Boccaccio’s lore

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Abstract and Keywords

Chapter 4 looks at narrative as one of the consolations of exile and focuses on the Pisan circle’s use of ‘Boccaccio’s lore’ to foster a more tolerant, cosmopolitan ethics and sexual politics in exile. Contrasted with the wary reception of Boccaccio’s Decameron in England by writers such as Coleridge, the chapter suggests that Boccaccio’s prose energizes the mixed modes and stylistic versatility of exiled art; at the same time, Boccaccio’s republican values made him a political figurehead for English liberals. Close analysis of the Decameron’s contribution to Landor’s Conversations, Don Juan, Peter Bell the Third, Matilda, and Edward William’s manuscript play The Promise makes a new case for Boccaccio’s importance to English writing out of Italy.

Keywords: Boccaccio, Decameron, narrative, sexual ethics, Byron, Shelley, Landor, Hunt, Williams
In the last chapter, we looked at the points at which the visual and auditory sensations of the traveller and the exile in Italy intersect, tracing patterns of response to Catholic otherness in English writing from Beckford to Browning. This chapter examines the ways in which exiles tell stories about England out of Italy. Contra Adorno, Edward Said defines the intellectual benefits of exile as ‘different arrangements of living and eccentric angles of vision’ and ‘the pleasure of being surprised, of never taking anything for granted, of learning to make do in circumstances of shaky instability that would confound or terrify most other people’.¹ Julia Kristeva celebrates the gain of being a wandering cosmopolitan in imaginative free-play: ‘exile following exile, without any stability, transmutes into games ... Such a strangeness is undoubtedly an art of living for the happy few or for artists’.² The Byron-Shelley circle of English writers in Italy often envisaged itself as an elect community of artists, seeking refuge from the corruption and persecution of metropolitan life. As in Kristeva’s sketch of exiled play, their nomadic mode of existence sometimes branched into games: sailing paper boats and real ones, amateur theatricals, and competitive storytelling. One of their most significant models of shared narrative pleasure in Italy was the Decameron by Giovanni Boccaccio.
Boccaccio’s influence on Romantic-period English literature has been eclipsed by the figures of Dante and Petrarch, whose lyrical and visionary poetry seems more central to the concerns of canonical Romanticism. The Decameron’s conception of a mixed artistic group is, however, closer to the actual situation of the Pisan circle than the model of prophetic isolation provided by Dante, or the Platonic devotion of Petrarch. Before the Pisan circle assembled, Shelley suggested that Hunt should come out to Florence ‘and we would try to muster up a “lieta brigata,” which leaving behind them the pestilences of remembered misfortunes, might act over again the pleasures of the interlocutors in Boccaccio’.

Boccaccio’s novelle inspired 19th-century writers who had left England to praise the delights of a bucolic existence in Italy, set apart from the rest of English and Italian society, but also to use this retirement to participate in what Jeffrey Cox recognizes as the ‘struggle over the definition of post-Napoleonic culture and society’. As Cox points out, the Pisan circle can be seen as Shelley’s attempt to reconvene the freely associating group of writers gathered in London by Leigh Hunt’s journalism. The formation of a fair brigade of young English poets in Tuscany realized Hunt’s determination to ‘raid the Italian cultural archive in order to remake British poetry’, in Cox’s words. Unlike the exiles that preceded him to Italy, however, Hunt found that he preferred to write prose and verse from the South in the North.
Hunt had rallied his new poets under the auspices of the native tradition headed by Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton, but he also pointed his protégées towards the Italian tradition. When Byron left England, Hunt’s envoi acknowledged that his favourite English writers had all ‘turned to Italy for added light,/As earth is kissed by the sweet moon at night’. Although Hunt had led the way in adapting the Italian poets, he urged Boccaccio on Shelley, rather than translating him himself, and ‘Boccaccione volente’ was adopted as a graceful way of sending kisses to Mary through the post when Hunt wanted to be gallant. In 1816, Hunt presented Italian influences on English poetry as feminine and softening, but following Keats and Reynolds’s use of the Decameron in 1818 (probably suggested by Hazlitt’s lectures at the start of the year), Hunt wrote to Mary Shelley in August 1818 and asked her to make Percy fulfil his commitment to read Boccaccio. The stories Hunt recommended held Boccaccio’s characteristic mixture of tenderness and brutality (‘The Falcon’ and ‘The Pot of Basil’) and studies of those who are pushed beyond the limit of human endurance, including the one ‘of the lover who returned and found his mistress married on account of false reports of him, and who coming in upon her at night-time, and begging her to lie down a little by her side, without disturbing her husband, quietly broke his heart there.’ Like Dryden, Hunt responded to the Decameron’s exploration of the strength of human attachments set against a background of casual violence, and the limits of passive obedience in the face of despotic power, especially as these clashes are emblazoned in the lives of women.
Boccaccio’s narrative mode is as important for his satiric purposes as the content of the stories themselves. In the *Decameron*, the unpredictability of fortune identified by Boethius, and the treacherous unreliability of other humans, create a narrative rhythm of constant adjustment and renewal. Like the subjects of his tales, Boccaccio’s readers must temporarily surrender themselves to the power of the storyteller and the Roman goddess Fortuna, and this is not simply escapism. In 1845, Elizabeth Barrett confessed her susceptibility to narrative to Robert Browning: ‘I am one who could have forgotten the plague, listening to Boccaccio’s stories,—& I am not ashamed of it. I do not even ['] “see the better part,” I am so silly’. Her allusion is to Luke 10, where Martha asks Jesus to upbraid Mary for sitting at his feet and listening to his talk while she is ‘cumbered about much serving’; Jesus quietly dismantles the equation of women and domestic duty by telling her that ‘Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her’. Barrett is always alert to literary authorities that test masculine and feminine roles, and in the invocation of the *Decameron* she points her suitor in that direction. Thereafter, Boccaccio’s world becomes woven into the private language of the Brownings’ courtship correspondence, as we can see when Robert writes on 4 September 1846:

in all this, I labour against the execrable policy of the world’s husbands, fathers, brothers, and domineerers in general: I am about to marry you ... ‘how wise, then, to encourage such a temper in you! such was that divine Griselda’s – a word rules the gentle nature – ‘Do this, or’... ’

