers (“fiumi sanguinei”) that flow from the Gulf of Setalia (in turn, a figure for the widow’s vagina). The passage above, however, while clearly taking its inspiration from that tradition, is notable for its specificity and its medico-philosophical accuracy. Besides its peculiar social historical interest in alluding to the instruments (in the guide’s formulation, the “horrible” instruments) women use to control, absorb, or otherwise get rid of, their menstrual flow, by referring to the menses as “umori superflui”, or superfluous humors, the passage reflects current beliefs about female physiology and the nature of menstrual blood.


319 I would note that Boccaccio manages to fit into this description of the menstrual period an obscene metaphor (“i Pisani col vermiglio all’asta cavalcavano”), a political insult (Pisa), and an attentive observation of a female malady and social practice (the widow tying up her head because of a, presumably, hormone-induced headache). When discussing menstruation, the commentator to Pseudo-Albertus’ *De secretis mulierum* writes: “You can tell when women have their menstrual periods because they normally wear many veils on their heads at this time. The reason for this is that they have headaches and so therefore they try to protect their heads from the cold by covering them. Another reason for this is that women know that their color is not good in this time therefore they cover their faces so that no one can see them.” See Helen Rodnite Lemay, *Women’s Secrets: A Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus’ De Secretis Mulierum with Commentaries* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992). In his notes, Cassell notes the jab at Pisa, “the perennial, hated, rival city of the Florentines.” See Corbaccio, trans. and ed. Cassell, 84n54.24. Guyda Armstrong sees a link between this passage and Dante’s invective against Pisa in *Inferno* 33 (“Boecaccio and the Infernal Body,” 92n18); I do not see a Dantean intertext at work here. The discussion, a few passages earlier, of whether the widow enjoys watching men jousting and at battle (“di vedere gli uomini pro’ e gagliardi, colle lance ferrate giostrando o nelle sanguinose battaglie” [370]) seems to foreshadow this crude joke about Pisans riding with red on their lances.

320 “Egli è per certo quel golfo una voragine infernale, la quale allora si riempierebbe o sazierebbe che il mar d’acque o il fuoco di legne. Io mi tacerò de’ fiumi sanguinei e de’ crocei che di quella a vicenda discendono” (Corbaccio, 414-415). Armstrong sees a reflection of Phlegethon, the river of blood in Dante’s *Inferno* in the Corbaccio’s bloody river of menstrual blood. See Armstrong, “Boecaccio and the Infernal Body,” 98.
In the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, the menses were believed to result from women’s inferiority and lack of heat: because women were too cold and moist (a sign of their inferiority) to concoct physiological superfluities, or excess food, into semen, like men, they were required to purge this ‘superfluous’ matter once a month. As Soranus noted, men were able to “rid themselves of surplus matter through athletics” but “women accumulate it in considerable quantity because of the domestic and sedentary life they lead”; lest women fall into danger, Nature “draw[s] off the surplus through menstruation.” Medieval authors repeated this explanation, and the value judgment behind it. William of Conches explained that because women could not “digest well…a superfluous remained which [was] purged every month.” According to Albertus Magnus, the menses were “superfluous and undigested fluid” (“de humido superfluo et

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321 See Cadden, Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages, 173; William F. MacLehose, “Nurturing Danger: High Medieval Medicine and the Problem(s) of the Child,” in Medieval Mothering, ed. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland, 1996), 6-7; Lemay, Women’s Secrets, 38-39; MacLean, The Renaissance Notion of Woman, 35. Only if a woman was pregnant or nursing was this matter no longer ‘superfluous’: during pregnancy, it provided the matter for the fetus’s growth, while after birth, it continued to nourish the infant through its transformation into breast milk. See Aristotle, Generation of Animals, 777a: “the nature of the milk is the same as that of the menstrual fluid”; and Isidore of Seville: “The blood used for nourishment of the uterus goes to the breasts and takes on the quality of milk.” Cited in Jacquart and Thomasset, Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages, 52. See also Clarissa W. Atkinson, The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 58-60.

322 See Soranus’ Gynecology, trans. Oswei Temkin, 23. Cadden notes that for Soranus menstrual blood represents “the natural flow of superfluous blood or fluid” (Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages, 27-28).

323 See William of Conches, De philosophia mundi 4.8-12, cited in MacLehose, “Nurturing Danger,” 6, 19n22. In the Dragmaticon, William states that since women are naturally cold, they are unable to digest their food well and therefore a superfluous remains which is expelled monthly as menses: “Cum mulier, ut praediximus, naturaliter frigida sit, perfecte cibum decoquere non potest; remanentque superfluitates quaedam, quas natura per singulos menses expellit, unde nominantur menstrua.” See Women’s Secrets, trans. Helen Rodnite Lemay, 42, 163n129. Isidore of Seville also defined the menses as “superfluous blood” in women. See Lemay, Women’s Secrets, 37; Bullough, “Medieval Medical Views of Women,” 489; and Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts, ed. Alcuin Blamires with Karen Pratt and C.W. Marx (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 44.
The passages from William of Conches and Albertus Magnus reveal the hierarchy at work here: women’s menses are superfluous because they are undigested, unlike men’s digested blood (semen).

Boccaccio’s description of menstrual blood as ‘superfluous’ is in keeping with theories that understood female physiology as a less hot, less perfect version of male physiology. The author’s characterization of the menses as superfluous *humors* also reflects contemporary thought. In the late Middle Ages, humors and blood were often interchangeable terms: humors were bodily fluids and blood was one of the four primary humors; the fluid running through the veins was “pure humor blood” intermixed with a lesser proportion of the other three humors. Both the twelfth-century gynecological text the *Trotula* and Hildegard of Bingen refer to the menses as humors: Hildegard states that retention of the menses can be caused by a “superfluity of humors”, while the *Trotula* explains retention as the result of ‘thick and overabundant’ humors that lack free passage.

By referring to male semen as *sangue digesto*, or digested blood, and to menstrual blood as superfluous humors, *umori superflui*, Boccaccio incorporates contemporary thought on the production and release of seed and menses into two commonplaces of the antifeminist tradition: the widow, and by extension all women, is maligned for her lust –

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her avidity for digested blood (semen) - and her menstrual cycle - her creation of superfluous blood (menses). The fact that Boccaccio ably weaves contemporary medical discourse into timeworn topoi of the misogynist tradition speaks to the author’s ability to make new his sources. Such attention and specificity is not found in Boccaccio’s main misogynistic source: Juvenal does not mention the menses in Satire VI, nor, while making ample use of the female sexual insatiability topos\(^{327}\), does he draw attention to the biology of semen.\(^{328}\) But it is not only Boccaccio’s famed ability to rejuvenate or renew his sources that is at play here; by weaving contemporary beliefs about generative physiology into these traditional topoi – woman’s lustful nature and menstrual period - the author effectively heightens the text’s anti-female charge.

Histories of the body and sexuality, like Joyce Salisbury, have stressed “the centrality of semen and menstrual blood in shaping ideas of gender and gendered sexuality” in the Middle Ages and Renaissance.\(^{329}\) In the Aristotelian tradition, semen

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and menstrual blood were ‘analogous’ in that they were both superfluous food: men, with their greater heat, were able to fully concoct that superfluous food, or blood, into semen, while women, “on account of their failure to effect concoction” were left with “a considerable volume of bloodlike substance” whose function was nourishment.\(^\text{330}\) The idea here, of course, is not that men and women are equal because they create analogous fluids consisting of superfluous food, but unequal because of their differing capacities to concoct that food. To a medieval reader, the mention of sperm or menses, particularly in language that drew attention to the origin of these fluids – digested blood, superfluous humors - would highlight not only biological differences between the sexes - one produces seed, one produces menses - but a whole set of concepts indicating the inferiority of women. While vilifying women for their lust or menstrual periods is nothing new – the Corbaccio abounds with references to female lust, and, as noted, mentions the menses at least two other times: in a description of the widow during her period and, synedochically, through the “fiumi sanguinei” that flow from the Gulf of Setalia – Boccaccio’s language lends extra weight to the accusations. In the context of beliefs about generative physiology, the very mention of ‘digested’ and ‘superfluous’ bloods, above and beyond their use in topoi, underscores the argument Boccaccio is making in this explicitly misogynistic text: woman is an imperfect - hence, inferior - creature - “La femmina è animale imperfetto” (200).\(^\text{331}\)


\(^{331}\) I have not found any critical notice of the Aristotelian provenance of this statement, but I hear a clear echo. In *Generation of Animals* 767a and b, in a oft-cited passage, Aristotle describes women as a “deviation” from the generic type (male), as monstrosities, and as “deficient” offspring or “imperfectly
In the *Corbaccio*, Boccaccio wields generative physiology in the service of an overtly anti-female argument. In the *Decameron*, an avowedly female-friendly text, Boccaccio engages with the same underlying concepts of generative physiology but his presentation of female sexuality in novella V.10 puts timeworn topoi to the service of an entirely different argument. In the following section, I explore how the old woman’s argument for female sexual satisfaction rests on physiologically-based understandings of the female body and the differential effect of sexual intercourse on men and women.

### 3.3 *Semper parata: Gendered Sexuality in Decameron V.10*

In the article, “*Le parole son femmine e i fatti sono maschi*: Toward a Sexual Poetics of the *Decameron*,” Teodolinda Barolini has argued for the importance of V.10 - a “crucial if underappreciated Dionean story” - for the *Decameron*’s presentation of gender.332 In her astute reading, the novella contains “a rigorous and brutal analysis of the different standings that biology and society have conspired to accord men and women within the social order.”333

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332 See Barolini, “*Le parole son femmine e i fatti sono maschi*,” in *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture*, 284.

333 See Barolini, “*Le parole son femmine e i fatti sono maschi*,” 294.
Despite Barolini’s lead, few critics have explored the presence of these two interrelated strands – biology and society – in the old woman’s discourse. Arguably the most interesting aspect of this tale is how it so actively engages with the question of gender and its biological and social ramifications. In claiming that women are born to have sex and bear children – “le femine a niuna altra cosa che a fare questo e figliuoli ci nascono” - the old woman neatly links a woman’s societal value to her reproductive potential; the evidence she marshals to support this claim about female utility draws not on notions of the hierarchy of social organization – woman’s place in the family - but on the biology of reproduction and the differing expression of male and female sexuality.

Before we explore the particulars of the old woman’s speech, a brief sketch of novella V.10 is in order. In the tale, the sexually unsatisfied wife of a homosexual Perugian seeks out the counsel and aid of an old woman who procures for her a number of sexually willing young men. One evening, the wife and a lover are surprised by her husband; the lover hides in a chicken-coop, only to have his fingers crushed beneath the hoof of a wandering donkey, thereby revealing his presence. In a suggestive ‘happy’

334 In an exploration of the play of metaphors used to describe sex and storytelling in V.10 and VI.1, Susan Gaylard has suggested that the old woman’s claim to be able to procure the wife potential lovers - “to be able to create what she will, using words to mold and sculpt her material” – inverts the gender roles of Aristotelian generative theory, by claiming the ability to fashion the male material into shape. Gaylard limits her application of Aristotle’s theory of generation to the artistic creation paradigm and does not consider how the tale plays with beliefs about the physiology of sex and reproduction. See Susan Gaylard, “The Crisis of Word and Deed in Decameron V., 10,” in The Italian Novella, ed. Gloria Allaire (NY and London: Routledge, 2003), 33-48. In “‘Women Make All Things Lose Their Power’: Women’s Knowledge, Men’s Fear in the Decameron and Corbaccio,” Regina Psaki touches on V.10 as part of her exploration of Boccaccio’s use of the misogynistic convention of ‘women’s secret knowledge’ “to highlight the masculine fear which underlies and generates misogyny as a cultural discourse”. See Psaki, “‘Women Make All Things Lose Their Power’: Women’s Knowledge, Men’s Fear in the Decameron and Corbaccio,” Heliotropia 1.1 (2003) <http://www.heliotropia.org/01-01/psaki.html>.

335 Barolini notes that the old woman’s discourse demonstrates “with proto-Marxian clarity” that “youth is a woman’s capital.” Her analysis makes clear Boccaccio’s linking of societal value to reproductive potential in this tale and others, e.g. II, 10 (“Le parole son femmine e i fatti sono maschi,” 294-5).
ending, both wife and husband enjoy the sexual favors of the comely young male lover. As critics point out, the tale draws its inspiration from Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*.336

The figure of the old woman-procuress, in addition to its presence in Apuleius, was part of the medieval tradition reaching from Ovid to the *Roman de la Rose* to the *Fiore*.337 In Ovid’s *Amores*, an old woman named Dipsas trains a novice in the arts of manipulation.338 Jean de Meun’s late thirteenth-century amplification of *Roman de la Rose* contains perhaps the most well-known example of the stereotype: his Old Woman counsels *Bel Acueill* on the games of love, or how to use men, including lessons on how to dress, where to go to be seen, and how to fleece a lover.339

While Boccaccio may have derived the figure of the saintly-seeming old woman - clutching her rosary and attending religious services – acting as a sexual go-between from the previous literary tradition, the speech he puts into her mouth unsparingly reflects beliefs about women’s nature and role in contemporary Tuscan society. In making her argument for female sexual satisfaction - the red headed wife should take advantage of her youth and find a more willing sexual partner than her homosexual husband – the old


337 For the references to the *Roman de la Rose* and *Fiore*, see *Decameron*, ed. Vittore Branca, 696n1. Branca argues that the physical and moral outlines of the old woman in V.10 “risentono dei topoi dei vituperia di donne.”

338 See Ovid’s *Amores*, trans. Guy Lee (New York: Viking, 1968), I.8 and *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, ed. Alcuin Blamires, 21. Dipsas teaches young women the arts of manipulation; her speech includes a reminder of time’s fleeting nature, but stresses only that beauty fades.

woman connects female social value with fertility and references widespread beliefs about the expression of female sexuality, even citing a scholastic authority on the subject. After learning of the wife’s unhappy situation, the old woman seeks to assure her that she does well (“tu molto ben fai”) to look for sexual satisfaction outside marriage, given the impossibility of finding it within. Her sustaining argument draws on the notion, of popular and existential origin, of the importance of not losing time, something, the old woman notes, that is even more important for women than for men, given a woman’s limited reproductive shelf-life. While men are born with many talents and gain in value as they age, women have only one purpose:

le femine a niuna altra cosa che a fare questo e figliuoli ci nascono, e per questo son tenute care. E se tu non te ne avvedessi a altro, sí te ne dei tu avvedere a questo, che noi siam sempre apparecchiate a ciò, che degli uomini non avviene: e oltre a questo una femina stancherebbe molti uomini, dove molti uomini non possono una femina stancare. E per ciò che a questo siam nate, da capo ti dico che tu fai molto bene a rendere al marito tuo pan per focaccia, sí che l’anima tua non abbia in vecchiezza che rimproverare alle carni. (V.10.18-20)

The old woman begins by voicing the deep-seated and long-lived connection of women with childbearing, an association reaching back to Genesis. In keeping with Thomas Aquinas’ claim that woman is “ordained for the purpose of generation by the

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340 See Barolini’s excellent examination of this theme in “Le parole son femmine e i fatti sono maschi,” in *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture*. 
intention of nature” (“est de intentione naturae ad opus generationis ordinata”), the old woman affirms that women are born to have sex and bear children: “le femine a niuna altra cosa che a fare questo e figliuoli ci nascono” (V.10.18). She then marshals up two pieces of supporting evidence, both of which are based on biological understandings of sex and gender: first, women, unlike men, are always ready for sex (“noi siam sempre apparecchiate a ciò, che degli uomini non avviene”), and second, one woman could tire out many men, whereas many men couldn’t tire one woman (“e oltre a questo una femina stancherebbe molti uomini, dove molti uomini non possono una femina stancare”). She concludes that since women are born to this reproductive fate (“E per ciò che a questo siam nate”), the wife does well to seek sexual satisfaction elsewhere.

Barolini has noted that this speech, “hard-headedly realistic and certainly not inaccurate with respect to the society it represents”, provides the “theoretical foundation” for the wife’s infidelity: women are held dear, or valued, for their ability to have sex and bear children; the red-haired wife, therefore, should make the most of her youth. In between ‘A’ (women are born for sex and procreation) and ‘B’ (the wife should profit from her youth), however, Boccaccio inserts two supporting points that are meant to convince the wife of the truth of the opening statement: first, women are always ready for sex, and, second, sexually insatiable. These secondary points, frequently dismissed as mere topoi, reflect beliefs about the physiology of sex and the expression of male and female sexuality. Somewhat paradoxically, the old woman’s argument for female sexual

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341 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, bk. I, q. 92, art. I, cited in Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, 134. Nor is this the only instance that Boccaccio cites Aquinas; for an oft-cited example, see the reflection of Thomas’ statement that “man is the head of the woman” (“vir est caput mulieris”) in Elissa’s introductory speech: “veramente gli uomini sono delle femine capo” (*Decameron*, Introduction, 76).

342 See Barolini, “Le parole son femmine e i fatti sono maschi,” 293-295.
agency rests on an edifice of biology that affirms the passivity of the female, or maternal, body.

Let us examine these supporting points in turn. The old woman first highlights women’s perpetual receptivity to sexual intercourse. Should the wife in V.10 doubt that women were born to have sex and bear children, she need but consider that women are always ready for sex, something that is not the case with men: “E se tu non te ne avvedessi a altro, sí te ne dei tu avvedere a questo, che noi siam sempre apparecchiate a ciò, che degli uomini non avviene” (V.10.19).343 This claim is, in my opinion, meant to remind readers of another text: it is, in an echo that has gone heretofore unnoticied, an exact translation of Albertus Magnus’s statement, when dissociating female pleasure from the emission of seed, that woman is “always prepared” - “semper parata” - for intercourse: “..tamen mulier, quia non semper coit emittendo, sed etiam alias habet coitus delectationes, semper parata est ad coitum..” (my emphasis).344 The old woman’s opening salvo echoed Thomas Aquinas; her first supporting point knowingly cites Albertus Magnus.

The old woman next draws attention to the insatiable or indefatigable nature of female sexuality: one woman would tire out many men, whereas many men cannot tire one woman (“una femina stancherrebbe molti uomini, dove molti uomini non possono una femina stancare”). This idea, a misogynistic topos, crops up in various Decameronian

343 G.H. McWilliam translates the passage as, “If you doubt my words, there’s one thing that ought to convince you, and that is that a woman’s always ready for a man, but not vice-versa,” thereby interpreting the ciò as sex in general and not extending it to reproduction, but the language here is somewhat imprecise. See Giovanni Boccaccio, The Decameron, trans. G.H. McWilliam (2nd ed), 434.

344 Albertus Magnus, De animalibus, bk. X, tr, i, ch. I, cited in Joan Cadden, Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages, 143. See also Cadden, “Western Medicine and Natural Philosophy,” 57, and Jacquart and Thomasset, Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages, 81.
novelle; earlier in the tale, the red-haired wife is described as ideally having two
husbands, but it also appears in III.1 (Masetto and the nuns), VI.10 (Madonna Filippa),
as well as in numerous passages of the Corbaccio. In V.10, however, it is presented as
part of a larger discourse on female sexuality, and it is in this context that I would like to
consider it here.

Readiness

The idea that women were always receptive to intercourse and the belief that they
were insatiable sexually were interrelated concepts both of which found ample support in
the medical writings of the day. Medieval thinkers inherited a view of female sexuality in
which “women were believed to be profoundly sexual, insatiable in their capacity to
experience intercourse and to enjoy it.” Sexual insatiability or voracity was a defining
element of female sexuality in the late Middle Ages: women were imputed to be more
libidinous and feel greater pleasure in the sexual act than men; to desire sex even when

345 “…una giovane compressa, di pel rosso e accesa, la quale due mariti piú tosto che uno avrebbe voluti, là
dove ella s’avvenne a uno che molto piú a altro che a lei l’animo avea disposto” (Decameron V.10.7).
Guyda Armstrong notes the presence of antifeminist commonplaces in the tale: the wife is “sexually
voracious (but unsatisfied by her husband); she nags and torments her husband; and she has as accomplice
an older bawd who encourages her in her plottings to take a lover.” She rightly points to similarities
between the appearance of the wife in V.10 and the widow in the Corbaccio. See Armstrong, “Boccaccio
and the Infernal Body,” 101.

346 To name but one example of many, the passage on the bloody rivers (menstrual blood) which issue forth
from the Gulf of Setalia (the widow’s vagina) includes two adynata meant to indicate the impossibility of
sexually satisfying the widow: “Egli è per certo quel golfo una voragine infernale, la quale allora si
riempierebbe o sazierebbe che il mar d’acque o il fuoco di legne.” (Corbaccio, 414).


348 According to Isidore of Seville, women’s lust was “very passionate”: women were “more libidinous
than men.” See Salisbury, “Gendered Sexuality,” 86. Joan Cadden notes that woman’s libidinousness, like
her cold, wet complexion, was taken for granted in the late Middle Ages; the real problem was how a
woman, of a colder and moister nature than man, could feel a more burning desire. Scholars came up with a
variety of solutions to this problem. One answer relied on a natural analogy: damp wood takes longer to
light on fire, but then it burns for a longer time. Those in favor of the existence of a female seed, such as
pregnant - a time when the reproductive purpose of the act was already actualized; and to be perpetually receptive to sex. Female sexuality was seen as the opposite of male sexuality; it was “open and receptive”, giving, as Joyce Salisbury has argued, “a metaphorical logic to a sexual role for women of passivity and submission.” The female body was always ‘ready’ because its reproductive role was passive; its openness and its receptivity were the opposite of male sexuality, understood in terms of action and power.

The old woman’s description of women as sexually receptive, or always prepared – “sempre apparecchiate” – meant to lend support to her claim that woman’s fundamental role is sexual, thus reflects one of the staple beliefs about female sexuality from the

Constantine and William of Conches, argued that women experienced a two-fold pleasure in emitting their seed and receiving their partner’s. Albertus Magnus, despite adhering to a one-seed model, believed woman’s greater pleasure came from “the touch either of the man’s sperm in the womb or of the penis against her sexual part.” When dealing with the question, Aristotelians tended to qualify woman’s pleasure as “greater in quantity but lesser in quality and intensity” than a man’s. See Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, 97-98, 121, 151-4; Jacquet and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, 81; and Salisbury, “Gendered Sexuality,” 93. It would be interesting to consider Dante’s comparison of his unreceptive *donna* in the poem “Al poco giorno” to ‘green wood’ that will not light (“Ma ben ritorneranno i fiumi a’ colli / prima che questo legno molle e verde / s’infiammi, come suol far bella donna, / di me..” [31-34]) in the context of the natural analogy for female sexuality cited above, for it would indicate a more explicitly sexual significance for the poem than has been traditionally seen.

Taking their lead from Aristotle, scholastic authors noted that, in contrast to other female animals, only women were willing to have sex when pregnant. This desire was explained by the fact that only women possessed memory of the experience of sexual pleasure, which led them to want it again. (Indeed, Albertus Magnus noted that many women say they experience greater pleasure when they are pregnant.) See Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, 148-149; Cadden, “Western Medicine and Natural Philosophy,” 57; Jacquet and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, 82; and Lemay, *Women’s Secrets*, 77-78. Pregnant women’s desire was troublesome because, as Cadden notes, it separated pleasure from its teleological end but also because medieval thinkers could find “no countervailing purpose or contingent necessity” for it. She wryly notes that these writers are little troubled by “men’s willingness to have intercourse with pregnant women.” See Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, 148-149.


classical period up through the Renaissance: women are always ready for sex because their reproductive contribution is predominantly passive; unlike men, they are not physically depleted by the sexual act. Her next point, while undoubtedly a topos - one woman would exhaust many men, while many men cannot exhaust one woman (“una femina stancherebbe molti uomini, dove molti uomini non possono una femina stancare”) - also reflects beliefs about sexual intercourse’s differential effects on men and women.

*Indefatigable*

At the time Boccaccio was writing, and for years after, it was widely believed that women became stronger the more they had sex, while men were weakened by the sexual act. Behind these views about sexual intercourse’s differential effects were theories of reproduction that assigned men a formative, active role in the generative process, and women a passive nourishing role, as well as medieval beliefs about “complexion”, or the relative heat of males and females.  

In the late Middle Ages, Joan Cadden points out, a man performed not only the dominant and most important reproductive role “but the most difficult one, demanding the ability to refine blood into semen and to communicate form to the fetus.” The perceived difficulty of the male role translated into a high level of post-coital fatigue for men. “For the majority of men,” Aristotle had claimed, “the sequel to sexual intercourse

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354 See Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, 176, 240. Cadden notes this belief was common to both Aristotelian and Galenic biology.
is exhaustion and weakness.” A man’s post-coital fatigue, therefore, was not so much related to his physical activity during the sexual act but to the difficulty of his generative duty: a man had to concoct blood into seed, while a woman just had to be open to implantation.

In the logic of the Middle Ages, the male role in generation was more difficult, and therefore more tiring; men, however, were also thought to emit more of their vital heat during sexual intercourse, further leading to depletion. The immensely popular late thirteenth-century work *De secretis mulierum* drew on beliefs about the relative heat of males and females to explain why women became stronger through sex, while men grew weaker. Women, naturally cold and wet, gain heat during the sexual act: they are “made hot by the motion that the man makes during coitus” and are also warmed and strengthened by the reception of hot male sperm. Men, however, lose heat during the sexual act; those who have frequent intercourse are “weakened…because they become

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355 Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, 725b. The exhaustion following the release of even a small quantity of semen was, according to Aristotle, “quite conspicuous.” Aristotle does allow that men in the heat of youth might feel relief, and not exhaustion, upon release.


358 *De secretis mulierum* was written by the Pseudo-Albertus Magnus. The work frequently circulated accompanied by commentaries by unknown authors, which appear in many of the manuscripts. Helen Rodnite Lemay’s translation includes two of these commentaries, and it is from the commentary, not the purported text of Pseudo-Albertus, that the above citation is derived. However, as Lemay notes, the commentaries “illustrate further ideas about women’s ‘secrets’ current among some thirteenth- and fourteenth-century clerics.” See Lemay, *Women’s Secrets*, 2-3.

exceedingly dried out.” When the body is dried up, Pseudo-Albertus explains, its life and powers are weakened: “this is the reason why those who have a great deal of sexual intercourse do not live for a long time.”

The fact that men “emit more and are consumed more in intercourse” (“plus emittunt et plus consumuntur in cohitu”) meant that too much sex could cause them a dangerous loss of heat or moisture; Joan Cadden points out that “older men or men in a weakened condition from some other cause were especially susceptible to harm.”

Intercourse was seen as less dangerous for women because the female reproductive role was secondary and primarily passive; Cadden writes: “although childbirth might harm a woman, intercourse generally did not.”

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360 See Salisbury, “Gendered Sexuality,” 90; Lemay, Women’s Secrets, 127. The real Albertus Magnus cited the taxing effect of intercourse on men (and, as noted earlier, the healthful effects of menstruation) to explain why women tended to live longer than men. See Cadden, Meanings of Sex Difference, 175-6.

361 The commentator to these verses writes: “note that someone can engage in so much sexual intercourse that he emits not only sperm, which is a superfluity of nature, but also those substances which are necessary for life, such as blood. This can cause death.” See Lemay, Women’s Secrets, 147.

362 The quote is from Peter of Spain, writing in mid-thirteenth-century Siena. Petrus Hispanus, Questiones super Viaticum, cited in Cadden, Meanings of Sex Difference, 154n142.

363 See Cadden, “Western Medicine and Natural Philosophy,” 66.

364 See Cadden, “Western Medicine and Natural Philosophy,” 66; and Meanings of Sex Difference, 176.

365 “Whereas men are aged by frequent intercourse, women are aged by frequent childbirth: men’s efforts, in other words, are sexual; women’s are reproductive.” See Cadden, Meanings of Sex Difference, 176 and “Western Medicine and Natural Philosophy,” 66. This belief was related to the view that not having sex could be damaging to females. Without regular sexual intercourse, the womb could wander and poison the other organs; Pseudo-Albertus suggests that young women have regular intercourse to avoid this malady. See Lemay, Women’s Secrets, 5, 131-135. Galen, who rejected the theory of the wandering womb, claimed that a build up of female semen led to the spoiling or corrupting of a woman’s blood; he advocated masturbation to relieve this situation. Trotula also drew attention the dangerous effects of a build up of spoiled seed in women. See Bullough, “Medieval Medical and Scientific Views of Women,” 493, 495-496; and Cadden, “Western Medicine and Natural Philosophy,” 58-59. Not coincidentally, the red haired wife’s marriage to the homosexual Perugian in V.10 is described as potentially causing her death: “suo consumamento” (V.10.8).
In the context of beliefs about the effects of sexual intercourse on men and women, the old woman’s claim that ‘one woman would tire many men, but many men cannot tire one woman’ has a certain logic: women can tire out many men because they grow stronger in the sexual act by absorbing male heat, while men lose both their heat and their semen, their “purest blood” or “final product formed out of the nourishment”. The old woman’s statement is a standard of antifeminist discourse; it is also an accurate reflection of beliefs about the expression and nature of female sexuality. The fact that we may find some consonance between a misogynistic literary topos and contemporary medical literature is not particularly surprising; historians have shown how throughout the late Middle Ages and Renaissance medical texts established “a sexually based grounding from which to construct gender expectations”. I would argue, however, that while the topos is absolutely present here, the language Boccaccio uses shifts the emphasis from sexual insatiability to the indefatigable nature of women’s sexuality, thereby slightly tempering the misogynistic charge.

366 In his Esposizioni on Canto V of Dante’s Inferno, Boccaccio described the effect of lust, or sexual desire, in similarly gendered terms. Lust is the death of young men (“ella è morte de’ giovani”) but the friend of women (“e amica delle femine”): it diminishes the brain, empties the bones, ruins the stomach, makes memory depart, dullens the intellect, debilitates the sight, and reduces every bodily force almost to nothing (“La lussuria….diminuisce il cerebro, evacua l’ossa, guasta lo stomaco, caccia la memoria, ingrossa lo ’ngegno, debilita il vedere e ogni corporal forza quasi a niente reduce”). The fact that Boccaccio differentiates between lust’s relationship to men and women (death and friend, respectively) suggests that these negative effects are suffered by men. See Esposizioni, Lezione XXII, ed. Giorgio Padoan, cited in Cassell, “Il Corbaccio and the Secundus Tradition,” 359-360. The rough English translation is my own. A similar passage can be found in the Corbaccio but the gendered effect is lost: love is “una passione aceccatrice dell’animo, disviatrice dello ’ngegno, ingrossatrice, anzi privatrice della memoria, dissipatrice delle terrene facoltà, guastatrice delle forze del corpo, nemica della giovanezza e della vecchiezza, morte, genitrice de’ vizi e abitatrice de’ vacui petti, cosa senza ragione e senza ordine e senza stabilità alcuna, vizio delle menti non sane e sommergitrice dell’umana libertà” (Corbaccio, 193, my emphasis).

In V.10, the old woman does not say that one woman cannot be *satisfied* by many men, she says that one woman cannot be *tired* by many men: “una femina *stancherebbe* molti uomini, dove molti uomini non possono una femina *stancare*” (5.10.19, my emphasis). Such an emphasis on sexual fatigue is in contrast to language used in the *Corbaccio* for this topos. In the later openly misogynistic text, the emphasis is on satiability: women’s lust is fiery and insatiable and for this reason any man (the servant, the Ethiopian, etc.) is good as long as he is up to it: “la loro lussuria è focosa e insaziabile, e per questo non patisce né numero né elezione: il fante, il lavoratore, il mugnaio e ancora il nero etiopo, ciascuno è buono, sol che possa” (224). 368 Women are described as so insatiable that even upon departure from a public brothel they are only tired, not satisfied: “stanche, ma non sazie” (225). 369 In other passages, too, the widow’s (and, by extension, women’s) lust is described as fiery (“focosa”) and the insatiable nature of it commented upon; the impossibility of sexually satisfying the widow is underscored with verbs like ‘bastare’ and ‘soddisfare’: “Alla cui focosa lussuria, non che io solo bastassi o uno amante o due oltre a me” (347); “ancora aggiunse a soddisfare a’ suoi focosi appetiti tal vicino ebb’io” (350).

In the passage in *Decameron* V.10, Boccaccio does not comment on the fiery nature of female lust nor does he explicitly mention satisfaction or satiability. The old woman speaks only of the relative levels of sexual fatigue in men and women: “una

368 For this passage, see *Corbaccio*, ed. Natali, 224.

369 As critics note, these passages are greatly indebted to the misogynistic tradition; they are, at times, direct translations of Juvenal’s Sixth Satire. See Boccaccio, *Corbaccio*, ed. Giulia Natali, 58n453, and Boccaccio, *Corbaccio*, ed. and trans. Anthony K. Cassell, 106-7n110. Juvenal mentions the variety of women’s partners and describes women on their return from brothels as tired, but unsatisfied: “tamen ultima cellam / clausit, adhuc ardens rigidae tentigine vulvae, / et lassata viris necdum satiat recessit.” See Juvenal, *Satura* VI, 128-130. For the substitutability of male partners, see Juvenal, *Satura* VI, 329-34.
femina stancherebbe molti uomini, dove molti uomini non possono una femina stancare” (V.10.19, my emphasis). While ‘stancare’ certainly can be taken as a stand-in for sexual satisfaction, I would argue that the old woman’s claim places the emphasis more on the relative sexual energy levels of a woman and her partner, than on the impossibility of female satisfaction. In so doing, it subtly shifts the topos away from its original intent toward a more neutral acknowledgment of the differing expressions of female and male sexuality.

Two earlier Decameron tales, II.10 and III.1, provide support for this reading. Boccaccio’s depictions of the sexually-exhausted Masetto in III.1, struggling to satisfy eight nuns, and older husband Riccardo in II.10, who, as Barolini has noted, barely succeeds in consummating his marriage with his younger wife, “requiring restorative doses of vernaccia the next morning”\(^3\), in addition to having their own intrinsic comic reasons, conform to contemporary views of sexual intercourse’s differential effects on men and women. In III.1, a tale rife with the topos of female sexual insatiability, Masetto has sex so frequently - or, in the idiom of the tale, “works the nuns’ fields” or “rides” so assiduously - that he suffers physically: he falls asleep during the day and is unable to perform his work around the convent.\(^4\) By the end of the tale, he is so

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\(^3\) See Barolini, “Le parole son femmine e i fatti sono maschi,” 290.

\(^4\) As examples thereof, see Filostrato’s introductory paragraph to the tale, and Masetto’s poultry analogy: “io ho intesto che un gallo basta assai bene a diece galline, ma che diece uomini posson male o con fatica una femina sodisfare” (Decameron III.1.37). In “Desire and the Fantastic in the Decameron: The Third Day,” *Italica* 70.1 (1993): 1-18, Marga Cottino-Jones notes the “institutionalized negative view of female sexuality” inherent in former gardener Nuto’s connection of the female body with devils (“parmi ch’ell’abbiano il diavolo in corpo” [III.1.9]).

\(^4\) “Masetto, il quale di poca fatica il di per lo troppo cavalcar della notte aveva assai, tutto disteso all’ombra d’un mandorlo dormirsi” (3.1.34).
weakened that he can neither work nor perform sexually: “per quello che infino a qui ho fatto, a tal venuto che io non posso fare né poco né molto” (III.1.37).

Luckily, Masetto is in good physical shape: Boccaccio tells us he is a young, strong laborer (“un giovane lavoratore forte e robusto” [III.1.7]) who can split wood and fell timber with ease (III.1.14-15); when put on a more sensible sexual schedule, he manages to father a number of little nuns and monks (“assai monachin generasse” [III.1.42]). In II.10, the older Riccardo, described as having more brain than brawn (“piú che di corporal forza dotato d’ingegno” [II.10.5]), is so thin, withered, and of little spirit (“magro e secco e di poco spirito” [II.10.7]) that one session of lovemaking – barely completed at that – entirely depletes him, causing him to turn to wine and restorative tablets to regain his forces (“convenne che con vernaccia e con confetti ristorativi e con altri argomenti nel mondo si ritornasse” [II.10.7]).

As noted, older men or those in a weakened physical state (Riccardo appears to be both) were especially “susceptible to harm” from excessive sexual activity. The joke here is that the ‘excessive’ sexual activity that so harms Riccardo is one just-barely-completed instance of wedding night sex. The younger and stronger Masetto, although initially able to keep up, is neither able to work nor have sex once the demands become excessive (here the amount of sex, as compared to II.10, really is excessive, since it involves eight sexually-curious nuns). Given that Aristotle claimed the exhaustion resulting from even a small emission of semen was “quite conspicuous”, it is a probably a testament to

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373 For David Wallace, Masetto’s admission reveals that “masculine sexuality cannot sustain the pretensions of masculine fantasy”. See Wallace, Giovanni Boccaccio: Decameron, 44. For a different reading of III.1, see Millicent Marcus, “Seduction by Silence: A Gloss on the Tales of Masetto (Decameron III, 1) and Alatiel (Decameron II, 7),” Philological Quarterly 58 (1979): 1-15. Marcus considers the aphrodisiac effects of Masetto’s silence with regard to the brigata’s speech and celibacy.
Masetto’s virility that he is able to do so much before his body gives out. I would note that Boccaccio’s depiction of the effect of sexual intercourse on the male physique – the fatiguing, and nearly damaging, effect of excessive sex on a young, strong male, and the completely depleting effect of one barely-completed session of intercourse on an older, dried-out (“secco”) man – complement V.10’s description of the indefatigable nature of female sexuality.