Browning signals his willingness to defer to Barrett by playing with one of the most risqué elements of Boccaccio’s writing—relations between the sexes. For women readers in the Byron-Shelley party, Boccaccio’s focus on *domestica facta* also provided a much-needed challenge to ‘domineerers in general’. Alongside a powerful sexual ideological critique and the pleasures of good storytelling, Boccaccio suggests an ethical role for the sustaining power of narrative in exile. The rest of this chapter will consider the various ways in which the Romantic-period English exiles deploy Boccaccio to ‘labour against the world’s policy’, creating as they did so the formal inventiveness that carries human conversation into art.
Boccaccio’s foreword to the *Decameron* is addressed to those ‘who stand in need of consolation’, specifically to women because they have less freedom than men to seek active relief from heart-quakes: ‘they spend most of their time within the narrow confines of their chambers; here they sit in relative idleness, torn between yes and no as they brood on all manner of things.’ Boccaccio’s intuiting of the interior agony of those confined in a domestic space anticipates Donna Julia’s farewell letter in *Don Juan*, and the piercing account of how women do not forget men so soon as men forget women given by Anne Elliot at the end of *Persuasion*. The author of the *Decameron* confesses that he has survived the pangs of disprized love himself, but ‘Now all that survives of it in my heart is the joy it is inclined to afford to those who do not launch out too far across its dark waters’. Knowledge of a lonely journey across a ‘dark gulf’, and the comfort that is afforded by ‘pleasing discussion with friends’ makes the *Decameron* a natural refuge for the homeless and the broken-hearted. Set as a diversion from the terrors of the Black Death that Boccaccio witnessed in Florence in 1348, the *Decameron* explores the shocks that sever human ties: war, pestilence, shipwreck, infidelity, and death. These twists of fortune or ‘heart- quakes’, as Byron would term them, are incorporated into each day’s array of narratives and as each story is told, art achieves a temporary hold over the contingencies that are usually beyond human control.
On a simple emotional level, then, the *Decameron* is a consolatory text. Walter Savage Landor conveys its affective capacity in a beautiful sensory metaphor at the end of *The Pentameron*: ‘The human heart’, he says, ‘through all its foldings, vibrates to Boccaccio’. For the Pisan circle, Boccaccio’s tales also possess special significance as the vehicles of linguistic innovation and political idealism. The reasons for the censorship of this book in Italy were the irreverent comedy it extracted from depictions of corrupt Catholic priests, and its candid discussion of the venality of the court and the injustice of hereditary power. At the end of the story (p.122) about the patience of Griselda, for example, the narrator confronts his readers: ‘What are we to say, then, if not that heaven rains forth sublime souls even on to the hovels of the poor, just as it showers the palaces of the mighty with spirits better suited to herding swine than to ruling men?’ The emphatic position of this question about the real identity of the swinish multitude, at the end of the last tale on the tenth day, led to its being picked up as a motto by later social commentators, and helped to cement Boccaccio’s republican reputation.

The Swiss historian, Jean Charles Leonard Simonde de Sismondi, who had himself been an exile in London in the 1790s, linked Boccaccio with the ‘eloquence of history’ that he found in Thucydides when that writer ‘animates the relation of the plague in Athens’. Sismondi argued that Boccaccio’s style embodies the indefatigable resilience that distinguishes the exile:

One cannot but pause in astonishment, at the choice of so gloomy an introduction to effusions of so gay a nature. We are amazed at such an intoxicated enjoyment of life, under the threatened approach of death; at such irrepressible desire in the bosom of man to divert the mind from sorrow; and at the torrent of mirth which inundates the heart, in the midst of horror which should seem to wither it up.
In addition to his tough spirit of survival, Boccaccio’s contribution to the sound of the Italian language is vital for all the writers in this book. The conversational style of the *Decameron* supports the possibility of a new civility that could develop from the conditions of exile. Boccaccio’s fluid prose had earlier fascinated Dryden, who endorsed Boccaccio as ‘the Standard of Purity in the *Italian* Tongue’, the writer who, like Chaucer, ‘cultivated his Mother-Tongue’ and possessed a ‘familiar Style’. Dryden’s translation work on the *Fables* overlaps with his late period of life when, after his conversion to Catholicism, he was effectively in political exile; Boccaccio helped him to cultivate an authorial voice of robust independence. In the writings of the exiled 19th-century critics Ugo Foscolo and Pierre-Louis Ginguené, Boccaccio’s displaced situation is seen as having facilitated his leap from the old inherited Latinate structures into a more flexible vernacular. Foscolo suggests that Boccaccio was able to play his language as if it were a musical instrument:

*(p.123)* Boccaccio courts his [language] like a lover; every word seems, in his eyes, instinct with life, not needing to be animated by intellect; and therefore, for a medium of continuous narration ... Certain it is that the exterior and permanent beauty of language depends on sounds, because these are natural properties, and the only ones which can be perpetual and unchangeable in words. All other qualities they acquire from common consent and usage, which are often inconstant; or from the various modifications of feeling and thinking among writers.
Boccaccio’s prose is seen, therefore, as possessing a peculiar timelessness, creating an art form free from the influence of other writers. As the ‘father of Tuscan prose’, his language offered a new music. In December 1820, Mary Shelley told Leigh Hunt about her new Italian friend, Professor Pacchiani: ‘He speaks the most beautiful Italian tongue, completely different from today’s idiom, which makes one believe that he might be hearing Boccaccio or Machiavelli speaking as he wrote.’ Vernacular purity held a patriotic charge at this time. When the Byron-Shelley group was in Italy, Boccaccio was at the heart of an academic and political debate about what language a new unified Italy might espouse: the Tuscan of Boccaccio, Dante, and Petrarch, or a more modern dialect, or even French. For the exiled community in Italy, Boccaccio’s function as the ‘true’ sound of Italy—rooted in opposition to the former oppression of the French, or the prevailing Austrian culture, or Papal Latin—is also a key part of his appeal. His political, religious, and sexual rebelliousness made him a hero for Romantic exiles, who took delight in casting aside the prevailing English caution about the Decameron in particular.

S. T. Coleridge typifies the conflicted 19th-century English attitude to Boccaccio: attracted by the Arcadian prospects of the Teseida or the Filostrato, but recoiling from his more earthy novelistic accounts of human sexuality. In 1814, Coleridge told John Murray that he would, of course, exclude the Decameron from the translation that he proposed of Boccaccio’s prose works. Thomas Stothard’s illustration to Coleridge’s poem, ‘The Garden of Boccaccio’ in The Keepsake (1829) (see Figure 5), with its extensive topiary, cascading fountain, picnicking, and al fresco chess-playing groups of elegant youths and maidens, watched over by pairs of deer, rabbits, and birds, epitomizes the anodyne Boccaccio prepared for English readers. At (p.124)
this time, the fullest available English translation of the Decameron was an 1804 ‘corrected and improved’ reissue of the expurgated translation published by R. Dodsley in 1741. Its editor briskly stated the need for censorship: the ‘many words and sentences that trench on decency’ have been ‘metamorphosed or expunged, without ceremony or compunction. Much (p.125) the translator has judiciously omitted, and some things he has treated with a freedom of translation that might be justly reprehended’.23

Figure 5. Thomas Stothard’s illustration to S. T. Coleridge’s ‘The Garden of Boccaccio’

The Keepsake (1829). Author’s copy.
In order to avoid ‘freedoms and indecencies’ among women readers, early 19th-century editors took liberties with the text. In English translations, Boccaccio was only available in heavily abridged and selected forms, such as The Spirit of Boccaccio’s Decameron, comprising Three Days Entertainment; Translated, Selected, Connected, and Versified (1812), which edited out seven days of dubious material. The Decameron presented the same challenge that Byron’s ottava rima verse posed for his contemporaries—the problem of mixed modes. It offers a succession of meetings, encounters, and ironies in both content and style that 19th-century English readers often found awkward and offensive. In their unexpurgated form, however, Boccaccio’s stories forced readers to confront changes of tone and situation, going to the heart of the abrupt and unsettling transitions that shape the literature of exile.

Landor and Boccaccio
In Landor’s early dramas, *Andrea of Hungary* and *Giovanna of Naples*, which he presented in 1839 to Robert Browning (*Fra Rupert* completed the trilogy in 1840), Boccaccio appears as a less than perfect courtly lover: he wears Fiammetta’s scarf, sighs to her, and sings rather badly to attract her attention. In *Andrea* Act IV, his minstrelsy is overheard by Andrea, who sees Boccaccio ‘maskt … under the mulberry’ and is unconvinced by Fiammetta’s attempt to persuade him that it is merely a shadow: ‘Think you so? It may be. And the guitar?’ The gently humorous Andrea evicts Boccaccio, but this comic mood is shattered by the ensuing violence. *Giovanna of Naples* begins as Boccaccio and Fiammetta bid farewell to each other in the garden after the murder of Andrea has broken up the court. In Act III, Boccaccio appears briefly in Rome with Petrarch, where he expresses his hatred of legal process: ‘Since in all law-courts I have ever entered,/The least effrontery, the least dishonesty,/Has lain among the prosecuted thieves’. Even in this cameo appearance there are signs of reclusiveness that make Boccaccio a version of the exiled Landor himself: (p.126) Petrarch asks him, ‘Should days like yours waste far from men and friends?’, and Boccaccio answers that ‘almost two’ friends would be plenty. His penultimate reflection is about the power of letter writing: ‘But frequent correspondence/Retains the features, nay, brings back the voice;/The very shoe creaks when the letter opens’. This is the Landor who could recognize (and avoid) visitors by telling the sound of their feet on the stairs, or tell the distinctive noise of his dog jumping up at a particular door. It is a mark of Boccaccio’s capaciousness that both the antisocial Landor and the socially affirming Hunt see him as versions of themselves.
Landor’s first *Imaginary Conversation* between Boccaccio and Petrarch picks up the theme of Petrarch’s own exile, ‘there is, and ever will be, in all countries and under all governments, an ostracism for their greatest men’, and uses it as the starting point for a discussion of human adaptability, which is, as we shall see, the prime skill encouraged by the *Decameron.*

Putting Petrarch’s immediate situation aside, and addressing each other in familiar terms as ‘Giovanni’ and ‘Francesco’, the two writers discuss human obduracy and frailty from the different perspectives of romance and fabliau. Boccaccio tells a story from his neighbourhood about a young man’s despair because the woman he adored, Monna Tita, was going to enter a convent. The day before she was due to go, the young man’s friend, a monk, persuaded her to delay for a few hours and urged the young man to rest, take some old wine, and allow himself to be waited on by a pretty maidservant. The monk left them together and returned the following morning with Monna Tita to find the boy ‘in the arms of sleep’. Following the convention of courtly love, Petrarch assumes that ‘the truest lover would have done the same, exhausted by suffering’, whereupon Boccaccio breaks the news gently that, ‘[h]e was truly in the arms of sleep, but Francesco, there was another pair of arms about him’. Boccaccio and Petrarch laugh wryly at the revelation that her discovery of this night of drunken infidelity prompts Monna Tita to marry her lover, rather than become a nun. As in so many of Boccaccio’s tales, the acceptance of less than the shining ideal is the hallmark of human survival and it is the patient unravelling of recalcitrant detail and tolerant listening that enables both storyteller and auditor to master the exigencies of fortune.
The artistic possibilities of diametrically opposed philosophies within friendship were so fruitful that Landor went on to produce *The Pentameron* (1837), a miniature version of the *Decameron* consisting of five days of interviews between Petrarch and Boccaccio and concluding with an editorial defence of their friendship against rumours of alleged jealousy between them: 'Never were two men so perfectly formed for friendship; never were two who fulfilled so completely that happy destination.' Landor’s view of them as companionable exiles follows the tenor of the contemporary biographies that saw exile as the seal of *trecentisti* integrity.

Thomas Warton traces the *Decameron* to Boccaccio’s encounters with ‘his learned friends among the Greek exiles who, having been driven from Constantinople, took refuge in Italy about the fourteenth century’. In the same spirit, an essay prefacing the 1804 and 1820 English translations of Boccaccio highlights the way in which classic Italian authors share the experience of banishment or alienation:

The Tuscan language ... took its rise, if we may use the expression, like a rose amidst the thorns of persecution, since Dante and Petrarch composed their works in exile, and Boccaccio terminated his Decameron, as he himself declares, in the proem to the fourth day, opposed to the galling shafts of envy and calumny. Machiavel was a martyr to the faction of the Medici, for endeavouring to prevent them from becoming the tyrants of his country. Guicciardini had recourse to a voluntary banishment to one of his villas, that he might not see the liberty of the Florentine republic expire in the hands of Cosmo the First, and there he finished his History of Italy.
We can see here the merger of the actual condition of exile with its metaphoric dimension. In the Preface to Day 4, Boccaccio claims that he has tried to avoid the hostile crowd of envious critics by ‘sticking to the low ground’ and writing in ‘the vulgar tongue and in prose’.\textsuperscript{33} He observes that this has not prevented his being ‘savagely buffeted by the storm wind’, and he also asserts that the familiar style does not ‘[stray] from Parnassus and the Muses nearly as much as many people may think’, and that ‘many are the poets who, by attending to their poetry, quickened the age in which they live’.\textsuperscript{34} Boccaccio’s use of the verb meaning to make bloom or flourish (‘\textit{fecero la loro età fiorire}’) has the same organic energy as Percy Shelley’s metaphor in ‘Ode to the West Wind’: ‘Drive my dead thoughts over the universe/Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!’ (ll. 63–4), and Shelley identifies a renovating force in the \textit{Decameron}: ‘What descriptions of nature are those in his little introductions to every new day. It is the morning of life stript of that mist of familiarity which makes it obscure to us.’\textsuperscript{35} Boccaccio is, therefore at the root of Shelley’s (p.128) rethinking of Coleridge’s ideas about the role of poetic language in \textit{A Defence of Poetry}.\textsuperscript{36}

Boccaccio defines the cusp located by Said when he describes the intellectual as de facto a metaphoric exile and sometimes a real one as well. From a position on the outside, he injects a vigorous life-force back into society. Walter Savage Landor is not one of Said’s case studies either, but Landor would fit exactly the model of Said’s ‘intellectual who because of exile cannot, or more to the point, will not make the adjustment, preferring instead to remain outside the mainstream, accommodated, uncoopted, resistant’.\textsuperscript{37} Landor epitomizes the unco-opted version of Boccaccio in person, but recreates the keenly discursive nature of his art, with its profound ethical contemplation of the nature of compromise and the testing issue of how to accommodate self and other in hostile circumstances.