When considering the passages above, as well as the old woman’s speech in V.10, we must take into account the interrelationship of misogynistic literary topoi and ideas about women’s sexuality as developed in the medical literature. As historians have shown, scholarly medical treatises incorporated and disseminated “medicalized misogyny” under the guise of scientific lessons about the generation of the embryo or causes of infertility. I do not suggest that these passages are not imbued with a misogynistic charge; in III.1 there are numerous remarks about female sexual insatiability, not indefatigability, mixed in with references to male fatigue, that complicate any sort of proto-feminist reading. In V.10, the old woman’s speech includes commonplaces of the antifeminine tradition: a strict connection of women to procreation; female sexual receptivity; and women’s sexual insatiability. What I am suggesting is that in these tales Boccaccio engages with some of the constants of medieval antifeminism, even if – and this, of course, may be debated – he does not endorse them.

Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset have suggested that after the spread of Aristotelianism in the thirteenth century, the expression of female sexuality became yet

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374 The term is Joan Cadden’s. See Cadden, “Western Medicine and Natural Philosophy,” 67. Vern L. Bullough makes a similar argument in “Medieval Medical and Scientific Views of Women,” 486: he contends that medieval misogyny resulted, in part, from the medical and scientific assumptions of the ancient world.
another symptom of woman’s comparative inferiority: “Woman’s excess of moistness, her immoderate lust and her passivity, made of her a creature *semper parata ad coitum*, who once the act had been completed remained *lassata sed non satiata*, as Juvenal put it.” The fact that the old woman’s speech in V.10 so closely reproduces this view of female sexuality would seem to argue for Boccaccio’s rather derivative use of antifeminist commonplaces. It is important, however, to consider the use to which these commonplaces are put.

The old woman states that women are always ready, ‘sempre apparecchiate’, for sex: as we have seen, a clear echo of Albertus Magnus. Boccaccio, however, puts this declaration of ‘medicalized misogyny’, to use Joan Cadden’s characterization, into a woman’s mouth, transforming it from ‘*woman* is always ready for sex’ - “mulier….semper parata est ad coitum” - to ‘*we* are always ready for sex”: “noi siam sempre apparecchiate a ciò.” In the passage from which this phrase is taken, Albertus Magnus is arguing against the existence of female seed, and therefore for a strictly passive reproductive role for women. The old woman, however, uses the concept of woman’s sexual openness and receptivity (*semper parata*), qualities intimately related to a passive and submissive female sexual role, to argue not for passivity or submission, but for action and agency: the red haired wife should seek out sexual satisfaction and not submit to the marital hand she has been dealt. Likewise, the old woman’s portrayal of female sexuality, while seemingly conforming to the *lassata sed non satiata* formula, shifts the emphasis from satisfaction or satiability to fatigue, reflecting beliefs about the

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375 Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, 81.
differential effects of sexual intercourse on men and women, seen also in III.1 and II.10, but omitting the necessarily negative conclusion of female insatiability.\footnote{This conclusion is not omitted in III.1, where female sexual insatiability is an intrinsic part of the tale.}

In putting this speech for female sexual liberation into a woman’s mouth, Boccaccio is, to a certain extent, reflecting a dynamic already established in the \textit{Roman de la Rose}. As Alcuin Blamires points out, Jean de Meun’s Old Woman emphasizes “the instinctual imperative of human libido, which impels women towards sexual freedom in defiance of society’s restraints.”\footnote{See \textit{Woman Defamed and Woman Defended}, ed. Alcuin Blamires, 163.} An examination of the Old Woman’s speech in the \textit{Roman de la Rose} shows, however, the very generic nature these statements take in the earlier text: women are born free, each woman is made common for every man, and every man common to each woman.\footnote{See \textit{Roman de la Rose}, trans. Dahlberg, 238-241, particularly section 13875.} What is, I would argue, original to Boccaccio’s text is the specificity and societal and cultural embeddedness of these statements. Even when recycling the ‘take advantage of youth’ thematic – the Old Woman in the \textit{Roman de la Rose} urges young people to profit from their youth by accumulating gifts and possessions (14441) – Boccaccio adds a level of societal specificity lacking in the original by tying female worth to reproductive potential: women should seize the day not to amass gifts or trinkets, but because their ever-depreciating value lies in sex and reproduction.\footnote{For this passage, see \textit{Roman de la Rose} (14441), trans. Dahlberg, 246-247.}

What I find striking about the old woman’s discourse in V.10 is that it takes specific and historicized ideas about female purpose and sexuality enjoying wide support in contemporary society and the medical literature to advocate for an expression of
female sexuality that upsets gender expectations and defies normative female behavior.\textsuperscript{380} Women are made for sex and procreation; they are held dear for their ability to bear children; they are always ready for sex and sexually tireless. The old woman’s first two statements, in linking female social utility to fertility, voice the long-lived association of women with childbearing, an association particularly pronounced in the natalist culture of late medieval Tuscany. Her third statement however - the supporting evidence for the previous two - changes the game. It appropriates a discourse of ‘medicalized misogyny’, and its perceptions of female sexuality that are rooted in biological inferiority (passivity) or depravity (insatiability), to argue for female sexual agency and satisfaction: she uses this discourse to persuade the wife to take the sexual initiative and find a lover. Since women are born to this sexual and reproductive fate - “per ciò che a questo siam nate” – the old woman, and through her, Boccaccio, advises the wife to make the best of it.

In the end, the role Boccaccio is advocating for women in \textit{Decameron} V.10 is still, intrinsically, sexual: the red haired wife is urged not to find happiness in a better marriage or occupation, but to seek out sexual satisfaction. Some critics view Boccaccio’s conflation of women’s freedom with sexual autonomy in a negative light; Joy Hambuechen Potter writes: “He argues for their freedom, but freedom to do what?....Women’s rights in the \textit{Decameron} are limited to the right to give in to their physical nature, and their ‘intelligence’ is almost always inspired by and put at the

\textsuperscript{380} The fact that this encouragement takes place in the context of non-normative male sexuality - the red-haired wife’s husband is a sodomist - does not diminish Boccaccio’s argument. As Martin G. Eisner and Marc D. Schachter have shown, the sexual orientation of the husband and the boy in V.10 are not of paramount interest to Boccaccio: the author’s concern is with female desire and Pietro is “depicted as he is not because his specific sodomitical disposition was the only way for Boccaccio to update the character of the pistor from The Golden Ass….but rather because characters like Pietro are instruments in Dioneo’s larger program of seduction.” See Martin G. Eisner and Marc D. Schachter, “\textit{Libido Sciendi}: Apuleius, Boccaccio, and the Study of the History of Sexuality,” 827.
service of their sexuality….it is a proof of their inferiority, not of their equality.”

The fact, however, that “the women in these texts are not agitating for the freedom to be scholars or lawyers”, as Regina Psaki rightly notes, should not necessarily discount what they are advocating for, nor should it lead us to overlook Boccaccio’s sensitivity to the way discourses about physiology and generation reinforce societal limitations on women. Contextualizing the old woman’s speech in medieval medical literature allows us to see how Boccaccio plays with the dominant beliefs about human sexuality and the physiology of generation in V.10, acknowledging the way these discourses tell a story about women at the same time as he twists them to purposes contrary to their original intent.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored how Boccaccio incorporates contemporary beliefs about generative physiology into timeworn misogynistic commonplaces, lending the

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382 See Psaki, “Boccaccio and Female Sexuality,” 128. Psaki, unlike Potter, does not fault Boccaccio for figuring female autonomy as sexual; she sees a strict connection between female independence and female control over sexual behavior and desire (128).

383 A common strategy in Dioneo’s stories: over the years, critics have drawn attention to the subversive qualities of Dioneo’s storytelling. For two opposing readings, see Itala Rutter, “The Function of Dioneo’s Perspective in the Griselda Story,” Comitatus 5 (1974): 33-42 and Millicent Marcus, “The Marchioness and the Donkey’s Skull: The Tale of Patient Griselda (X, 10),” in An Allegory of Form: Literary Self-Consciousness in the Decameron (Anma Libri, 1979), 93-109. In “The Griselda Tale and the Portrayal of Women in the Decameron,” Philological Quarterly 56.1 (1977): 1-13, Shirley Allen has noted that while Dioneo “seems to be echoing the sentiments of medieval misogynists on female lust, he is actually encouraging women’s sexual freedom and their equality with men in its enjoyment” (4). Unfortunately, Allen does not develop this remark further beyond noting that even in V.10, “the most obscene of all his tales”, Dioneo is able to justify the wife’s adultery as the proper behavior for a woman married to a sodomist (4).
topoi a specificity lacking in the source material. In the *Corbaccio*, the incorporation of this material heightens the text’s anti-female charge: women are not only lustful, menstruating creatures, but inherently inferior due to their lack of heat, their inability to concoct or ‘digest’ blood. In *Decameron* V.10, Boccaccio takes this same biology and repurposes it. Women are made for sex and procreation; they are always ready for sex and sexually indefatigable. These aspects of female sexuality – topoi of the anti-feminist tradition - were inherently tied to woman’s primarily passive reproductive role yet Boccaccio uses them in a context that advocates not female passivity, but agency and activity. As a result, an admission that biology is destiny – “E per ciò che a questo siam nate” (V.10.19) – becomes an exposure of the limitations placed on women and an encouragement to take your pleasure where you can.

4.1 *Introduction*

In the previous chapter, I explored how Boccaccio incorporates beliefs about generative physiology into commonplaces of the antifeminist tradition. In the overtly misogynistic text the *Corbaccio*, the author used beliefs about digested and superfluous blood to underscore female inferiority; in *Decameron* V.10, he twisted an inherently gender-biased discourse - women are made for sex and reproduction - into an argument for female sexual agency and satisfaction. This chapter moves forward on the reproductive spectrum from the underlying physiology of reproduction to the processes that directly result in maternity: impregnation, gestation, and birth.

In the *Decameron*, as in the earlier *Ninfale fiesolano*, Boccaccio continues to be attentive to female life and the limitations – sexual, legal, familial – faced by women in contemporary society, something not altogether surprising in a text explicitly addressed to women. Yet the treatment of maternity is, I would argue, much darker in the *Decameron* than in the earlier poem. What appears to interest Boccaccio in the *Decameron* is not so much the female body’s metamorphosis in pregnancy, but the steps women take to avoid pregnancy or elude maternity. In several tales, Boccaccio turns his eye to the problems attending maternity: he depicts unwanted pregnancies – male and female, discusses anti-natal practices, and infuses his portrayals of motherhood with the twin threats of female sexual fidelity and illegitimate birth.

It is not solely Boccaccio’s willingness to address these ‘problematic’ topics, however, that makes the *Decameron’s* depiction of maternity darker than the *Ninfale*. As
this chapter will demonstrate, the ‘darkness’, from a modern feminist perspective, is encoded into the language the author uses to discuss the generative process. When narrating procreation, Boccaccio hews closely to medieval gender constructs – men generate children whom women’s bodies bear – and repeatedly draws attention, at times, explicitly, to the passive functionality of the maternal body. The darkness with which maternity is imbued in this text starts, I argue, at the biological level.

Because of an historical emphasis on the Decameron’s eroticism – understood as the celebration of non-procreative sexuality – little critical notice has been given to the passages and/or novelle in which reproduction occurs. Even when pregnancy is cited as one of the “aspects of existence” that Boccaccio includes in his realistic human drama

very little substantive attention has been paid to the way the author treats the pregnant state or how he narrates the processes behind it, contributing to a general deracination of the theme from its cultural context.

The aim of this chapter, and the following, is to root, or reconnect, the depiction of maternity in the Decameron to its social and cultural milieu. Before we can explore how Boccaccio treats motherhood in the Decameron, we must consider how he narrates the biological processes leading to it. In this chapter, I closely examine the language – the verbs, phrases, and tropes - used by Boccaccio when describing or indicating the biological processes that lead to maternity – impregnation, gestation, and birth – and connect that language to beliefs about the reproductive process and blood kinship in fourteenth-century Tuscan society. In the following chapter, I explore the profound

cultural embeddedness of Boccaccio’s treatment of maternity by placing literary
depictions of motherhood - whether wanted or unwanted, problematic or affective -
within the greater social context of Renaissance natalism.

Despite a demonstrated ability to narrate reproductive processes with specificity
and historical accuracy - in both his earlier and later works - Boccaccio glosses over
impregnation and birth in the Decameron with formulaic and standardized language. In
this chapter, I probe the significance of the non-specificity of Boccaccio’s treatment; I
argue that this language is less the result of authorial disinterest in reproductive sexuality
as it is a conscious move to reflect the gender bias of learned accounts of generation and
contemporary records of birth. I explore how, in novelle III.8, V.7, and X.4, the distinctly
gendered language of generation works to underscore the marginality of women to
patrilineal family and society. In the latter part of the chapter, I turn to the critically
contested last tale of the Decameron, the tale of Griselda, where the ancillary role of
women in family and society is made explicit: as mother, Griselda is ‘the body that bears
the children generated by Gualtieri’ (“Quel corpo nel quale io ho portati i figliuoli da voi
generati” [X.10.45]).

In considering the biology behind maternity, this chapter takes as one of its
primary focuses the maternal, or gravid female, body. The body has, in recent years, been
the object of much critical analysis. Social, symbolic, and structural anthropologists

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385 For a synthetic overview of theoretical approaches to the body, see Nancy Scheper-Hughes and
Margaret M. Lock, “The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology,”
Medical Anthropology Quarterly Vol. 1.1 (1987): 6-41. For a discussion of the historiography of the body
and a reconception of the Renaissance body, see Katharine Park, “Was There a Renaissance Body?,” in The
Italian Renaissance in the Twentieth Century, I Tatti Studies, vol. 19, eds. Walter Kaiser and Michael
Perspective”, Critical Inquiry 22 (1995): 1-33, Caroline Bynum notes the proliferation of studies of the
body; in this essay, as in earlier works, she argues against traditional dualist interpretations of the body. See
also, Bynum, Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval
have explored the representational uses of the body as a figure for nature, society, and culture.\(^{386}\) Poststructuralists have considered the body politic,\(^{387}\) while feminist theorists have presented us with the notion of performative bodies, bodies that “become what they are by performing what they ‘choose’ or must choose”\(^{388}\).

In this chapter, I engage with body theory inasmuch as I consider how, in Katharine Park’s words, “cultural constructions of the body sustain particular views of society and justify particular social values and arrangements”\(^{389}\). I am less interested in the body as performance or political metaphor than I am in how representations of the female body, in a literary context, interact with and reinforce particular and historicized ideologies of motherhood and the family. In recent years, medical and social historians have explored the consonance of learned theories of generation and constructions of

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\(^{386}\) In this approach, the body in health is a symbol of organic wholeness; in sickness, a symbol of “social disharmony, conflict, and disintegration”. See Scheper-Hughes and Lock, “The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology,” 7, 18-23. As an example of this approach, see Margaret Brose’s reading of Petrarch’s figuration of Italy as a wounded female body in the canzone “Italia mia” in relation to political events in Italy in the mid-fourteenth-century (“Petrarch’s Beloved Body: “Italia mia,” in Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature, eds. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993]: 1-20).

\(^{387}\) According to these theorists, the stability of the body politic is related to its ability to control its population and discipline individual bodies; Scheper-Hughes and Lock note that Michel Foucault’s work is exemplary in this regard. See Scheper-Hughes and Lock, “The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology,” 7-8, 23-28.

\(^{388}\) See the work of Judith Butler. The citation is Caroline Bynum’s who notes that in many of these formulations body is collapsed into speech acts or discourse, and the living and dying body seems to disappear. See Bynum, “Why all the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist’s Perspective”, 4.

\(^{389}\) See Katharine Park, “Was there a Renaissance Body?,” 323.
kinship in Renaissance Italy. These scholars have shown how accounts of generation that assigned the dominant role to the father and viewed the female body as a passive receptacle for the perfect male seed naturalized the patrilineal family. In premodern Italy, biological discourse mirrored and reinforced social arrangements: men used women’s bodies to bear children actively created by men and legally belonging to the male line.

When narrating procreation in the Decameron, Boccaccio simultaneously highlights and plays with this intersection of generative theory and family ideology. By stressing male-initiated generation and male possession of both offspring and maternal body, Boccaccio underscores the marginality of women to male-defined kin groups. Yet, as we will see in the following chapter, his more affective treatments of mother-child relations reinstate the female to family and reproductive act by making explicit the carnal – bodily - tie between mother and child. Marianne Hirsch suggests that the figure of the mother, more so than the figure of woman, is determined by the body: “by taking on the notion of essentialism so directly – maternity, inasmuch as it is represented as biological, poses the question of the body as pointedly as possible.”

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narrating procreation in the *Decameron*, Boccaccio explicitly ‘poses the question of the body’: his accounts of generation highlight the corporeality - alternately passive and affective - of the maternal reproductive role, reifying and, at times, subverting patrilineal ideology.

4.2 To Conceive and to Bear: Impregnation and Parturition in the Decameron

“Come fu piacer di Dio, la donna ingravidò in due figliuoli maschi, come il parto al suo tempo fece manifesto”
*Decameron* III.9.49

In claiming that Boccaccio is little interested in reproductive sexuality in the *Decameron*, critics are perhaps responding to a certain vagueness and repetitive quality to the work’s treatment of impregnation and birth; the narration of reproduction in the *Decameron* is strangely repetitive and lacking in detail: conception is summarily noted in formulaic language, while the process of birth is cloaked in the trope of parturition – “partorí un figliuol maschio” - with little attention given to the female character’s subjective experience of the process. To indicate the actualization of the reproductive act in the *Decameron*, Boccaccio employs the verb *ingravidare*, to become or make become pregnant, or, less frequently, *impregnare*, to impregnate.\(^{393}\) As used in the work, these verbs relay little substantive information about the process of conception, besides noticing that someone got (or was gotten) pregnant; noticeably missing are the *Ninfales*

comparably detailed discussions of the biology of conception and the signs and effects of gestation on fetus and mother.

The verb *impregnare*, to impregnate, is found only twice in the *Decameron*. In novella IX.5, Calandrino, in love with a prostitute, asks that Bruno pass along to her his good wishes: “le dirai in prima in prima che io le voglio mille moggia di quel buon bene da impregnare, e poscia che io son suo servigiale e se ella vuol nulla: ha’mi bene inteso?” (IX.5.27). McWilliam euphemistically translates “quel buon bene da impregnare” as “the sort of love that fattens a girl”. The fact that Calandrino is wishing the young woman ‘lots of the good that fattens (literally, impregnates) a girl’ - in other words, sex or, more precisely, semen - and then offering himself as her servant, makes this passage a comical distortion of the usual optative message of love, but it does not reveal much about the process of generation. Later in the same tale, the verb is used in a less figurative, if equally vague, sense: Calandrino’s wife, Tessa, in a rage at having found another woman astride him, swears that this time (in a reference back to IX.3, the tale of Calandrino’s *finto* pregnancy) she did not impregnate him - “Alle fé di Dio, egli non era ora la Tessa quella che t’impregnava, che Dio la faccia trista chiunque ella è” (IX.5.64).

Boccaccio’s use of *ingravidare* is similarly non-specific; the verb is found in the transitive, with a male subject, as in the rubric to V.7 - “Teodoro la ’ngravidà” (V.7.1) - and intransitive, as in III. 9 - “la donna ingravidò in due figliuoli maschi” (III.9.49). Whether used transitively or intransitively, however, there is little consideration of the

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sexual act preceding conception or the biology of reproduction. In most cases, a summary mention of the enjoyable nature of sexual intercourse is followed by formulaic language that reveals more about how the pregnancy will be received than it does about the process of conception: in III, 8, the abbot enjoys the time of his life (“il piú bel tempo del mondo”) with Ferondo’s wife, until she, unfortunately, conceives: “assai sovente l’abate bene avventurosamente visitò la bella donna e con lei si diede il piú bel tempo del mondo. Ma, come avvengono le sventure, la donna ingravidò” (III.8.64). Similarly in V.7, Violante and Teodoro/Pietro meet ‘with considerable enjoyment’, until she, too, suffers an unwelcome pregnancy: “Quivi alcuna volta…con gran consolazione insieme si ritrovarono; e sí andò la bisogna che la giovane ingravidò, il che molto fu e all’uno e all’altro discaro” (V.7.17).

In the following chapter, I consider the significance of these unwelcome pregnancies; my aim here is to highlight the lack of any sort of ‘technical’ discussion of the procreative process in these tales. In the novelle above, the stereotyped phrases ‘so it happened’ (“sí andò la bisogna”) and ‘accidents happen’ (“come avvengono le sventure”) stand in for any fuller discussion of conception. In III.9, the story of Giletta, the quasi-talismanic (and non-scientific) phrase ‘as was God’s will’ (“come fu piacer di Dio”) completely glosses over the process: “Ne’ quali primi congiugnimenti affettuosissimamente dal conte cercati, come fu piacer di Dio, la donna ingravidò in due

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395 For other intransitive uses of the verb in the Decameron, see III.9.47: “Forse mi farà Idio grazia d’ingravidare”; V.7.17: “la giovane ingravidò”; X.10.27: “ella ingravidò”; and X.10.34: “la donna da capo ingravidò”. For other transitive uses, see also III.8, where the cuckolded Ferondo mistakenly believes he has impregnated his wife: “la ’ngravida al suo parere” (III.8.75).

396 Likewise, in X.10, Griselda’s pregnancies are noted matter-of-factly and with little embellishment: the first time Griselda conceived, she had not long been with Gualtieri - “ella non fu guari con Gualtieri dimorata che ella ingravidò” (X.10.27); the second time, Boccaccio only tells us that she happened to get pregnant again: “sopravvenne appresso che la donna da capo ingravidò” (X.10.34).
figliuoli maschi” (III.9.49). Boccaccio made use of this invocatory formula in the *Ninfale*, when discussing Mensola’s impregnation: “e come fu di Dio in piacimento / d’Africo Mensola s’ingravidava / d’un fantin maschio” (311, 3-5); in the poem, however, it complemented a fuller consideration of the biology of conception and gestation: the seed and soil language, the attention to female pleasure and the persistent linking of it to Pruno’s conception. In the *Decamerone*, the phrase is a surrogate for any deeper discussion of conception. To better appreciate the non-specificity of the *Decamerone*’s treatment of conception, I would like to briefly turn to a poem, not written, but transcribed by Boccaccio: William of Blois’s *Alda*. While not dwelt upon, William’s narration of conception in this earlier Latin poem reveals a more precise attention to the generative process.

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397 For a variation on this invocation, see Giletta’s earlier wish that God would grace her with a pregnancy: “Forse mi farà Idio grazia d’ingravidare” (III.9.47).

398 For Balduino, the *Ninfale*’s verse has biblical overtones (“formula d’estrazione biblica”). See Giovanni Boccaccio, *Ninfale fiesolano*, ed. Balduino (Milan: Mondadori, 1997 [1974]), octave 311n1. The verb *ingravidare* appears frequently in the contemporary medical literature: fifteenth-century physician Michele Savonarola uses the verb in a transitive sense, with an implied male subject, when counseling on the best time to impregnate one’s wife - “a zò anco concorre la hora di la coniugatione in volere ingravidare la moglie.” He suggests right after her menstrual cycle, when the new menses are hotter, and therefore of greater help to the male seed in its efforts to form a male child: “l’hora de la mondificatione di mestrui passati, che i nuovi sono più purificati, più caldi, dendo cussì aiuto al seme per sua calidità, che è caxuone di masculinare.” See Savonarola, *Il Trattato Ginecologico-Pediatrico in Volgare*, 55. Clearly, Savonarola is not just interested in instructing men and women how to conceive, but how to conceive the desired male child. His advice cannot have been very effective on two counts: most women ovulate 14 days after the start of their period, and, as Charles T. Wood reports, modern medicine has found that many fewer males than females are conceived in the early part of the menstrual cycle. See Charles T. Wood, “The Doctors’ Dilemma: Sin, Salvation, and the Menstrual Cycle in Medieval Thought,” *Speculum* 56.4 (Oct. 1981), 716. Sixteenth-century physician Giovanni Marinello also employs the verb when describing the practices a couple must follow to conceive a male child: “i precetti per i quali la donna si abbia ad ingravidare di figliuolo maschio” (*Medicina per le donne nel Cinquecento*, 56).

William of Blois’s *Alda*, composed around 1167, is a semi-dramatic poem in elegiac couplets.\(^{400}\) Boccaccio transcribed the poem in the *Codice Laurenziano XXXIII* 31.\(^{401}\) Although few studies compare it to Boccaccio’s works, it appears to have influenced the author, perhaps most significantly in the *Decameron*.\(^{402}\) William’s poem begins *in medias res* with Alda’s mother dying in childbirth and works backward, through her speech, to recreate the conditions of conception. Alda’s mother (also called Alda) seeks to comfort her grief-stricken husband Ulfus by reminding him that she will live on through their child; her speech, while drawing heavily on thematics of metamorphosis and regeneration, also includes references to the reproductive process.\(^{403}\)

Alda reminds her husband:

> And though I may die, I shall still survive in my child. I die before my time, but my life’s root has sprouted into a new plant, increasing in my child. Ulfus, my essence is transferred into another, a better Alda who appropriates my days for herself. I am transformed, not dead. I am transfused into another body made from our bodies. She’ll be a part of me, she who dwelt first in her father, then flowed from father to mother,


\(^{402}\) In “After Iphis: Ovidian Non-Normative Sexuality in Dante, Boccaccio, and Ariosto,” Vlad Vintila considers the *Alda*’s conceptual influence on several *Decameron* tales (Vintila, 136-151). For similarities to the *Ninfale*, see Alda’s plea to Lucina (111); Pyrrhus’ feminizing pallor, the result of lovesickness (380); and the revealing of daughter Alda’s pregnancy/crime through a swelling belly (527-528).

\(^{403}\) See Vintila, “After Iphis: Ovidian Non-Normative Sexuality in Dante, Boccaccio, and Ariosto,” 125.
To discuss Alda’s pregnancy, William makes use of the commonplace imagery of plant life: “my life’s root has sprouted into a new plant, increasing in my child” ("Pullulat in plantam nostre premortua uite / Radix in fetu multiplicata suo"). Interestingly, however, Alda’s speech also contains a brief lesson on embryology; William describes how the child, originating in its father, flowed from father to mother, comparing the fetus, at this early stage, to an unformed mass or crude ball: “prius in patre de patre fluxit / In matrem informis massa globusque rudis” (97-8). Alda’s speech, of course, is meant to be consolatory: this lesson is likely included because it illustrates that the surviving child will be the fruit of both mother and father. Nonetheless, in describing the embryo as originating in the father and taking up residence in the mother, where it exists as an unformed mass, William reflects theories of generation that placed formation of the fetus at some temporal distance from conception.

By describing the child as originating in, and flowing from, the father, thereafter taking up residence in the mother’s womb, William reflects the belief, common to Aristotelian and Galenic biology in varying degrees, that the male seed performed the primary role in procreation. His description, however, of the embryo as an unformed mass ("informis massa globusque rudis") reflects a more in-depth understanding of

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404 Guillaume de Blois, Alda, trans. Alison G. Elliott, 63-65. The original latin reads: “Di bene, qui tibi me comuni in prole reseruant, / Inque mea moriens styrepe superstes ero. / Pullulat in plantam nostrre premortua uite / Radix in fetu multiplicata suo. / Vlfe, meum melius aliam mutatur in Aldam / Esse, meosque sibi uendicat illa dies. / Transeo, non morior, alios transfundor in artus / Sumptos de nostro corpore deque tuo. / Pars erit ista mei, prius in patre de patre fluxit / In matrem informis massa globusque rudis” (Alda, 89-98).

405 As indicated at the following line: “Est pariter nostra, pariter uiuemus in illa” (Alda, 99).
procreation by drawing on the distinction between a formed and unformed fetus.\textsuperscript{406}

According to Aristotle, ensoulment occurred only after the fetus was formed: forty days after conception if the fetus was male, ninety days after conception if female.\textsuperscript{407}

Augustine reflects this distinction when, in a comment on early abortion, he describes the embryo at this early stage as “unformed [\textit{informe}]….. some sort of living shapeless thing [\textit{informiter}].”\textsuperscript{408}

William’s description of the procreative process, while likely included for consolatory reasons – Alda will live on in the new Alda, the product of her parents – manifests an attention to the physiology of generation notably lacking from Boccaccio’s impregnation formula (i.e. “Teodoro la ’ngravidà”). Given that Boccaccio transcribed this passage in his notebooks, we may assume that it held some interest for him. Yet when depicting conception in the \textit{Decameron}, he opts for standardized and imprecise phrases (“sì andò la bisogna che la giovane ingravidò”) that reveal little about the biology behind the process.

When narrating labor and parturition in the \textit{Decameron}, Boccaccio again opts for non-specificity. Examining birth in the \textit{Decameron}, one is struck, first, by the repetitive terms employed to narrate labor and, second, by the fact that nearly every labor results in

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{407} See Noonan, \textit{Contraception}, 90, and Riddle, \textit{Contraception and Abortion}, 21.
  \item \textsuperscript{408} Augustine, \textit{Quaestiones Exodi}, 80.1439-45 (in CCSL 33, pt. 5), cited in Riddle, \textit{Contraception and Abortion}, 20. In \textit{De secretis mulierum}, Pseudo-Albertus Magnus describes the fetus during the first six days as having the nature of milk, which is then changed to the nature or color thickened blood (for nine days), whereafter the members of the fetus start to be formed. See Helen Rodnite Lemay, \textit{Women’s Secrets: A Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus’ De secretis mulierum With Commentaries} (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), 78-79.
\end{itemize}
a male child: of seven narrated births, all but one produce a figliuol maschio; the only birth to result in a girl, of which I am aware, is Griselda’s first child. The births of these many male infants are described in a startlingly similar fashion: the verb “partorire”, either in the passato remoto (partorí) or the trapassato (aveva partorito) is followed, or preceded, by “un figliuol maschio”, sometimes qualified as beautiful - “un bel figliuol maschio” (X.4.22) - or very similar to their father – “due figliuoli maschi simigliantissimi al padre loro” (III.9.55).

The pattern is set in II.6 when Madama Beritola gives birth to her second son on the island of Lipari: “gravida e povera montata sopra una barchetta se ne fuggí a Lipari, e quivi partorí un altro figliuol maschio” (II.6.8). Boccaccio employs nearly identical language in III.8, when Ferondo’s wife gives birth to the abbot’s son - “la donna partorí un figliuol maschio” (III.8.75); in III.9, when Giletta succeeds at bearing the Count’s children: “’I tempo del parto venne, e partorí due figliuoli maschi” (III.9.55-6); in X, 4, when Catalina miraculously comes back from the dead to give birth: “non molto stante partorí un bel figliuol maschio” (X.4.22); and in X.10, during Griselda’s second confinement: “partorí un figliuol maschio” (X.10.34). Slight variations on the formula are seen in V.7 - “la quale mentre di lei il padre teneva in parole aveva un figliuol maschio partorito” (V.7.27) - and in the rubric to X.4: “Messer Gentil de’ Carisendi, venuto da

409 The seven narrated births I count are: II.6 (Beritola’s second child); III.9 (Giletta’s twins); III.8 (Ferondo’s wife’s illegitimate child); V.7 (Violante and Teodoro’s child); X.4 (Catalina’s son); and X.10 (Griselda’s two pregnancies). There are, of course, daughters in the Decameron, yet their birth is never dramatized and always constitutes a past event (as in II.8; II.9; V.5; and X.6). So much is the male sex the default position for newborns in the Decameron that their sex can be foretold ahead of time. In III, 8, the Abbot, upon recalling Ferondo to life from ‘Purgatory’, tells the cuckolded husband that, according to God’s will, he will soon have a son: “a Dio piace che tu torni al mondo; dove tornato, tu avrai un figliuolo della tua donna, il quale farai che tu nomini Benedetto” (III.8.65).
Modena, trae della sepoltura una donna amata da lui, sepellita per morta; la quale riconfortata partorisce un figliuol maschio” (X.4.1, all emphases mine).

The phase “partori un figliuol maschio”, frequently accompanied by some mention of the ‘proper’ time of birth (“a convenevole tempo”; “al tempo debito”; “sopravenuto il tempo del partorire”, etc.), is clearly a trope, a recurring language pattern to which Boccaccio makes recourse when narrating a birth.\textsuperscript{410} With only slight variation the same phrase announced Pruneo’s arrival in the Ninfale: “per tutto ’l corpo doglie si sentie; / per che, la dea del parto allor chiamando, / un fantin maschio quivi partorie” (403, 3-5). It is worthwhile, however, to contrast the formulaic and dispassionate way in which labor is announced in the Decameron – “il tempo del partorire”, “al tempo debito” or “convenevole” - with the Ninfale. In the earlier poem, labor announced itself through the appearance of female-experienced pain: “per tutto ’l corpo doglie si sentie” (403, 3).

In the Decameron, the focus is not on female subjectivity – the sensation of pain - but on external objectivity: only once does a woman perceive the start of labor – “sentí il tempo del partorire esser venuto” (X.4.22) – in all other instances, the “proper” or “suitable” time of childbirth arrives and the woman gives birth. Even when the pain of labor is explicitly referenced, as in V.7, the language indicates a male, or at least gender-neutral, perspective - “Quivi, sopravenuto il tempo del partorire, gridando la donna come le

\textsuperscript{410} References to the “proper time of birth”, or, in today’s terms, the inception of labor, frequently accompany the primary Boccaccian trope of childbirth. This detail is found in III.8: “a convenevole tempo….la donna partori un figliuol maschio” (III.8.75); in X.10: “da capo ingravidó e al tempo debito partori un figliuol maschio” (X.10.34); in V.7 (with slight variation and separated from the scene of parturition by several lines): “Quivi, sopravenuto il tempo del partorire, gridando la donna come le donne fanno…..la quale….aveva un figliuol maschio partorito” (V.7.24, 27); and in X.4: “sentí il tempo del partorire esser venuto: per che….non molto stante partori un bel figliuol maschio” (X.4.22, all emphases mine).
“donne fanno” (V.7.24, my emphasis) – strongly implying the external observation of
the phenomenon rather than the experiential knowledge of it.

There is a clear element of non-specificity to Boccaccio’s depiction of
impregnation and birth in the Decameron: ‘so it happens’ (or ‘accidents happen’ or ‘as
was God’s will’) and women get pregnant; ‘when the time comes’, they give birth (to a
male infant); they scream, ‘like women do’. The patterned nature of these seemingly
substitutable phrases is in marked contrast to the author’s treatment of reproduction or
reproductive physiology in the earlier Ninfale and later Corbaccio. In the Ninfale,
Boccaccio discussed the details of Pruneo’s conception and gestation, carefully
catalogued the prenatal changes to which Mensola’s body and psyche were subject, and
dramatized the childbirth. In the Corbaccio and Decameron V.10, while not concerned
with conception and birth per se, the author skillfully utilized particular and historicized
beliefs about generative fluids and their differential impact on male and female sexual
expression in the service of two different arguments. As we have seen, Boccaccio is
clearly knowledgeable about the physiology of reproduction and has shown himself, in
the Ninfale at least, capable of narrating the process of procreation – from conception to
gestation and birth - with specificity and attention. In the Decameron, he chooses to gloss
over the procreative process with non-specific, rote language; we may ask why.

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411 N. Piguet sees a source for this verse in Ovid’s Heriodes XI. He claims that Boccaccio twists what is a
heroic image in the Ovidian source (Canace’s parturient cries are the result of youth and inexperience and
she is likened to a warrior new to battle) into a sneering comment (“commentaire narquois”). See Piguet,
34. Giovanni Getto instead connects Violante’s parturient screams to the “alte grida” that announce
Cacciaguida’s birth in Paradiso XV. See Getto, Vita di forme e forme di vita nel Decameron (Turin: G.B.
Petrini, 1972), 265.

412 I would note this type of external language is common to both male and female narrators. V.7 is narrated
by Lauretta, but similar language is found in IX.3, narrated by Filostrato, when Calandrino, believing he is
pregnant, bases his fear of parturition on the experience of having heard women screaming in childbirth
(see IX.3.27, cited in Chapter One above).
A possible answer to that question may be found by comparing the *Decameron*’s narration of conception and birth with the way birth was noted in contemporary Tuscan society. If Boccaccio’s language is formulaic, it is certainly not unusual. Historians note that the language used to record a birth in late medieval and Renaissance Tuscan family memoranda books, or *ricordanze*, varied little from writer to writer and tended to follow a predetermined model.\(^{413}\) Jacqueline Marie Musacchio writes: “a formulaic statement would record the date, time, sex, and name of the new child, and occasionally the godparents and the associated costs, as well as an invocation to God or specific saints”.\(^{414}\)

The formulaic nature of these entries is evident even from the briefest review of this literature. When middle-class Florentine Ser Girolamo’s first son was born in 1473, he recorded the date and time of birth, gave thanks to God and a number of saints, and specified the sex of the resulting child: “Ricordo come a dì 19, a hore venti e tre quinti in circa, per lo Iddio gratia e della Beata Vergine Maria e di sancto Niccolò nostro protectore e advocato e di tucti gli altri sancti e sancte di Dio, mi nacque della Chaterina mia donna uno fanciullo maschio.”\(^{415}\) Florentine Ser Piero Bonaccorsi noted the birth of

\(^{413}\) Births were noted in family record books either in a separate section at the beginning of the book or as they occurred, mixed in with other sundry household events and transactions. For information on *ricordi* and *ricordanze* in medieval and Renaissance Tuscany, see Jacqueline Marie Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 9; Louis Haas, *The Renaissance Man and His Children: Childbirth and Early Childhood in Florence 1300-1600* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 12-13, 19; Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, 69.