Lord Byron, Hobhouse, and Boccaccio
For the benefit of his stay-at-home English contemporaries, Byron embraced the spirit of Boccaccio in as physical a way as possible. Moore felt obliged to censor the letter that reported: ‘I am just come out from an hour’s swim in the Adriatic; and I write to you with a black-eyed Venetian girl before me, reading Boccaccio. ****’.\textsuperscript{38} In Ravenna, Byron revelled in his absorption in an Italian way of life:
The weather is hot – but in the evening I take a ride or a drive to the Pineta – the scene of Boccaccio’s tale – and Dryden’s fable.––Afterwards I visit – and – – believe me.  

The different lengths of dash in this letter are the notations of a musical score that invites the readers to interpolate words or non-verbal sounds. Familiarity with the scenes of Boccaccio’s tales is linked with the ever-increasing separation Byron felt from his English contemporaries. In December 1820, he wrote for the first time in five years to Francis Hodgson, his Church of England, former Cambridge University contemporary, connecting himself with a different set of friends:

We have here the Sepulchre of Dante and the forest of Dryden and Boccaccio, all in a very poetical preservation. I ride and write, and have here some Italian friends and connexions of both sexes ... few English pass by this place, and none remain, which renders it a much more eligible residence.

Byron’s separation from home is underlined by his dual attachments to the Italian literary tradition and living Italian ‘connexions’. According to Medwin, Byron delighted in unfashionable Ravenna, where he felt ‘unbroken in upon by society’:

Ravenna lies out of the way of travellers. I was never tired of my rides in the pine-forest: it breathes of the Decameron; it is poetical ground. Francesca lived, and Dante was exiled and died at Ravenna. There is something inspiring in such an air.

It is as if Byron has taken in the air that Dante expired. As with the letter to Hodgson, Byron blends literary texts and everyday life into a seamless texture: centuries-old historical figures and poetic characters exist on the same plane of reality as the poet. This is not escape, but ‘inscape’, to borrow G. M. Hopkins’s word for the way landscape is charged with energy. For Byron, the merging of art and life has a revolutionary potential.
Boccaccio’s lore

In *Don Juan* Canto III, in the middle of the Juan-Haidee episode on a Greek island, Byron uses a digression about Ravenna to remind Murray and his disapproving readers that the narrator of *Don Juan* occupies more spacious mental territory, if not higher ground, than they do, and breathes a different atmosphere:

> Sweet hour of twilight! – in the solitude  
> Of the pine forest, and the silent shore  
> Which bounds Ravenna’s immemorial wood,  
> Rooted where once the Adrian wave flow’d o’er;  
> To where the last Cesarean fortress stood,  
> Evergreen forest! which Boccaccio’s lore  
> And Dryden’s lay made haunted ground to me,  
> How have I loved the twilight hour and thee!  
> The shrill cicalas, people of the pine,  
> Making their summer lives one ceaseless song,  
> Were the sole echos, save my steed’s and mine,  
> And vesper bell’s that rose the boughs along;  
> The spectre huntsman of Onesti’s line,  
> His hell-dogs, and their chase, and the fair throng,  
> Which learn’d from this example not to fly  
> From a true lover, shadow’d my mind’s eye. (III, 105–6)

The stanzas are attuned to the utterly un-English sounds of cicalas and vesper bells, and yet, in the first two lines of stanza 106, we hear Byron (p.130) ‘peopling’ imaginative Italian space in an unexpectedly English way. The voice of William Lisle Bowles drifts onto the airways with the mention of the cicalas, though it is typical of Byron that other poets’ lines sound completely different in his mouth. Bowles’s anti-slavery poem, ‘The African’, recalls the notes that haunt his displaced brethren:

> Or the shrill cicalas sing  
> Ceaseless to their murmuring  
> Where the dance, the festive song  
> Of many a friend divided long  
> Doom’d thro’ stranger lands to roam,  
> Shall bid thy Spirit welcome home.42
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Bowles was in Byron’s mind because of the Pope controversy: the ‘Letter to John Murray’ discusses Bowles as an indifferent lyric poet, as well as a critic, but, in a fascinating way, Bowles’s lines on the sound of homesickness become the medium through which Don Juan rejects England and looks to Italy, and yet turns back to England. We catch a glimpse of the ghost of Aesop’s Fables before the phantoms from the Decameron: orthodox, ant-like disapproval of the crickets who make their lives one long summer is folded into the second line, even as the verse welcomes a different rhythm of existence. Byron’s ottava rima forces Bowles’s earnest tetrameter to broaden its mind in a more languorous ride through the forest, but the idea of home waits in the shadows, anticipating the fuller ‘Soft hour’ translation of Dante’s lines on homecoming from the Purgatorio three stanzas later. ‘Evergreen forest!’ takes us into the sort of timeless (but usually Anglo-Saxon) fairy-tale territory beloved of the Cockney School; here, its metrical impact chimes with Boccaccio’s name. The twilight setting provides a suitably liminal space for the negotiation of a different culture, while the landscape Byron contemplates has seen time and tide and ‘Caesars’ come and go. ‘Boccaccio’s lore’ encapsulates what many English exiles reach for in the Decameron—an ethical outlook that is simultaneously more unflinching and more forgiving than codes of behaviour at home: the archaic ‘lore’ suggests an alternative religious doctrine or form of learning, which might be opposed to the more punitive ‘law’ of England under the Tories.
The story of ‘Onesti’s line’ from the Decameron Day 5 was set in the Pineta outside Ravenna. It tells of the repeated ghostly appearance of a naked woman pursued by a huntsman and his hounds; each time the (p.131) woman is dragged down by the pack, the huntsman cuts open her back, tears out her heart, and throws it to his ravenous dogs, who consume it; the woman gets up and the chase resumes. It is, we learn, the infernal punishment of a lover who killed himself and the woman whose rejection drove him to despair. Having been spurned by a proud noblewoman, Onesti has retreated from life in Ravenna to live in the forest. He arranges for his scornful lover to encounter the scene of ‘the hell-hounds and their chase’ by setting up a banquet in the woods for the ‘fair throng’ of Ravenna. After witnessing the phantoms of the hunt, Onesti’s lady relents and accepts him, and all the women of Ravenna make more of an effort to be kinder to their men (‘a piaceri degli uomini furono’). The story was painted in a cycle of eerie panels by Botticelli for the Palazzo Pucci in Florence and versified by Dryden as ‘Theodore and Honoria’.

In Onesti’s withdrawal from Ravenna we can see a reflection of Byron’s primal scene of disgrace and expulsion predicated upon love. The repeated hellish punishment chimes with Byron’s acute sense of the inescapability of the heart’s anguish, the infinite reflections of the broken mirror described in Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage Canto III: ‘the more, and still the same the more it breaks’ (st. 33). Boccaccio’s tale relays the same relentless causality. His rapidly changing Italian register emphasizes the arbitrary and inconstant force of human love (in a different medium, Botticelli’s panels convey the way the narrative cuts from scene to scene). Don Juan is equally determined to transmit the ‘controlless core/Of human hearts’ (I, 96) through deftly controlled verse, but the story also points to the merger of life and art: the affective power of the vision changes reality for Onesti and the other spectators. Added to this, in 1821 Byron is concerned to avoid joining the crowd of passive spectators to Italy’s age-old pattern of revolutionary fervour and bloodshed. There is an urgent need for art to make a difference to life, to assist in the process of political and cultural revival.

For aesthetic, political, and philosophical reasons, as well as for pure pleasure, Byron envisages himself in the community of Boccaccio, joining with the advocates for a new Italy:
The ‘Americana’ (a patriotic society here, under branch of the ‘Carbonating’) give a dinner in *The Forest* in a few days, and have invited me, as one of the C[arbonari]. It is to be in *the Forest* of Boccaccio’s and Dryden’s ‘Huntsman’s Ghost’; and, even if I had not the same political feelings, (to say nothing of my old convivial turn, which every now and then revives), I would go as a poet, or, at least, as a lover of poetry ... At any rate ... I will get as tipsy and patriotic as possible.44

(p.132) Byron’s ‘patriotism’ is on behalf of a new Italy, which will be reached through the reviving spirit of literature as much as political activism. Dryden is a presiding genius along with Boccaccio because he shares knowledge of the consanguinity of civil and domestic strife and, like Byron at this time, the Dryden of the 1690s also experienced the ‘same feelings’ between political involvement and detachment. Along with Pope, Dryden had been attacked recently by the Lake School: ‘The “little boatman” and his “Peter Bell”/Can sneer at him who drew “Achitophel!”’ (*Don Juan* III, 100). That Byron watches himself joining the cause of Italian liberation as one of the Carbonari, welcomed by the ‘Americana’, reveals the extent to which he is forging a new post-national identity predicated on literary kinship. It is more advanced than the cynical attitude of *Le Cosmopolite* of Louis Charles Fougeret de Monbron, which Byron invoked as the epigraph for *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* I and II, and which implies rootless detachment and equal indifference to all places. In 1821, Byron’s ability to inhabit Boccaccio’s fictional world and the place of the brotherhood of Ravenna mirrors the cosmopolitan ideal of being an actively engaged citizen of more than one polity.
Byron’s tribute to Boccaccio in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*
Canto IV salutes him as ‘scarce less than’ Dante and Petrarch: ‘The Bard of Prose, creative spirit! He/Of the Hundred Tales of love’ (IV, 56). We have lost the sense of shock that some of Byron’s readers would have felt on encountering this laureate address. It is as different as can be imagined from Coleridge’s horrified rejection of ‘the gross and disgusting licentiousness, the daring profaneness … which rendered the Decamerone of Boccace as the Parent of an hundred worse children, fit to be classed amg the enemies of the human Race’, in a lecture given in the same year.45 Reactionary critics oppose artistic challenges to social mores in every generation: Savonarola burnt the works of Boccaccio along with paintings, musical instruments, and articles of women’s finery in the Bonfire of the Vanities in 1497, and Boccaccio’s fate in death anticipates what Byron felt sure would happen to him too:

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Boccaccio to his parent earth bequeathed
His dust, – and lies it not her Great among,
With many a sweet and solemn requiem breath’d
O’er him who form’d the Tuscan’s siren tongue?
That music in itself, whose sounds are song,
The poetry of speech? No;–even his tomb
Uptorn, must bear the hyaena bigot’s wrong,
(p.133) No more amidst the meaner dead find room,
Nor claim a passing sigh, because it told for whom! (CHP IV, 58)
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According to Hobhouse’s note on the stanza, Boccaccio’s tomb in Certaldo was ‘ejected from the holy precincts’, but rescued by the Marchioness Lenzoni of the Medici family. ‘This is not the place to undertake the defence of Boccaccio’, Hobhouse observes, before adding a three-page note which rescues him from the hostile criticism of John Chetwode Eustace, and salutes Boccaccio for having ‘founded, or certainly fixed, a new language’ and for living ‘the life of a philosopher and a freeman’.46 Lacking the anti-English sexual liberality of Byron, Hobhouse acknowledges that some of Boccaccio’s tales deserve ‘censure’, and is obliged to mention that Boccaccio repented his work at the end of his life and tried to discourage the reading of the *Decameron* ‘for the sake of modesty’, but he is keen to align Boccaccio with those writers who have been done down by ignorance and bigotry:
'I have remarked elsewhere', says Petrarch, writing to Boccaccio, ‘that the book itself has been worried by certain dogs, but stoutly defended by your staff and voice. Nor was I astonished, for I have had proof of the vigour of your mind, and I know you have fallen on that unaccommodating incapable race of mortals who, whatever they either like not, or know not, or cannot do, are sure to reprehend in others; and on those occasions only put on a show of learning and eloquence, but otherwise are entirely dumb.'

Hobhouse’s critique highlights the resilience and toleration of the trecentisti in the face of ‘unaccommodating’ portions of society. Reinscribing Petrarch’s defence of Boccaccio in his addendum to Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage Canto IV, Hobhouse exhibits that ethical respect for otherness that was in danger of being stamped out in the culture of the new 19th-century nation states. As he writes of Boccaccio, Hobhouse has the wounded name of Byron before him. His lengthy note reveals the extent to which Whigs who lean towards the ideal of universal benevolence, as opposed to post-Napoleonic chauvinism, see Boccaccio as a forerunner in the pan-European group of persecuted liberal writers. From the perspective of Dryden, Hunt, Byron, and (with some caveats) Hobhouse, the Decameron supports the Whig argument for just rebellion; literary tradition energizes the chance of a break with the past. Boccaccio’s presence in this liberal pantheon explains why he also appears in Percy Shelley’s Defence of Poetry.

(p.134) Percy Shelley and Boccaccio

In a letter to Leigh Hunt of 27 September 1819, Percy Shelley presented Boccaccio as ‘one of us’:

Boccaccio seems to me to have possessed a deep sense of the fair ideal of human life considered in its social relations. His more serious theories of love agree especially with mine. He often expresses things lightly too, which have serious meanings of a very beautiful kind. He is a moral casuist, the opposite of the Christian, Stoical, ready-made and worldly system of morals.
Shelley recommended Boccaccio as a political force as well, seeing him with Dante and Petrarch as one of the productions of ‘the vigour of the infancy of a new nation—as rivulets from the same spring as that which fed the greatness of the republics of Florence and Pisa’. Boccaccio was an ‘unacknowledged legislator’ because he had put forward a new morality and a belief in social amelioration.