\(^{414}\) See Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, 9. Musacchio considers Tuscan birth records an “unvarying literary type” (9).

\(^{415}\) “I record how on the 19th, at about the 23rd hour, by the grace of God and the Blessed Virgin Mary and Saint Niccolò our protector and advocate and all the other male and female saints of God, was born to me of Caterina my wife a baby boy.” See Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, 36, 183n6. Recording the birth of his second child, two years later, Ser Girolamo employed nearly identical language, while shortening the invocation: “Ricordo come a dì 10 di gennaio, a hore tre di notte, pocho prima, dalla Chaterina mia donna mi nacque un bello fanciullo maschio, che per la Dio gratia l’uno e l’altro stanno bene.” Cited in Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, 53, 186n130.
his son in a similar fashion (adding, however, a lengthy genealogical appendix identifying his wife through reference to a string of male ancestors): “A di 6 di giugno 1509 in circha a ore 14 mi nacque della Bendeta mia donna e figliuola che fu di Barone di Bernardo di Ser Salvestro di Ser Tommaso di Ser Silvestro uno figliuolo al quale posi nome Giovanfrancescho Domenico et Romolo.”

Letters, too, were characterized by formulaic, set phrases; when informing a friend of his wife’s delivery in 1490, Antonio da Bibbiena noted the date, time, and sex of the child: “La Piera…questa nocte passata a hore sei partorì una bambina femmina.”

Lorenzo Morelli’s record of a gift of damask given to his sister-in-law following the birth of her son contains similar language: “Io donai in nome dela Vaggia [his wife] ala Marietta sua sorella donna di Lionardo Ridolfi che avea partrito un figliuolo maschio domaschino tane per una chotta chon maniche di tragittato.”

In making recourse to formulaic language with respect to verb choice (partorì) and stereotyped description of the resulting infant (uno figliuolo, un figliuolo maschio) and weaving invocatory formulae into his discussions of conception - Giletta conceives according to divine plan (“come fu piacer di Dio”) – Boccaccio recreates, to some extent,

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416 “On June 6, 1509, at about the fourteenth hour, Bendeta, my wife and the daughter of Barone di Bernardo di Ser Salvestro di Ser Tommaso di Ser Silvestro, bore me a son to whom I put the name Giovanfrancescho, Domenico and Romolo.” See Musacchio, The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy, 9, 179n22.

417 He reassures his friend that he is no less happy than if the child had been a boy: “Tiene per certo che io non ne sono mancho lieto che si fussi stato maschio.” See Musacchio, The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy, 181n16.

418 “I gave in the name of [my wife] Vaggia to Marietta her sister, the wife of Lionardo Ridolfi who gave birth to a boy, golden damask for a tunic with dagged sleeves.” Musacchio, The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy, 46, 185n77. Musacchio notes that in making this gift, Morelli accrued an obligation from the powerful Ridolfi family.
the language patterns and vocabulary of these contemporary birth records.\textsuperscript{419} The reproduction of the ricordanze’s standardized language of birth in a literary context might be unremarkable – mere evidence that literary text and family record share a common idiom – had Boccaccio not manifested an interest in more ‘technical’, or ‘scientific’, explanations of reproductive processes in the earlier Ninfale and later Corbaccio. These precedents force us to question the significance of the Decameron’s language. In the Ninfale, a poem populated by Diana’s nymphs and ‘prehistoric’ shepherds, Boccaccio incorporates beliefs about the gravid female body and the generative process circulating in the medieval cultural imaginary; in the Decameron, a text set in fourteenth-century Tuscany, he cloaks the processes of conception and birth in the repetitive and standardized phrases of contemporary birth records.

In my reading, the non-specificity of the Decameron’s birth formulae is attributable not to the work’s erotic focus, but to the way Boccaccio roots his text to fourteenth-century Tuscan society; I see the language as a conscious move to reflect the language patterns and gender bias of contemporary records of birth. I argue, however, that the most meaningful reflection of these birth accounts is found not in Boccaccio’s reproduction of contemporary language patterns - vague as they are repetitive - but rather in the emphasis the author places on possession and paternity.

The records above, somewhat paradoxically given the centrality of women to the birth process, privilege the father’s, not the mother’s, role in the reproductive process; in keeping with the dictates of patrilineal ideology, they emphasize masculine relationship

\textsuperscript{419} Louis Haas considers the invocatory phrase “Per la grazia di Dio partori uno babino” emblematic enough to make it the title of his second chapter on the birth process. See Haas, “Per la grazia di Dio partori uno babino: The Birth Process,” Chapter Two in The Renaissance Man and His Children. Unfortunately, Haas does not provide a citation for this quote.
and masculine action. Louis Haas notes that the phrase “mi nacque”, or a contracted (hence even more formulaic) variant thereof, “minaque”, was used to record nearly every birth in Tuscan ricordanze. In the records above, Ser Girolamo and Piero Bonaccorsi record that sons were born to them of their wives (“mi nacque della Chaterina mia donna uno fanciullo maschio”; “mi nacque della Bendeta mia donna”). In a letter to Lucrezia Tornabuoni announcing the birth of his son (and thanking her for the fertility-enhancing prescription she shared with his wife), Antonio de Nobili dispenses with the ‘born to me’ formula and describes how he had a child: “Questa per aviarvi ch’ome questo dì a ore dieci, mediante la grazia di Dio e della vostra ricetta, i’ò auto un bello fanciullo maschio” (my emphasis).

These male-authored records, with their egocentric mi naque phrase, effectively elide women from the reproductive process in the same way that contemporary genealogies elide women from the family narrative by privileging male-traced descent.

420 See Haas, The Renaissance Man and his Children, 18-19. Indeed, Haas considers Lapo Niccolini’s inclusion of his wife’s role in the reproductive process – “Giovanni mio figliuolo nato dame e de Carmellina mia donna” - anomalous, representing the “exception that proves the rule” (19, 207n13).

421 For other examples of this language, see Jacopo Pandolfini’s record that his son Giovanbattista was born to him with a caul: “mi naque….vestito” (cited in Klapisch-Zuber, Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy, 292n21) and Tommaso Guidetti’s notation that he had “from Lisa my wife and born to me (minaque) one little girl” (cited in Haas, The Renaissance Man and his Children, 18-19 - Haas does not provide the original Italian besides the phrase “minaque”). The title of Haas’ first chapter, “Di Mateo Naque Molti Figli: Florentines Think About Having Children”, similarly implies children being born to men or of men; unfortunately, Haas provides no citation for the quote.

422 Jacqueline Marie Musacchio, “Imaginative Conceptions in Renaissance Italy,” in Picturing Women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy, eds. Geraldine A. Johnson and Sara F. Matthews Grieco (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 55, 259n42. De’ Nobili’s letter dates to 1473.

423 Here I disagree with Louis Haas. Haas forgives these Florentine men their “eccentric and egocentric turn of phrase – born to me” because they were “understandably proud of this event and perceived it first in how it related to themselves” (19). While egocentric, the minaque phrase is anything but eccentric, as is obvious when contextualized in theories of generation that attributed to the man the creative, formative reproductive role and saw women as little sacks carrying the seed of their husbands. See “Generation and Gestation” in section three of this chapter.
As we will see, the way Boccaccio discusses the generative process in the *Decameron* bears remarkable similarities to these male-authored and male-focused records by privileging paternity and in dissociating women from reproductive act and family line. In contemporary Tuscan birth records, children are born to men of their wives; in the *Decameron*, men generate their children in women’s bodies.

4.3 The Gendered Language of Generation

Thus far I have examined how Boccaccio narrates the processes of conception and birth in the *Decameron*. In addition to the verbs of impregnation – *ingravidare* and *impregnare* - and parturition – *partorire* –there is one other verb used by Boccaccio in the *Decameron* when discussing the procreative process: *generare*, to father or beget. The way Boccaccio uses this verb demonstrates a keen awareness of the gendered differentiation of reproductive roles - and their effect on family structure - and exposes some of the dominant discourses about the maternal body.

Unlike *impregnare* and *ingravidare*, *generare* is typically used in the *Decameron* after the fact of conception to indicate, or clarify, paternity. Thus, in the rubric to novella III.8, we learn how the stoltish and cuckolded Ferondo rears as his own a child ‘generated’, or fathered, by the abbot: “per suo nutricia un figliuol dell’abate nella moglie di lui generato” (III.8.1). In the following tale, III.9, Giletta hopes Beltramo will recognize her as his legitimate wife when he sees ‘his’ child in her arms: in the idiom of the tale, the child ‘generated’ by him (“Forse mi farà Idio grazia d’ingravidare: e così appresso, avendo il suo anello in dito e il figliuolo in braccio *da lui generato*, io il
In X.4, Gentile assures Niccoluccio that the child he presents him is ‘his’ – again, ‘generated’ by him: “io ti voglio donare questa donna mia comare con questo suo figliuolletto, il qual son certo che fu da te generato” (X.4.42, all italics my emphasis).

Taken together, these phrases can seem little more than another trope; “da te generato” a shorthand for saying “your child”. Indeed, they are rarely translated literally. Of the above, only the rubric to III.8 is translated by G.H. McWilliam in a manner closely following the original Italian - Ferondo “raises as his own a child begotten on his wife by the Abbot”424 - others substitute “the child’s father” or “my husband’s child”.425 These are accurate translations - paternity is certainly at issue here – but I would argue that they gloss over what is actually being relayed in these passages. Boccaccio’s language – his repetitive insistence on children ‘generated’ by men – does not just clarify paternity, it conflates paternity with reproductive causality in such a way that the female is elided out of the generative process. To recover the original weight of these passages, we must consider this language in the context of medieval beliefs about generation.

Generation and Gestation


425 See Giovanni Boccaccio, The Decameron, trans. G.H. McWilliam, 271, 725. McWilliam’s translations are as follows: III.9.47: “Perhaps by the grace of God I shall become pregnant, and later on, with my husband’s ring on my finger and my husband’s child in my arms, I will regain his love...”; X.4.42: “I wish to present you with this lady, together with her little child, of whom you are assuredly the father, though I am his godfather...” See also III.1.42: “come che esso assai monachin generasse,” translated as “And although he fathered quite a number of nunlets and monklets”; IV.1.34 “Sono adunque, si come da te generata, di carne” (“since you were the person who fathered me, I am made of flesh and blood like yourself”) and V.7.27: “O tu manifesta di cui questo parto si generasse, o tu morrai senza indugio” -“either you reveal the name of this child’s father, or you shall die forthwith” (The Decameron, trans. G.H. McWilliam, 199, 296, 415).
By folding the action of “il figliuolo…da lui generato” into the comparably static (and neutral) “his child”, critics and translators alike overlook the profound gender hierarchy implicit in Boccaccio’s original language. For a medieval reader, the verb ‘generare’ was anything but gender-neutral: the ability to ‘generate’ was an exclusively male prerogative. In *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle stated: “there must be that which generates, and that out of which it generates”.\(^{426}\) For Aristotle, of course, man was the active ‘agent’ of reproduction: the male seed was “that which generates,” woman’s menstrual blood, the passive matter “out of which it generates”.\(^{427}\) Unlike Aristotle, Galen believed that woman “contributes something….toward the generation of the animal”.\(^{428}\) Yet he still considered the male seed “the principle of motion”: female semen was “scantier, colder, and wetter” and therefore “incapable of generating an animal.”\(^{429}\)

These classical ideas, and the binary constructions behind them, were incorporated into a variety of medieval and renaissance texts. The neatest formulation may be found in Dante, for whom ‘generator’ is a handy periphrasis for the male actor in reproduction, or father - “or si distende / la virtú ch’è dal cor del generante, / dove natura


\(^{429}\) See Galen, *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body: De usu partium*, 631, 634. According to Galen, male semen, thoroughly concocted in men’s larger, hotter testes, is “the efficient principle of the animal” (632). He notes, “Thus, from one principle devised by the Creator in his wisdom, that principle in accordance with which the female has been made less perfect than the male, have stemmed all these things useful for the generation of the animal: that the parts of the female cannot escape to the outside; that she accumulates an excess of useful nutriment and has imperfect semen and a hollow instrument to receive the perfect semen; that since everything in the male is the opposite [of what it is in the female], the male member has been elongated to be most suitable for coitus and the excretion of semen; and that his semen itself has been made thick, abundant, and warm” (632).
a tutte membra intende” (Purg. XXV, 58-9, my emphasis) – but the association of men with generation also informs Paolo da Certaldo’s less philosophically-attuned writings.\footnote{See Dante Alighieri, La Divina Commedia, ed. Natalino Sapegno (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1996 [1957]). Sixty years before Dante, Bartholomaeus Anglicus stated, in De proprietatibus rerum, that the father is “head and well of begetting and engendering”. See Bestor, “Ideas about Procreation,” 157.}

Paolo’s use of the second person singular when reminding men not to have intercourse with menstruating wives - any children ‘generated’ during that time (“filgliuoli che’n quella ora ingienerassi”) run the risk of being sick or crippled – bears witness to the idea that man (Paolo’s interlocutor) is the effective cause of reproduction.\footnote{See Paolo da Certaldo, Il libro di buoni costumi (Florence: Felice Le Monnier, 1921), n.278.} The idea that man is the origin, or primary cause, of generation, is also seen in sixteenth-century physician Marinello’s assignation of the cause of a couple’s infertility to the man: “ma ciò si deve più guardare negli uomini che nelle donne, perciòché il lor seme, come vogliono alcuni, non è atto al generare, ma solo quello degli uomini”; as Marinello matter-of-factly states, woman’s seed is not generative – “non è atto al generare”.\footnote{See G. Marinello, Le medicine partenenti alle infermità delle donne (Venice: Francesco de’ Franceschi, 1563), in Medicina per le donne nel Cinquecento, eds. M. Altieri Biagi, C. Mazzotta, A. Chiantera, and P.Altieri (Turin: UTET, 1992), 50-51. Marinello later reaffirms that most philosophers deny the generative functionality of female seed: “Ma che il seme della donna si richieda al generare della creatura negano il più de’ filosofi”; as proof thereof, he provides the wry observation that most women report feeling no pleasure whatsoever when they conceived: “tutte le donne affermino che quando si sono ingravidate o s’ingravidano non sentano piacere né diletto alcuno” (54).} Accompanying these beliefs about male-effected generation were conceptualizations of the gestating female body as a passive vessel or receptacle. If men generated, women gestated: as Joan Cadden notes, the word vas (jar or vessel) frequently occurs in medieval texts as a synonym for woman.\footnote{Cadden, Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 178.} We will remember that in Dante’s account of embryology, a woman’s uterus was the “natural vasello” (XXV, 45) in which
the perfect male blood ("sangue perfetto" XXV, 37) acted on the passive female material ("altrui sangue….disposto a patire" XXV, 45, 47) like rennet on milk ("coagulando prima, e poi avviva / ciò che per sua matera fe’ constare" XXV, 50-51). Behind these views of women as vessels or containers for the male seed was not only the reality of gestation – women carry the fetus – but a profound minimizing of the female reproductive role. Katharine Park notes that in Aristotelian and Galenic biology alike, "women’s primary function was to serve as a receptacle for the growth of the fetus and to supply the uterine blood that would nourish this growth,” a function characterized in purely passive terms. This idea of passive receptivity is rather clearly illustrated by a Florentine statute from 1433 in which gestating women are likened to ‘little sacks’: Florentine women are urged to fulfill their civic duty to procreate, to “carry [the children] procreated by their husbands – they who, like a little sack, hold the perfect natural seed of their husbands so that people will be born.”

434 Aristotle also employed the cheese metaphor: “The male provides the ‘form’ and the ‘principle of the movement,’ the female provides the body, in other words, the material. Compare the coagulation of milk. Here, the milk is the body, and the fig-juice or the rennet contains the principle which causes it to set. The semen of the male acts in the same way…” (Generation of Animals, 729a). Medieval physicians repeated this comparison, likening the process of generation to cheese manufacture. See Vern L. Bullough, “On Being a Male in the Middle Ages,” in Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages, ed. Clare A. Lees (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 31-2. Aristotle also likened the male role in the generative process to a carpenter or potter shaping or forming his material; according to him, Nature uses man’s semen “as a tool”. See Aristotle, Generation of Animals, 730b. Cheese and artisan metaphors conceptualize the generative process as one in which the passive female material is activated, coagulated, or shaped by the power or force of the male seed. For man’s semen likened to a painter sketching the human form on the female blood, see Girolamo Mercurio, La commare o riccoglitrice (Venice: Gio. Battista Ciotti, 1956) in Medicina per le donne nel Cinquecento, 76-77.

435 See Katharine Park, The Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection, 142. Contemporary engravings of the female reproductive system clearly illustrate this sense of passive receptivity: the uterus is figured as an upside down vase. See Cadden, Meanings of Sex Difference, 179.

My point in including this lesson on generation is to illuminate the conceptual baggage adhering to any language describing the reproductive act in the premodern period. When Boccaccio uses the verb *generare* in the *Decameron*, he is not just designating who fathered whom, as indicated by English translations, he is conjuring up a belief system in which men perform the active, creative act – the generation of a new being – while women hold, nourish, and eventually give birth to children created by men. By ignoring the gender hierarchy behind discussions of generation, we run the risk of using our own set of values and modern systems of thought to interpret passages that may have been received in a very different manner by a late medieval reader.

With this information in mind, I would like to return to the passages in which Boccaccio uses the language of generation. Backing out of flattening modern translations – “his child” - will allow us to better gauge the effect of this language on these tales. The way Boccaccio uses the verb *generare* in the *Decameron* tends to emphasize the male origin of the procreative act and the passive receptivity of the female reproductive role, in keeping with medieval theories of generation.\(^{437}\) Male origin is particularly stressed in III.9. In the passage noted earlier, Giletta hopes that Beltramo will accept her as his legitimate wife when he sees ‘his’ child (the child he generated) in her arms: “Forse mi

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\(^{437}\) While not discussed here, the verb *generare* also appears in *novelle* III.1, IV.1, and VII.3. In III.1, Filostrato recounts how Masetto generates a number of nunlets and monklets in the nuns - “Nelle quali, come che esso assai monachin generasse” (III.1.42) - thus enjoying the privileges of paternity – generation – free from the accompanying expenses of fatherhood: “Così adunque Masetto vecchio, padre e ricco, senza aver fatica di nutricare i figliuoli o spesa di quegli” (III.1.43). In IV.1, Ghismonda reminds her father that he ‘generated’ a daughter of flesh and blood, not rock and iron: “Esser ti dòve, Tancredi, manifesto, essendo ti di care, aver generata figliuola di carne e non di pietra o di ferro” (IV.1.33). In VII.3, Rinaldo uses the fact that Agnesa sleeps with her son’s blood father as part of his argument to get her into bed with him, the child’s spiritual father: “Ma ditemi: chi è piú parente del vostro figliuolo, o io che il tenni a battesimo o vostro marito che il generò?” (VII.3.17).
farà Idio grazia d’ingravidare: e così appresso, avendo il suo anello in ditto e il figliuolo in braccio da lui generato, io il racquisterò” (III.9.47). In making this statement, Giletta is echoing language used by Beltramo when first setting the conditions she must satisfy to win him back: he will return to her when she has his ring on her finger and a child ‘acquired’ from him in her arms - “io per me vi tornerò allora a esser con lei che ella questo anello avrà in dito e in braccio figliuolo di me acquistato” (III.9.30-31, my emphasis). When rephrasing Beltramo’s demand, Giletta substitutes the more literal ‘generato’ for Beltramo’s ‘acquistato’ but the meaning is the same in both cases: whether children are ‘acquired from’ or ‘generated by’ men, children (and hence family and line) originate with men. This emphasis on male origin is echoed by the rubric’s description of how Giletta has from Beltramo two children (“ebbene due figliuoli” [III.9.1]) and by the language Giletta uses when presenting Beltramo with his two children, literally two children from him: “eccomi nelle mie braccia non un sol figliuolo di te, ma due” (III.9.58, my emphases).

Boccaccio’s use of the phrases “di me acquistato” and “da lui generato” in III.9, instead of the simple possessives ‘mine’ or ‘his’, draws attention to the male origin, or impetus, of the reproductive act. This dynamic is taken to an extreme in novella V.7, the tale of Violante and Teodoro’s illicit love, where, in a near slippage of gender roles, men generate not only children, but also births. Upon discovering his daughter, Violante, giving birth, Amerigo demands that she reveal, in an unusual turn of speech, the name of “[he] from whom this birth is generated”: “Egli, salito in furore, con la spada ignuda in mano sopra la figliuola corse, la quale mentre di lei il padre teneva in parole aveva un
figliuol maschio partorito, e disse: ‘O tu manifesta di cui questo parto si generasse, o tu morrai senza indugio’. (V.7.27, my emphasis)

The way Amerigo phrases his demand is significant. While he can be understood to be asking the name of ‘this child’s father’ (indeed, this is McWilliam’s translation), he is literally asking for the name of the actor who started the process that led to Violante giving birth: ‘[he] from whom this birth is generated’ (“di cui questo parto si generasse”). When this demand is made, Violante has just finished actively laboring (and, of course, has carried the pregnancy to term), but Amerigo’s question, specifically, its use of the reflexive construction (“questo parto si generasse”), elides her from the process by giving the sense of an autonomous self-generating birth. The language implies that it is the male reproductive act - the moment when the male converts blood to semen and vivifies the female matter – not the nine months of gestation or the moment of birth that is the crucial element in the procreative process.

Like V.7, Decameron III.8, the tale in which jealous Ferondo is sent to Purgatory, allowing his wife to conduct a successful affair with the Abbot, also bears witness to the ancillary role of women in reproduction. In the rubric, we learn how Ferondo raises as his own ‘a son of the Abbot generated in his wife’: “Ferondo, mangiata certa polvere, è sotterrato per morto; e dall’abate, che la moglie di lui si gode, tratto della sepoltura è messo in prigione e fattogli credere che egli è in Purgatorio; e poi risuscitato, per suo nutricia un figliuol dell’abate nella moglie di lui generato. (III.8.1, my emphasis)
The rather odd phrasing highlights the actions of the two males in the story: the Abbot generates the child, Ferondo raises him. Left out of the picture (at least in the rubric) is the wife.

In addition to attributing generative ability to the male, the language used by Boccaccio when discussing generation in these novelle is consonant with contemporary conceptualizations of the gestating female body as a vessel. Explicit in the rubric above is the view that men generate (their) children in female bodies; the emphasis on male-ownership and male-traced relationship in this phrase - Ferondo raises as ‘his’ (“suo”), the abbot’s son (“un figliuol dell’abate”), generated in his own wife (“nella moglie di lui generato”) – dissociates the adulterous wife from the reproductive process by making her the locus of, not an actor in, generation. In V.7, Violante was so removed from the ‘action’ of reproduction that even her labor was male-effected; female passive receptivity is writ large in Amerigo’s demand that Violante reveal ‘he from whom this birth was generated’.

To a certain extent, of course, Boccaccio’s language in these tales reflects contemporary thought regarding the process of procreation: after all, as Dante put it, man is the ‘generator’. I argue, however, that this language lends an element of critique to these tales by underscoring notions of paternal possession and male-traced kinship. Historians have shown how theories of generation that attributed men the preeminent role in reproduction and conceptualized the female body as a vessel in which the male seed

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439 As we will see, the language also underscores the cuckolded Ferondo’s stupidity by emphasizing his blind acceptance, and rearing, of another man’s son as his own.
was matured naturalized the patrilineal family in Florentine patrician society. Both III.8 and V.7, due to their narration of extra- or premarital sexual relationships, actively engage with questions of family or kinship. In Decameron III.8, kinship is complicated: in this tale of successful adultery, Ferondo’s wife gives birth to the Abbot’s illegitimate child whom she passes off as Ferondo’s rightful offspring, thereby contaminating Ferondo’s patriline with the Abbot’s blood. In Decameron V.7, questions of family and relationship are more prominent and, arguably, given the lack of a cuckolded fool and the presence of an irate father, more vexing. In both tales, the language of generation coexists with a pervasive emphasis on paternity and possession.

In the following section, I propose focused readings of novelle III.8 and V.7 that take account not only of the gendered nature of the language of generation but of the consonance of generative theory and contemporary constructions of kinship. I argue that Boccaccio uses the trope of generation in these tales not just to underscore the marginality of women to the reproductive process but, more importantly - and far more originally - to highlight their marginal position in patrilineal family and society.

4.4 The Trope of Generation and The Privileging of Paternity: Decameron III.8; V.7 (and X.4)

The two tales discussed above, Decameron III.8 and V.7, as well as the tale touched upon in this section, Decameron X.4, are all narrated by Lauretta. Teodolinda

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Barolini has noted brigata member Lauretta’s “association with reality”: Lauretta is the first to mention the plague (in VI.3) and recounts the only two stories in the *Decameron* where an unwanted pregnancy figures in the plot, III.8 and V.7. In addition to being open to, in Barolini’s words, “the open-ended bedlam and chaos of unexpurgated life,” I believe Lauretta may be associated with reality in that she is attentive, in several of her tales, to the realities of generation. Lauretta has a firm grasp of generative theory and its implications on family structure: when describing the generative process and defining family relationships, she tends to emphasize paternity and possession, a dynamic particularly notable in V.7. Yet III.8 and X.4 also bear witness to the realities – both social and biological – of reproduction. To fully appreciate Lauretta’s sensitivity to these realities we must take account of the complex interrelation of generative theory and constructions of kinship in fourteenth-century Tuscan society.

*The Interrelation of Generative Theory and Contemporary Constructions of Kinship*

In recent years, scholars have been increasingly interested in the way learned theories of generation supported and sustained constructions of kinship in late medieval and Renaissance Italy. As Katharine Park points out, “patrilineal kinship systems tend

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441 See Teodolinda Barolini, “The Wheel of the Decameron,” in *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006 [1983]), 242, 432n22. Barolini also remarks on Lauretta’s association with Dioneo. It would appear that Boccaccio entrusted these two characters with tales which explicitly or implicitly deal with the physiology of reproduction (in other words, the biological reality of things): V.10, covered in the last chapter, and X.10, discussed in the following section, are both told by Dioneo.


443 See Katharine Park, “Was there a Renaissance Body?,” 323-4, and, also, Jane Fair Bestor, “Ideas about Procreation and Their Influence on Ancient and Medieval Views of Kinship,” 150-167; Christiane
to produce theories of generation that emphasize the father’s contribution to the fetus at the expense of the mother’s,” thereby mirroring the importance attributed the agnatic line in family organization.\textsuperscript{444} Jane Fair Bestor has noted that by appropriating and elaborating the classical view of the father “as sole generator” and “the chief agent in forming the identity of his offspring”, medieval intellectuals “reinforced the father’s superior authority in the family and provided cultural grounds for the ascendancy of the patrilineal principle among elites.”\textsuperscript{445}

As Bestor suggests, medieval thinkers found a biological basis for the preeminence and importance of the male line in the patrilineal kinship system not only in the exclusive attribution of generative power to the man, but also in the differing (and value-laden) contributions each parent made to the formation of the fetus.\textsuperscript{446} In Aristotelian biology, men created or gave life to the fetus; with their maximally concocted blood, or semen, they gave the fetus form and identity and prepared it to receive a rational soul.\textsuperscript{447} In the \textit{Summa Theologica}, Thomas Aquinas wrote: “The mother supplies the formless matter of the body; and the latter receives its form through the

\textsuperscript{444} See Park, “Was there a Renaissance Body?,” 324.

\textsuperscript{445} See Bestor, “Ideas about Procreation and Their Influence on Medieval Views of Kinship,” 167. Bestor notes, however, that the assumption that a child was made of the substance of both parents, as well as views of heredity that attributed active roles in generation to both parents (i.e. Galenic), resulted in “a situational stress on maternal kin ties in accordance with pragmatic interests, such as the acquisition of status, political support, and material resources” (167).

\textsuperscript{446} For maternal and paternal contributions to the fetus as theorized in accounts of embryology, see Bestor, “Ideas about Procreation and Their Influence on Medieval Views of Kinship,” 150-167; Vern L. Bullough, “Medieval Medical and Scientific Views of Women,” \textit{Viator} 4 (1973), 499-501; Pomata, “Legami di sangue, legami di seme,” 299-334; Park, \textit{The Secrets of Women}, 141-159.

formative power that is the semen of the father. And though this power cannot create the rational soul, yet it disposes the matter of the body to receive that form.”

Katharine Park suggests that the belief a child received its “life and human identity” from its father meant that “children were always, in a metaphysical sense, more his than hers.” Yet children were also “more his than hers” in that they had more of their ‘substance’ from their father. Giles of Rome (c.1243-1316) claimed that while children were generated from the substance of both parents, they received more substance from their father: “because a carnal son has matter from his mother and form from his father, he is said to have his whole substance from his mother and father,” but “because form is more in substance than matter, a son has more substance from his father than from his mother.”

Aquinas used this physiological ‘fact’ to explain a social phenomenon: he claimed that because a child receives more substance from his father than mother, he naturally loves his father and the kin on his father’s side more than his mother and maternal relations.

In the Aristotelian system, a child owed its form and identity to its father and had more of its ‘substance’ from its father. In Galenic embryology, the tie between father and child was, if not stronger, then arguably more evident. Unlike Aristotle, Galen claimed

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that the male and female sperm provided both material and form to the embryo.\textsuperscript{452} The male sperm, however, played a much more important role: while the fetus’s allantoic membrane was formed from the female sperm, all other membranes were formed from the male sperm, as well as the fetus’s arteries and veins, nerves, brain, tendons, cartilage, and bones.\textsuperscript{453} Because in Galenic biology the fetus’s vascular system was formed directly from the father’s semen - in itself blood - the tie between child and father was, as Gianna Pomata suggests, literally a blood tie.\textsuperscript{454}

This constellation of beliefs about male-effected generation and maternal and paternal contributions to the fetus reinforced, and provided a rationale for, family structure in patrilineal Tuscan society. Italian patricians understood family membership primarily in terms of “blood relationships defined by biological descent through the male

\textsuperscript{452} According to Aristotle, semen had no material existence and was just a vehicle for the pneuma, analogous to the element from which the stars are made. See Pomata, “Legami di sangue, legami di seme,” 315-316; and also Cadden, \textit{Meanings of Sex Difference}, 127-130. Albertus Magnus sought to resolve the problem of the material existence of male semen by splitting it into a material part (“the superfluity of fully digested food”) and immaterial part (“the power of the father’s soul, existing in a certain foamy spirit”). He hazarded that “the principal and fundamental members” of the fetus might be generated from the material part of the male sperm. See Cadden, \textit{Meanings of Sex Difference}, 129. Avicenna divides the members of the body into “those in whose generation the paternal sperm played a larger part (all \textit{membra similia} other than flesh and blood) and those generated primarily from the retained menstrual blood of the mother (flesh and blood).” See Nancy G. Siraisi, \textit{Avicenna in Renaissance Italy: The Canon and Medical Teaching in Italian Universities after 1500} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 28.

\textsuperscript{453} See Pomata, “Legami di sangue, legami di seme,” 318. In humans, the allantoic membrane develops as part of the digestive system early in conception, eventually maturing into the umbilical cord. The other two membranes present in the embryonic stage of the fetus’s development are the amnion and chorion. The association of the allantoic membrane with the female contribution to reproduction is likely due to the role it plays in providing nutrients to the fetus, thus continuing the identification of women with nourishment.

\textsuperscript{454} “Il sistema vascolare del feto si sviluppa direttamente dal seme del padre. I vasi stessi in cui scorrerà il sangue del nuovo essere – quei vasi che sono gli agenti principali del processo di coazione – derivano direttamente dal seme maschile (che altro non è che l’essenza del sangue paterno). L’embriologia galenica mostra graficamente come il legame fra figlio e padre sia letteralmente, materialmente, un legame creato di sangue.” See Pomata, “Legami di sangue, legami di seme,” 320. Pomata suggests that the theory of haematogenesis, in its Galenic or Aristotelian iteration, negated the more obvious blood tie between mother and child by showing that, in reality, the fetus was created primarily by the father; it privileged the undetectable – the role of the father’s semen, or blood, in forming the fetus - over the immediately perceptible (and bodily) connection between mother and child (319).
Generative theory supported this view: a child owed its form and identity to its father’s blood; it had more of its ‘substance’ from its father, and, in some accounts of embryology, derived its primary organs, bones, nerves, and vascular system – its blood – directly from its father’s perfectly concocted blood. Biologically then children were, to use Katharine Park’s words, “more his than hers”, just as ideologically and legally, they were the ‘property’ of the male line. When considering the novelle in which Boccaccio uses the language of generation, I argue that we must keep in mind not only the gender hierarchy inherent to medieval generative theory, but the interrelation of that theory with contemporary constructions of kinship. As Bestor notes, an emphasis on man as “sole generator” reinforced the father’s authority in the family and provided a rationale for patrilineal descent. In novelle III.8, V.7, and X.4, the language of generation coexists with a pervasive narrative emphasis on male-dominated kin relationships; I contend that Boccaccio uses this gendered language to underscore a greater argument about the marginality of women to contemporary family and line.

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455 See Park, The Secrets of Women, 25. Barbara Katz Rothman draws a parallel between medieval and renaissance “valuing of the seed” and modern surrogacy arrangements: “what makes a child one’s own is the seed, the genetic ties, the ‘blood’”; she notes the gendered application of the term blood - “the blood they mean is not the real blood of pregnancy and birth, not the blood of the pulsing cord, the bloody show, the blood of birth, but the metaphorical blood of the genetic tie.” See Barbara Katz Rothman, “Beyond Mothers and Fathers: Ideology in a Patriarchal Society,” in Maternal Theory: Essential Readings, ed. Andrea O’Reilly (Toronto: Demeter Press, 2007), 394, originally published in Mothering: Ideology, Experience and Agency, eds. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang and Linda Rennie Forcey (New York: Routledge, 1994). As we have seen, in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, the blood tie linking father to child was more than just metaphorical.


457 As noted earlier, the legal system in fourteenth-century Florence did not recognize a mother’s kinship ties to her children. See my discussion of this point in section 2.6 of Chapter Two.
Decameron III.8

To understand how the language of generation underwrites a textual emphasis on male-dominated family structures in the Decameron, let us start with novella III.8, Ferondo’s voyage to Purgatory. In this tale, the Abbot, described as “a veritable saint of a man in all his ways except for his womanizing” (“in ogni cosa era santissimo fuori che nell’opera delle femine” [III.8.4]), ignores the restrictions of his office and falls in love with Ferondo’s beautiful wife. When, at confession, the wife complains of Ferondo’s jealousy, the Abbot hatches a plan to cure Ferondo of this vice and to satisfy his desire in the process: Ferondo will be sent to Purgatory and, as reward (the sexually-charged “guiderdone”) for having removed this noisome burden from her presence, the wife will have sex with the Abbot. The tale ends happily: Ferondo, cured of his jealousy by his otherworldly voyage, gives freer rein to his wife, who visits the Abbot when she can.

If we were to interpret the tale according to the Day’s subject – those who by their own efforts have achieved an object they greatly desired, or recovered a thing previously lost – we might be led to read the tale as the Abbot’s or the wife’s: the Abbot gains access to Ferondo’s wife, whom he greatly desires (“sí ferventemente s’innamorò, che a altro non pensava né dí né notte” [III.8.5-6]) and the wife gains (or regains) her freedom from a jealous husband, something troubling enough to cause her to seek counsel at confession. As we have seen, however, the rubric focuses almost exclusively on Ferondo and the Abbot; it describes the Abbot’s actions toward Ferondo (his enjoyment of Ferondo’s wife and his placement of Ferondo in Purgatory) and Ferondo’s toward the Abbot (the cuckolded fool raises the Abbot’s son as his own): “Ferondo, mangiata certa polvere, è sotterrato per morto; e dall’abate, che la moglie di lui si gode, tratto della
sepoltura è messo in prigione e fattogli credere che egli è in Purgatorio; e poi risuscitato, per suo nutrica un figliuol dell’abate nella moglie di lui generato.” (III.8.1)

As Maria Gabriella Stasi suggests, the majority of Day Three stories are structured around a “triangolo amoroso”, or love triangle.\textsuperscript{458} III.8 is no exception: in this novella, the three points of the triangle are Ferondo, the wife, and the Abbot. Despite the obvious centrality of the wife to the tale’s amorous plot – one could argue she is the most important point of the triangle, desired by both Ferondo and the Abbot - she receives little emphasis in the tale’s rubric: by describing how Ferondo raises as his own a child ‘generated’ in his wife by the Abbot, the rubric frames the tale as a story about two men and their relationship to the child fathered by one in the body of the other’s wife.