Calling Boccaccio a ‘moral casuist’, Shelley recalls Boccaccio’s ‘volendo e non volendo’ or ‘yes and no’ portrait of the interior life of women in the Preface to the Decameron, and the friends whose reasoning and argument or ‘ragionamenti’ forms a consolation for the author in the Preface. Although the tales told by Boccaccio’s narrators often meet with a chorus of approval from the rest of the company, there are moments when the characters form different interpretations of what they have heard. At the end of the third day, for example, we are told that ‘Lauretta ended her song; everyone had followed it closely, but not all had understood it in the same way [diveramente da diversi fu intesa]. Some were inclined to a rather down-to-earth interpretation … others took a more uplifting view’. Ostracized by a ‘ready-made and wordly system of morals’, it suited the Shelley circle to espouse a more searching ethical system; Boccaccio’s model of a refined company debating serious issues without reference to institutionalized moral codes was exactly the sort of community that they wanted to create. Shelley uses the ‘lore’ of Boccaccio as a way of opposing those who have a ‘low tide’ of soul, like William Wordsworth. Timothy Webb has shown how Shelley uses Boccaccio with Dante and Petrarch to create ‘a general ambiance, particularly in their idealized treatment of love’. If ‘Epipsychidion’ represents the idealized vision of sexual love, ‘Peter Bell the Third’ is an example of Boccaccio’s ‘mixture of hilarity and Pathos’.

In ‘Peter Bell the Third’, Shelley invokes the Decameron to counter the lack of generosity or ‘free love’ in the older poet. Nature laughs and kisses Peter before telling him:

“Tis you are cold – for I, not coy,
Yield love for love, frank warm and true;
And Burns, a Scottish Peasant boy, –
His errors prove it – knew my joy
More, learned friend, than you.
’Bocca baciata non perde ventura
Anzi rinnuova come fa la luna:—
So thought Boccaccio, whose sweet words might cure a
Male prude like you from what you now endure, a
Low-tide in soul, like a stagnant laguna.’ (ll. 323–32)

It is not enough here for the reader to recognize the name of Boccaccio and interpolate a vague sort of Chaucerian bawdiness: we need the full context to appreciate how and why Boccaccio might revitalize the ‘stagnant’ Lake School—the renewed object of Byron’s wrath in Don Juan Canto III.

Shelley’s quotation is drawn from the Decameron 2.7, the story of Alatiel, the beautiful daughter of the Sultan of Babylon, who is sent as a bride to the King of Africa, but is shipwrecked and thrown into a series of adventures with different male guardians. Initially, she preserves her virginity, but having been plied with wine and seduced by her first protector, she quickly learns to enjoy sex and accepts the change of partner that comes with each change of fortune. After eight men, and what Boccaccio calls ‘diecemilia’ sexual encounters, Alatiel finds herself back with the King of Africa, whom she impresses with a story about her heroically sustained chastity.

Needless to say, the 1804 English translation of this tale is reserved about the physical details of Alatiel’s adventures, such as her violent seasickness, and very circumspect about her sexual experience. When one of her suitors is described as being ‘tutto ignudo’, the translation relays this as ‘in his shirt’, and where Boccaccio uses expressions like ‘s’incominciò a prendere piacere’, ‘sotto le lenzuola maraviglioso piacere’, and ‘appetito tirati, cominciatisi a stuzzicare insieme’, the 1804 translation reads: ‘they began to consider themselves as man and wife’, or ‘he spared no pains to gain her consent, in which he succeeded’, or ‘by which means that thing was brought about, which neither of them intended’. Shelley doesn’t labour the point, but readers who have encountered the full Italian text will realize that the English translation traduces Boccaccio’s open account of pleasure: the morality of censorship enforces a distorted view of human, specifically female, sexuality; it is against this that the Pisan circle was writing.
Boccaccio’s story is one of pragmatic survival amidst the reversals of fortune. Alatiel’s optimistic surrender to each new sexual experience anticipates what Byron would later render in the plot of Don Juan. The force of the repeated verb ‘piacere’ counters the dishonesty lamented by Mary Wollstonecraft, whereby society teaches women to adapt themselves to the superficial coquettish arts of pleasing. Boccaccio’s narrative, by contrast, teaches female listeners to adapt to fortune, to move on after heart-break, not to place too much trust in the idea of a permanent abode or a single faithful partner, and that they should take as much pleasure as possible from any loving act of sex while it is available because man’s devotion is short-lived and marriage can be long and lonely. Far from regarding the loss of her virginity as a tragedy, Alatiel is allowed to find comfort (‘ma pur poi da Constanzio riconfortata, come l’altro volte fatto avea’) in each new coupling, and her ability to ‘have the same affection for [Marato] that she had entertained for his brother’ is a mark of the bounty of experience.55

The Tuscan proverb which completes the tale (“Bocca baciata non perde ventura, anzi rinnova come fa la luna’’), pointedly redirected to William Wordsworth, means: ‘There’s no misfortune in a well kissed mouth; it renews itself as does the moon’. Shelley repeats it to Hunt in his letter of 27 September 1819, and suggests that it ‘might do some good to the common narrow-minded conceptions of love’. He then adds, ‘If you show this to Marianne ... tell her that I don’t mean xxxxx. ... ---- !!? () ?.56 This maxim is, not surprisingly, omitted from the 1804 English translation, but understanding the context of the allusion allows us to see just how radical was Shelley’s critique of the English prudery that ostracized the Pisan circle. The fact that Boccaccio’s story was not about just kissing, but the full sexual pleasure that can be given to a woman, ‘con che corno gli uomini cozzano’, makes Peter Bell’s feeble groping about the hem of Nature’s shift all the more comic and inadequate.57 Boccaccio spearheads their attacks on the Lake School’s ‘stale virginities’ as the Byron-Shelley circle confronts the shibboleth of English domestic life.58 An exile’s perspective offers Wordsworth a lesson in Nature’s ‘frank, warm and true’ energies, and from a position of enforced passivity and exclusion, a fantasy female capacity to absorb disaster and remain open to pleasure initiates the forces of renewal, regeneration, or quickening.
Leigh Hunt and Boccaccio
Hunt was always ready to endorse Shelley’s enthusiasms, and he had already invoked the spirit of Boccaccio himself when he contrasted ‘fair Ravenna’ with London in the early drafts of *The Story of Rimini* in 1811. Hunt later included Boccaccio as one of the genial founding spirits of the *Liberal* when defining the ‘liberality … upon which our readers may reckon’ in the Preface:

> We are not going to discover every imaginative thing even in religion to be nonsense, like a semi-liberalized French-man; nor, on the other hand, to denounce all levity and wit to be nonsense and want of feeling, like a semi-liberalized German. If we are the great admirers of VOLTAIRE, we are great admirers also of GOETHE and SCHILLER. If we pay our homage to DANTE and MILTON, we have tribute also for the brilliant sovereignties of ARIOSTO and BOCCACCIO.59

In 1823, after the disintegration of the *Liberal* project in the wake of Shelley’s death and Byron’s departure for Greece, Hunt moved to Florence and then to Maiano, from where he tried to continue writing journalism for an English audience. ‘From our windows’, he told readers, ‘we saw, close to us, the Fiesole of antiquity and of Milton, the site of the Boccaccio-house … still closer, the Valley of Ladies at our feet’.60 Maiano provided a literary refuge, but Hunt was unable to shake off his homesickness for London:

> I stuck to my Boccaccio haunts, as to an old home. I lived with the divine human being, with his friends of the Falcon and the Basil, and my own not unworthy melancholy; and went about the flowering lanes and hills. Solitary indeed, and sick to the heart, but not unsustained … In the Valley of the Ladies, I found some English trees (trees not vine and olive) and even a meadow; and these, while I made them furnish me with a bit of my old (p.138) home in the north, did no injury to the memory of Boccaccio, who is of all countries, and finds himself wherever we do ourselves, in love, in the grave, in a desert island.61
Here again, we hear that slippage between a geographical exile ‘in a desert island’ and a metaphoric eviction from stability that comes from being ‘in love’. The ‘Basil’ refers to the *Decameron* episode already versified by Keats in ‘Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil’.62

The ‘Falcon’ (also one of Hazlitt’s favourites), refers to the ninth story from the fifth day, in which Federigo degli Alberighi spends his fortune in passionate pursuit of a married woman, Giovanna, who will not look at him. At last, with no money left, Federigo retreats to the country and spends his time hunting with the only thing he has left—his prize falcon. The woman he loves is widowed and suggests to Federigo that she might come to lunch. Federigo readily agrees, but is then embarrassed that he has nothing to feed the woman he has adored for so long. Boccaccio narrates simply how ‘his eye turned to his fine falcon sitting on its bar in his little room’ (‘gli corse agli occhi il suo buon falcone, il quale nella sua saletta vide sopra la stanga’). The sentence is a poignant echo of the description of Giovanna paying no attention to Federigo at all (‘niente di queste cose per lei fatte né di colui si curava che le faceva’).63 In a desperately rapid couple of sentences, he finds the falcon promisingly ‘grasso’ and, without further thought, wrings its neck, ‘senza più pensare, tiratogli il collo’, and bakes it. He believes the dish to be worthy of her, but he is then distraught when, after the meal, she asks for the same bird as a present for her son. Federigo has to confess, tearfully, that she has just eaten it. His sacrifice makes such a deep impression on Giovanna that, after the death of her son, she takes Federigo as her husband.
Boccaccio’s lore

The Basil and Falcon stories are about lovers who are left with almost nothing and who channel their intense emotions into a relic—a decapitated head in a pot of basil and a pet bird. In this way, they encapsulate the obsessiveness of exile, which, as we have seen, often involves clinging on to ‘the wreck and remnant of his fortune’, as Hazlitt describes it. Hunt presents Boccaccio as the greatest consolation of exile, but even the ‘divine human being’ is still not enough to reconcile him to the loss of home. The difference between being ‘of all countries’ and ‘of no country’ (p.139) is one way of defining the distinction between the cosmopolitan and the exile. Properly speaking, Hunt was neither; although he wanted to be both. He never adopted Italian life in the same way as Byron and the Shelleys, and his attachment to Italy remained a theoretical one, as Maria Gisborne recognized.

The one point at which Hunt’s 1822–5 sojourn in Tuscany overlaps with the preoccupations of his more completely exiled contemporaries is in his heightened appreciation of books as material objects. Hunt’s nest of comforts in the Surrey Gaol had included well-stocked bookshelves and a plentiful supply of new reading material, such as the 56-volume *Parnaso Italiano*. In Maiano and Florence, a much smaller library allowed him to cultivate the persona of the Boccaccio, whom he imagined ‘With book under arm, and in scholarly gown’ in *The Bluestocking Revels* (III, 145), as a bibliophilic forefather:
Sitting last winter among my books, and walled round with all the comfort and protection which they and my fire-side could afford me, – to wit, a table of high-piled books at my back, my writing-desk on one side of me, some shelves on the other, and the feeling of the warm fire at my feet, – I began to consider how I loved the authors of those books; how I loved them too, not only for the imaginative pleasures they afforded me, but for their making me love the very books themselves, and delight to be in contact with them. I looked sideways at my Spenser, my Theocritus and my Arabian Nights: then above them at my Italian Poets; then behind me at my Dryden and Pope, my Romances, and my Boccaccio; then on my left side at my Chaucer, who lay on [the] writing-desk; and thought how natural it was in C. L. to give a kiss to an old folio, as I once saw him do to Chapman’s Homer … ‘We had talk, Sir,’ – the only talk capable of making one forget the books. Good God! I could cry like one of the Children in the Wood to think how far I and mine are from home; but this would not be ‘decent or manly;’ so I smile instead, and am philosophic enough to make your heart ache. Besides, I shall love the country I am in more and more, and on the very account for which it angers me at present.65

Struggling to come to terms with Shelley’s death and trying to love Italy ‘more and more’, the tangible presence of Hunt’s books means more than the intellectual stimulation that their authors provide. The ‘high-piled’ books at his back become a surrogate bower, recalling the ‘high-piled’ books ‘like rich garners’ in Keats’s ‘When I have fears that I might cease to be’, and the ‘high piled’ clouds in The Fall of Hyperion, among which he can (p.140) dream, but also behind which Hunt can shelter from the Italian winter storms.
Recollecting the kiss that Charles Lamb plants on Chapman’s Homer, as if it were a gospel, Hunt explains why books are more than words on a page (or in our day, a screen). Being ‘in contact’ with books provides something uniquely touching with a familial value that simulacra will never be able to reproduce. By making the books into a ‘wall’, offering ‘comfort and protection’, Hunt rebuilds a literary home from the wreckage of the one he has lost. Literary authors become the friends of his friends, so the Falcon and the Basil work as totems summoning Keats, Hazlitt, Reynolds, and the convivial talk of the Cockney School, while Hunt does his best to survive his spell in an evergreen forest that, after Shelley’s death, falls into the province of Grimm’s, rather than Boccaccio’s, lore.

Claire Clairmont, Mary Shelley, and Boccaccio
Prompted by Hunt, Mary read Boccaccio’s *Decameron* in Rome in May 1819; Percy read it in late August and the first two weeks of September. A year later, in September 1820, Mary notes that Shelley had again begun to read Boccaccio aloud in the evening, a pattern that continued into October. Claire Clairmont’s 1819 Rome journal suggests that the reading of the *Decameron* was shared among women:

Monday May 10th. A lesson in Music – Miss Curran calls – (Read Boccaccio – among others) the tale of Guiscardo & Ghismonda which is very beautiful.