The Decameron’s rubrics are notoriously slippery, as the work of scholars like Jonathan Usher and Antonio d’Andrea has shown; rubrics often emphasize one aspect, or one protagonist, of a tale to the exclusion of others.\textsuperscript{459} I would argue, however, that it is not the fact that the wife is excluded from this rubric that is significant, but the way she is excluded and why. The marked disparity between the role the unnamed wife plays in the amorous narrative – the body of the tale - and the way she is presented in the rubric is due, I would argue, to the rubric’s focus on family relationships.

Stasi claims that the last phrase of the rubric – “per suo nutrica un figliuol dell’abate nella moglie di lui generato” – seals Ferondo’s fate as the stupid husband – \textit{lo}


sciocco marito – by highlighting how he unwittingly raises the Abbot’s son as his own.\textsuperscript{460}

The verse certainly underscores the cuckolded Ferondo’s stupidity – as Thomas Kuehn notes, a husband who unwittingly raised another man’s child was seen as “the worst of cuckolds, simple and foolish”\textsuperscript{461} - but I would argue that is not all that is going on here. By making Ferondo’s wife the location of male-effected generation and emphasizing masculine possession and masculine relationship - Ferondo raises as ‘his’ ("suo") the abbot’s son (“un figliuol dell’abate”) - the rubric neatly reflects contemporary ideologies of the family in fourteenth-century Tuscan society. The last phrase of the rubric demotes the wife from a starring role in the love triangle to an ancillary role in the family narrative, present only in relation to the male figures: as the wife of Ferondo (“la moglie di lui”) or, even more distantly, the mother of the Abbot’s child (“un figliuol dell’abate nella moglie di lui generato”). Central to the amorous plot, though never named in the tale, the wife can only be a supporting player in the family narrative; like the wives in contemporary Tuscan birth records, from whom children are born to men (“mi nacque della Chaterina mia donna uno fanciullo maschio”), she is the body in which the Abbot generates a child, a child who, thereafter, is included in Ferondo’s lineage (“per suo nutrica un figliuol dell’abate nella moglie di lui generato”).

The child’s name, Benedetto Ferondi, bears witness to the wife’s marginality to male-dominated and male-traced family structures. Named Benedetto by the Abbott, exercising the traditional privileges of the father in Renaissance Italy, the child takes the

\textsuperscript{460} See Stasi, “Amore e ‘industria’: III giornata,” 41.

\textsuperscript{461} See Thomas Kuehn, \textit{Illegitimacy in Renaissance Florence} (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 94. Boccaccio’s tale would appear to have a basis in reality: Kuehn cites an example of an illegitimate child of a priest passed off as the legitimate offspring of the mother’s cuckolded husband (131).
patronym ‘Ferondi’, or ‘of Ferondo’.\textsuperscript{462} The use of the patronym heightens the comic charge of this tale of cuckoldry by parodying notions of male descent - as the rubric makes exceedingly clear, the child is not ‘of Ferondo’ (Ferondi) but ‘of the Abbot’ (generated by the Abbot in Ferondo’s wife) – yet it also underscores the wife’s insignificance to the family narrative. The child to whom Ferondo’s wife gives birth is male-defined - “la donna partorì un figliuol maschio, il quale fu chiamato Benedetto Ferondi” (III.8.75) - and male-generated: “un figliuol dell’abate nella moglie di lui generato” (III.8.1). In generating the child, the Abbot gives him form and identity; by including him in his kin group, Ferondo accords him social position. The wife’s contributions to the child’s existence are effectively ignored. The ostensibly comic subject matter of III.8 does not prevent Boccaccio from inserting some rather dark observations into it.

\textit{Decameron X.4}

In \textit{Decameron} X.4, as in III.8, Boccaccio mixes the language of generation with a narrative emphasis on male-dominated kin relationships. In the novella, Gentile de’ Carisendi rescues pregnant (and supposedly dead) Catalina from the tomb, nurses her back to health, and, in a grand ceremony, presents her and her newborn son to her husband, Niccoluccio. Nelson Moe has shown how Catalina and her child function in this tale as objects of exchange used to bind men together: Gentile uses the \textit{comparitico}, or

spiritual kinship, to “establish a place for himself in the Caccianemico clan as the son’s spiritual father while also ensuring his new ‘sisterly’ ties to Catalina.”[^463] I would note the existence of the trope of generation in the passage in which this bonding takes place: Gentile presents Niccoluccio with his wife and son – a child, Gentile assures him, he generated - “Leva sú, compare; io non ti rendo tua mogliere, la quale i tuoi e suoi parenti gittarono via, ma io ti voglio donare questa donna mia comare con questo suo figioletto, il qual son certo che fu da te generato e il quale io a battesimo tenni e nomina’lo Gentile” (X.4.42-43).

In this passage, Gentile uses his self-appointed role as godfather to the child to redefine his relationships to Catalina and, more importantly, to Niccoluccio; as coparent to their child, he will accrue the social and economic benefits accompanying affiliation with Niccoluccio’s kingroup. Catalina does not figure large in the passage, focused as it is on masculine relationships. Moe suggests that by the end of the tale Catalina has not only been silenced “but has in fact dropped out of the picture altogether, leaving messer Gentile united with ‘Niccoluccio and his relatives and those of the woman’ in eternal friendship. With her body and her silence – first as a corpse and then as a gift – Catalina is thus relegated to providing ‘the means of binding men together’.”[^464]

Moe insightfully draws attention to the role Catalina’s body plays in binding men together in this tale - mute and reified, Catalina is presented to Niccoluccio as a grand gift - yet he does not, understandably given the focus of his article, consider how Boccaccio’s language exposes the biological role her body plays in binding men together. I agree with


Moe that Catalina has “dropped out of the picture” by tale’s end, I would only add that the way Gentile describes the child when presenting him to Niccoluccio—“da te generato”—pushes her even further out of the picture by implicitly devaluing her reproductive contributions: by redefining the child she bore as something generated by and exchanged between men. Niccoluccio generates the child (“fu da te generato”), Gentile holds him at baptism and names him (“il quale io a battesimo tenni e nomina’lo Gentile”); Catalina, the child’s mother, appears to have no part in these male-dominated operations. The fact that Boccaccio uses the trope of generation in a passage dedicated to confirming male-based kin relationships does not seem to me coincidental. By describing the child Gentile presents Niccoluccio as ‘generated by him’, Boccaccio draws attention to the ancillary role Catalina performed in the process resulting in family creation, echoing, on a biological level, her mute reification at the tale’s end.

*Decameron V.7*

In III.8 and X.4, the trope of generation underscores women’s marginal position in male-dominated family structures. In *Decameron V.7*, female marginality is yet more pronounced: the tale privileges paternity throughout, not only in the elision of the maternal from the reproductive process, but in the way family relationships are defined and the attention given male possession of offspring. As in so many other *Decameron* novelle, a father’s tardiness in marrying off his daughter provides the pretext for premarital sex: in the tale, Violante, the name, perhaps not coincidentally, of Boccaccio’s favored daughter,⁴⁶⁵ falls in love with Teodoro/Pietro, a freed Armenian slave and one of

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⁴⁶⁵ Violante was born somewhere between 1349 and 1350; in a letter to Petrarch from 1367, Boccaccio states that he last saw her when she was five and a half years old and describes his grief at seeing a
her father’s servants, and becomes pregnant, enraging her father, and nearly causing her, her child’s, and Pietro’s death. As N. Piguet has suggested, the tale bears remarkable similarities to Boccaccio’s own *Ninfale fiesolano* and, ultimately, to Ovid’s *Heroides* XI. Like Canace in *Heroides* XI, young Violante unwittingly conceives and vainly attempts to abort the fetus; like Mensola, she hides during her pregnancy as long as possible. She nearly succeeds until her father, out birding one day, overhears her parturient cries and forces her to reveal the name of the child’s father. Overcome by wrath, Amerigo then arranges to do away with the new family trio: Pietro is tortured, confesses, and is sentenced to be whipped through town and then hanged by the neck; Violante is offered her choice of poison or dagger with which to kill herself; the child is ordered to be smashed against a wall and fed to the dogs (“piglierai il figliuolo pochi dí fa da lei partorito e, percossogli il capo al muro, il gitta a mangiare a’ cani” [V.7.30-31]).

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466 See N. Piguet, “Variations autour d’un mythe ovidien dans l’œuvre de Boccace,” *Revue des études italiennes*, 31 (1985): 25-35. Piguet suggests that V.7 is essentially the myth of Canace in bourgeois dress; he argues that Boccaccio transforms the tragic grandeur of the Ovidian source into a shabby, and somewhat mocking, family news item: “Rien ne survit du désespoir farouche, de la grandeur tragique du mythe, rabaisse ici aux dimensions mesquines et malicieuses d’un fait divers familial et bourgeois” (34). I agree with Piguet as to the bourgeois register, but do not detect any mocking intent on Boccaccio’s part; if anything, I would characterize his tone as sympathetic. Piguet is the only critic, of whom I am aware, who connects *Decameron* V.7 to the *Ninfale* and *Heroides* XI; Virgilian echoes in the scene in which Teodoro and Violante seek shelter from a storm are frequently noted. See Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ed. Branca, 662n5&7 and Francesco Spera, “La buona sorte e la forza d’amore: V giornata,” in *Prospettive sul Decameron*, ed. G. Barberi Squarotti (Turin: Tirrenia, 1989), 88.

467 The intended fates of Violante, Teodoro, and their child should not be considered fairy tale elements; as Thomas Kuehn points out, a household’s honor rested on the control of its women’s sexuality: an illegitimate child cast “dishonor on the men upon whom [a woman’s] protection was incumbent.” See Kuehn, *Illegitimacy in Renaissance Florence*, 90-91. Carol Lansing also notes the close connection between family honor and control of female sexuality; her examination of thirteenth-century court records
Unlike *Heroides* XI and the *Ninfale*, *Decameron* V.7 ends ‘happily’: Violante, her child, and her lover survive. Despite its happy resolution, I would argue that *Decameron* V.7 is, on the whole, a darker story than the *Ninfale*, or even *Heroides* XI. It is not only the gruesome, if unfulfilled, description of infanticide – the child smashed against a wall and fed to dogs – that makes this tale darker than the earlier sources. I believe the darkness originates in the way Boccaccio roots this tale to contemporary Tuscan society; unlike the *Ninfale*, where maternity took center stage, at least briefly, V.7 privileges paternity throughout.

Our first hint of the importance and power of paternity in the tale comes early on. The rubric describes Teodoro’s fate as influenced by two paternal figures, Violante’s father, Amerigo, and his own father, Fineo: “Teodoro, inamorato della Violante, figliuola di messere Amerigo suo signore, la ’ngravida e é alle forche condannato; alle quali frustandosi essendo menato, dal padre riconosciuto e prosciolto prende per moglie la Violante” (V.7.1). Teodoro’s fate thus hinges on the decisions of two fathers: Amerigo causes Teodoro to be sentenced to death, a sentence for whose remittance his own father is responsible.

The decision for Violante and Teodoro to wed is similarly characterized as the result of paternal decision and paternal action. When Fineo learns of the illicit relationship with Violante that has resulted in his son’s death sentence, he seeks to repair things by arranging a marriage between the couple and approaches Amerigo. Upon

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in Bologna found several inquests in which girls had run off because they were pregnant and feared their fathers and brothers. Lansing notes that the belief that male kinsmen did kill girls over dishonorable pregnancies was common enough that this testimony could be used as proof that a girl had not been kidnapped but had voluntarily run off. See Carol Lansing, “Girls in Trouble in Late Medieval Bologna,” in *The Premodern Teenager: Youth in Society, 1150-1650*, ed. Konrad Eisenbichler (Toronto: Center for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2002), 302.
discovering Teodoro’s true identity, Amerigo is ‘the sorriest man in the world’ (‘il più dolente uom del mondo’ [V.7.44]). Boccaccio’s language, purposefully ambiguous, does not indicate whether Amerigo’s distress stems from his belief that Violante is already dead or from the missed opportunity to form a kinship bond with Fineo. To Amerigo’s relief, Violante is still alive, unable to decide between poison or knife (‘avendolo il coltello e ’l veleno posto innanzi, perché ella così tosto non eleggeva’ [V.7.45]); he tells Fineo that if Teodoro wants his daughter for his wife, he will be very happy to give her to him: “affermando sé, dove Teodoro la sua figliuola per moglie volesse, esser molto contento di dargliele” (V.7.46). When responding, Fineo ignores Amerigo’s (rather belated) consideration of Teodoro’s wishes; he stresses that the decision is his, not his son’s: “io intendo che mio figliuolo la vostra figliuola prenda; e dove egli non volesse, vada innanzi la sentenzia letta di lui” (V.7.47, my emphasis).\(^{468}\) In this sentence, as in the following, Boccaccio highlights the paternal impetus of the decision for the couple to wed: “Essendo adunque e Fineo e messer Amerigo in concordia” (V.7.48).

When Fineo and Amerigo finally ask Teodoro and Violante their opinions on the subject, their responses, far from being unalloyed expressions of joy, are somewhat ambiguous, and tend to stress their subjection to the wills of their fathers. Teodoro is so happy to wed Violante that he feels he has jumped from Hell to Heaven (“che d’Inferno gli parve saltare in Paradiso” [V.7.49]), yet his alternative to marriage - death – gravely qualifies this statement. The tentative happiness of Violante’s own response is overshadowed by her concluding affirmation of absolute subjection to her father’s control: “se ella il suo desidero di ciò seguisse, niuna cosa più lieta le poteva avvenire che

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\(^{468}\) For the English, see Giovanni Boccaccio, The *Decameron*, trans. G.H. McWilliam, 418.
d’esser moglie di Teodoro, *ma tuttavia farebbe quello che il padre le comandasse*” (V.7.50-51, my emphasis). While the following verse describes the concord of the couple’s decision to wed (“Cosí adunque in concordia fatta sposare la giovane” [V.7.51]), the obvious echo of Fineo and Amerigo’s ‘agreement’ a few lines earlier - “Essendo adunque e Fineo e messer Amerigo in concordia” (V.7.48) – undercuts any expression of free will on the part of Violante or Teodoro.

The darkness with which V.7 is imbued is the result not only of a persistent privileging of paternity – the textual relief given paternal power and paternal descent – but also of the way the tale downplays, or devalues, maternity. When Fineo recognizes Teodoro as he is being driven through the streets, he calls him by name and asks: “Where do you come from? Whose son are you?” - “Onde fosti? e cui figliuolo?” (V.7.38). Teodoro’s response privileges male descent: he responds to the query of whose son he was with only his father’s name - “Io fui d’Erminia, figliuolo d’uno che ebbe nome Fineo” (V.7.39). Teodoro defines himself as the son of, significantly, only his father; his mother is never mentioned in the tale. Violante’s mother does appear in V.7 - she is part of the party that travels to the country with Violante and Teodoro at the beginning of the tale, is privilege to Violante’s pregnant condition, and is present for the birth scene – but, in all cases, she is more of a detail than a fully developed character.

N. Piguet has argued that Violante’s mother’s presence in V.7 introduces a misogynistic element into the tale in that it allows Boccaccio to raise the question of the

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470 The words of Violante’s mother are only reported in indirect discourse. When Violante reveals her pregnancy to her mother, her mother amply curses her - “La donna, dolente senza misura, le disse una gran villania” (V.7.23) and then sends her to a country house for the rest of her pregnancy. The mother is not mentioned at all in the second half of the novella (after V.7.26).
merits of female and male intelligence: the mother gullibly believes Violante when she
tells her she doesn’t know who got her pregnant, while her father does not.\footnote{“egli, men presto a creder che la donna non era stata, disse ciò non dovere essere vero che ella non sapesse di cui gravida fosse” \textit{(V.7.25)}. See Piguet, “Variations autour d’un mythe ovidien dans l’oeuvre de Boccace,” 34.} According
to Piguet, it is the mother’s fault that Violante gets pregnant and suffers such negative
consequences: had she watched her daughter better on the return from the excursion to
the country, Violante would have been unable to meet with Teodoro; had she anticipated
her husband’s birding trip, Amerigo would not have discovered Violante giving birth.\footnote{See Piguet, “Variations autour d’un mythe ovidien dans l’oeuvre de Boccace,” 31, 34.} While Piguet picks up on a certain devaluation of mothers and maternity in the tale, I
strongly disagree with his reading of Violante’s mother’s actions and the authorial agenda
behind them.

In his haste to demonstrate Violante’s mother’s dimwittedness, Piguet ignores the
restrictive familial context in which she, as well as all other mothers in the \textit{Decameron},
operates. Violante’s mother, like the mothers in several other \textit{Decameron} tales, tries to
appease her husband and protect her child as best possible, cognizant, however, that a
child’s fate lies in the father’s hands. In several \textit{Decameron} tales, Boccaccio shows us
mothers who act as a tempering force on the absolute power of the father over his
children. This dynamic is most evident in II.6 where Spina’s mother successfully
redirects her husband’s wrath, convincing him to imprison - and not kill - Spina and her
lover: “E tanto e queste e molte altre parole gli andò dicendo la santa donna, che essa da
uccidergli l’animo suo rivolse” \textit{(II.6.40)}.\footnote{“La madre della giovane….avendo per alcuna parola di Currado compreso qual fosse l’animo suo verso
i nocenti, non potendo ciò comportare, avaccianosi sopragiunse l’adirato marito e cominciò a pregare
che gli dovesse piacere di non correr furiosamente a volere nella sua vecchiezza della figliuola divenir

In V.4, Caterina’s mother advocates for her
daughter, convincing her older husband to let their daughter escape the heat by sleeping on the balcony. When a mother is absent from a tale, the consequences can be dire: in *Decameron* IV.1, unlike in II.6, no mother is present to temper a father’s homicidal rage and Ghismunda dies. I would argue with Piguet that Violante’s mother’s relative impotence and insignificance in the plot are part of the darkness of this tale: Boccaccio portraits a mother vainly trying to shield her daughter from the *patria potestas* only to see her efforts fail.

In her work, Katharine Park has shown how a pervasive emphasis on paternity in late medieval and Renaissance society – on family membership defined by biological descent through the male line – was in conflict with “the realities of conception, gestation, and childbirth, all of which foregrounded the mother’s contributions to generation and the physical tie between mother and child.” In V.7, as in other *Decameron* tales, the processes of conception, gestation, and childbirth are given little emphasis. In contrast to the *Ninfale*, a work with which, Piguet rightly notes, V.7 shares many similarities, Boccaccio does not dramatize the scene of conception in V.7, nor does he include any information about Violante’s prenatal care or the changes to which her body or psyche are subject (the only sign of her pregnancy is an increase in girth: “lo

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474 The horror of X.10’s family tale may be due in part to the absence of a maternal figure: not only is Griselda’s mother absent from the tale but Griselda herself completely abdicates her maternal role. For a more in-depth discussion of *Decameron* X.10, see section 5 of this chapter.


476 As Piguet has shown, both texts draw upon, and rework, a common source: *Heroides* XI. See Piguet, “Variations autour d’un mythe ovidien dans l’oeuvre de Boccace,” 25-35. On pages 32-33, Piguet charts the elements that recur across *Heroides* XI, the *Ninfale*, and *Decameron* V.7; while I disagree with some of his classifications, it is nonetheless a useful presentation.
crescer che 'l corpo facea” [V.7.22]). His treatment of parturition in the tale, as we have seen, explicitly downplays the maternal in favor of the paternal: Amerigo demands Violante reveal the name of ‘he from whom this birth was generated’ (“di cui questo parto si generasse”).

With Amerigo’s question, Boccaccio collapses the tension between an ideological privileging of paternity and the reality of the maternal contribution to reproduction by showing that even birth – the maternal process par excellence – can be attributed to (i.e. generated by) men. The darkness informing this description of the reproductive process is echoed by a profound privileging of paternity and elision of the maternal at the tale’s end. Far from resolving positively (“positivamente”), as Francesco Spera suggests, I would argue that the end of the tale is its darkest point. 478 By the end of V.7, Violante’s previously disruptive pregnancy is inscribed within the lawful parameters of male-defined kinship: the insult done to Amerigo by Pietro (“la ingiuria fattagli da Pietro” [V.7.28]) - the deflowering and impregnation of his daughter 479 - is amended by the assumption of Violante into Pietro’s kin group through a marriage engineered by Amerigo and Pietro’s father, Fineo. The novella concludes with Fineo sailing off with his...

477 Despite its extended discussions of conception, gestation, and birth, the verb ‘generare’ is found only once in the Ninfale, when Mensola starts to show: “in capo di tre mesi incomincioe / a manifesto far la creatura / che dentro al ventre suo s’ingeneroe” (380, 2-4). In the poem, Boccaccio tends to use ‘creare’ or ‘nascre’ when discussing generation and birth (“per qual degnitade / l’uom si creasse, e poi come nascesse [306, 5-6]) and relies on direct familial terms like ‘father’ and ‘son’ instead of roundabout periphrases like “di cui questo parto si generasse” or “il figliuolo….da lui generato”. These terms are less overtly gendered than those found in the Decameron: the verbs creare and nascere are more neutral than generare and partorire, because they are not as strictly associated with one sex.

478 Spera sees Teodoro and Violante’s love story as initially having negative consequences, but resolving itself “positivamente” by the end. See Francesco Spera, “La buona sorte e la forza d’amore: V giornata,” in Prospettive sul Decameron, ed. G. Barberi Squarotti (Turin: Tirrenia, 1989), 87. As will be evident, my reading of the end of the tale is less sanguine than Spera’s.

479 The injury done to Amerigo by Pietro (“la ingiuria fattagli da Pietro”), the loss of Violante’s virginity, is made explicit at V.7.42: “la qual si dice che della sua virginità ha privata.”
son, Violante, and his grandson – “E dopo alquanti dí il suo figliuolo e lei e il suo picciol nepote, montati in galea, seco ne menò a Laiazzo” (V.7.53, my emphasis) – the possessives perfectly reproducing the sense of male-traced kinship and the ancillary importance of women to the patriline.

Fineo returns home with his son, his grandson, and ‘her’. The lack of the possessive appendage ‘his’ - sua - to Violante, despite her characterization one sentence earlier as Fineo’s daughter-in-law (“sí bella nuora”) and daughter (“in luogo di figliuola”), makes explicit the male-bias of the patrilineal family.

I would argue, however, that the marginality of women to male-traced and male-dominated family is already encoded into the language of generation in this tale. Amerigo’s notion of an autonomous self-generating birth distances Violante from the reproductive process – she is the receptacle in which a birth ‘generates itself’ (“si generasse”) - in the same way that Fineo’s possessives dissociate her from the male-defined family (“il suo figliuolo e lei e il suo picciol nepote”). Violante is as ancillary to the procreative process as she is to the family or line that results from the child her body bears. What makes V.7 so dark with respect to its sources is the way the tale unsparingly reflects patrilineal ideologies of the family by stressing paternal power over, and possession of, offspring and by eliding women from the reproductive process and line.

480 Christiane Klapisch-Zuber notes the instability of a woman’s identity in late medieval and Renaissance Tuscany - “Shunted between two lineages - her father’s and her husband’s - a woman was not a full member of either. She had an excellent chance of spending her life under several roofs, as her successive marriages dictated, and of never seeing her identity fixed in a definitive name” - a dynamic well captured by Boccaccio in this passage. See Klapisch-Zuber, Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy, 285.

481 Interestingly, V.7’s ending can be seen as the fulfillment of the familial fate that Mensola rejected in the Ninfale. When Africo pleads with Mensola to return home with him, he states that she will be treated like a daughter and will be a daughter-in-law to his mother and father: “venirtene potrai / qui presso a casa mia, / con esso meco, / e con la madre mia li ti starai: / la qual, mentre che tu sarai con seco, / sempre come figliuola tu sarai / da lei trattata, e da mio padre ancora, / e potrai essere d’ammenduo lor nuora” (Ninfale
The intermixing of generative theory and patrilineal ideologies of the family, found in V.7, is perhaps nowhere as plainly evident as in the last tale of the Decameron, the story of patient Griselda. Not only does Griselda refer to her body in this tale as the body that carried the children generated by her husband (“quel corpo nel quale io ho portati i figliuoli da voi generati”)⁴⁸², a neat restatement of generative theory, her response to Gualtieri’s supposed murder of her children stresses her biological as much as her behavioral passivity while nullifying any claim for custody: “mai altro non disse se non che quello ne piaceva a lei che a colui che generati gli avea” (X.10.39). In the following section, I explore how the Decameron’s hermeneutically-freighted last tale takes to the extreme the privileging of paternity seen in contemporary theories of generation and patrilineal ideology and makes explicit the passive functionality of the maternal body, only hinted at in tales III.8, V.7, and X.4.

4.5 “Quel corpo nel quale io ho portati i figliuoli da voi generati”: Boccaccio and the Maternal Body (Decameron X.10)

The last tale of the Decameron, the story of Gualtieri’s cruel tests of his patient and constant wife Griselda, has a long and contested interpretive history, of which I will give here only the briefest of summaries. The tale has been read as an allegory of exalted humility (Victoria Kirkham); a reductio ad absurdam of traditional views of marriage

⁴⁸² This is my literal English translation. McWilliam’s translation reads, “the body in which I have borne your children” (The Decameron, trans. G.H. McWilliam, 790).
and an argument for women’s liberation (Shirley Allen); a fable and sociological meditation on class (Giorgio Barberi Squarotti); a critical examination of the myth of order and law (Robert Hollander and Courtney Cahill); an obscene parody of magnificence and a political parable (David Wallace); and, in Petrarch’s influential reading, an allegory of the soul’s relationship to God. Griselda has been likened to Job, Mary, a figura Christi, Beatrice and Laura, Abraham, and the soul. She has served as an exemplum of the good wife, been viewed as a good mother, by virtue of her limitless suffering, and a bad mother due to her complacent handing over of her children.


484 For the association of Griselda with Job and Gualtieri with God, or his inversion, see Kirkham, “The Last Tale in the Decameron,” Janet Smarr, Boccaccio and Fiammetta, 191; Mazzotta, The World at Play in Boccaccio’s Decameron, 123-5; and Barberi Squarotti, “L’ambigua sociologia di Griselda.” In addition to putting forth a political reading, Wallace echoes Petrarch’s allegory of the soul in making Griselda “the faithful and enduring Christian subject” and Gualtieri God’s agent, a tyrant or the Black Death (“Whan She Translated Was,” 189-90). Branca draws parallels between Griselda and Mary as part of his ascensional schema (Boccaccio medievale, 18, 96-97). For analogies between Griselda’s surrender of her children and the biblical story of Abraham, see Barberi Squarotti, “L’ambigua sociologia di Griselda,” 205-206, and Allyson Newton, “The Occlusion of Maternity in Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale,” in Medieval Mothering, ed. Parsons and Wheeler (New York: Garland, 1996), 64. For a totally allegorized view of Griselda as a figura Christi (the innocent victim needed to restore the community), as well as analogous to Dante’s Beatrice and Petrarch’s Laura, see Marga Cottino-Jones, “Fabula vs. Figura: Another Interpretation of the Griselda Story,” Italica 50.1 (1973): 38-52. Itala Rutter views Gualtieri and Griselda as exemplary creatures, occupying “a moral plane far above that of common reality.” See Rutter, “The Function of Dioneo’s Perspective in the Griselda Story,” Comitatus 5 (1974): 33-42. For Griselda as the soul facing God, see Petrarch’s translation cited above.

485 In “The Griselda Story in Boccaccio, Petrarch and Chaucer,” in Chaucer and the Italian Trecento, ed. Piero Boitani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), Robin Kirkpatrick notes that in some later French versions and in Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale Griselda is intended as “a mirror for wives” (232). Bergin
The novella is without a doubt a puzzle: it is the last tale of one hundred, and therefore, by virtue of its ordering, more significant, and is told by Dioneo, considered by most critics to be Boccaccio’s mouthpiece, who prefaces it by making clear his anti-exemplary intent and ends it with disparaging, sexually-allusive comments.\footnote{Itala Rutter diverges from the dominant critical view that sees similarities between Dioneo and Boccaccio; in her reading of X.10, Gualtieri’s exemplary explanation escapes the rather dense Dioneo, “who operates only on the human level and is clearly not Boccaccio’s mouthpiece.” See Rutter, “The Function of Dioneo’s Perspective in the Griselda Story,” 38.}

Allegorizing readings, of the sort favored by Petrarch in which Griselda is the soul and Gualtieri God, do not fully explain the sadistic cruelty of Gualtieri’s tests\footnote{Hollander and Cahill note the problem caused by the attribution of Gualtieri’s senseless cruelty to God (“Day Ten of the Decameron,” 158-159), as does Giorgio Barberi Squarotti, if obliquely (“L’ambigua sociologia di Griselda,” 207).} nor, as Millicent Marcus has rightly pointed out, do they account for Boccaccio’s sudden lapsing into a figural mode.\footnote{See Millicent Marcus, “The Marchioness and the Donkey Skull: The Tale of the Patient Griselda,” in Allegory of Form, 98.} Reading the tale as an exemplum of prescribed spousal behavior, however, also presents problems. At some basic level, X.10 is about the relationship of a husband and wife; Gualtieri’s explanation for his cruel trials at the story’s end suggests as much: he wanted to teach Griselda how to be a wife (“volendoti insegnar d’esser moglie”) and show his subjects how to choose and keep a wife (“e a loro di saperla tenere” [X.10.61]). Dioneo, however, offers explicit instructions that the story not be read didactically, questioning, therefore, the exemplary significance that his character would considers Griselda not a good, but a ‘pathological’ wife (Bergin, Boccaccio, 323-5). For Griselda as a ‘good’ mother, see Atkinson, The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 144-48 and 191-3. For Griselda as ‘bad’ mother, see Lloyd de Mause, “The Evolution of Childhood,” in The History of Childhood, ed. Lloyd de Mause (New York, NY: The Psychohistory Press, 1974), 51.
Even Petrarch, who perhaps did the most to promote the tale as an exemplum of wifely obedience by translating it into *De insigni obedentia et fide uxoria*, claimed that the story was not meant for “the matrons of [his] age” but for his “readers”, men conversant in Latin. He insists that Griselda’s behavior, eminently laudable, is unfortunately inimitable by modern wives: Griselda is too perfect, and therefore too removed from the women who would hypothetically emulate her.

In the mid-nineteen-seventies, Shirley S. Allen attempted to defuse the tale’s exemplary charge by arguing for an ironic reading. For Allen, the tale is the culmination of Dioneo’s argument throughout the text that sexual desire is natural and cannot be restrained by human institutions: “Since the ladies have objected to [Dioneo’s] implication that wives play tricks on their husbands, he shows them their ideal wife, who obeys her marriage vows against every natural inclination. The absolute submission of the wife to her husband, promised in the marriage vows, preached in the churches, and demanded by men in a feudal society, is carried to its logical extreme in the tale of patient Griselda.”

According to Allen, Griselda is the ‘ideal wife’, but the tale is a *reductio ad
absurdam of the traditional concept of marriage, and therefore “an ironic argument for women’s liberation.”

While perhaps not as willing to see an argument for women’s lib in this fourteenth-century tale, I, like Allen, tend to read X.10 on a more literal level. Whereas Allen, however, is primarily concerned with the relationship between husband and wife as played out in the institution of marriage, I am interested in how the tale comments on a woman’s role not as wife but as mother in the fourteenth-century Tuscan patrilineal family. I argue that this polyvalent and complicated tale functions, at one level, as a parody of contemporary ideologies of motherhood: by stressing Griselda’s complete corporeal submissiveness and pathologizing the precept that children belong to, and originate from, the paternal line.

Griselda as mother is not a subject that has captured the critical attention of Boccaccian scholars. If critics have considered the topic, it has generally been to condemn Griselda for a lack of proper maternal behavior. Bergin writes that as a mother Griselda “is hardly to be admired”; Hollander and Cahill (following Momigliano) point out, with disapproval, that Griselda is willing to be an accomplice in the murder of her children in order to keep her word. Marga Cottino-Jones takes an essentializing,


495 The tale’s polyvalence is frequently noted by critics. Guido Almansi sees X.10’s polyvalence as “a deliberate, one might even say malicious, product of Boccaccio’s authorial strategy.” See Almansi, The Writer as Liar, 133-134. Also arguing for polyvalence, Millicent Marcus proposes that the tale may be read as “an extreme argument for the need to entertain several, possibly contradictory, perspectives at once.” See Marcus, “The Marchioness and the Donkey’s Skull,” 105. I agree with these critics as to the last tale’s multiple layers of meaning; in this section, I am not proposing any sort of totalizing reading of X.10, but rather seek to bring out elements that have previously gone unnoticed.

historical approach to Griselda’s maternity: “As a feminine counterpart of Christ, Griselda undergoes trials that are intended to hurt a woman the most, in her vital roles of mother and wife.”\textsuperscript{497} Whether condemning Griselda for a lack of natural maternal feeling or seeing within her maternal behavior biblical echoes (Abraham, Mary, Christ), critics have largely ignored how her behavior, praise- or blameworthy as it may be, relates to ideas about women and mothers in late medieval society.

In an article examining motherhood in Chaucer’s \textit{Clerk’s Tale}, a later rendition of Boccaccio’s Griselda filtered through Petrarch, Allyson Newton has explored the relationship between Griselda’s behavior and contemporary theories of motherhood and patriarchal ideology.\textsuperscript{498} She argues that the tale’s pervasive cruelty results from a “system of patrilineage which appropriates the maternal, denies its significance, and then attempts to exclude it”.\textsuperscript{499} Newton’s reading is heavily influenced by feminist theory – Walter dreams of “autonomous male succession”; murdering his children is “an attempt to purge

Cross so that women should give their innocent children to be murdered” (146). See also Francesco De Sanctis, “Il Decamerone,” in \textit{Storia della letteratura italiana}, 349. Social historians have been, by and large, more willing to consider Griselda’s maternal qualities, although they tend to cite the tale to support their theses about parent-child relations or family structure. For Clarissa Atkinson, Griselda functions as a type of the good mother due to her limitless suffering; she notes the popularity of the story at a time when the sudden death of children was a commonplace. See Atkinson, \textit{The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages}, 144-48, 191-3. For Lloyd de Mause, on the other hand, Griselda is a bad mother, emblematic of the “abandonment mode” of parent-child relations. See Lloyd de Mause, “The Evolution of Childhood,” 51. Historian John Boswell also sees abandonment in the tale: of Griselda by her own father, and of her children by Gualtieri. See John Boswell, \textit{The Kindness of Strangers} (New York: Vintage Books, 1990 [1988]), 412-413. Boswell sees a recurrence of the ancient association of abandonment with incest in Gualtieri’s decision to ‘marry’ his daughter (413).

\textsuperscript{497} See Cottino-Jones, “Fabula vs. Figura: Another Interpretation of the Griselda Story,” 47. She sees three trials for Griselda as there were three nails fastening Christ’s body to the cross: the first two trials “wound Griselda in her mother role” (her children are taken away), the third trial “harms Griselda in her wife role: she is made to feel unwanted and rejected” (47).

\textsuperscript{498} See Allyson Newton, “The Occlusion of Maternity in Chaucer’s \textit{Clerk’s Tale},” in \textit{Medieval Mothering}, ed. Parsons and Wheeler (NY: Garland, 1996): 63-75. Newton’s article is focused on Chaucer; she does not consider Boccaccio’s version of the Griselda tale or Petrarch’s moralizing translation of the story.

\textsuperscript{499} Newton, “The Occlusion of Maternity in Chaucer’s \textit{Clerk’s Tale},” 69.
the maternal”; sending his children to his sister to be raised, an “effort to consolidate paternal influence while diminishing maternal influence"500 – nonetheless it cogently draws attention to the ways in which the tale engages with contemporary notions of motherhood and family. As Newton suggests, in the context of medieval reproductive theory, Griselda’s passivity, inertia over the loss of her children, and “excruciating” patience constitute one image of “proper maternity”, or perfect motherhood.501 I would argue however, as Newton does not, that in Boccaccio’s version Griselda’s passivity and inertia are not mere abstract reflections of Aquinian or Aristotelian ideals of motherhood502, although they certainly remark in some way upon them, but comments on the function of motherhood and the position of women in a specific historical context: fourteenth-century Tuscany.

Boccaccio’s Griselda is, of course, the ur-text; it is the first extant version of the story.503 In it, Boccaccio makes some unusual moves that have gone mostly unnoticed in Boccaccian criticism, if remarked upon, in the course of different arguments, by Petrarchan and Chaucerian critics. We have seen how Boccaccio’s language in Decameron III.8 and V.7 subtly dissociates the female from the reproductive process by

500 Newton, “The Occlusion of Maternity in Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale,” 67, 69.

501 Newton, “The Occlusion of Maternity in Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale,” 63, 70.

502 Newton reads Aristotle into Walter’s decision to marry below his class: “Walter’s seemingly perverse choice of the socially inferior Griselda, then, gestures toward the Aristotelian devaluation of the maternal role in reproduction: the inferiority of the mere matter to be shaped is irrelevant, given the paramount, inherent superiority of the active, formative male principle.” She offers an Aquinian explanation for Griselda’s patience: “Griselda’s almost excruciating patience is the essence of the maternal as defined in Aquinas’s sense of the ‘the distinct operations, that of the agent and that of the patient’ and by his insistence that ‘the entire active operation is on the part of the male and the passive on the part of the female.’” See Newton, “The Occlusion of Maternity in Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale,” 65 and 70, respectively.

503 For information on potential, if vague, antecedents to the novella, see Boccaccio, Decameron, ed. Branca, 1232n6.
making her the locus of, not an agent in, generation. This dynamic is strikingly evident in the last tale of the *Decameron*. In Boccaccio’s rendition of the Griselda story, biological and behavioral passivity feed off of and reinforce each other: Boccaccio makes Griselda the ideal mother both with respect to passive reproductive receptivity – she is ‘the body that carries the children generated by Gualtieri’ - and lack of child custody - as Griselda herself points out, Gualtieri may do what he likes with the children he generated.

There are two instances in X.10 where Griselda’s corporeal (or biological) passivity perfectly mirrors her submissive wifely behavior: her response to Gualtieri’s removal, and supposed murder, of their children and her request for a shift upon return to her paternal home. I limit my reading of the tale to these two passages, for it is at these moments – the times when, by modern standards at least, Griselda is the most submissive - that Boccaccio makes recourse to the language of generation.

When Griselda gives birth to her first daughter, Gualtieri is at first pleased: “ella ingravidò, e al tempo partorì una fanciulla, di che Gualtieri fece gran festa” (X.10.27); soon, however, he is seized by an unusual desire to test his wife’s patience. This desire first manifests itself as verbal abuse (“la punse con parole” [X.10.27]) and then as *finto* infanticide: Gualtieri orders a servant to remove the baby girl from Griselda’s care, with the pretense of killing the child. When Griselda later gives birth to a boy, he, too, is taken away and ‘murdered’. Unbeknownst to Griselda, both children are sent to a relative of Gualtieri’s to be raised.\(^{504}\)

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504 When rewriting Boccaccio’s tale, Petrarch makes slight modifications: Griselda’s children are taken only after they are weaned, at two years of age, and are sent to a sister, not a distant relative. See Petrarch, “*Historia Griseldis*: Petrarch’s *Epistolae Seniles* XVII.3”, in *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, vol. I, eds. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), 119, 121. All citations from Petrarch hereafter from this text. In Boccaccio’s version, both children are taken sometime after birth (the girl, at least, is taken from her crib) and are sent to be raised by an unspecified relative (“*una sua parente*”). In this case, as elsewhere, Petrarch’s modifications have the effect of softening Gualtieri’s
Griselda’s complacent handing over of her children to Gualtieri to be killed is an aspect of the tale that has long troubled critics; it was this incomprehensible passivity that led Momigliano to call her, in no uncertain terms, an idiot.\textsuperscript{505} Griselda’s response to her children’s loss has probably not helped her critical evaluation. To the women who offer her sympathy for the loss of her children, Griselda responds with a statement that would seem to provide support for Bergin’s diagnosis of her as “pathologically submissive”;\textsuperscript{506} she laments not her husband’s decision, claiming that her happiness, like the souls’ in Dante’s Heaven of the Moon, lies in that which is pleasing to him: “I subditi suoi, credendo che egli uccidere avesse fatti i figliuoli, il biasimavan forte e reputavanlo crudele uomo e alla donna avevan grandissima compassione. La quale con le donne, le quali con lei de’ figliuoli così morti si condoleano, mai altro non disse se non che quello ne piaceva a lei che a colui che generati gli avea” (X.10.39)

In glossing this passage, critics have drawn attention to biblical echoes – Mazzotta sees a counterpart to Griselda’s conduct in Job’s humility at the tragedies that befall him\textsuperscript{507} – or have dismissed Griselda’s response as another manifestation of her actions. See Michel Olsen, “Griselda, fabula e ricezione,” in \textit{La Storia di Griselda in Europa}, ed. Raffaele Morabito (L’Aquila-Rome: Japadre Editore, 1990), 257; and Emma Campbell, “Sexual Poetics and the Politics of Translation in the Tale of Griselda,” \textit{Comparative Literature}, Vol. 55, No. 3 (2003), 205.


\textsuperscript{506} See Bergin, \textit{Boccaccio}, 323.

\textsuperscript{507} See Giuseppe Mazzotta, \textit{The World at Play in Boccaccio’s Decameron}, 124. Mazzotta hears echoes of \textit{Job} 1:22 in Griselda’s speech.
perfect obedience and submission. They have ignored how Griselda’s language in this passage – specifically, her use of the ideologically and biologically weighted periphrasis for her children’s father, “colui che generati gli avea” - underlines that passivity and submission on both a social and a biological level. What I find interesting about Griselda’s response to the women is the way it neatly aligns behavioral and biological passivity. By expressing her agreement with the decision of the children’s ‘father’ – in her words, ‘he who generated them’ - Griselda underlines her minimal biological tie to those children at the same time as she abrogates any claim to them. In keeping with the tenets of patrilineal ideology, Griselda conflates generative power with control over offspring.

As we have seen, in fourteenth-century Italy children were considered biologically, ideologically, and legally the property of the male line. I re-cite Giulia Calvi on the subject: “from a juridical standpoint, women brought up children who did not belong to them. Indeed, according to Roman law, all children, sons and daughters, legally descend and only belong to their fathers, and patria potestas, that is the power of the father over his offspring, generates the family”.

Griselda’s response to the women’s sympathy bears witness to the idea that children are generated by and, therefore, belong to men: it implicitly minimizes her contributions to her children’s creation (Gualtieri

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509 For the legal distinction, see my earlier discussion of this point in section two of Chapter Two.

510 See Calvi, “‘Cruel’ and ‘Nurturing’ Mothers: The Construction of Motherhood in Tuscany (1500 – 1800),” 81. This quote also appears in Chapter Two; I repeat it here due to its relevance to Griselda’s speech.
generated them) while explicitly expressing her agreement with any decision he takes regarding them (“quello ne piaceva a lei che a colui che generati gli avea”).

To a certain extent, Gualtieri’s decision to ‘murder’ his children and Griselda’s compliant acceptance of it can be read as a pathologizing of the precept that children belong to the male line.\textsuperscript{511} While Gualtieri’s actions and Griselda’s response to them are open to different interpretations – therein lies the complexity of this tale - I would argue that at one level they can be read as comments on the tenuous relationship of mothers to their children in the fourteenth-century Tuscan patrician family.\textsuperscript{512} As Calvi notes, \textit{patria potestas}, the power of the father over his offspring, generates the family. In X.10, Gualtieri generates the children and he takes them away; Griselda’s response stresses her total lack of agency with regard to those children on both a biological and familial level: “mai altro non disse se non che quello ne piaceva a lei che a colui che generati gli avea”. Her response unambiguously bears witness to the view in contemporary Tuscan society that children are “more his than hers”: Gualtieri can do what he likes with the children he generated.

Twelve years after the removal of her son, Gualtieri subjects Griselda to one last test: he tells her that he will abandon her for a new younger wife. Cognizant that she came to Gualtieri with few belongings, Griselda asks only for a shift, in recompense for

\textsuperscript{511} In Chapter Two, I noted some tragicomic illustrations of the ideology that children belonged to the male line: a pregnant widow, retracted by her natal family, gives birth to a child in her husband’s home, and then is hastily remarried, leaving the child with his paternal relatives. See Section 2.6, “Mensola’s Joyful Maternity, Revisited,” in Chapter Two.

\textsuperscript{512} In his translation, Petrarch omits Griselda’s response to the people’s speech, but one could argue that he nonetheless understood the weight of the passage. In Petrarch’s version, when her daughter is taken from her, Griselda describes herself and her baby girl as ‘Gualtieri’s things’ (“de rebus tuis”); when her son is killed, she stresses that she has had no part in the children except labor pains (“neque vero in his filiis quicquam habeo preter laborem”). See Petrarch, \textit{Historia Griseldis: Petrarch’s Epistolae Seniles} XVII.3, 119, 121.
her virginity, to wear upon her return to her paternal home. Like her response to the
women, Griselda’s request for a shift affirms her behavioral submission and accordance
with Gualtieri’s wishes - if Gualtieri wishes it, she will go home nude – while underlining
her passivity on a biological and familial level:

Comandatemi che io quella dota me ne porti che io ci recai: alla qual cosa fare né
a voi pagatore né a me borsa bisognerà né somiere, per ciò che di mente uscito non m’è
che ignuda m’aveste; e se voi giudicate onesto che quel corpo nel quale io ho portati i
figliuoli da voi generati sia da tutti veduto, io me n’andrò ignuda; ma io vi priego, in
premio della mia virginità che io ci recai e non ne la porto, che almeno una sola camiscia
sopra la dota mia vi piaccia che io portar ne possa. (X.10.45)

When considering this passage, critics have generally focused on Griselda’s lost
virginity and its value as her dowry – Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, in particular, has
explored the dynamics of marital exchange in this passage - or have commented on the
biblical resonances of Griselda’s nudity: Mazzotta notes the echoes of Job (“Naked I
came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the
Lord has taken away”). By and large, critics have been more interested in themes of
dressing and undressing or nudity in this passage than they have been in Griselda’s body.

Without discounting the ritual aspects or biblical echoes, I believe the way Boccaccio

513 Klapisch-Zuber has drawn attention to the way in which the dressing and undressing of Griselda in X.10
reflects “acts and behaviors rooted in the nuptial practices” of Boccaccio’s time; she claims that Boccaccio
invested the Marquis of Saluzzo with the actions and ritual gestures of a fourteenth-century Tuscan
husband. See Klapisch-Zuber, Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy, 228-231.
For the biblical resonances of Griselda’s nudity, see Barberi Squarotti, “L’ambigua sociologia di Griselda,”
200-201and 217-18; Vittore Branca’s notes to the Decameron, 1243n8; and Giuseppe Mazzotta, The World
at Play in Boccaccio’s Decameron, 123-124. The citation is from Job 1.21 in The New Oxford Annotated
Attilio Momigliano generically faults Griselda for this speech; her meek acceptance of Gualtieri’s
repudiation of her and request for a shift is “idiotic”: “Essa è idiota, nel contegno, aristocratica nel
describes Griselda’s body in this passage – “quel corpo nel quale io ho portati i figliuoli da voi generati” - draws attention not so much to the nudity of that body as to its functionality: his language explicitly draws attention to Griselda’s maternity – to the role her body played in carrying Gualtieri’s children.

In “Sexual Poetics and the Politics of Translation in the Tale of Griselda,” Emma Campbell has explored the changes Boccaccio’s tale undergoes in Petrarch’s and Chaucer’s later rewritings. She has argued that Petrarch, in his Latin translation of the story, attempts “to offset the attention paid to Griselda’s sexual and maternal body” in Boccaccio’s tale. According to Campbell, Petrarch “deliberately downplays the material emphasis of the Boccaccian source” by having Griselda “declare before God that she has always remained a maid at heart, drawing attention away from the physical reality of her relationship with her husband and her two children to focus instead upon the continuing integrity of her spiritual being.” The fact that Petrarch would seek to downplay any reference to Griselda’s maternal body or her procreative capacity is not altogether surprising: we will remember that in the Secretum, Augustine evokes Laura’s post-partum body – described as “sfinito dai frequenti parti” - as a means of disabusing the author of his love for her. Yet Campbell draws attention to an aspect of


517 “…ogni giorno s’avvicina sempre di più alla morte, e quello splendido corpo, sfinito dalle malattie e dai frequenti parti, ha perso molto della salute di un tempo.” See Petrarch, Secretum: Il mio segreto, ed. and
Boccaccio’s text, even if only in reference to Petrarch’s version, that I believe has gone unnoticed in Boccaccian criticism. In the passage discussed above, Boccaccio places Griselda’s “sexual and maternal body” – the object that so troubled Petrarch – front and center.\(^{518}\)

In this passage, Boccaccio openly draws attention to the passive functionality of Griselda’s maternity: as mother, Griselda is the body (or vessel) that carries the children generated by Gualtieri (“quel corpo nel quale io ho portati i figliuoli da voi generati” [X.10.45]).\(^{519}\) This verse is reminiscent of the Florentine statute urging women to carry the children procreated by their husbands “like little sacks”.\(^{520}\) As historians suggest, ideas of the body were often used in Renaissance Italy “to naturalize the domination of one group by another….or to underpin the transmission of property and power.”\(^{521}\) I believe that in X.10 Boccaccio makes Griselda the emblematic maternal body - passively functional, with no right or claim to the children she bears - to parody patrilineal ideologies of motherhood and the family. By stressing Griselda’s complete corporeal

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\(^{518}\) Boccaccio, unlike Petrarch, does not take a moralistic approach to the sexualized maternal body: in at least two tales in the *Decameron*, men fall in love with (and in one case, sexually respond to) pregnant women. X.4’s necrophilia scene takes place when Catalina is far along in her pregnancy (she gives birth shortly after reawakening), and in VII.3, Rinaldo first falls in love with Agnesa when she is pregnant.

\(^{519}\) In his rewriting, Petrarch substitutes ‘uterus’ and ‘ventrem’ for ‘body’: “hic uterus in quo filii fuerunt quos tu genuisti” and “qua ventrem tue quondam uxoris operiam”. See Petrarch, *Historia Griseldis*: Petrarch’s *Epistolae Seniles* XVII.3,”125. Chaucer’s English is closer to Petrarch than Boccaccio: “That thilke wombe in which youre children leye.” Cited in Newton, “The Occlusion of Maternity,” 68.


\(^{521}\) See Park, “Was There a Renaissance Body?,” 324.
passivity – the vessel in which Gualtieri generates his children – and by pathologizing the
precept that children belong to the male line, Boccaccio exposes the male-bias of
contemporary ideologies of the family: by her own admission, Griselda passively carries
children generated by Gualtieri, over whom she has little claim. Barberi Squarotti
suggests that the Griselda tale presents us with an example of a family whose perfect
organization is the result of the total and perfect submission of the woman (“l’esempio
della famiglia perfettamente organizzata proprio per la sottomissione totale e perfetta
della donna”).522 That Griselda’s submission is ‘total and perfect’ is due in part to the
way Boccaccio represents her body and her maternity in this tale. Boccaccio’s
employment of the trope of generation in the passage above, and in the earlier response to
the women, underscores Griselda’s total domination by Gualtieri and her marginal
position in the patrilineal family.

I would like to conclude by noting a discordant note that complicates, somewhat,
this tale’s neat reflection of generative theory, patrilineal ideology, and contemporary
family structure.523 At the end of X.10, Gualtieri explains his reasons for having
subjected Griselda to such cruel tests: “ciò che io faceva a antiveduto fine operava,
volendoti insegnar d’essere moglie e a loro di saperla tenere, e a me partorire perpetua
quiete mentre teco a vivere avessi” (X.10.61, my emphasis). His tests thus had three

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523 Another discordant note occurs during Griselda’s request for a shift. I find it intriguing that when
docilely submitting to Gualtieri’s substitution of her with a younger wife, Griselda draws attention to the
fulfillment of her uxorial and maternal duties – she bore him two children – something that could make
Gualtieri feel indebted to her and, therefore, less disposed to divorce her; as we have seen, the terms in
which she does so stress the passivity of her reproductive role. I wonder, however, if by mentioning the
children ‘her body bore’ Griselda may be resisting, or contesting, Gualtieri’s rule. At this point in the tale,
it has been twelve years since Gualtieri ostensibly murdered their two children; the fact that Griselda brings
them up here – she could have just asked for a shift to cover her ‘body’ and left it at that – could be read as
an indication of silent resistance to Gualtieri’s tyranny.
goals: to teach Griselda to be a wife; to teach his subjects how to keep a wife; and to bear him perpetual peace and quiet as long as he was living with Griselda. This figurative usage of the verb *partorire* represents a hapax in the text: it is the only time that the verb is used metaphorically. Hollander and Cahill have noted the unusualness of Gualtieri’s language: “Gualtieri, in his self-exoneration to his wife, uses the verb for parturition to indicate not the children whom he feigned to have put to death, who are not even mentioned as part of the result of this most strange marriage, but the peace that he has gained from his wife’s subservience.”

It is not only the covert allusion to Griselda’s children that makes this language so odd, however. Throughout this chapter, I have argued for the gendered nature of the language of generation: men generate children, women carry and bear them. Fourteenth-century physician Savonarola’s comment on the perceived inequality of the pain and pleasure men and women experience in reproduction clearly acknowledges the distinctly gendered nature of this language: “O misere, ditime il perché ha la natura dato tanto delecto a l’huomo ne l’*impregnare* e *generare*, e a la femena tanto dolore nel *parturire*?”

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524 McWilliam totally circumvents the verb with “and to guarantee my own peace and quiet for as long as we were living beneath the same roof”. See Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. G.H. McWilliam, 793.

525 The verb appears six times: at V.7.24; IX.3.1; IX.3.27 (twice); X.4.22; and X.10.61. See [www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/texts/concordance/parole-piacevano.pdf](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/texts/concordance/parole-piacevano.pdf) accessed 8/18/10.

526 See Hollander and Cahill, “Day Ten of the *Decameron*,” 157. In her keynote address for the “Towards a Gendered History of Italian Literature” conference at New York University, given on February 8, 2008, Teodolinda Barolini also noted the oddness of this use of *partorire*. As Barolini has shown, Gualtieri’s use of the *consolato* trope in this verse - “e a me partorire perpetua quiete mentre teco a vivere avessi” - moves away from a religious context to become an affirmation of self-satisfied power. See Barolini, “Sociologie della brigata: il gender nel gruppo sociale da Guido, *I’ vorrei al Decameron*,” in *Per una storia di genere della letteratura italiana: Percorsi critici e gender studies*, eds. Virginia Cox and Chiara Ferrari (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011).
Throughout the Decameron, Boccaccio respects this gendered split: men impregnate (impregnare) and generate (generare), women give birth (partorire). At the end of X.10, however, the lines become muddled: Gualtieri generates and, oddly, he gives birth. If, as Katharine Park suggests, “the process of generation mapped onto the proper hierarchy of gender in the patriarchal family” in late medieval and Renaissance Italy, Gualtieri’s explanation distorts in some way this tale’s presentation of the proper hierarchy of the family. By describing his, by any measure, hateful spousal actions as ‘giving birth’ to familial peace and quiet, Gualtieri fully absorbs Griselda’s reality into his own. Yet the confounding of gender expectations implicit in Gualtieri’s use of partorire would likely lead medieval readers to sense a false note – una stonatura – in this rosy, self-justifying family narrative.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have considered how Boccaccio uses the gendered language of generation to underscore the marginality of women to male-dominated kin relationships and male-dominated family structures. Boccaccio’s use of the trope of generation in III.8,

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527 See Michele Savonarola, *Il trattato ginecologico-pediatrico in volgare*, ed. Luigi Belloni (Milan: Società italiana di ostetricia e ginecologia, 1952), 116. Savonarola relies on the biblical account of the Fall (God said Eve would bear children in pain) to explain this phenomenon. He then hypothesizes that if men felt some pain during the birth of their children they would at least be more certain they were theirs: “dil parto di quelle non porta alcuna pena, che cussì portendolla serebbe più secco che suo fiolo fosse” (117). In addition to the traditional biblical explanation, Girolamo Mercurio relates the pain women feel during childbirth to their weak and fragile constitution that is not equal to the hard work required in labor and to the large size of the human fetus’s head. See Mercurio, *La commare o riccoglitrice in Medicina per le donne nel Cinquecento*, 68-69.


529 I am grateful to Teodolinda Barolini for this observation.
V.7, X.4, and X.10 privileges paternity by placing the emphasis on the father’s actions in bringing about a new being - the Abbot generates a child in Ferondo’s wife – and dissociates the mother from the process, thereby effacing her relationship to the child. Yet while Boccaccio stresses male-initiated generation and male possession of both offspring and maternal body in many of the Decameron’s tales, we will see that he complicates the paradigm in others by endowing women with reproductive agency. Significantly, this agency does not manifest itself in female efforts to conceive a child, a desire both universally accepted and promoted in fourteenth-century society, but rather in efforts to avoid or terminate unwanted pregnancies. While, in focusing on extra-marital sexuality, Boccaccio is clearly drawing on the fabliaux tradition, the historical specificity of his references to anti-natal practices root these tales to their cultural context and make them rich for exploration.

In the following chapter, I consider how depictions of unwanted, problematic, and/or parodic maternities in the Decameron – a work, we will remember, specifically addressed to women – function as a counter-narrative to contemporary society’s overwhelmingly natalist ideology of reproduction and birth. I conclude by examining affective portrayals of the tie between mother and child; I explore how an authorial emphasis on the physicality of gestation and the carnal bond between mother and child – the primal odor materno which, in II.6, enables a son to recognize his mother – subtly questions the profound privileging of paternity in fourteenth-century Tuscan society.
Chapter V: L'odor materno: The Decameron and Fourteenth-Century Motherhood

5.1 Introduction

Throughout this project, I have argued that when considering literary depictions of motherhood, whether in the Ninfale fiesolano or the Decameron, we must keep in mind the realities of motherhood in late medieval and Renaissance Tuscan society. In previous chapters, I have explored what we would today call the “biological” realities of motherhood: the various discourses, medical and familial, that assigned women a secondary role in the process of generation, effacing their contribution to both child and line. Theories of reproduction, of course, constitute only part of the reality of motherhood; a woman’s experience of motherhood is also determined by custom and practice, demographic realities, as well as ideologies of the family. It is the complex interaction of biology, ideology, demography, ritual, and practice that constitutes the reality of motherhood at any one given point in history.

In this chapter, I seek to relate the picture of motherhood we receive when reading the Decameron to the complex mix of discourses and practices that made up the reality of motherhood in fourteenth-century Florence. I explore what aspects of fourteenth-century motherhood Boccaccio elects to include in his work, to what end he puts this material, and, perhaps most importantly, what he chooses to omit or ignore. As noted in earlier chapters, there have been few studies of maternity in the Decameron; comments about Boccaccio’s treatment of motherhood are typically folded into studies of the family and are notable for their ahistorical, de-contextualized nature. If we are to understand what Boccaccio is saying about mothers - and, by extension, women - in the Decameron, however, we cannot rely on our own modern perceptions of, or feelings about,
motherhood. Just as ignoring the gender hierarchy behind the trope of generation misses
the significance of Boccaccio’s employment of this language, so too do de-contextualized
readings of motherhood overlook the way literary depictions mediate a woman’s
experience or engage with contemporary discourses of the family.

Twenty years ago, Thomas Bergin suggested that Boccaccio is not much
interested in ‘good mothers’ in the Decameron: “Aside from Madonna Beritolà, good
mothers are not ‘played up’ in the Decameron. We may applaud the solicitude of Monna
Giovanna in the tale of the falcon; in order to save her son’s life she humbles herself to
ask a favor of a man she had earlier rejected. But mothers do not always know best, as we
learn from the sad story of Young Girolamo (4.8), whose mother, not recognizing true
love when she sees it, separates her son from his sweetheart and is ultimately responsible
for his death. And whatever we may think of Griselda’s claim to perfect wifehood, as a
mother she is hardly to be admired.”

Given the brevity and scope of his article, Bergin was not concerned with probing
the reasons behind Boccaccio’s supposed lack of interest in good mothers. But his
comment is representative of a general critical stance when considering motherhood in
the Decameron. As noted earlier, Giovanni Getto has claimed that when the figure of the
mother is not necessary to a story, Boccaccio does without. In Boccaccio: l’invenzione
della letteratura mezzana, Francesco Bruni repeats, with approval, Giuseppe
Billanovich’s observation that the Decameron praises ‘women who don’t get old and who
don’t reproduce’: “Nel Decameron si esaltano, per ripetere un’ incisiva osservazione di

Billanovich, ‘donne che non invecchiano e che non generano’. What these critics have forgotten to ask is why. Why doesn’t Boccaccio play up ‘good mothers’? Why are mothers afforded little narrative presence in the Decameron? Why is the text more interested in donne che non generano than those who do?

One way to start to answer these difficult questions is by relating the image of motherhood we receive in the Decameron to the reality of motherhood in the society of the work’s composition. As historians have shown, Tuscan women were conditioned for motherhood from a young age: their dowries included items for future children, their house contained items reminding them of the importance of becoming a mother (and bearing a male child), and, in society, they regularly encountered a wealth of recipes and practices aimed at increasing their fertility. I argue that the omnipresence and gender-specificity of Tuscan society’s promotion of procreation is a necessary context when considering the way motherhood is treated in the Decameron.

The Decameron is, as we know, openly dedicated to women subject to the wills of others - fathers, mothers, brothers, and husbands - and restricted to the narrow confines of their rooms. Regardless of the book’s actual audience - which certainly included many men - the author frames the work, and its stories, as solace for fourteenth-century women. In this chapter, I consider the relationship between the restricted lives of

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533 It is a matter of scholarly debate whether fourteenth-century women were actually readers of the Decameron. Victoria Kirkham has noted that the work’s most avid early readers were upper class men and merchants, although she allows that their wives - “respectable, and presumably active, burgesses” - were also likely readers. See Victoria Kirkham, “Boccaccio’s Dedication to Women in Love,” in Sign of Reason in Boccaccio’s Fiction (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1993), 118-119. Marilyn Migiel addresses the issue of the Decameron’s audience in the Introduction to her book A Rhetoric of the Decameron. Migiel, while accepting that Boccaccio represents his female audience according to literary antecedents, seems to discount the possibility of any real female audience (whom she calls the “non-existent audience - i.e. the
Boccaccio’s purported audience and the *Decameron’s* depiction of motherhood. I ask how Boccaccio’s literary portrayal of motherhood - whether depictions of unwanted motherhood, such as V.7 or IX.3, or affective portraits of mother-child interactions, such as Monna Giovanna’s solicitude for her ailing son in V.9 - comment on, or provide solace with respect to, the ideology and reality of motherhood in fourteenth-century Tuscany.

To a certain extent, then, the work of this chapter is one of restoration: I aim to restore to the *Decameron’s* depictions of motherhood the multiple resonances which these passages would have carried for his contemporaries. In an effort to recreate the conditions of motherhood in fourteenth-century Tuscany, this chapter considers not only the demographic realities of childbearing, but also the manifold discourses promoting female fertility and the domestic objects and rituals that encouraged women to assume a maternal role. I explore how, when depicting motherhood in the *Decameron*, Boccaccio alternately ignores, plays with, and, at times, subverts beliefs about motherhood and its attendant rituals and customs. In the latter part of the chapter, I turn to affective portrayals of the tie between mother and child; I explore how an emphasis on the strength and physicality of the bond between mother and child – the primal *odor materno* which, in II.6, enables a son to recognize his mother or the unbreakable *leggi delle madri* invoked by monna Giovanna in V.9 – is framed by the traditional concerns of the male-dominated family.

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women the Author spuriously claims as his audience”). See Migiel, *A Rhetoric of the Decameron* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 6. I take Boccaccio’s claim to be writing for women at face value and assume that the tales he includes in the work are selected with this audience in mind.
5.2 The Demographic Realities of Motherhood in Fourteenth-Century Tuscany

Before turning to the Decameron’s unwanted, farcical, or affective treatments of motherhood, I will explore some of the factors that influenced and structured the experience of motherhood in fourteenth-century Tuscany. The demographic realities of childbearing, and fourteenth-century Florentines’ response to them, are an essential context for the Decameron’s depiction of motherhood, for high maternal and infant mortality rates profoundly influenced the way Florentines thought about reproduction and structured the family. In this section, I explore the demographic factors influencing a woman’s experience of maternity and consider how, and why, Boccaccio’s treatment elides or obscures these harsh realities.

Perhaps the most pressing and unavoidable ‘reality’ of motherhood in the premodern period was the ever-present specter of death. As Katharine Park notes, childbearing in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance was “risky business”, many women died during birth or following it, while only half the children they bore reached maturity.⁵³⁴ From their examination of the Florentine Books of the Dead, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber and David Herlihy found that roughly 20% of the deaths of married women in fifteenth-century Florence were associated with childbearing.⁵³⁵ Their data

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indicates a maternal mortality rate of 14.4 deaths for every 1,000 births, a rate on par with maternal mortality today in war-torn countries like Afghanistan, and approximately 300 times higher than in most modern European countries today.\textsuperscript{536} According to Klapisch-Zuber, half of all deaths of married women who predeceased their husbands in the ricordanze are related to childbirth; only one in six (17\%) of these deaths of married women is attributable to various fevers, illnesses, or epidemics.\textsuperscript{537} As Park notes, this data indicates three times as many married women died in childbirth “as died of disease, even in the relatively unhealthy period following the Black Death of 1348.”\textsuperscript{538}

Being from a prosperous family did little to protect a fourteenth-century woman from death in childbirth; if anything, it exposed her to it more. Because patrician families in Renaissance Tuscany, “placed especial emphasis on lineage,” Jacqueline Marie Musacchio writes, women “underwent pregnancy after pregnancy, in an attempt to bear an heir.”\textsuperscript{539} The more pregnancies one underwent, of course, the higher the probability of something eventually going wrong.\textsuperscript{540} Beatrice d’Este, Lucrezia Borgia, Maddalena de la

\textsuperscript{536} Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber calculate the maternal mortality rate in Florence as 14.4 deaths for every 1,000 births. They note that one out of sixty-nine women who gave birth died of puerperal complications. See Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, \textit{Tuscans and their Families}, 277. For a point of comparison, according to the World Health Organization, maternal mortality in 2008 was 24 per 100,000 live births in the United States; 12 in Canada; 8 in Australia; and 5 in Italy. Much of Africa shows rates between 550-999 deaths per 100,000 live births. Only Afghanistan in 2008 approaches fifteenth-century Florence’s rate. For WHO data, see \url{http://www.who.int/healthinfo/statistics/indmaternalmortality/en/index.html} accessed 6/7/2011.

\textsuperscript{537} See Klapisch-Zuber, “Les femmes et la mort à la fin du Moyen Age,” 219.

\textsuperscript{538} See Park, \textit{The Secrets of Women}, 138.

\textsuperscript{539} Musacchio, \textit{The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy}, 25.

\textsuperscript{540} Poor women, if pregnant less often, faced worse conditions of care; an oft-cited letter to Francesco Datini (1388) graphically illuminates the helplessness of pre-modern people when faced with a birth complication: “La serva vostra è stata da martedì sera in qua sopra partorire, ed è lla magiore pieta che mai si vedesse. Che mai no fu femine contantri e non si a si duro chuore che no piagnesse vedendola. E conviene che ssia tenuta, altrimenti s’ucciderebbe; era vi donne ch’à parte a parte di loro la guardano. Stamano dichono che temono che lla criatura nella sia morta in chorpo.” (Since Tuesday evening your maid has been in labor and it is the most piteous thing one could ever see. Never has a woman suffered so much
Tour d’Auvergne de’ Medici, and the Grand Duchess Giovanna de’ Medici all died as a result of childbirth; the Medici secretary’s notation of Maddalena’s death is evidence of the common nature of this outcome: “questo anno ne sono morte assai qui in Firenze, come è la verità, delle donne di parto.”

If a woman made it through a birth unscathed, there was no guarantee that her child would also. Louis Haas notes the recurrence of the phrase “Nacque …. e morì subito” (born and died quickly) in Tuscan birth records, indicating the frequency with which newborns died. Throughout the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, mortality rates for infants and young children were frighteningly high. Estimates of childhood mortality in the pre-modern period vary, but most historians place it in the range of thirty to fifty percent. In late medieval Florence, periodic epidemic diseases, such as plague

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541 Maddalena died two weeks after giving birth to Caterina de’ Medici in 1519 from post-partum infection. See Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, 25, 182n47. Giovanna de’ Medici had six difficult pregnancies, all resulting in daughters, before her son Filippo was born in 1577. In 1578, she was pregnant again. When her favored midwife could not deliver her, a group of male doctors was brought in; they also proved ineffectual. After several interventions they decided it was better to let her die “che fusse meglio lasciarla vivere quel poco di vita che gli restava senza più travagliarla.” See Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, 25, 182n49.

542 Klapisch-Zuber and Herlihy’s analysis of the Florentine Books of the Dead identify 33 babies who died shortly after birth, 45 who were “nato innanzi il tempo” (likely premature), and 10 *sconciature*, or aborted fetuses and stillbirths, for an average of 47 neonatal deaths per year. They note that this estimate of neonatal mortality is difficult to evaluate because of a lack of information about the exact number of births and time of death. See Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families*, 278.


544 By relying on later demographic data and applying it to the late medieval period, historians have estimated that approximately three out of every ten children died before they reach the age of one, and that scarcely one child out of two lived to puberty. For infant and childhood mortality, see Danièle Alexandre-Bidon and Didier Lett, *Children in the Middle Ages: Fifth-Fifteenth Centuries*, trans. Jody Gladding (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999 [1997]), 32; Ann G. Carmichael, *Plague and the Poor in Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 41-54; Shulamith Shahar,
or smallpox, and chronic unsanitary environments, resulting in gastrointestinal disorders, dehydration, and infection, killed around half of all children before they reached ten years of age.\textsuperscript{545} Childhood mortality was something with which Boccaccio himself would have been well acquainted: not one of his five children survived to maturity.\textsuperscript{546}

Pre-modern men and women reacted to the perils of reproduction in a variety of ways. Stanley Chojnacki found that women tended to draw up wills during pregnancy; insurance was also purchased in anticipation of a birth to cover the potential loss of the \textit{gravida}'s dowry.\textsuperscript{547} But legal means of mitigating risk aside, the biggest way people dealt

\textsuperscript{545} In this respect, patrician children seem to have fared slightly better: Klapisch-Zuber, working from a sample of 152 affluent Florentine families between 1300 and 1550, found that 20\% of these well-off children were dead before the age of three, 30\% did not make it to age ten, and 34\% died before the age of fifteen. See Klapisch-Zuber, “Les femmes et la mort à la fin du Moyen Age,” 210. Her data comes from charting births and deaths as noted in family \textit{ricordanze}. For an excellent study and analysis of childhood illness in early fifteenth-century Florence, see Carmichael, \textit{Plague and the Poor in Renaissance Florence}, “Diseases of little children”, 41-54. See also Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, \textit{Tuscans and Their Families}, 274-279; and Alexandre-Bidon and Lett, \textit{Children in the Middle Ages: Fifth-Fifteenth Centuries}, 33-34.

\textsuperscript{546} As Thomas Bergin notes, Boccaccio’s Eclogue, “Olympia,” makes it clear that none of the author’s five children survived to adulthood. See Bergin, \textit{Boccaccio} (New York: Viking, 1981), 51 and, also, “Boccaccio and the Family,” \textit{Rivista di Studi Italiani}, Anno 1, No. 1 (June, 1983), 18. In the poem, Boccaccio’s daughter Violante (Olympia) points out four of his other children: Mario, Giulio, and two little sisters - “Non Marium Iulumque tuos dulcesque sorores noscis, et egregious vultus? Tua pulchra propago est.” Because Boccaccio’s children appear to him in this poem not at the age at which they died, but at the age they would be at its composition, he has difficulty recognizing Mario and Giulio who have light beards: “Abstulit effigies notas lanugine malas umbratas vidisse meis.” The fact that Boccaccio’s two little daughters are not named has led critics to hazard that they died shortly after birth, while Mario and Giulio’s light beards would indicate that they died sometime before puberty. See Boccaccio, \textit{Tutte le Opere}, ed. Pier Giorgio Ricci, \textit{Buccolicum Carmen}, Eclogue XIV “Olympia” (Milan and Naples: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1965).

\textsuperscript{547} See Stanley Chojnacki. “Dowries and Kinsmen in Early Renaissance Venice,” \textit{Journal of Interdisciplinary History}, Vol. V (1975), 585-6, also cited in Musacchio, \textit{The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy}, 25. Chojnacki notes that twenty-eight of the 202 women’s wills he studied were explicitly written during pregnancy, and another thirty-one were written by wives who may have been pregnant. Excluding out unmarried testatresses from his sample, Chojnacki calculates that as many as 49.2\% of married women writing wills were pregnant at the time (585). Alessandra Strozzi bought insurance to cover her pregnant daughter in 1449 to protect the 500 florins already advanced to her son-in-law. See Musacchio, \textit{The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy}, 25, 182n40, and “Imaginative Conceptions in Renaissance Italy,” in \textit{Picturing Women in Renaissance and
with the perils of reproduction was, somewhat paradoxically, by having more children: in this respect, the desire to produce heirs outweighed the fear of death in childbirth.\footnote{See Louis Haas, \textit{The Renaissance Man and His Children}, 28-29; Margaret L. King, \textit{Women of the Renaissance}, 2-4.}

“High fertility,” Margaret King notes, “was in the interest of the propertied family, whose ability to prevail ‘against the powerful forces of death’ required at least one surviving male heir.”\footnote{See King, \textit{Women of the Renaissance}, 2.}

As frequently noted, upper class Tuscan families achieved startlingly high levels of fertility: Gregorio Dati married five times and fathered 28 children;\footnote{See Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, \textit{Tuscans and Their Families}, 250.} Florentine Lapo di Giovanni Niccolini dei Sirigatti had seven children by his first wife and six by his second; his son Paolo had twenty children by two wives, a concubine, and a mistress.\footnote{See Klapisch-Zuber, \textit{Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy}, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987 [1985]), 73n25.}

Maximum biological fertility for the human female is generally considered twelve births, but many Renaissance women were able to surpass this number: Florentine Antonia Masi, the wife of an artisan, gave birth to thirty-six children, while Venetian noblewoman Magdalucia Marcello bore twenty-six, nearly one per year for her years of fertility.\footnote{Both women lived during the fifteenth century. See Margaret L. King, \textit{Women of the Renaissance}, 3-4; and Haas, \textit{The Renaissance Man and His Children}, 21. These high levels of fertility were considered necessary to continue the line in light of devastating rates of childhood mortality. Of the twenty-six children borne by Dati’s first four wives, eight were alive in 1431, while only eight of Paolo di Lapo’s sixteen legitimate children and thirteen of Magdalucia Marcello’s twenty-six children made it to adulthood.}

The patrician family’s focus on fertility and heirs meant, in practical terms, that women spent a large portion of their lives pregnant. Historians have found that the

\textit{Baroque Italy}, eds. Geraldine A. Johnson and Sara F. Matthews Grieco (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 42.
wealthiest women in Renaissance Florence were also the most fecund: wealthy women were both younger when they first became mothers and were able to maintain their fertility over a longer time span than poorer women, having, on average, 9.4 children.\textsuperscript{553} The well-established practice of wetnursing - the sending of an infant to be nursed by another woman for a period of up to two years - allowed upper class women to circumvent nursing’s contraceptive effects, thereby freeing them up to conceive children in quick succession.\textsuperscript{554} Yet, as Angus McLaren rightly notes, this system benefited the husband much more than the wife “since, at no risk to his health, it brought the promise of additional heirs.”\textsuperscript{555} Historians point to the heavy physical toll that repeated pregnancies had on women: even if they did survive, their health was often compromised, as the many descriptions of women ‘worn out by childbearing’ (in Petrarch’s words, “sfinito…dai frequenti parti”) attest.\textsuperscript{556} Katharine Park sums up the reality of motherhood

\textsuperscript{553} See Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, \textit{Tuscans and Their Families}, 151, 249. Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber note that while “the time that rich women spent in marriage, under risk of pregnancy, was often cut short by the deaths of their older husbands”, they maintained high levels of fertility and produced numerous children during their abbreviated married lives (250). In “Les femmes et la mort à la fin du Moyen Age,” Klapisch-Zuber comments on the elevated fertility rate of Tuscan merchants’ wives: she found that women married before the age of twenty had an average of 9.4 children (219n19).

\textsuperscript{554} Thus Ser Girolamo’s wife is able to conceive again only seven months after the birth of their first child (their first child was born on September 18, 1473 and their second child in January 1475). See Musacchio, \textit{The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy}, 36, 53. It is likely due to wetnursing that Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi was able to bear eight children in the span of ten years. See King, \textit{Women of the Renaissance}, 3; Haas, \textit{The Renaissance Man and His Children}, 21. Margaret King notes that poor women, whose fertility was somewhat limited by nursing, typically gave birth every twenty-four to thirty months. See King, \textit{Women of the Renaissance}, 2.


\textsuperscript{556} For the physical toll of repeated pregnancy, see Musacchio, \textit{The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy}, 24; Katharine Park, \textit{The Secrets of Women}, 131; Megan Holmes, “Disrobing the Virgin: The Madonna Lactans in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Art,” 188; and Angus McLaren, \textit{A History of Contraception: From Antiquity to the Present Day}, 111-112, 115. Louis Haas notes the frequency of miscarriage due to the low level of prenatal care. See Haas, \textit{The Renaissance Man and His Children}, 51. For the ‘worn out by childbearing’ topos, see Angus McLaren, \textit{A History of Contraception}, 115, Mary Martin McLaughlin, “Survivors and Surrogates: Children and Parents from the Ninth to the Thirteenth
in patrilineal Tuscany in rather stark terms: “Wed in their teens to much older men, these women were supposed to perpetuate the families of their husbands by producing as many male children as their bodies could bear.”

The picture of motherhood that emerges from these sources is not pretty. The stark demographic realities of childbearing and childrearing and the patrician family’s focus on heirs combined to make a woman “perpetually pregnant” and in constant peril during her years of fertility. Florentine women could expect to bear “a series of children in quick succession, only to die in childbirth in their twenties or early thirties.”

If this is the reality of motherhood in fourteenth-century Tuscan society, it is not, however, the picture we receive when reading the Decameron. To start with one significant departure, no woman dies in childbirth in Boccaccio’s text, nor does any woman suffer a pregnancy related illness. This observation stands both for narrated events, and past events related in the work; mothers who are already dead in a tale (such as II.8 or IV.1) are not identified as having died in childbirth. While the Decameron does not ignore childhood morbidity and mortality - in VII.3, Agnesa’s son is said to be stricken with vermi, or ‘worms’, a common childhood disease, and in V.9 Monna Giovanna’s young son dies after a brief illness - it does ignore these other troubling

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557 See Park, The Secrets of Women, 131. Gregorio Dati’s record of the deaths of his first three wives provides support for Park’s statement above: Bandecca “returned her soul to her Creator” after a nine-month illness started by a miscarriage; Isabetta ascended to Paradise after the birth of their eighth child (he writes, “and I shall have no more children by her to list here”); Ginevra, having borne eleven children in fifteen years, “died in childbirth after lengthy suffering, which she bore with remarkable strength and patience.” See Margaret L. King, Women of the Renaissance, 6; and Haas, The Renaissance Man and His Children, 51, 53. Bandecca died in 1390, Isabetta in 1402, and Ginevra in 1420.

558 See King, Women of the Renaissance, 14.

559 See Park, The Secrets of Women, 122.
aspects of motherhood. If the brigata is under strict orders not to talk about the plague, it seems they also cannot speak of maternal mortality. This may seem like a banal observation, but given that, as Teodolinda Barolini has astutely pointed out, women and their issues “are never peripheral” to Boccaccio, it strikes me as significant that this women’s issue is so patently ignored.560

The exclusion of maternal mortality from the Decameron appears intentional. When Boccaccio transformed a Filocolo story into Decameron X.4, he deliberately changed the cause of Catalina’s death from childbirth-related to a generic illness, a move that bucks the general trend of increased socio-historical specificity in the novella. In Question 13 of the Fourth Book of the Filocolo, widely seen as the precursor to Decameron X.4, Catalina’s counterpart dies in childbirth: “questa mattina, volendo partorire, per grave doglia non partorendo morì, e onorevolmente in mia presenza da’ suoi parenti fu sepellita” (IV 13).561 In the Decameron version, Catalina, while pregnant, dies as the result of “un fiero accidente” unrelated to her gravid state: “la donna a una sua possessione forse tre miglia alla terra vicina essendosi, per ciò che gravida era, andata a stare, avvenne che subitamente un fiero accidente la sopraprese, il quale fu tale e di tanta forza, che in lei spense ogni segno di vita e per ciò eziandio da alcun medico morta giudicata fu” (X.4.6). The change in cause of death, from childbirth in the Filocolo to an unrelated sickness in the Decameron, has no narrative logic: it does not affect the rest of


the story. In both the *Filocolo* and *Decameron* versions, Gentile enters Catalina’s tomb, discovers that she is still living, and takes her home where she later gives birth.\(^{562}\)

As critics have noted, the *Decameron* version of the *Filocolo* story is notable for its increased geographical and socio-historical specificity.\(^{563}\) The tale, originally set in Grenada - which, according to Nelson Moe, functions in its vagueness “as a kind of every city” - at an unspecified time with unnamed characters is transformed in the *Decameron* into a tale with very specific geographical and historical markers: X.4 is set Bologna in the recent past and the characters are given both first and the illustrious last names of Bolognese families.\(^{564}\) The novella’s increased geographical and historical specificity manifests itself in various details.\(^{565}\) Upon being rescued from the tomb, Catalina is brought not to Gentile’s mother’s house, as in the *Filocolo* (“a casa della madre di lui tacitamente la ne portarono” [IV 13]), but to Gentile’s own house where his mother is living (“in casa sua la condusse in Bologna. Era quivi la madre di lui…” [X.4.12-13]),

\(^{562}\) There are minor differences between the two tales, such as where Gentile feels Catalina’s pulse - in the *Filocolo*, Gentile’s counterpart discovers his beloved is living when he feels her pulse through her belly; in the *Decameron*, he feels her pulse when he puts his hand on her chest - and the amount of time that elapses before Catalina’s birth, but they do not appear to be related to the difference in the cause of death.


\(^{565}\) I would note that one place where historical specificity is lacking in X.4, however, is the childbirth scene: the *Filocolo* version is considerably more detailed than X.4’s formulaic announcement of birth (“ella sentì il tempo del partorire esser venuto: per che, teneramente dalla madre di messer Gentile aiutata, non molto stante partorì un bel figliuol maschio” [X.4.22]). The earlier text, while certainly not replete with description, contains a few more details that lend a realistic flavor to the scene: “In questa maniera stando, come fu piacere degl’iddii, invocato l’aiuto di Lucina, la donna, facendo un bellissimo figliuolo maschio, da tale affanno e pericolo si liberò, rimanendo scarica e fuori d’ogni alterazione e lieta del nato figliuolo; a cui prestamente balie alla guardia di lei e del garzone trovate furono” (*Filocolo* IV 13). In the *Filocolo*, while we get yet another male baby, we also have Lucina, the goddess of childbirth, and the practical mention of *balie* - nurses and wetnurses - for mother and baby (nor is this the only mention of the *balia* during the *Filocolo*’s banquet scene, which Catalina’s counterpart attends alone, the baby is in another room with a wetnurse).
reflecting, if not patrilocal residence, then at least the designation of houses as men’s.

Increased socio-historical specificity is also noticeable in Catalina’s preoccupation with maintaining her honor while living under Gentile’s roof (“il pregò, per quello amore il quale egli l’aveva già portato e per cortesia di lui, che in casa sua ella da lui non ricevesse cosa che fosse meno che onor di lei e del suo marito” [X.4.16]), an element completely lacking from the Filocolo original.

In light of the novella’s increased geographical and historical specificity, the change in cause of death is striking. Had Boccaccio wanted to be historically accurate, he could have easily continued to attribute Catalina’s death to childbirth; as we have seen, twenty percent of married women died in or shortly after childbirth. Instead, he chose to change it from a historically specific and plausible cause (“volendo partorire, per grave doglia non partorendo morì”) to a non-specific ‘cruel illness’ (“un fiero accidente”).

I would note that this change is made by an author who is more than capable of narrating the “specifics” of female life, when he wants to. In the Corbaccio, in a passage widely patterned off of Juvenal’s Satire VI, Boccaccio laments women’s anti-natal practices: “Oh quanti parti, in quelle o che più temono o che più delli loro sconci falli arrossano, innanzi il tempo periscono! Per questo la misera savina più che gli altri alberi si trova sempre pelata” (Corbaccio, 231). Boccaccio’s reemployment of the topos is marked by an unusual specificity in that he mentions the abortifacient herb savina, or juniper. Juniperus Sabina L., commonly known as sabine or savin, was prescribed

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566 Branca’s notes interpret ‘un fiero accidente’ as a violent sickness or a sudden, terrible collapse (“la colse di sorpresa una violenta malattia, o un subitaneo terribile collasso”). See Boccaccio, Decameron, ed. Branca, 1139n3. G.H. McWilliam translates it as “a sudden and cruel malady”. See Giovanni Boccaccio, The Decameron, trans. G.H. McWilliam (London and New York: Penguin, 1995 [1972]), 719. As used by Boccaccio in the Decameron, the word ‘accidente’ typically has the meaning of illness (as when the plague is called an ‘accidente mortifero’ [Introduction 47]) or fortune, chance, or circumstance. See Decameron Web concordance, accessed 6/13/11.
variously as a contraceptive, abortifacient, and menstrual stimulator throughout the
Middle Ages. The herb, called savina or sabina, is mentioned by physician Michele
Savonarola as facilitating, or bringing on, labor and by Girolamo Mercurio as effective in
expelling a dead fetus. The level of specificity seen in the Corbaccio is lacking from
Boccaccio’s literary model: Juvenal makes no mention of a specific herb in Satire VI,
noting only the many (generic) remedies women have at their disposal for ending a
pregnancy (“Tantum artes huius, tantum medicamina possunt, / quae steriles facit atque
hominess in uentre necandos / conducit” [595-597]).

If I digress here it is because I believe that Boccaccio’s mention of the perennially
defoliated savina plant in the Corbaccio, regardless of the motivation behind the passage,
well demonstrates the author’s attention to the details of women’s lived experience. To
return to X.4, what we notice is that Boccaccio has gone out of his way to avoid
mentioning an all-too-common element of female life. Giovanni Getto claims that

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[568] Savonarola counsels that the laboring woman be placed in a hot bath with savina in it; if that doesn’t work, wet wool soaked in savina can be inserted in her vagina or a poultice prepared with savina can be applied to her body. See Savonarola, Il trattato ginecologico-pediatrico in volgare, ed. Luigi Belloni (Milan: Società Italiana di Ostetricia e Ginecologia, 1952), 123-125. Mercurio recommends la sabina expelling a dead fetus. See Girolamo Mercurio, La commare, in Medicina per le donne nel Cinquecento: Testi di Giovanni Marinello e di Girolamo Mercurio, eds. Maria Luisa Altieri Biagi, Clemente Mazzotta, Angela Chiantera, and Paola Altieri (Turin: UTET, 1992), 113.

Catalina’s passage from death to life and then birth in X.4 reveals the breadth of the Decameron’s narrative reach: “quell’ampiezza di sguardo, che abbraccia la totalità delle forme e degli aspetti dell’esistenza.” It is in the context of this thematic breadth - the Decameron’s ability to narrate all aspects of human life - that the absence of death in childbirth is so significant: it appears that Boccaccio elected to not include this aspect of human - and specifically female - existence.

Why might the author be reluctant to narrate this aspect of female life? Other medieval authors had shown that childbirth death scenes held dramatic possibilities; Guillaume de Blois’ Alda (a poem, we will remember, transcribed by Boccaccio) opens on Ulfus’s grief-filled speech at the bedside of his dying wife, Alda, who, in turn, seeks to assuage his grief by nobly positioning her own death as a rebirth: she assures him the fates will make restitution for his loss by giving him a daughter, “an equal or better Alda.” Yet unlike Guillaume, Boccaccio does not seem interested in the pathetic or regenerative narrative possibilities of childbirth death scenes.

The Decameron is written, by Boccaccio’s own admission, to provide lovestruck women with succour and diversion (“in soccorso e rifugio di quelle che amano…intendo di raccontare cento novelle” [Proemio, 13]); the tales are meant to provide women with both pleasure (“diletto”) and useful advice (“utile consiglio”). In this context, the avoidance of the mention of maternal mortality in the Decameron, as well as the birth of

570 See Getto, Vita di forme e forme di vita, 264.
the work’s many male infants, may be read as a sort of wish-fulfillment, in the sense that Boccaccio would be offering his purported female audience a vision of the best possible reproductive outcome: no one dies and a male heir is (almost) always produced. There may be, however, another, less sanguine, reason for the author’s reluctance to discuss maternal death. Historians of Renaissance Tuscany detect an idealization of death in childbirth among patrician society; according to these scholars, death in the service of the patrilineage - bearing heirs - was the “hallmark” of the ‘good wife’ in late medieval and Renaissance Tuscany.⁵⁷² In “Les femmes et la mort à la fin du Moyen Age,” Christiane Klapisch-Zuber states that the ‘good wife’, the one who garners the praise of her husband and the Heaven of her Lord in Tuscan family record books, is the one who dies in childbirth: “La bonne épouse, l’épouse à qui la mort gagne l’éloge appuyé de son époux e le paradis de son Créateur…c’est celle qui meurt en couches ou de leurs suites”.⁵⁷³ Katharine Park, while working from different sources (maternal autopsy), espouses a similar view. Commenting on the functionality of women’s bodies in a patrilineal system, she notes that “Ideally….the patrician wife was to predecease her husband, leaving him in sole possession of her dowry, her body, and its progeny.”⁵⁷⁴

Regardless of whether we agree with Klapisch-Zuber’s reading of Tuscan men’s elegiac notations of their wives’ deaths - a less bleak reading might focus on the

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⁵⁷⁴ See Park, The Secrets of Women, 131. Park argues that both before and after death, the patrician wife’s body was at the disposal of her husband’s lineage: while alive, women assured the continuation of their husband’s lineage by bearing children; after death, their bodies were opened “to scrutiny in the interests of their children and their husband’s families, to whom those children by definition belonged.” See Park, The Secrets of Women, 129-131.
emotional attachment behind these records of maternal mortality - there is little question that in fourteenth-century Tuscany a ‘good’ wife was a fertile wife.\textsuperscript{575} When noting the deaths of their wives in \textit{ricordanze}, Tuscan men consistently listed the number of children they had borne them.\textsuperscript{576} As Louis Haas notes, this accounting “was not just a statement of fact but an evaluation of worth”: women were prized for their ability to create male children, and thus heirs, for the line.\textsuperscript{577}

It behooves us, in light of these observations, to revisit Bergin’s observation that Boccaccio is not much interested in ‘good mothers’ in the \textit{Decameron}. If, as scholars contend, death in childbirth was idealized in fourteenth-century Tuscan society as the sign of the ‘good wife’, Boccaccio’s reticence - the fact that he does not mention any woman dying in childbirth - may be a counter-ideological move, in that he refuses to contribute to this aspect of the myth of the good wife and mother. When placed in the context of high rates of maternal mortality, elevated fertility levels, and an idealization of female death in the service of the male line, Boccaccio’s avoidance of any mention of maternal mortality takes on a new significance: the author’s silence may be an attempt to undercut the tying of female worth to fertility, and, in extreme cases, to death. Perhaps the reason Boccaccio does not ‘play up good mothers’ in the \textit{Decameron} is because good mothers - those women who, at great risk to their health, carry as many of men’s children

\textsuperscript{575} See Angus McLaren, \textit{A History of Contraception}, 109.

\textsuperscript{576} See Louis Haas, \textit{The Renaissance Man and His Children}, 29-30, 213-214n86. Haas notes that this was common practice for daughters and daughters-in-law also. Examples of the precise accounting of children borne to men by their dead wives abound. Matteo Corsini recorded the death of his wife in 1397 and noted that she had given him five children (Haas, 213n86).

\textsuperscript{577} See Haas, \textit{The Renaissance Man and His Children}, 30. Haas, however, presents a sanguine (and non-gendered) vision of a society in which having children was a source of accomplishment - “Florentines had pride in their children and in the number of them that they had” (30) - ignoring the darker implications of this evaluation of female worth.
as their bodies can bear - already hold an ideologically privileged place in Tuscan society.

In this sense, I am proposing a different reading of the *Decameron*’s much remarked upon disconnect between sex and reproduction. As noted, it has been a tenet of Boccaccian criticism that the *Decameron* presents “the total surrender to the erotic instinct”, not the consequences thereof.\(^{578}\) The *Decameron*’s purported lack of interest in mothers - to use Billanovich’s formulation, *donne che generano* - is frequently posited as a corollary to the work’s lauding of sensuality. For Marilyn Migiel, Alatiel, who has sex thousands of times without getting pregnant, is emblematic of the text’s effort to disassociate sexuality and procreation; she asks: “Could it be that female fertility would prove deleterious to male sexual fantasies about women?”\(^{579}\) I contend, however, that the *Decameron*’s lack of interest in female fertility is less the result of the frame characters’ narrative agendas - Migiel argues that narrators present views on sex, marriage, women, and children based on their classification as men or women - than it is a rebuttal of a functional view of maternity that places women (and their bodies) at the service of the male line.\(^{580}\)

\(^{578}\) For the general critical view of the *Decameron* as interested in non-reproductive sexuality, see the Introduction.

\(^{579}\) While Migiel offers a more gendered reading of the work’s lack of interest in reproductive sexuality, she still positions the male narrators’ views as dominant. Working from the premise that Boccaccio’s narrators present different views on sex, marriage, women, and children based on their classification as men or women - men stress women’s sexuality, which they explicitly divorce from procreation, while women are more aware of the link between sex and reproduction - Migiel argues that as the days proceed the men’s perspectives become dominant. See Migiel, *A Rhetoric of the Decameron*, 64-71.

\(^{580}\) I agree with Migiel that there is a difference between the way the *Decameron*’s male and female narrators present sexuality and reproduction; not surprisingly, stories like III.1, where Masetto generates a brood of little monklets and nunlets and enjoys the benefits of paternity without the responsibilities associated with it, and IX.3, where Calandrino gets ‘pregnant’, are told by men. My problem is that by positioning men as interested primarily in carnality and sexuality and women as devoted to “an ethics of
Historian Margaret Miles has suggested that the idealization of the virginal woman in fourteenth-century Tuscan painting may have “symbolized to medieval women freedom from the burden of frequent childbearing and nursing in an age in which these natural processes were highly dangerous.”\textsuperscript{581} Alatiel, of course, is anything but a virgin (although she manages to position herself as such by tale’s end) but Miles’ comment points to the complex ways in which images, or literature, interact with and mediate a woman’s daily experience. When weighing the Decameron’s treatment of motherhood, I argue that it is important to consider how the text related to a fourteenth-century Tuscan woman’s experience. If, as Miles suggests, the image of the virginal woman provided medieval women respite from their biologically-determined lives, then perhaps so too did the Decameron’s narration of multiple non-reproductive sexual encounters; as Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski rightly points out, “birth, in an age before systematized contraception, was the natural consequence of sexual relations.”\textsuperscript{582} If death in the service of the patrilineage - bearing male heirs - was the sign of the ‘good wife’ in Tuscan society, then perhaps the absence of women dying in childbirth in the Decameron indicates not authorial indifference to female experience, but an attempt to counter an ideology of motherhood that equates female worth with procreative potential.

care”, Migiel tends to discount the possibility of alternate, more sympathetic readings of the Decameron’s disconnect between sexuality and reproduction.


\textsuperscript{582} See Blumenfeld-Kosinski, \textit{Not of Woman Born}, 10.
In reading the *Decameron*’s disconnect between sex and reproduction and its corollary disinterest in ‘good mothers’ solely as the result of the work’s sensual focus, I believe we have overlooked other more socially-grounded explanations. As we have seen, Boccaccio’s avoidance of any mention of maternal mortality in the *Decameron* stands in sharp contrast to the frequency, and idealization, of the event in pre-modern Tuscany. The author also largely ignores another facet of the good wife and mother: fertility. As a rule, women (and men) in the *Decameron* have two children, sometimes more, sometimes less, but never approaching the startlingly elevated levels of fertility seen in fourteenth-century patrician families.\(^{583}\) In only one tale, *Decameron* III.9, does a woman actively seek to become pregnant; in other *novelle* concerning men and women reproducing within the lawful confines of marriage, such as II.6 or X.10, pregnancy is noted as an unremarkable matter of course, neither hoped for nor sought, but not unwelcome either.\(^{584}\)

To a certain extent, Billanovich is right: the *Decameron* does not exalt *donne che generano*. Yet I would disagree as to the motivation behind Boccaccio’s focus on non-generative women in the text. In my reading, it is not (solely) the sensual, non-generative

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\(^{583}\) The Count of Anguersa (II.8), Madonna Beritola (II.6), Ferondo’s wife (III.8), Giletta (III.9), Messer Neri (X.6), Messer Torello (X.9), and Griselda (X.10) all have two children. More than two children are implied, but difficult to quantify due to vague wording, in tales II.8 (the Count’s daughter, Violante/Giannetta), V.5, and V.7 (Amerigo is “di figliuoli assai ben fornito” [V.7.4]). Tancredi (IV.1), Monna Giovanna (V.9), Agnesa (VII.3), and Catalina (X.4) all have one child.

\(^{584}\) Giletta seeks to bear Bertrand’s child to convince him to accept her as his legitimate wife. Bertrand’s acceptance of, and eventual love for, her upon being presented with twin boys closely resembling him, while infused with a sense of the fantastic, is consonant with the belief in fourteenth-century Tuscan society that children increase a husband’s love for his wife. Francesco da Barberino counsels wives who do not have children, and therefore are not as loved, to be extra loving and careful with their husband and his belongings: “s’ella non fosse tanto amata perché non ha figliuoli come assa’ volte veggiàn che ’ncontra, faccia che mostri, nell’ovra e ’n vista, del suo marito e delle cose tutte che sono nella sua magione amor e guardia e cura a suo potere.” See Francesco da Barberino, *Reggimento e costumi di donna*, ed. Giuseppe E. Sansone (Torino: Loescher-Chiantore, 1957), 108-109.
qualities of amorous relationships that Boccaccio is promoting, but the ability of such depictions to counter - or at least provide an alternative to - a dominant, pervasive, and, to my eye, oppressive discourse in late medieval Tuscany encouraging procreation and motherhood. In the following section, I place the Decameron’s focus on unwanted pregnancies and anti-natal practices in the context of Renaissance natalism and the pervasive presence of a pro-maternal discourse in women’s lives.

5.3 Renaissance Natalism and the Material Culture of Reproduction

Recently, scholars have explored the variety of ways in which women in late medieval and Renaissance Tuscany were encouraged to assume a maternal role. These scholars, working primarily in the field of art history, have drawn attention to the overt and subliminal messages contained within domestic rituals and objects with which women interacted on a daily basis. The most representative study in this vein is Jacqueline Marie Musacchio’s excellent The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy, in which the author explores a range of birth-related wares with regard to their function and mediating qualities. Yet other scholars, such as Megan Holmes, Geraldine Johnson, and Adrian Randolph, have also examined the interplay between art and ideologies of motherhood in Renaissance Tuscany. A commonality to these scholars’

585 See Jacqueline Marie Musacchio, The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), and her earlier article “Imaginative Conceptions in Renaissance Italy,” in Picturing Women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy, eds. Geraldine A. Johnson and Sara F. Matthews Grieco (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

586 Megan Holmes considers how images of the nursing Virgin interacted with the problematic of reproduction and child-rearing within the Florentine patrician class. See Megan Holmes, “Disrobing the Virgin: The Madonna Lactans in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Art,” in Picturing Women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy, eds. Geraldine A. Johnson and Sara F. Matthews Grieco (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Geraldine Johnson focuses on the exemplary qualities of sculpted reliefs of the Madonna and child destined for private domestic contemplation by mothers, wives, and brides-to-be. See
approaches is a careful attention to the way visual art - whether private or public - interacted with societal discourses promoting the family and motherhood in Renaissance Tuscany, shaping or mediating a woman’s experience.\textsuperscript{587}

One of the most striking aspects of Musacchio’s work is her attention to the pervasive presence of natalist ideology in a woman’s daily life. Musacchio shows how a woman in post-plague fourteenth-century Tuscany was surrounded by implicit and explicit messages encouraging fertility, procreation, and the production of male heirs.\textsuperscript{588}

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\textsuperscript{587} In addition to the above-mentioned studies, Paola Tinagli (\textit{Women in Italian Renaissance Art: Gender, Representation, Identity} [Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997]) and Cristelle L. Baskins (\textit{Cassone Painting and Gender Formation in Early Modern Europe} [Cambridge, 1988]) also address the interplay between family ideology and art. Naomi Yavneh relates images of the nursing Madonna to the societal practice of wetnursing in “To Bare or Not To Bare: Sofonisba Anguissola’s Nursing Madonna and the Womanly Art of Breastfeeding,” in \textit{Maternal Measures: Figuring Caregiving in the Early Modern Period}, eds. Naomi J. Miller and Naomi Yavneh (Aldershot, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000).

\textsuperscript{588} Historians connect the plague’s disastrous demographic effects - Florence’s population dropped from a high of 120,000 around 1338 to fewer than 40,000 by 1427 - to a surge in pro-natal sentiment among municipalities and individuals. See Musacchio, \textit{The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy}, 15, 17, and, also, “Imaginative Conceptions in Renaissance Italy,” 42-43; Park, \textit{The Secrets of Women}, 98; and Randolph, “Renaissance Household Goddesses: Fertility, Politics, and the Gendering of Spectatorship,” 181-182. For the effect of the plague on Florence’s population, see Klapisch-Zuber, \textit{Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy}, 15-16; Klapisch-Zuber and Herlihy, \textit{Tuscan and Their Families}, 67-70; and David Herlihy, “Santa Caterina and San Bernardino: Their Teachings on the Family,” in \textit{Women, Family and Society in Medieval Europe: Historical Essays}, 1978-1991 (Providence, RI and Oxford: Berghahn, 1995), 177. The first wave of plague in 1348, with which Boccaccio would have been familiar when writing the \textit{Decameron}, is believed to have killed two-thirds of Florence’s population, or 78,000 people (shrinking the city’s population from 120,000 pre-plague to 42,000 immediately after). See Klapisch-Zuber and Herlihy, \textit{Tuscan and Their Families}, 69. In the Introduction to the \textit{Decameron}, Boccaccio puts the number of dead at 100,000 (Introduction, 47).

While the plague is an important context for Renaissance natalism, birth-related objects and rituals were present in Tuscan society prior to the mid-fourteenth century, due to an emphasis on marriage and family among patricians, as well as the risks associated with childbirth; their popularity rose, however, in the years following the plague. Musacchio found that birth objects were most popular from the late fourteenth century - the immediate post-plague years - until the early seventeenth century, in the more economically and artistically advanced regions of Italy, particularly in Tuscany. See Musacchio, \textit{The Art and Ritual of...}
The encouragement started before marriage: birth-related items were a common constituent of a woman’s material dowry; in addition to new dresses and jewels, a bride received special birth cloths and swaddling bands, charms for future infants, and sometimes life-size dolls in her wedding chest. A girdle, an item possessing definite connotations of fertility, was also included in these chests; their interiors were frequently painted with erotic or suggestive imagery (nude or barely dressed young men and women) to encourage sexuality and procreation. Nuptial ritual also emphasized procreation: at the presentation of the betrothal chests during the wedding ceremony, a child was placed in the bride’s arms as a promise of fertility; this practice was so popular in Florence that sumptuary laws were drawn up in 1356, 1388, and 1415 to regulate it.

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590 An inventory from 1417 explicitly refers to a girdle as “una cintola da fare e fanciulli”. See Musacchio, Art, Marriage, and Family in the Florentine Renaissance Palace, 168-173, 290n223. For the painting of chests’ interiors, see Musacchio, “Imaginative Conceptions,” 49; The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy, 132-134; and Art, Marriage, and Family in the Florentine Renaissance Palace, 151-153. Musacchio notes that these images would have been seen by the bride in her bedroom each day as she accessed items stored in the chests (“Imaginative Conceptions,” 49).

591 For the inclusion of a child in this nuptial ritual, see Klapisch-Zuber, Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy, 319; Musacchio, The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy, 137, Art, Marriage, and Family in the Florentine Renaissance Palace, 128, and “Imaginative Conceptions,” 54; and Louis Haas, The Renaissance Man and His Children, 31. Florentines Giovanni Niccolini in 1353 and Paolo di Alessandro Sassetti (1384) mention this practice in their record books. In 1407 Ser Lapo Mazzei notes the one florino paid to the child placed in the new bride’s arms: “per dare a uno fanciullo che si pone in collo alla donna novella”. See Musacchio, Art, Marriage, and Family in the Florentine Renaissance Palace, 128; and Klapisch-Zuber, Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy, 319n32. Sumptuary legislation drawn up in 1388 forbade tipping the servant who carried the chest more than a florin and stipulated that the bearer could not be accompanied by a child. See Musacchio, Art, Marriage, and Family in the Florentine Renaissance Palace, 128 and The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy, 195n32; and Haas, The Renaissance Man and His Children, 31.
Musacchio considers these birth-related items and rituals “blatant encouragement” for a bride’s future role as mother. \(^{592}\) Yet messages to procreate were not limited to a woman’s dowry or marriage ritual; objects promoting motherhood and reproduction were also present in a woman’s home before and for a long time after a birth. \(^{593}\) *Deschi da parto*, bowls or trays used to bring food and drink to post-partum women, were popular household items from the late fourteenth to the late sixteenth century. \(^{594}\) These trays and bowls were painted with secular confinement or childbirth scenes, with naked (overwhelmingly male) children engaged in a variety of activities often appearing on the back. \(^{595}\) According to Musacchio, these objects focused a woman’s attention on reproduction but also sought to control and direct the procreative process, by providing paradigms for proper female behavior and channeling a woman’s imagination toward

\(^{592}\) See Musacchio, “Imaginative Conceptions,” 54. Similarly, Adrian Randolph notes that objects presented to women when they married or gave birth “served to socialize women by inculcating in them particular virtues.” See Adrian Randolph, “Renaissance Household Goddesses,” 172-173.

\(^{593}\) They were even present in lieu of a birth: childless couple Margherita and Francesco Datini’s bedroom and best guestroom contained a desco da parto. See Haas, *The Renaissance Man and His Children*, 59; and Iris Origo, *The Merchant of Prato* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), 251-252. As Musacchio notes, birth-related objects were purchased before and during pregnancy; their use was widespread among most social classes, with a healthy second-hand market in existence for these wares. See Musacchio, “Imaginative Conceptions,” 59, and *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, 13-14, 17.

\(^{594}\) See Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, 59, and “Imaginative Conceptions,” 45. Inventories indicate that nearly half of late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century households possessed at least one birth tray (*The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, 59, 187n1). There are approximately eighty extant *deschi da parto* dating from the 1370s to the 1570s in public and private collections today. See Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, 59.

\(^{595}\) Other popular subjects included mythological and classical narratives, contemporary literary themes, and religious stories. See Musacchio, “Imaginative Conceptions,” 47; and *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, 66. In her inventory of these bowls and trays, Musacchio found no children who were “conclusively female,” while many - given their nudity - were “visibly masculine.” These naked boys are depicted flying, squatting, sitting, boxing, or urinating, and sometimes holding drums, bows and arrows, animals, vegetation, or pinwheels. See Musacchio, “Imaginative Conceptions,” 47. Besides naked boys, heraldry, game boards, and allegorical figures sometimes appeared on the reverse of childbirth trays and bowls. See Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, 66.
desired reproductive outcomes.\textsuperscript{596} Familiar childbirth or confinement scenes provided comfort or “positive reinforcement” for women currently, or hoping to become, pregnant, while the presence of male infants stimulated a woman’s imagination “toward the procreation of similarly healthy, hearty sons.”\textsuperscript{597} (A childbirth tray from the sixteenth century is bluntly to the point: the underside simply displays the word *maschio*.)\textsuperscript{598}

Inside her home, then, a woman was surrounded by objects encouraging motherhood and procreation; outside her home, she encountered a multitude of recipes and practices purporting to increase her fertility. Historians note the popularity and proliferation of fertility recipes in late medieval and Renaissance Tuscan society; in an effort to conceive, Tuscans made recourse to herbal remedies and poultices and wore special girdles; they ate certain foods, drank particular wines, and had sex at certain hours said to be propitious for procreation; they also said prayers, made offerings to saints or beggars, attended special masses, took pilgrimages to sacred sites, made trips to baths, and sought out magical amulets to increase their fertility.\textsuperscript{599} Fertility-enhancing practices

\textsuperscript{596} See Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, 125,157, and “Imaginative Conceptions,” 42-43.

\textsuperscript{597} See Musacchio, “Imaginative Conceptions,” 47-48, 52. As discussed in Chapter Two, throughout the late Middle Ages and Renaissance it was widely thought that a mother’s imagination could have an effect on the child she carried, forming it, changing its shape, or imprinting it with the shape or characteristics of objects she held in her mind; by gazing on these naked boys, a woman would ideally form or shape the fetus she was carrying into a male.

\textsuperscript{598} For this tray dating to circa 1530, see Musacchio, “Imaginative Conceptions,” 57, and *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, 143. Musacchio notes that because many women were illiterate “most women would have needed to have it read aloud to them; in hearing it read over and over again, the magical effect could take hold” (“Imaginative Conceptions,” 57), conjuring up the depressing, if oddly comical, image of a woman being subjected to the chant “maschio, maschio, maschio.”

\textsuperscript{599} See Louis Haas, *The Renaissance Man and His Children*, 30-34; and Musacchio, “Imaginative Conceptions,” 54-59, and *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, 139-146. Much of historians’ information on fertility recipes in fourteenth-century Tuscany comes from information contained within the papers of childless couple Francesco and Margherita Datini. See Origo, *The Merchant of Prato*, 165-168; Haas, *The Renaissance Man and His Children*, 30-34; Musacchio, “Imaginative Conceptions,” 54-59, and *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, 139-146. Fertility recipes
and recipes are a common subject of contemporary letters: Margherita Datini’s correspondence contains a number of remedies purporting to promote fertility, including a foul-smelling plaster, a fertility belt to be placed on her by a virgin boy (with the inscription facing in, after which she had to say three paternosters and three Ave Marias), a return from Avignon to the “‘male and fertilizing’ (maschili e multipricativi) Tuscan soil, and the feeding of three beggars on three successive Fridays.\textsuperscript{600}

The sheer variety and inventiveness of this material indicates a strong societal investment in fertility and procreation. It is important to keep in mind, however, that these messages were directed primarily at women. Louis Haas notes that men rarely participated in activities to increase fertility: “Women - not men - had to visit sacred or propitious places; women had to possess ‘holy dolls’; women had to participate in rituals at their marriage to ensure fertility….despite the fact that children were born to men, as the writers of the ricordanze would have it, it seems that Florentine culture placed responsibility for conceiving them predominantly on women.”\textsuperscript{601} Musacchio also emphasizes the gender specificity of natalist ideology by drawing attention to the masculine origin of messages intended for women: the betrothal and wedding chests so promoting of procreation were purchased by a male member of the bride’s natal or marital family and “nothing,” she writes, “appeared on them, or in them, that was not

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\textsuperscript{600} See Musacchio, \textit{The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy}, 139, 142, 195n43; Haas, \textit{The Renaissance Man and His Children}, 32-33; and Origo, \textit{The Merchant of Prato}, 166-167. Margherita herself sent a friend a barrel of Venetian wine, thought to be good for producing boys. See Haas, \textit{The Renaissance Man and His Children}, 33.

\textsuperscript{601} See Haas, \textit{The Renaissance Man and His Children}, 33-34. Haas adds that in a patriarchal society dependent on male heirs, “this must have been both an awesome and burdensome responsibility to have” (34).
I believe the pervasiveness and gender-specificity of this pro-natal discourse is a necessary context for the *Decameron*’s treatment of motherhood. When we consider the *Decameron*’s lack of interest in ‘good mothers’ or its tendency to focus on unwanted, rather than wanted, pregnancies, we must ask how these depictions relate to a woman’s experience in fourteenth-century Tuscany. In the following section, I explore two depictions of unwanted motherhood in the *Decameron* - one sympathetic, one farcical - and consider how Boccaccio’s treatment undercuts contemporary ideologies of motherhood and the family.

5.4 “*Contro al corso della natura*”: Unwanted Pregnancies and Anti-Natal Practices (*Decameron* V.7 and IX.3)

In the *Decameron*, unwanted pregnancies occur, predictably, in tales concerning extra- or pre-marital sexuality, such as III.1, III.8, and V.7, or in novelle involving the reversal of sex roles, such as IX.3 where Calandrino becomes ‘pregnant’. In these tales, women (and men) want sex but not the consequences, a dynamic most evident in III.1 where the nuns’ hesitation to have sex with Masetto disappears once they are assured there are a thousand ways to deal with an undesired pregnancy. The marital or social situation of these tales’ protagonists is a fundamental context for the undesirability of these pregnancies: we have nuns (III.1), an adulterous affair (III.8), a premarital

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603 “O se noi ingravidassimo, come andrebbe il fatto?’ A cui la compagna disse: ‘Tu cominci a aver pensiero del mal prima che egli ti venga: quando cotesto avvenisse, allora si vorrà pensare; egli ci avrà mille modi da fare sì che mai non si saprà, pur che noi medesime nol diciamo’” (III.1.27-28).
What I find interesting about these tales, however, is that despite their varying treatments of the unwanted pregnancy theme, they offer alternatives to the dominant discourse about women and motherhood.

At the most simplistic level, depictions of unwanted pregnancies counter Renaissance natalism by showing women who, for various reasons, do not want to conceive. For the sexually curious nuns in III.1, pregnancy is an evil - a mal. For Ferondo’s adulterous wife in III.8, it is a misfortune - a sventura. To the unwed Violante, it is unwelcome - discaro. The undesirability of these pregnancies is inextricably linked to the extra-marital quality of these affairs: pregnancy threatens to reveal the protagonists’ sexual transgressions (tellingly, Boccaccio never depicts a married couple who do not want to conceive). Nonetheless, the explicit characterization of pregnancy as a misfortune or evil could have provided a counter narrative to the insistent promotion and praise of female fertility that a Tuscan woman encountered on a daily basis. These tales raise the possibility, if safely ensconced in an extra-marital context, that some women might not want to become mothers.

In two Decameron tales, V.7 and IX.3, motherhood is so unwanted that protagonists seek out abortive remedies to avoid it: in V.7, Violante employs various measures to disgravidare, or miscarry, none of which produce the desired effect - “ella

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604 The indebtedness of Boccaccio’s subject matter to the fabliaux likely determines, to some extent, the valence with which pregnancy is imbued in the Decameron. Sidney Berger points out that the fabliaux are populated by lusty monks, jealous and overprotective husbands, oversexed, clever wives, eager lovers, and frequent adultery, and are characterized by “a marked disinterest in the legal or moral implications of their acts.” See Sidney E. Berger, “Sex in the Literature of the Middle Ages: The Fabliaux,” in Sexual Practices and the Medieval Church, eds. Vern L. Bullough and James Brundage (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1982), 173.

605 In other works, Boccaccio shows himself capable of weaving the desire for children into the narrative: in the Filocolo he shows Bianciﬁore’s mother, Giulia, and father, Lelio, making a vow to a saint in hopes of conceiving. See Book I of the Filocolo.
molte arti usò per dovere contro al corso della natura disgravidare, né mai le poté venir fatto” (V.7.17) - while in IX.3, Calandrino rids himself of an unwelcome (and totally imaginary) pregnancy with an abortive beverage - “una certa bevanda stillata molto buona e molto piacevole a bere” - concocted by maestro Simone. As Roberto Zapperi suggests, just as Calandrino’s pregnancy is fake, so too is his abortion.\textsuperscript{606} Despite the inherently fantastical context, however, anti-natal practices are described in this tale with a fair amount of accuracy and realism. Maestro Simone reassures Calandrino that they found out about the pregnancy early enough that he will easily cure him - “noi ci siamo si tosto accorti del fatto che con poca fatica e in pochi dí ti dilibererò” (IX.3.26) - and prescribes Calandrino a distilled liquid - \textit{una bevanda stillata} or a \textit{beveraggio stillato} (IX.3.28, 29) - that he must take for three days. These details, while repurposed for comical effect - after all, Calandrino is not pregnant, just stupid - are consistent with contemporary anti-natal practices: while other modes of delivery were available, drinks or potions seem to have been the most common abortifacients; the sooner taken after sexual intercourse, the more effective they were believed to be.\textsuperscript{607}

The other \textit{Decameron} tale in which abortion is broached, V.7, contains

\textsuperscript{606} See Roberto Zapperi, \textit{L’uomo incinto: la donna, l’uomo e il potere} (Cosenza: Lerici, 1979), 112.

\textsuperscript{607} Penitentials of the Early Middle Ages asked a woman whether she had ever drunk “any \textit{maleficium}, that is herbs or other agents so that you could not have children?” See John M. Riddle, “Contraception and Early Abortion in the Middle Ages,” 264, 268. William of Saliceto gives a recipe for a drink made of juniper and rue that, if taken ten days or more after sexual union, can cause a woman to abort. See John M. Riddle, “Contraception and Early Abortion in the Middle Ages,” 273; and Helen Rodnite Lemay, “Human Sexuality in Twelfth- Through Fifteenth-Century Scientific Writings,” in \textit{Sexual Practices and the Medieval Church}, eds. Bullough and Brundage (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1982), 200. Michele Savonarola, after warning against the potential misuse of his information, counsels women to avoid strong liquid remedies in the first three months of their pregnancy for they can cause abortion: “sopra tute guardar ti debbe da le medicine solutive forte, maxime nei primi mexi, zioë primo, secundo, terzo, il perchè il feto in tal tempo è debelmente ai cotolidoni de la matrice ligato.” See Savonarola, \textit{Il trattato ginecologico-pediatrico in volgare}, ed. Luigi Belloni (Milan: Società Italiana di Ostetricia e Ginecologia, 1952), 103.
considerably less detail. Faced with an unwelcome pregnancy, Violante attempts to counter the ‘course of nature’ with various - and undescribed - measures: “sí andò la bisogna che la giovane ingravidò, il che molto fu e all’uno e all’altro discaro; per che ella molte arti usò per dovere contro al corso della natura disgravidare, né mai le poté venir fatto” (V.7.17). In comparison to IX.3’s beveraggio stillato or the Corbaccio’s savina, the “molte arti” to which Boccaccio refers in V.7 are necessarily vague. Nonetheless, a fourteenth-century reader would likely have had knowledge of one or two anti-fertility practices to associate with this passage; in addition to sterilizing drinks and potions, jumping, being shaken, sneezing, incantations, stones, talismans, and herbal pessaries or suppositories were thought to impede conception and cause abortion.

I find it significant that no mention is made in the Decameron of the fertility enhancing practices so popular in Tuscan society - and, as Machiavelli would show in the Mandragola, so possessed of comic possibilities - but anti-natal practices - their ideological inverse - appear in two novelle. When considering the references to anti-natal practices in V.7 and IX.3, it is important to keep in mind that fertility suppressing

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608 Roberto Zapperi suggests that the fact that Calandrino’s pregnancy is fake may allow Boccaccio the latitude to discuss abortion in more detail in the tale. See Zapperi, L’uomo incinto, 112. V.7’s realistic context - a woman actually trying to end a pregnancy - may, then, determine the vagueness of its references to abortion.


610 While the language in III.1 is allusive (“egli ci avrà mille modi da fare sí che mai non si saprà, pur che noi medesime nol diciamo’” [III.1.28]), it appears that Boccaccio is referring to efforts to hide the children born from the nuns’ affairs with Masetto, and not to contraceptive or abortive remedies.
practices were neither openly discussed nor advocated in late medieval and Renaissance society. Contraceptive and abortive measures were considered “women’s secrets” for which women were harshly criticized. Commenting in 1427 on the sexual mores of Tuscans, Bernardino of Siena condemned women—whom he considered more evil than murderers—for preventing conception and procuring abortions: “And this I say also to the women who are the cause that the children that they have conceived are destroyed; worse, who also are among those who arrange that they cannot conceive; and if they have conceived, they destroy them in the body. You (to whom this touches, I speak) are more evil than are murderers….O cursed by God, when will you do penance? Do you not see that you, like the sodomite, are cause for the shrinkage of the world; between you and him there is no difference.” Fra Cherubino da Siena also complained of women who, in Margaret King’s words, “resisted motherhood” through anti-natal measures: they first tried not to become pregnant; if pregnant, they tried to abort; if unable to abort, “then when the creature is born, they beat it, and would want to see it dead, so that they can be free to go freely about their business, here and there.” Not only clerics, of course, railed against anti-natal measures. In Paradiso XV, Dante decried contemporary Florentines’ ‘empty houses’ in a verse some historians have seen as referring to

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611 See Riddle, “Contraception and Early Abortion in the Middle Ages, 261.


contraceptive practices: “Non aveva case di famiglia vote; / non v’era giunto ancor Sardanapalo / a mostrargi ciò che ’n camera si puote” (Par. XV.106-108).\(^{614}\)

While Dante’s lamenting of Florentines’ anti-fertility practices is relatively gender-neutral, Bernardino and Cherubino make clear the disapprobation allotted women who sought to limit births. Boccaccio’s treatment of anti-natal practices in the Decameron is, by contrast, morally-neutral, even comical.\(^{615}\) The male context of Calandrino’s pregnancy leaves little room for any moralizing discourse; as Zapperi points out, fake abortions are unlikely to cause much offense: “di un aborto finto e persino burlesco che ragione c’è di scandalizzarsi?”\(^{616}\) Yet in V.7, the more potentially transgressive of the two tales - a woman actually trying to end a pregnancy - young Violante is never criticized or censured in any way by the author, the narrator (Lauretta), or any character within the tale.

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\(^{614}\) Sapegno’s notes give as one possible interpretation of these verses: “vuote di prole, a cagione di costumi corrotti.” See Dante Alighieri, Divina Commedia, ed. Sapegno, 202n106. Angus McLaren sees a reference to contraception, specifically coitus interruptus, in the Paradiso’s verses. See Angus McLaren, A History of Contraception, 128-129. John T. Noonan, Jr. considers several potential references to contraception in the Commedia (including Purgatorio XVII, which he sees as implicitly pointing to contraception through the figure of Procne who kills her own son, and Purgatorio XXV’s praise of chaste marriages, in his reading, the avoidance of nonprocreative sexual acts) but does not mention Paradiso XV. See Noonan, Contraception: A History of its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists, 213-214.

\(^{615}\) Boccaccio takes an opposing view in the Corbaccio. In a short and powerful passage, the author lists the many ways women have of thwarting procreation, proceeding, with a sort of grim logic, from unwanted pregnancy to abortifacients, to failed abortive attempts, to abandonment, and, finally, to infanticide: “Oh quanti parti, in quelle o che più temono o che più delli loro sconci falli arrossano, innanzi il tempo periscono! Per questo la misera savina più che gli altri alberi si trova sempre pelata, quantunque esse a ciò abbiano altri argomenti infiniti. Quanti parti per questo, mal lor grado venuti a bene, nelle braccia della fortuna si gittano! Riguardinsi gli spedali! Quanti ancora, prima che essi il materno latte abbian gustato, se n’uccidono! Quanti a’ boschi, quanti alle fiere se ne concedono e agli uccelli!” (Corbaccio, 231-234). The Corbaccio is an openly misogynistic text and in condemning women for anti-natal measures, Boccaccio is drawing on an earlier tradition, despite adding his own socio-historically specific touches such as the children abandoned at the spedali, Florence’s new foundling homes.

\(^{616}\) See Zapperi, L’uomo incinto, 112.
If anything, I would characterize Boccaccio’s attitude toward Violante, and her abortive attempts, as sympathetic. His description of Violante’s predicament is matter-of-fact and devoid of moralizing comments: Violante gets pregnant ("sí andò la bisogna che la giovane ingravidò"); the pregnancy is undesired by both her and her lover ("il che molto fu e all’uno e all’altro disaro"); so she attempts to end it ("per che ella molte arti usò per dovere contro al corso della natura disgravidare"). Given that Boccaccio dedicates the rest of the tale to describing the series of unpleasant events that this pregnancy unleashes - Teodoro’s incarceration and death sentence, Violante’s choice of suicide by poison or knife, their infant’s promised death, dashed against a wall and fed to dogs - Violante’s decision seems rational, even, one might argue, justified.

Yet the authorial sympathy that I detect in V.7 is not solely the result of the morally-neutral tone with which Violante’s abortive efforts are described, nor the account of ensuing events that might justify those efforts. As we have seen, Boccaccio ends V.7 by stressing Violante’s marginality to male-dominated kin relationships and family structures. By the end of the tale, Violante’s disruptive pregnancy is inscribed within the lawful parameters of male-defined kinship: patriarch Fineo returns home with his son,

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617 N. Piguet has noted this scene’s indebtedness to *Heroides* XI where Canace also attempts an unsuccessful abortion. See N. Piguet, "Variations autour d’un mythe ovidien dans l’oeuvre de Boccace,” *Revue des études italiennes*, 31 (1985), 33. “Every herb and every remedy / my nurse brought, applying each one shamelessly / to evict from my flesh - the only / secret we kept from you - the burden growing / there”, “quas mihi non herbas, quae non medicamina nutrix / attulit, audaci supposuitque manu / ut penitus nostris (hoc te celaimus unum) / uisceribus crescents excuteretur onus?” See Ovid, *Heroides: Select Epistles*, ed. Peter E. Knox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), XI: 39-42. English translation from Ovid, *Heroides*, trans. Harold Isbell (London and New York: Penguin, 2004 [1999]), 98. While there are minor differences between the two scenes - in the Ovidian source, Canace’s nurse procures the abortifacients, in V.7, Violante has no help - Boccaccio keeps Ovid’s sympathetic tone. Boccaccio’s sympathy for women’s efforts to rid themselves of a pregnancy in the *Decameron* does not extend as far as Ovid’s in *Amores* II xiii, where the poet invokes the Gods’ help for a lover who is near death after trying to end a pregnancy. In the following poem, Ovid adopts a less personalized approach to abortion and decries all women’s efforts to “tear an embryo from the womb.” See Ovid’s *Amores*, trans. Guy Lee (New York: Viking, 1968), specifically Book II xiii and xiv. Boccaccio is clearly able to adopt both these postures, the latter particularly evident in *Corbaccio* 231-233.
Violante, and his grandson (“E dopo alquanti dí il suo figliuolo e lei e il suo picciol nepote, montati in galea, seco ne menò a Laiazzo” [V.7.53]). The narrative arc of this tale thus begins with Violante attempting to rid herself of an unwanted pregnancy and ends, after she has given birth to a male heir, with her identity completely subsumed by the male lineage. As noted earlier in this chapter, the reason patrician Tuscan women underwent pregnancy after pregnancy was to bear a male heir for their husband’s line; the wide variety of objects and rituals promoting procreation had this end result as their goal. V.7 ends with this happy outcome: Violante bears a son who is thereafter included in Fineo’s (and Teodoro’s) line. I find it incredibly significant, however, that the tale begins with a woman resisting this fate: Boccaccio shows Violante vainly trying to rid herself of a pregnancy that will result in her lawful assumption into Fineo’s line. V.7 raises the possibility that pregnancy, and motherhood, might be unwanted not only because they reveal one’s sexual transgressions but also because they can lead to the loss of female identity. This observation casts a dark shadow on contemporary society’s praise and promotion of female fertility.

“Pur che io non abbia a partorire”: Decameron IX.3 as Mirror of Female Experience

I conclude this section by looking more closely at the one tale in which a man, not a woman, suffers an unwanted pregnancy: Decameron IX.3. In this tale, Calandrino is tricked into believing he is pregnant by Bruno, Buffalmacco, and Nello, who, with the help of Maestro Simone, persuade Calandrino to pay them for an abortive remedy. As Roberto Zapperi points out, the tale belongs to an established tradition of stories about male pregnancies; in these tales, belief in male pregnancy is the sign of the fool or, as in
the *Leggenda aurea* from the mid-thirteenth century, the madman. While IX.3 is clearly indebted to this tradition, Boccaccio firmly roots the tale to contemporary society: by twisting and repurposing information about sexual positions, post-partum cuisine, and anti-natal remedies in fourteenth-century Tuscany, Boccaccio makes Calandrino’s fantastical pregnancy an accurate, if inverted, mirror of female experience.

This perverse mirroring starts early in the tale with Calandrino’s easy acceptance of Maestro Simone’s diagnosis. The reason Calandrino so easily believes Maestro Simone when he tells him he is pregnant (“tu non hai altro male se non che tu se’ pregno” IX.3.20) is because his wife, Tessa, is always on top when they have sex. While Calandrino is undoubtedly a fool - as Valeria Finucci notes, the fact that he believes he can be pregnant is another confirmation of his stupidity - the idea that his pregnancy could have been caused by a deviant coital position is not completely far-fetched. The woman-on-top position was condemned by theologians and medical writers because it was thought to impede conception, the only legitimate aim of love making, and because it reversed gender roles. Not only was a man contaminated by contact with a woman’s

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618 See Roberto Zapperi, *L’uomo incinto*, particularly 100-112. The *Leggenda aurea*, or *Golden Legend*, written by Dominican Jacobus de Voragine, recounts the Emperor Nero’s desire to conceive a child and give birth, an unnatural wish that ends when he is tricked into swallowing a frog and vomiting it up. See Zapperi, *L’uomo incinto*, 65-67; and Katharine Park, *The Secrets of Women*, 155-156. Boccaccio's tale seems particularly indebted to a German verse-story from the fourteenth century in which an ignorant monk believes he is pregnant because he was on the bottom during sex, and to a sermon given by Giordano da Pisa in Florence in 1304 describing a man falling ill (but not pregnant) as a result of his friends’ repeated insistence that he looks ill. See Zapperi, *L’uomo incinto*, 100-101, 103; and Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988 [1985]), 134. Zapperi also notes similarities to one of Aesop’s fables (103).


620 For coital positions, see Michael Camille, “Manuscript Illumination and the Art of Copulation,” in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, eds. Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), particularly 70, 76-77; Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, 245-248; Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset,
seed, which flowed downward, but the woman’s womb was turned over in this position thus making conception less likely.\textsuperscript{621} No less important, the position reversed the active-passive binary of men and women in the act of reproduction, effeminizing the man.\textsuperscript{622}

With Calandrino’s ready explanation for his pregnancy (“Tessa, questo m’hai fatto tu, che non vuol stare altro che di sopra” [IX.3.21]), Boccaccio draws on these beliefs and amplifies them: he makes Tessa active (on top) and infertile (she does not conceive), and Calandrino passive and effeminized to the point where he actually becomes pregnant like a woman.\textsuperscript{623} As Finucci suggests, Calandrino thinks male pregnancy equals female pregnancy: the fool is thrown into a panic by the thought that he must give birth, especially since he has heard the noise women - who have plenty of room for the purpose - make when having babies: “Oimè, tristo me, come farò io? come partirò io questo figliuolo? onde uscirà egli?.....io non so come io mi facessi; ché io odo fare alle femine un sí gran romore quando son per partorire, con tutto che elle abbiano buon cotal grande donde farlo, che io credo, se io avessi quel dolore, che io mi morrei

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Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages, 134-135; and Angus McLaren, A History of Contraception, 119.

\textsuperscript{621} See Camille, “Manuscript Illumination and the Art of Copulation,” 70, 76-77; Cadden, Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 245-248; and Jacquart and Thomasset, Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages, 134-135.

\textsuperscript{622} See Camille, “Manuscript Illumination and the Art of Copulation,” 59, 68, 76-77; and Cadden, Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages, 245.

\textsuperscript{623} Roberto Zapperi astutely notes that what Boccaccio gives to Tessa, he takes away from Calandrino: “con Tessa lo scrittore è generoso e sia pure a spese di Calandrino: tutto quello che dà a lei lo toglie infatti sempre a lui, per arrivare alla fine al completo ribaltamento comico dei ruoli e presentare la donna in veste di uomo e l’uomo in veste di donna.” See Zapperi, L’uomo incinto, 110. David Wallace sees Tessa’s response to Calandrino’s sexual accusation - she turns red with embarrassment, lowers her eyes, and leaves the room without a word - as a rare “masculine victory in the fight for domestic space” in the Calandrino cycle. See Wallace, Giovanni Boccaccio: Decameron (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 97. I do not see any sort of victory for Calandrino in this passage; his accusation that it is Tessa’s fault only effeminizes him.
This speech is comical precisely because gender roles are so inverted: Calandrino, earlier effeminized by a passive sexual position, is now concerned that he lacks a vagina - the ultimate sign of femininity - through which the child can exit.

When making Calandrino ‘pregnant’, Boccaccio plays with beliefs about sexual positions and their effect on fertility: he transforms the female infertility thought to result from the woman-on-top position into a grotesque male pregnancy. The price Boccaccio has Calandrino pay to rid himself of that pregnancy - in the idiom of the tale, spregnare - also references and repurposes beliefs about reproduction. After diagnosing Calandrino’s illness, Maestro Simone reassures him that he will make a medicine that will cure him in three days. For this remedy, he will need three brace of capons and a few other ingredients that Bruno, Buffalmacco, and Nello can pick up if Calandrino gives them five lire apiece: “Ora ci bisogna per quella acqua tre paia di buon capponi e grossi, e per altre cose che bisognano darai a un di costoro cinque lire di piccioli, che le comperi, e fara’mi ogni cosa recare alla bottega; e io al nome di Dio domattina ti manderò di quel beveraggio stillato” (IX.3.29).

The whole reason Bruno, Buffalmacco, and Nello trick Calandrino into believing he is pregnant is so that they can have a good meal on his expense; having purchased the capons and other delicacies with his fifteen lire, the group successfully concludes their trick (“Bruno, comperati i capponi e altre cose necessarie al godere, insieme col medico e co’ compagni suoi se gli mangiò” [IX.3.31-32]). Yet the presence of the capons in this tale is not due solely to their being the tricksters’ dinner. In late medieval and

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Renaissance Italy, poultry was considered a beneficial food for pregnant women and new mothers. Michele Savonarola recommended hens, capons, chickens, pheasants, and partridge, among other fowl, as suitable nourishment for pregnant women. Capons were particularly associated with childbearing, as seen by Francesco da Barberino’s advice that pregnant women practice moderation and - specifically - not overindulge in capons: “Nel parto suo, sia qual donna si vuole, / non ti lasciar empier soverchio: / mangerai meno e anzi più sovente, / e anco il ber ti convien rifrenare. / Non ti pensar li sei mesi dinanzi / come porranno ingrassar li capponi.” Savonarola’s treatise on pregnancy contains multiple references to capons, which, besides advocating the bird as a suitable food for pregnant and parturient women, make it clear that women expect this food during and after their pregnancies. Indeed, capons were one of the costs associated with pregnancy that Tuscan men regularly listed in their account books;


626 “La carne di galena, capuoni, pulli, francellini, fasani, pernice e pipioni gia suono conveniente.” He asks who wouldn’t want to be pregnant with such a menu: “O frontosa, chi non vorrebe essere gravida, per essere tenuta a tal pasti?” See Savonarola, Il trattato ginecologico-pediatrico in volgare, 69. Cooked fowl are consistently found in pictorial representations of the birth of the Virgin and of John the Baptist during the late Middle Ages and Renaissance. Cimabue’s Birth of the Virgin (1291) shows a woman serving the mother a chicken in a bowl. Uccello’s Birth of the Virgin (1436) shows a servant carrying a chicken wing on a plate for the mother. See Jacqueline Marie Musacchio, “Pregnancy and Poultry in Renaissance Italy,” 3; and Haas, The Renaissance Man and His Children, 48.


628 For references to capons, see Savonarola, Il trattato ginecologico-pediatrico in volgare, 69, 109, 110, 121, 131, 132. At one point, Savonarola counsels women to eat little in labor but acknowledges the disinclination of women, who expect fat hens and capons, to follow his advice: “se alamentarà frontosa dicendo ‘Questa non è buona doctrina per le donne parturiente, le quale di tanto suo male aspectano i buoni boconi di grasse galine, capuoni, ove, confecti, e bevere senza reprehensione di vini avanzati’ (109). He later advises women to yell loudly while giving birth so as to induce their husbands and other family members to prepare them capons after the birth: “ti conseglio crida forte, a ziò chel te sia creduto il tuo male, havendote compassione il marito e li altri di caxa, asmorzendo tal fuoco grande cum capuoni, confecti e vini avanzati” (121).
Tribaldo de’ Rossi bought so many of the birds during his wife’s pregnancy that he entitled a page of his account book “capons”.

Boccaccio’s irreverent reuse of a food intimately associated with reproduction slyly pokes fun at a fertility-obsessed culture. By making capons one of the components of Calandrino’s abortive remedy, Boccaccio reverses the positive association between capons and procreation. In Tuscan society, capons were pro-natal in that they helped a woman have a successful pregnancy and post-partum recovery. In IX.3, capons are anti-natal: they help Calandrino, a man, rid himself of an unwanted pregnancy. By twisting the directional vector of the association between capons and reproduction, as well as substituting man for woman, Boccaccio heightens the novella’s comic charge, making Calandrino’s pregnancy even more absurd for being such a mirror of female experience.

The idea of Calandrino’s pregnancy as a mirror of female experience is generally to Calandrino’s detriment: the parallels are meant to elicit laughter. Yet there is one instance in which the effect of this mirroring is not entirely comical. I would note that it is Calandrino, the pregnant male, who is allowed to broach, if in the most elliptical fashion, the subject of maternal mortality in the Decameron. So fearful is Calandrino of giving birth that he is willing to hand over his entire inheritance to avoid it - “Io ho qui da dugento lire di che io volea comperare un podere: se tutti bisognano, tutti gli togliete, pur che io non abbia a partorire” (IX.3.27) - for his experience of hearing women’s parturient cries has led him to conclude that he would die from the pain before ever producing a

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629 In 1456, Carlo Strozzi bought four pairs of capons while his wife Lucrezia was pregnant; Ser Girolamo purchased eight capons during his wife’s second pregnancy. See Jacqueline Marie Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, 40, 53; and “Pregnancy and Poultry in Renaissance Italy,” 7. Capons were not purchased solely for one’s wife: Iacopo Ottavanti recorded that he provided four eggs a day, biscuits and jam, and capons for the mother of his brother’s illegitimate son. See Haas, *The Renaissance Man and His Children*, 48.
child: “io credo, se io avessi quel dolore, che io mi morrei prima che io partorissi” (IX.3.27).

I am aware that we are in the context of a male pregnancy and these words are, first and foremost, meant to be amusing: Calandrino is a fool for thinking he can be pregnant and will have to give birth. Nonetheless, I find this passage intriguing for two reasons: first, it acknowledges the pain women experience in childbirth and second, it obliquely references their fear of dying in childbirth. So certain is Calandrino that he will die from the pain of giving birth (“io credo, se io avessi quel dolore, che io mi morrei prima che io partorissi”) that he will do anything to avoid it: “se tutti bisognano, tutti gli togliete, pur che io non abbia a partorire” (my emphasis). Calandrino’s fervent desire to avoid childbirth would have rung true for Boccaccio’s female reader: as we have seen, twenty percent of married women could expect to die in childbirth. The fact that Boccaccio puts these observations into a fool’s mouth does not entirely neutralize their import. What Calandrino is allowed to show us is not the rosy praise of fertility and idealization of female death in childbirth that constitute the ideology of motherhood in Tuscan society, but the unalloyed fear of a woman facing an event she knows she has a high chance of dying from.

By making Calandrino’s unwanted pregnancy a perverse mirroring of female experience, Boccaccio irreverently pokes fun at the culture of reproduction in contemporary Tuscany. In V.7, the author’s sympathetic depiction of Violante’s unwanted motherhood undercuts ideologies of motherhood and the family by positing a cause and effect between the assumption of a maternal role and the loss of female

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Musacchio also perceives in Calandrino’s statement a certain “mystified appreciation” for the pain women experience in labor. See Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, 24.
identity. In two other *Decameron* tales, II.6 and V.9, Boccaccio’s questioning of family ideology takes an entirely different form. In these *novelle* containing the *Decameron*’s most prolonged meditations on motherhood, Boccaccio highlights the close, affective ties between mother and child, even positing, in V.9, a natural law of motherhood. While the way in which Boccaccio describes the tie between mother and child - frequently conceived of as bodily or carnal - reproduces the close association of the maternal with the body in the medieval cultural imaginary, the emotion of these passages complicates male-based understandings of the family. In this final section, I explore how Boccaccio deliberately plays up the affective qualities of motherhood in II.6 and V.9 only to frame, or delimit, it through reference to the norms of the fourteenth-century family.

5.5 “L’odor materno” and “le leggi delle madri”: Carnal and Affective Motherhood (*Decameron* II.6 and V.9)

In the Boccaccian critical tradition, *Decameron* II.6 and V.9 are frequently hailed as tales in which motherhood - understood as maternal love or instinct - is depicted with particular skill: in II.6, critics laud the earthy, sensorial (“immanente, terrena, fatta di percezioni sensitive”) or exuberantly affective (“affettività esuberante e dolce”) qualities of Beritola’s maternity; in V.9, they praise Giovanna’s love and moving solicitude for her ailing son. One thing critics have not noticed, however, is that these praise-worthy

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631 In II.6, critics have seen a ‘return’ on the part of Boccaccio to the theme of ‘maternal instinct’, variously treated in earlier works such as the *Ninfale*. Mario Baratto writes: “la tematica del solitario idillio elgiasco-paesistico e insieme dell’istinto materno, variamente trattata dal *Filocolo*, dall’*Amorosa Visione* e dal *Ninfale*, è ripresa con matura complessità.” See Mario Baratto, *Realità e stile nel Decameron* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1974), 161. According to Giuseppe Chiechi, II.6 represents, after the *Ninfale*, the most salient treatment of maternity by Boccaccio: “è, dopo Mensola del *Ninfale* fiesolano, la riproposta della maternità al centro della narrazione.” See Giuseppe Chiechi, *Giovanni Boccaccio e il romanzo familiare* (Verona:
depictions of maternal love are framed by very realistic legal and familial considerations; in both tales, maternal affect is juxtaposed to or set off against the traditional concerns of the male-dominated and male-traced family in fourteenth-century Tuscany: inheritance, family status, and kin alliances. This juxtaposition is particularly notable in II.6 where Boccaccio highlights the affective, bodily qualities of Beritola’s motherhood and contrasts them with a filial attention to family status and social position. But V.9’s moving depiction of maternal solicitude is also framed by precise legal and familial considerations that limit Giovanna’s agency both at the start and end of the tale.

When depicting motherhood in II.6 and V.9, Boccaccio tends to highlight the affective, instinctual, or bodily qualities of maternity, in keeping with contemporary beliefs about the tie between mother and child. In II.6, an ‘occult force’ causes Beritola to recognize her son, Giannotto, after a long separation - “cominciò a riguardare, e da occulta vertú desta in lei alcuna rameorazione de’ puerili lineamenti del viso del suo figliuolo” (II.6.66) - while a primal ‘maternal odor’ is what draws Giannotto to his mother: “conobbe incontanente l’odor materno” (II.6.67). In V.9, maternity is, if less bodily-based, just as instinctual: Giovanna’s love for her son overpowers lesser social considerations, to the point that maternal love becomes an unbreakable law. Before exploring the juxtaposition of maternal affect and family strategy in these tales, I would like to consider how Boccaccio highlights the affective or carnal qualities of motherhood.

Marsilio, 1994), 162. For the instinctual or affective qualities of Beritola’s motherhood, see Chiechchi, Giovanni Boccaccio e il romanzo familiare, 162-163; and Giovanni Getto, Vita di forme e forme di vita, 237. For the affective or moving qualities of V.9, see Thomas Bergin, Boccaccio, 311; and Getto, Vita di forme e forme di vita, 221.
The affective, sensorial quality of Beritola’s motherhood in II.6 is something frequently noted, if not explored, by critics. Yet the way Boccaccio achieves this quality is somewhat unusual; to depict a mother’s love in this tale, the author repurposes language typically used for sensual, heterosexual love and twists contemporary beliefs about the nursing body. Boccaccio first highlights the affective quality of Beritola’s motherhood when her children are kidnapped by pirates. Having lost her entire family, and finding herself alone and abandoned, Beritola collapses on shore calling for her husband and sons: “ottimamente cognobbe, sí come il marito, aver perduti i figliuoli. E povera e sola e abbandonata, senza saper dove mai alcuno doversene ritrovare, quivi vedendosi, tramortita il marito e’ figliuoli chiamando cadde in su il lito” (II.6.11-12); her grief over their loss is so great that she ultimately faints - “Quivi non era chi con acqua fredda o con altro argomento le smarrite forze rivocasse, per che a bell’agio poterono gli spiriti andar vagando dove lor piacque: ma poi nel misero corpo le partite forze insieme con le lagrime e col pianto tornate furono, lungamente chiamò i figliuoli e molto per ogni caverna gli andò cercando” (II.6.12-13).

Branca has noted the accuracy of Boccaccio’s description of the physiological processes behind Beritola’s loss of consciousness: “è naturalmente riferimento a quegli spiriti della vita vegetativa, animale, razionale che negli svenimenti si credeva si separassero dal corpo, come nella morte stessa”. We may hear in this passage, however, another, more poetic, reference. In the stilnovist poetry of Guido Cavalcanti,
and in certain poems of Dante’s, love frequently caused the poet’s spiriti, or vital life forces, to flee the poet’s body. The description of Beritola’s reaction to the loss of her children utilizes the same imagery and language: as a result of her overwhelming grief, Beritola’s spirits take flight and wander freely - “per che a bell’agio poterono gli spiriti andar vagando dove lor piaque”. In this passage, Boccaccio draws on a convention of love poetry - wandering spirits - to describe, somewhat incongruously, a mother’s love for her children: when Beritola’s spirits return to her body, and she awakens, her first thought is for her children - “ma poi nel misero corpo le partite forze insieme con le lagrime e col pianto tornate furono, lungamente chiamò i figliuoli e molto per ogni caverna gli andò cercando” (II.6.12-13).

This reemployment of language coded as sensual or amorous for maternal love is seen again later in the novella when Currado asks Beritola what she would say if he restored her eldest son to her (“se io vi facessi il vostro figliuolo maggior riavere?” [II.6.58]). Beritola replies that he would be giving her ‘something dearer to her than she herself’: “più cara cosa, che io non sono medesima a me, mi rendereste” (II.6.59). In II.8, Giachetto’s mother uses a similar expression when pleading with her son to reveal the source of his unhappiness, assuring him that ‘she loves him more than herself’: “te più amo che la mia vita” (II.8.52-53). Branca notes the stereotypical nature of these affirmations: besides II.6 and II.8, variations on the “I love you more than myself” expression are found in II.10, III.3, III.6, III.7, III.9, IV.2, IV.6, V.6, VI.7, VIII.10, and X.8.634 In all these cases, however, the love being described is amorous, not familial: this

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is the love of husbands for wives, wives for husbands, or one lover for another. In II.6 and II.8, Boccaccio uses the expression to describe not the love of one character for his or her beloved, but a mother’s love for her son: as they so readily admit, Beritola and Giachetto’s mother love their sons more than themselves.

Boccaccio’s use of language typically coded as amorous for the love of mothers for sons strongly implies that maternal love is at least as strong a force as sensual love. If the author’s choice of language is incongruent, the underlying sentiment is not. The strength of a mother’s love was a commonplace in the medieval imaginary. In *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, Aquinas stated that mothers naturally love their children more than fathers do because they labor more in their generation, they know better than fathers that the children are really theirs, and they nurture the children right after birth, and social interaction makes love grow stronger. Following Aquinas’s lead, medieval writers commonly claimed that a mother’s love was greater than a father’s, often repeating his reasons.

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636 See Bestor, “Ideas About Procreation and Their Influence on Ancient and Medieval Views of Kinship,” 163. Jacobus de Varagine repeated Aquinas’s reasons for the phenomenon, adding two of his own: bearing children removes some of a woman’s faults by making her less cold and humid, which tends to make her husband love her more; therefore knowing that she is relieved of her faults and loved more by her husband, a woman loves her children more than a father who has no such motivation. See Bestor, “Ideas About Procreation and Their Influence on Ancient and Medieval Views of Kinship,” 164-165.
The fact that a mother’s love was stronger did not mean, however, that it was better. Danièle Alexandre-Bidon and Didier Lett note that maternal love was frequently “presented and judged as more excessive, more unrestrained, more instinctual, and more visceral that that of the father”, qualities which were often viewed negatively in the late Middle Ages.637 The bodily or ‘visceral’ nature of maternal love was particularly ingrained in the medieval psyche; Katharine Park notes that although learned theories of generation in Renaissance Tuscany downplayed a mother’s physical contribution to her offspring, in keeping with patrilineal ideology, laypeople “saw the anatomy and physiology of generation as establishing indelible corporeal links between a mother and her children.”638 Two of Aquinas’s reasons above for the strength of maternal love rest on the bodily connection between mother and child: mothers labor more in their child’s generation and, because of the realities of gestation, are more certain that children are theirs.

When depicting motherhood in II.6, Boccaccio incorporates many of these traits. Beritola’s love for her children is not only strong, it is also, at times, excessive and unrestrained. As we have seen, Beritola faints upon losing her children; when she rediscovers her eldest son, she faints again: “con le braccia aperte gli corse al collo; né la soprabbondante pietà e allegrezza materna le permisero di potere alcuna parola dire, anzi sì ogni virtú sensitiva le chiusero, che quasi morta nelle braccia del figliuolo cadde” (II.6.66-67). Overwhelmed by ‘allegrezza materna’, Beritola loses first her ability to

637 See Danièle Alexandre-Bidon and Didier Lett, *Children in the Middle Ages: Fifth to Fifteenth Centuries*, 56.

638 See Katharine Park, *The Secrets of Women*, 131. In keeping with this bodily emphasis on maternity, Griselda is described as “carnalissima”, or extremely loving of or doting on, her children (X.10.38).
speak and then her consciousness. When she comes to, she showers her son with affection, bestowing upon him an excess of tears, gentle endearments, and kisses: “rabbracciò da capo il figliuolo con molte lagrime e con molte parole dolci; e piena di materna pietà mille volte o piú il baciò” (II.6.68, my emphases).

This passage stresses not only the strength of maternal love, but its excessive quality and lack of emotional restraint: Beritola faints, cries, kisses her son a thousand times. In other passages, Boccaccio highlights the instinctual or bodily quality of Beritola’s maternity. The novella’s unusual nursing scene - where, as Getto rightly notes, Beritola so overflows with maternal love that she nurses two roe deer - and the final mother-son recognition scene founded on extra-visual, sensory clues both emphasize the close bodily link between mother and child.639

According to Giuseppe Chiecchi, the loss of Beritola’s husband and children causes the instinctual, earthy qualities of her motherhood to come to the fore: “l’offesa subita fa esplodere l’istinto materno, ne espone la pura sostanza immanente, terrena, fatta di percezioni sensitive.”640 One manifestation of this ‘explosion’ of maternal instinct, to use Chiecchi’s term, is Beritola’s willingness - even need - to continue her motherhood through a process of transferral: having lost her own children, Beritola latches on (and vice versa) to animal substitutes, two newborn roe deer, which, in Beritola’s frustrated

639 “Nella figura di Beritola….si ha il vagheggiamento di una rara gentilezza femminile e materna, di un’affettività esuberante e dolce che si riversa, non potendo su creatura umana, su graziosi animali.” See Getto, Vita di forme e forme di vita, 237.

640 See Chiecchi, Giovanni Boccaccio e il romanzo familiare, 162. Chiecchi argues that once the social layers have been stripped away, and Beritola is alone on a primitive island, her innate maternity expresses itself: he sees a movement in the tale “dalla civiltà alla condizione selvaggia e segnata dalle spoliazioni progressive del personaggio materno che constringono Beritola al nucleo disadorno della maternità.” See Chiecchi, Giovanni Boccaccio e il romanzo familiare, 163. While I agree with Chiecchi that there is a certain contrast between motherhood and the norms of the aristocratic family in II.6, I dislike the way his reading implies that motherhood is at the root of female identity.
maternal state, appear to her as the sweetest and most charming things in the world ("le parevano la piú dolce cosa del mondo e la piú vezzosa" [II.6.15]). As Jonathan Usher suggests, the nursing of the roe deer serves to prolong Beritola’s physical maternity, tragically interrupted by the kidnapping of her sons. The result of this prolonging is that Beritola begins to assume the wild, bestial traits of the roe deer, to the point where she actually becomes wild: “la gentil donna divenuta fiera” (II.6.17).

Critics have tended to read Beritola’s transformation in this tale as simply an unusual, strange touch - in Baratto’s words, “un gusto dell’inedito e dello strano”; Marilyn Migiel has argued that de-humanized and reduced to eating herbaceous vegetation, Beritola “evokes traditional representations of the madman.” Yet as unusual as Beritola’s transformation may appear to us, it reflects contemporary beliefs about the maternal body. By making Beritola assume the qualities of her nurslings - she becomes “bruna e magra e pelosa” (II.6.20) - Boccaccio reverses the formative relationship thought to exist between nurse and nursling.

In fourteenth-century Tuscany, it was widely believed that a nurse could transmit her qualities to her nursling. Milk, “distilled from the blood of its bearer,” was imbued with the nurse’s character and could “for better or for worse, shape the character of the nursling.” For this reason, moralists and medical authorities recommended maternal nursing since it allowed the mother to root her qualities in her child; if the mother was

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642 See Baratto, Realtà e stile nel Decameron, 162; and Migiel, A Rhetoric of the Decameron, 67.

643 On the transmission of qualities through nursing, see Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy, 161-162; and Margaret King, Women of the Renaissance, 13, 15.

644 See King, Women of the Renaissance, 15.
unavailable, it was recommended that the nurse resemble her as closely as possible.\textsuperscript{645} Because children assume the qualities of the milk they drink, Paolo da Certaldo advised men to select a wise, honest, and polite nurse who was not a drunk: “molto guarda di dargli a nudrire a buona baglia, e che sia di natura savia, e sia chostumata e onesta, e che non sia bevitrice né ubriacha, però che molto spesso i fanciuli ritraghono e somilgliano da la natura de latte che popano.”\textsuperscript{646} Maffeo Vegio claimed that both he and his brother Lorenzo took on the qualities of their nurses: Lorenzo “seemed to have the same features, the same expression and even the same walk” as his nurse; Maffeo himself assumed his nurse’s modesty and reticence, as if he “had imbibed with her milk her heart and spirit.”\textsuperscript{647}

In II.6, of course, it is the nurse who assumes the traits of the nursling, not vice versa: the flow is reversed such that Beritola receives qualities from the deer - she becomes \textit{bruna, magra, and pelosa} - instead of rooting her own qualities in them. Nonetheless, the fact that Beritola becomes deer-like is not just a fantastical touch. I would note that Boccacio is careful to ensure that this scene appear realistic: he explains


Aldobrandino of Siena, like Francesco da Barberino, advised that the nurse resemble the mother as much as possible: “ele soit samblans à le mere tant com ele puet plus.” See \textit{Le régime du corps de Maître Aldebrandin di Sienne}, eds. Louis Landouzy et Roger Pépin (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1911), 76.


that Beritola is able to nurse the two deer because she has recently given birth and her milk has not yet dried up - "non essendolesi ancora del nuovo parto rasciutto il latte del petto, quegli teneramente prese e al petto gli si pose" (II.6.15-16). Although it reverses the directional flow, the transformation of Beritola into a wild creature - *la gentil donna divenuta fiera* - is also realistic inasmuch as it references beliefs about the fluidity of the female body and the bodily relationship between mother and child.

II.6’s unusual nursing scene emphasizes the close, bodily tie between mother and child: Beritola takes on the qualities of her nurslings. Nowhere, however, is the corporeal basis of motherhood more evident than in the novella’s final recognition scene. The way Boccaccio narrates this scene explicitly emphasizes the physicality of the tie between mother and child. The author attributes Beritola’s ability to recognize the faint outlines of the son she lost more than fourteen years ago to an ‘occult force’ - “cominciò a riguardare, e *da occulta vertù* desta in lei alcuna ramemorazione de’ puerili lineamenti del viso del suo figliuolo” (II.6.66, my emphasis); similarly, Giannotto’s recognition of

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648 Boccaccio makes a similar observation in *De mulieribus claris* when he notes the feasibility of a daughter nursing her imprisoned mother: he notes that the daughter “had recently given birth and so had plenty of milk to give to her now starving mother.” See Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, ed. and trans. Virginia Brown (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2001), 271. In *De mulieribus claris*, the nursing of an unusual recipient is an example of filial devotion; in II.6, it is proof of a superfluity of maternal love.

649 The fact that Beritola chooses to prolong her maternity by taking roe deer as nurslings may have also underscored, to Boccaccio’s contemporaries, her identification with maternal love. Although it is rarely noted, Beritola was not nursing her own child prior to being abandoned; Boccaccio tells us that she hired a wetnurse for the infant on the island of Lipari: “e gravida e povera montata sopra una barchetta se ne fuggí a Lipari, e quivi partorì un altro figliuol maschio, il quale nominò lo Scacciato; e presa una balia, con tutti sopra un legnetto montò per tornarsene a Napoli a’ suoi parenti” (II.6.8, my emphasis). As noted, the practice of wetnursing was widespread among middle and upper class Florentines from the mid-fourteenth century on. According to Shulamith Shahar, being nursed by one’s own mother was considered a sign of special love throughout this period. See Shulamith Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages*, 62. Beritola’s progression from an aristocratic, non-nursing mother to a semi-feral woman so eager to nurse that she takes two roe deer as nurslings may have further highlighted the affective quality of her surrogate motherhood.

650 Variations of the phrase “*da occulta vertù mossà*” appear in recognition scenes in *Decameron* II.8 and V.5. In II.8, the Count of Anguersa’s grandchildren are drawn to him by an occult force: “quasi *da occulta*
Beritola is predicated on an atavistic, ‘maternal smell’: “quantunque molto si maravigliasse, ricordandosi d’averla molte volte avanti in quel castel medesimo veduta e mai non riconosciutala, pur nondimeno conobbe incontanente l’odor materno” (II.6.67, my emphasis). The recognition produces an outpouring of maternal and, also, filial affect: Beritola faints, comes to, showers her son with tears, sweet words, hugs and kisses; Giannotto, slightly more restrained, tearfully and tenderly kisses his mother - “lei nelle braccia ricevuta lagrimando teneramente baciò” (II.6.68).

In this passage, Boccaccio privileges the mother-child bond as something instinctual, innate, primal, and ever-lasting: even after fourteen years of separation, Beritola and Giannotto respond - corporeally and emotionally - to each other.

Interestingly, however, he frames this affective recognition scene with two filial responses that tend to qualify the preeminence of the mother-child relationship. We have seen that when Currado asked Beritola what she would do if he returned her son to her, she stated that he would be giving her ‘something dearer to her than herself’. When Currado poses the same question to her son - “che ti sarebbe caro sopra l’allegrezza la qual tu hai, se tu qui la tua madre vedessi?” (II.6.63) - his response is decidedly less emotional. Giannotto’s response is more keyed to lineage and social position than it is expressive of filial love: “egli non mi lascia credere che i dolori de’ suoi sventurati

vertú mossi avesser sentito costui loro avolo essere” (II.8.78-79). (A similar force drew Pruneo to his grandfather Girafone in the Ninfale fiesolano: “quel fantin, quando Girafon vide, / da naturale amor mosso, gli ride” [429, 7-8].) In Decameron V.5, a daughter recognizes her father “da occulta vertú mossa” (V.5.37). For the use of this expression in a non-familial context, see Purgatorio 30 where Dante intuits Beatrice’s presence (she is veiled and his eyes are blinded) by an occult force that emanates from her body: “sanza de li occhi aver piú conoscenza, / per occulta virtú che da lei mosse, / d’antico amor senti la gran potenza” (Purg. 30. 34-39).

Paolo da Certaldo uses odore in a familial context with respect to paternal, not maternal, odor: “Dicie Tuglio che per cierto choliu ch’è diritto filgliuolo di choliu chu’ egli tiene per padre, e none bastardo, egli ama e teme e onora e ubidisce il suo padre, o giovane o vecchio o povero o ricco o sano o ‘nferno che sia, e sempre glie ne viene gr[a]ndsissimo olore.” See Paolo da Certaldo, Il libro di buoni costumi, n.266.
accidenti l’abbian tanto lasciata viva; ma, se pur fosse, sommamente mi seria caro, sì come colui che ancora, per lo suo consiglio, mi crederei gran parte del mio stato ricoverare in Cicilia” (II.6.64). In short, Giannotto would be happy to see his mother because she could help him recover his fortune and social position in Sicily.

This pragmatic statement is followed by the bodily-based recognition scene discussed above. As soon as the joyful greetings have ended, however, Giannotto turns back to practical family matters, requesting Currado’s help in finding his brother and father and in ascertaining the state of Sicily: “vi priego che voi mia madre e la mia festa e me facciate lieti della presenza di mio fratello, il quale in forma di servo messer Guasparrin Doria tiene in casa….e appresso, che voi alcuna persona mandiate in Cicilia, il quale pienamente s’informi delle condizioni e dello stato del paese, e mettasi a sentire quello che è d’Arrighetto mio padre, se egli è o vivo o morto, e, se è vivo, in che stato, e d’ogni cosa pienamente informato a noi ritorni” (II.6.70). Boccaccio thus frames - or bookends - the affective, bodily-based mother-son recognition scene in II.6 with two statements that indicate a different understanding of family.

The contrast between Beritola’s and Giannotto’s responses vividly illustrates the differential believed to exist between maternal and filial love in late medieval society. This differential was thought to arise from a mother’s secondary role in generation and in the family. According to Aquinas, children naturally loved their fathers more than their mothers because “more of that which is of the son is contributed by the father than by the mother” (i.e. form); consequently, “a man by nature loves his father and relatives on his father’s side more than he loves relatives on his mother’s side.”

For this view, see St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae (New York and London: McGraw-Hill, 1975), vol. 34, 2a2ae. 26, 10; and Sent. 3.29.7 in St. Thomas Aquinas, On Love and Charity: Readings
provided two more socially-rooted reasons for a child’s love for his father: sons inherit their fathers’ goods, and, unlike mothers, fathers are not associated with the transmission of liabilities but only with the conferral of honors and offices.\footnote{653}

In II.6, Boccaccio perfectly reflects these views not only by positing an affective differential between mother and son but by alluding to the socially-motivated reasons underpinning it. Beritola may love her child more than herself, she may be so full of maternal love that she takes roe deer as nurslings, but Giannotto knows that true family resides in the male line; he desires the full restitution of his family, knowing that it will also bring about the recovery of his rightful social position. By framing Beritola’s outpouring of maternal love with Giannotto’s pragmatic attention to family status, Boccaccio acknowledges the limitations of motherhood in the patrilineal family of fourteenth-century Tuscany. If we turn to V.9, we will find that Boccaccio again frames an affective portrait of motherhood and maternal loss - Giovanna’s love and care for her young son - with realistic social and familial considerations.

\textit{Decameron V.9}

Motherhood in V.9 has been somewhat neglected, due, perhaps, to the traditional view of the tale as ‘Federigo’s’.\footnote{654} This reading is fostered in part by the tale’s rubric: in

\footnote{653} See Bestor, “Ideas About Procreation and Their Influence on Ancient and Medieval Views of Kinship,” 165.

\footnote{654} Baratto is emblematic of the critical tendency to focus on Federigo (his sacrifice, his quotidian nobility, etc.) in the tale and overlook the role of Giovanna and her son. See Baratto, \textit{Realità e stile nel Decameron}, 349, 351, 353. Francesco Bruni sees the passage from the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie as a big theme in the novella. See Bruni, \textit{L’invenzione della letteratura mezzana}, 340.
one of the more puzzling omissions, the rubric does not mention Giovanna’s child or his illness, focusing instead exclusively on Federigo and his desire - “Federigo degli Alberighi ama e non è amato, e in cortesia spendendo si consuma e rimangli un sol falcone, il quale, non avendo altro, dà a mangiare alla sua donna venutagli a casa; la qual, ciò sappiando, mutata d’animo, il prende per marito e fallo ricco” (V.9.1). Although the rubric ignores the mother-son relationship that for so many readers is a central part of the tale, a significant portion of the novella is dedicated to motherhood. V.9 contains one of the longest speeches on motherhood in the Decameron and portrays the mother-son relationship in particularly moving terms; for Giovanni Getto, Giovanna’s care and love for her son is one of the purest images in the entire Decameron: “fra le immagini più pure di questo libro che è stato per tanto tempo così frainteso nel suo tono essenziale e nelle sue sfumature più delicatamente umane.”

The picture we receive of the mother-child relationship in V.9 is beautiful, moving, even ‘pure’. The beauty and pathos result from the way Boccaccio posits maternal love as an irresistible force and the way he infuses the novella with loss. Yet this beautiful portrait of motherhood occurs within a very particular legal and familial context that, I argue, provides the necessary space for this touching relationship to unfold.

Before considering the narrative function of this legal and familial context, I would like

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655 For Antonio D’Andrea, this omission seriously puts into doubt the viability of using rubrics to interpret the tales. See Antonio D’Andrea, “Le rubriche del Decameron,” in Yearbook of Italian Studies (1973-1975), 53.

656 Giovanni Getto rightly notes that V.9, which should illustrate the theme of the fifth day - loves with happy endings - dedicates a significant amount of narrative space to motherhood: “questa novella che dovrebbe illustrare il tema della quinta giornata….concede una parte non indifferente alla presentazione di una tenere e dolorosa figura di madre.” See Getto, Vita di forme e forme di vita nel Decameron, 220.

657 See Getto, Vita di forme e forme di vita nel Decameron, 221. In addition to containing a long speech on motherhood, I would note that V.9 is also one of few Decameron tales in which a child actually speaks.
to explore how, as with Beritola’s motherhood in II.6, Boccaccio plays up the affective or instinctual qualities of Giovanna’s motherhood in this tale.

In V.9, Giovanna, a widow, and her young son go to a country home to spend the summer. There, the boy comes into contact with Federigo, a neighbor and old admirer of Giovanna’s; he delights in playing with Federigo’s birds and dogs, taking a particular interest in his falcon. One day, the boy falls ill, to the distress of his mother who, seeking to comfort him, promises him anything he wants. The child’s request for Federigo’s falcon - “Madre mia, se voi fate che io abbia il falcone di Federigo, io mi credo prestamente guerire” (V.9.13) - sets into play the rest of the story for it leads to Giovanna’s visit to Federigo’s home and the ultimate death of both falcon and boy; David Wallace notes that “when the bird dies, so does the child’s last hope: when Monna Giovanna unknowingly eats the falcon she is, in effect, eating her son.”

Prior to this tragic denouement, we encounter, as critics have noted, some beautiful scenes of maternal love and solicitude. The way Boccaccio narrates these scenes dramatically illustrates the strength and invincibility of maternal love. Giovanna’s response to her son’s illness is one of the most moving scenes in the novella. In addition to playing up the affective qualities of Giovanna’s motherhood - she loves her son ‘as much as one can’ (“lui amava quanto piú si poteva”) - the passage sets the stage for the scene to come: “avvenne che il garzoncello infermò; di che la madre dolorosa molto, come colei che piú no n’avea e lui amava quanto piú si poteva, tutto il di standogli

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659 Like Beritola in II.6, although in this more socially-rooted story Boccaccio provides a mitigating reason for Giovanna’s attachment: she has no other children.
dintorno non restava di confortarlo e spesse volte il domandava se alcuna cosa era la quale egli disiderasse, pregandolo gliele dicesse, ché per certo, se possibile fosse a avere, procaccerebbe come l’avesse” (V.9.12). Giovanna’s desire to procure her son anything he wants echoes an earlier passage in II.8 where Giachetto’s mother promised her son that she would satisfy his any request: “figliuol mio, non ti guardare da me, ma sicuramente ogni tuo desiderio mi scuopri…renditi certo che niuna cosa sarà per sodisfacimento di te che tu m’imponghi, che io a mio poter non faccia, sí come colei che te piú amo che la mia vita” (II.8.52-53).

In both tales, Boccaccio implies that it is ‘natural’ - an innate quality of motherhood - for mothers to want to fulfill their sons’ wishes. In V.9, this idea is important for it is responsible for a good deal of the tale’s dramatic tension: when Giovanna’s son asks for the falcon, her maternal instincts - her natural desire to fulfill her son’s request - come into conflict with a host of other considerations.

Boccaccio’s narration purposefully heightens the dramatic charge of this conflict between maternal love and ethical and social concerns. The author first lays out the reasons behind Giovanna’s disinclination to ask for the falcon: Federigo’s love for her, the falcon’s superior quality and its value in Federigo’s life, the heartlessness of asking for a man’s one remaining pleasure; these reasons are so daunting that Giovanna does not respond to her son, but sits silently - “Ella sapeva che Federigo lungamente l’aveva amata, né mai da lei una sola guatatura aveva avuta, per che ella diceva: ‘Come manderò io o andrò a domandargli questo falcone, che è, per quel che io oda, il migliore che mai volasse e oltre a ciò il mantien nel mondo? E come sarò sí sconoscente, che a un gentile uomo al quale niuno altro diletto è piú rimaso, io questo gli voglia torre?’ E in così fatto

If she doesn’t, he can consider her ‘the cruelest mother that ever brought a child into the world’: “abbimi per la piú crudel madre che mai partorisse figliuolo” (II.8.53).
pensiero impacciata, come che ella fosse certissima d’averlo se ’l domandasse, senza sapere che dover dire, non rispondeva al figliuolo ma si stava’ (V.9.14-15). By making the reader privy to her inner dialogue and then pausing the narrative, Boccaccio emphasizes the strength of Giovanna’s aversion to ask Federigo for his falcon. In the following sentence, however, he brings in a stronger force: Giovanna’s love for her son - “ultimamente tanto la vinse l’amor del figliulo, che ella seco dispose, per contentarlo, che che esser ne dovesse, di non mandare ma d’andare ella medesima per esso e di recargliele” (V.9.16, my emphasis). 661 Overcome - in the idiom of the tale, **vinto** - by love for her son, Giovanna decides, no matter what the outcome, to satisfy the child.

When Giovanna visits Federigo’s home the following day, the strength or invincibility of maternal love is again highlighted. Appealing to Federigo’s knowledge of parental love, Giovanna positions her request for his falcon as motivated by a ‘natural law of motherhood’. She states that she never would have come were it not for the force of the love she has for her son; she is constrained, against her own wishes and all rules of decorum - “oltre al piacer mio e oltre a ogni convenevolezza e dovere” - to follow the laws common to all mothers: “se figliuoli avessi o avessi avuti, per li quali potessi conoscere di quanta forza sia l’amor che lor si porta, mi parrebbe esser certa che in parte m’avresti per iscusata. Ma come che tu no’ n’abbia, io che n’ho uno, non posso però le leggi communi dell’altre madri fuggire; le cui forze seguir convenendomi, mi conviene,

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661 In VII.3, Boccaccio uses a similar phrase to describe a father’s love for his son: “Il santoccio, credendo queste cose, tanto l’affezion del figliuol lo strinse, che egli non pose l’animo allo ‘nganno fattogli dalla moglie ma gittato un gran sospiro disse: ‘Io il voglio andare a vedere” (VII.3.33). For a more in depth examination of this tale, see my “Che il fanciullin suo avea per mano’: The ‘presence’ of the child in _Decameron_ VII.3,” *La Fusta*, Vol. XVI (Fall, 2008): 42-60.
oltre al piacer mio e oltre a ogni convenevolezza e dovere, chiederti un dono” (V.9.29-30).

This is, by my calculation, the longest speech we have on motherhood in the Decameron. In it, Boccaccio presents maternal love as an ineluctable, instinctual force, naturally present in women. As Jane Fair Bestor notes, the love of parents for their children was frequently described in the late Middle Ages as a natural force, like “sap welling up from the roots of a plant to its outer branches”, that was beyond their control. The way Giovanna describes her love for her son is consonant with this image: the repetition of the word ‘forza’ (“di quanta forza sia l’amor che lor si porta”, “non posso però le leggi communi dell’altrre madri fuggire; le cui forze seguir convenendomi”) underlines the strength - even the coercive power - of maternal love, complementing the earlier description of Giovanna ‘overcome’ by love for her son (“tanto la vinse l’amor del figliuolo”).

Besides stressing the strength of maternal love, this speech repeatedly highlights Giovanna’s fear for her son’s life: she is afraid that her son will die if she returns home empty handed (“se io non gliele porto, io temo che egli non aggravi tanto nella infermità la quale ha, che poi ne segua cosa per la quale io il perda [V.9.31-32]) and implores Federigo to give her the falcon so she may save her son’s life: “acciò che io per questo dono possa dire d’avere ritenuto in vita il mio figliuolo e per quello averloti sempre obligato” (V.9.32). When Federigo presents Giovanna with the remains of the falcon he

662 Giovanna also appeals to Federigo’s courtesy when asking for the falcon: “per la tua nobiltà, la quale in usar cortesia s’è maggiore che in alcuno altro mostrata, che ti debba piacere di donarloni, acciò che io per questo dono possa dire d’avere ritenuto in vita il mio figliuolo e per quello averloti sempre obligato” (V.9.32). The underlying reason, however, is always the child.

663 The plant image is developed by Jacobus de Varagine in the Sermon on the Saints. See Bestor, “Ideas About Procreation and Their Influence on Ancient and Medieval Views of Kinship,” 165.
cooked for her, her contemplation of his magnificence is quickly supplanted by concern for her son and she rushes off to be by the child’s side: “molto seco medesima commendò. Poi, rimasa fuori della speranza d’avere il falcone e per quello della salute del figliuolo entrata in forse, tutta malinconosa si dipartì e tornossi al figliuolo” (V.9.38).

From here the narrative accelerates quickly: the child dies, either from disappointment in not having the falcon or because the illness would have turned out that way anyhow (“o per malinconia che il falcone aver non potea o per la ’nfermità che pure a ciò il dovesse aver condotto” [V.9.38]), and Giovanna’s grief is passed over in two short sentences: she experiences “grandissimo dolore” and passes through a period of bitter mourning and weeping (“piena di lagrime e d’amaritudine fu stata alq uanto”). The narrative jumps quickly from her grief to the effects her son’s death will have on her financial and marital situation: “La quale, poi che piena di lagrime e d’amaritudine fu stata alquanto, essendo rimasa ricchissima e ancora giovane, più volte fu da’ fratelli costretta a rimaritarsi” (V.9.39).

The effect of this quick jump can be jarring; having been so recently in the emotional territory of maternal love and child mortality, we suddenly find ourselves confronted with the mundane details of family strategy and marital alliance. Yet the tale began with a similarly brusque switch from death and family concerns. In the passage immediately preceding Giovanna and her son’s trip to the country, Giovanna’s husband dies and Boccaccio spends some time noting the details of the child’s inheritance: “avvenne un dí che….il marito di monna Giovanna infermò, e veggendosi alla morte venire fece testamento; e essendo richissimo, in quello lasciò suo erede un suo figliuolo già grandicello e appresso questo, avendo molto amata monna Giovanna, lei, se avvenisse
che il figliuolo senza erede legittimo morisse, suo erede substituí, e morissi” (V.9.9). As sole heir, the child will receive his father’s fortune unless he dies without legitimate issue, in which case Giovanna will inherit everything.

As critics have noted, this paragraph more or less seals the child’s fate, for if this is Federigo’s tale, the boy must die for him to recover his previous economically-elevated state.\footnote{Bruni considers the child’s death “un sacrificio alla macchina narrativa”, noting that Giovanna’s wealth is dependent on the death of her child. See Bruni, \textit{Boccaccio: l’invenzione della letteratura mezzana}, 343.} I would argue, however, that this passage also provides the necessary conditions for Giovanna’s motherhood. As noted in Chapter Two, it was common for widows in late medieval Florence to be retracted by their natal family and remarried, leaving - or abandoning, depending on your point of view - their children with the paternal lineage to which they legally belonged.\footnote{For the remarriage of widows and the abandonment of children, see Section 2.6 of Chapter Two.} If a husband opposed the eventual remarriage of his wife and wished to keep her near their children after his death, he could name her ‘\textit{domina et usufructuaria omnium bonorum}’, which would give her usufruct over his entire estate or goods during her life, and name her guardian of their children in his will.\footnote{See Isabelle Chabot, \textit{“Lineage Strategies and the Control of Widows in Renaissance Florence,”} in \textit{Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe}, eds. Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner (Essex: Pearson, 1999), 139.} Ann Crabb found that sixty percent of Florentine testators with sons granted joint usufruct - lifetime use of their property, shared with their children - to their widows.\footnote{See Ann Crabb, \textit{The Strozzi of Florence}, Appendix B, Table B.7. Chabot notes that seventy percent of surviving wives granted \textit{domina} were young mothers who would be taking care of under-age children. See Chabot, \textit{“Lineage Strategies and the Control of Widows in Renaissance Florence,”} 138.} What Boccaccio is doing in this passage, I argue, is creating a realistic context for his touching, but solitary, mother-son relationship. By naming the child sole heir and placing Giovanna in the line...
of inheritance, Boccaccio affords her a level of agency and independence that allows her
to interact with her son without the interference of other male characters.

Tellingly, it is after the death of her son, and the dissolution of the legal situation
that afforded her some agency, that Giovanna is drawn back into the patrilineal family.
As a young, rich widow, she is pressured to remarry by her brothers; despite a strong
preference to remain a widow, she capitulates on the condition that she can choose her
mate: “Io volentieri, quando vi piacesse, mi starei; ma se a voi pur piace che io marito
prenda, per certo io non ne prenderò mai alcuno altro, se io non ho Federigo degli
Alberighi” (V.940).

David Wallace astutely characterizes Giovanna in this tale as “a woman who
negotiates her way with great skill between the conflicting claims of husband, lover and
son”. 668 Brothers should certainly be added to this list for the end of the tale stresses their
repeated efforts to reassert their claims to her: “piú volte fu da’ fratelli costretta a
rimaritarsi. La quale, come che voluto non avesse, pur veggendosi infestare…” (V.9.39,
my emphasis). Yet the fact that they wait until after Giovanna’s child dies is testament to
her ability to negotiate male desire. Boccaccio makes it clear that Giovanna’s favored
position in her husband’s will results from the special love her husband felt for her while
alive: “lasciò suo erede un suo figliuolo già grandicello e appresso questo, avendo molto
amata monna Giovanna, lei, se avvenisse che il figliuolo senza erede legittimo morisse,

668 See Wallace, Giovanni Boccaccio: Decameron, 67. Ray Fleming takes a similar view, characterizing
Giovanna as “a woman who reasons in a sophisticated and analytic manner from the beginning to the end
of this tale.” See Ray Fleming, “Happy Endings? Resisting Women and the Economy of Love in Day Five
of Boccaccio’s Decameron,” Italica, vol. 70 (Spring 1993), 40. Even Francesco Bruni, when claiming that
the Decameron only exalts women who do not generate, admits that Giovanna is an exception: “Nel
Decameron si esaltano….’donne che non invecchiano e che non generano’: perciò spicca in quel mondo
monna Giovanna, col suo figliuolo che s’incapriccia del falcone di Federigo degli Alberighi.” See Bruni,
L’invenzione della letteratura mezzana, 342-343.
suo erede substitui” (V.9.9, my emphasis). Giovanna’s ability to live out his wishes and remain with her son may be the result of her skill in resisting, not fostering, male desire. Despite being granted guardianship of their children, many widows were forced to remarry by their natal families; in one particularly illustrative example, when the Sassetti brothers took back their widowed sister Isabetta in 1389, they forced her to renounce the guardianship of her children granted to her by her husband’s will, stating: “as we had to remarry M[adonn]a Isabetta, she could not, and we did not want her to, take on this guardianship, and she renounced it 7 December 1389.”669 The beautiful picture of maternal love and solicitude in V.9 may be dependent on Giovanna’s success in securing - and then maintaining - a domestic situation that affords her some level of agency and self-determination.

Like Mensola and her child in the Ninfale, or Beritola on the island with her roe deer, Giovanna’s ‘beautiful’ motherhood occurs outside the strictures of the male-dominated family: after her husband has died, but before her brothers have reasserted their claim to her; wedged between the wishes of husband and brothers, Giovanna finds a space for herself and her son. We may ask what Boccaccio is saying about the prospects of motherhood - and good mothers - by setting his most beautiful, poignant depictions of motherhood outside the normative family structure.

669 See Klapisch-Zuber, Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy, 124; Chabot, “Lineage Strategies and the Control of Widows in Renaissance Florence,” 135. Klapisch-Zuber notes that Isabetta’s brothers, her children’s maternal uncles, took over responsibility for her sons, a fact that weakens her emphasis on the power of the patrilineage (124). Ann Crabb notes that a widow almost always lost guardianship of her children if she remarried. See Ann Crabb, The Strozzi of Florence, 248.
Conclusion

How we dwelt in two worlds
the daughters and the mothers
in the kingdom of the sons

Adrienne Rich, “Sibling Mysteries”

Throughout this project, I have explored the relationship between Boccaccio’s representation of maternity in the Ninfale fiesolano and Decameron and beliefs about generation and ideologies of motherhood and the family in fourteenth-century Tuscan society. I have argued that efforts to understand what Boccaccio is saying about mothers - and, by extension, women - are necessarily incomplete unless we consider the particular social and historical context in which the author was working. Fourteenth-century Tuscany promoted female fertility and motherhood at the same time as it devalued female reproductive contributions to family and line. When we weigh the Decameron’s treatment of maternity - its lack of interest in “good mothers” or reproductive sexuality - we must ask how these themes relate to the greater historical context.

As we have seen, the depiction of motherhood in the Decameron is, by and large, rather dark. The attentiveness to female experience and level of specificity when discussing reproduction seen in the earlier Ninfale fiesolano are largely lacking from the prose work: when narrating procreation, Boccaccio employs formulaic and standardized language that hews closely to medieval gender constructs - men generate children whom women’s bodies bear - and repeatedly draws attention to the passive functionality of the maternal body. Yet it is not only the terms with which Boccaccio discusses generation in the later work that makes the Decameron’s treatment of maternity so much darker than

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the *Ninfale*’s. In the earlier poem, Boccaccio demonstrated a pronounced interest in the female body’s metamorphosis in pregnancy. In the *Decameron*, Boccaccio is more interested in efforts to avoid maternity: he depicts women (and one man) for whom pregnancy is a misfortune or evil. An examination of the few positive, critically-acclaimed, depictions of motherhood in the *Decameron* reveals that Boccaccio deliberately plays up the affective, bodily qualities of maternity in these tales only to frame, or delimit it, through reference to the norms of the fourteenth-century family: Beritola loves her son more than herself; he desires the restitution of his family; Giovanna’s touching time with her son exists wedged between the wishes of her husband and her brothers.

In my reading, the darkness of the *Decameron*’s depiction of maternity results from the fact that in this text, Boccaccio actively engages with contemporary ideologies of motherhood and the family, particularly as they pertain to women’s freedom of choice and agency. In the *Ninfale*, the reflection of the ideologies and practices of the Tuscan patrilineage was softened, or refracted, somewhat due to the poem’s pastoral setting: the citations were never overt. In the *Decameron*, a text addressed to fourteenth-century women, we are presented with more realistic depictions of motherhood (albeit with a great deal of fantasy mixed in): Beritola, Ferondo’s wife, Giletta, Violante, Monna Giovanna, Catalina, Griselda. The depictions of motherhood that we receive from these tales tend to stress, in one way or another, the marginal position of women and the tenuous relationship of a mother to her child in the male-dominated and male-defined family: Violante’s self-generating birth distances her from the reproductive process as Fineo’s possessives (“il suo figliuolo e lei e il suo picciol nepote”) dissociate her from the
male-defined family; Griselda as mother is ‘the body that carried the children generated by Gualtieri’, children Gualtieri may do with as he likes. Even II.6 and V.9, our critically-acclaimed portraits of motherhood, sharply delimit a mother’s love by framing it in the concerns of the male-dominated and male-traced family. Enriching these tales with social-historical context allows us to become aware of entirely new levels of meaning; as I have shown in this project, there is more to Boccaccio’s depiction of maternity than meets the (modern) eye.
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