Tuesday. May 11th. Walk in the Gardens of the Trinity – Miss Curran calls. Read again the story of Guiscardo & Ghismonda. 66
It is easy to see why the story of Guiscardo and Ghismonda would have appealed to Claire and Mary as it had appealed to Mary Wollstonecraft before them.\(^{67}\) It tells of a strong, lonely young widow who initiates a sexual relationship with a page in her father’s court, staunchly defends her sexual appetite to her father when the affair is discovered, and after her father executes her lover, acts decisively to end her own life. Ghismonda’s grief when presented with the heart of her lover in a chalice, and her quietly (p.141) determined suicide, must have impressed the 21-year-old Claire, who had instigated a sexual relationship with Byron, but who then had to contend with his casual cruelty and the knowledge that ‘these ten minutes’ of ‘happy passion … have discomposed the rest of my life’.\(^{68}\) (‘Ten minutes’ does not, alas, make it sound as if Byron won many prizes on the ‘piacere’ front.) For Mary and Claire, shared reading of Boccaccio becomes an imaginative touchstone in the aftermath of William Shelley’s death in June 1819, at a time when Claire was still trying to come to terms with the idea of yielding care of Allegra to Byron. Dialogue with Boccaccio’s narrative art fuels the composition of Mary’s novels *Matilda* and *Valperga*, providing a model that will help readers to escape trauma and beguile the time.

*Matilda* is a tale of estrangement and alienation, predicated on the incestuous love of a father for his daughter. Having forced her father to reveal the cause of his brooding discontent, Matilda is propelled into a state of pathological isolation. She insists that, ‘like another Cain, I had a mark set on my forehead to show mankind that there was a barrier between me and them’ and describes herself as ‘this outcast from human feeling; this monster with whom none might mingle in converse and love’.\(^{69}\) In the first draft of the novel, the narrative begins in Rome, where the idealistic Diotima persuades the Matilda figure to tell her story in order to leave intelligible ‘traces’ of feeling behind:

> relate to me what this misery was that thus engrosses you – tell me what were the vicissitudes of feeling that you endured on earth – after death our actions & wordly interests fade as nothing before us but the traces of our feelings exist & the memories of those are what furnish us here with eternal subject of meditation.\(^{70}\)
This urgent encouragement of the sufferer to tell all does not survive in the finished version of the novel, where Woodville narrates his own history, but repeatedly assures Matilda that he will not ask her to reveal hers. In Shelley’s narrative, confession is a form of knowledge that can lead to reconciliation or catastrophe. Matilda’s father views the articulation of his sexual passion for his daughter as an irrevocable crossing, replicating the exile’s sense that return is impossible:

‘Now I have dashed from the top of the rock to the bottom! Now I have precipitated myself down the fearful chasm! ... We have leapt the chasm (p.142) I told you of, and now, mark me, Mathilda, we are to find flowers, and verdure and delight, or is it hell, and fire, and tortures?’

Images of chasms and gulfs haunt all forms of the Shellesys’ writing as realizations of personal alienation. In 1820, for example, Mary wrote to Maria Gisborne, demanding that she choose between friendship for her or for the second Mrs Godwin: ‘Now is the time! Join them, or us—the gulph is deep, the plank is going to be removed’. The language of terminal separation pervades both personal correspondence and literary works. In the face of this biographical experience of loss and rejection, William Brewer argues that many of Mary Shelley’s works explore the possibilities of relief from trauma afforded by oral and written communication. Building on Brewer’s essay, I suggest that her novels reveal that it is not enough simply to put suffering into words; the speaker needs to create a coherent narrative if she is not to sink into madness. The bereaved, the abandoned, and the exiled desperately need to form new connections or strengthen remaining ones; it is, therefore, the rhythm of narrative, rather than lyric utterance, that becomes the urgent focus of Mary’s writing out of Italy.

After hearing her father’s confession, Matilda instantly assumes that she must leave her home: ‘Tomorrow night the same roof may not cover us; he or I must depart. The mutual link of our destinies is broken; we must be divided by seas—by land ... Let there be the distance of the antipodes between us’. When her father’s drowning means that they are indeed separated by a sea, Matilda imposes a sentence of banishment on herself:
I was for ever forming plans how I might hereafter contrive to escape the tortures that were prepared for me when I should mix in society, and to find that solitude which alone could suit one whom an untold grief separated from her fellow creatures ... I left my guardian’s house and I was never heard of again.\textsuperscript{75}

The obliteration of Matilda’s name anticipates what will happen to Euthanasia at the end of \textit{Valperga} when, having been exiled by Castruccio, her ship ‘never reached its destined port, not were any of those on board ever after seen ... She was never heard of more; even her name perished’.\textsuperscript{76} (p.143)

Matilda wills the cancellation of her own historical record, but holds it at bay in the act of telling her story. She does not quit her country, but there is a sense in which she seeks internal exile in ‘a solitary house on a wide plain near no other habitation: where I could behold the whole horizon, and wander far without molestation from the sight of my fellow creatures’.\textsuperscript{77}

Narrative forms the only bridge between Matilda’s extreme self-imposed exile and the rest of society. Boccaccio’s \textit{Decameron} is the key that allows Shelley’s lyrical images of intense isolation to communicate with a narrative of ongoing survival. Matilda’s dry ‘Well, this could not last’, after the scene of fainting and raving that follows her father’s confession, draws on the practical voice of Boccaccio’s storytelling, and its clear-eyed awareness that life continues.\textsuperscript{78}

Shelley is well aware of the psychological stages by which intense grief gives way to mute misery:

At first, as the memory of former happiness contrasted to my present despair came across me, I gave relief to the oppression of heart that I felt by words, and groans, and heart rending sighs: but nature became wearied ... as Boccaccio describes the intense and quiet grief of Sigismunda over the heart of Guiscardo, I sat with my hands folded, silently letting fall a perpetual stream from my eyes.\textsuperscript{79}
The recollection of Sigismunda and Guiscardo is anticipated by the image of Matilda’s ‘overflowing heart’, and by the language her father uses to warn her away, telling her that it would be better if she ‘tore [his] heart from [his] breast and tried to read its secrets in it as its life’s blood was dropping from it’. In Boccaccio’s tales, hearts are cut out as punishment for the transgression of divine or human law, but the pageant of the bleeding heart is also a powerful metaphor for amputated emotional life. The counter-image in the novel is that of the golden chain, which Woodville invokes when he urges Matilda to form a link ‘in the chain of gold with which we ought all to strive to drag Happiness from where she sits enthroned above the clouds, now far beyond our reach, to inhabit the earth with us’. Michael Scrivener sees Woodville’s idealism as an index of cosmopolitan engagement, and it clearly connects with the classical imagery Mary associated with Shelley’s Platonism, whereby humans might overcome the distance not just between them and the divine, but between each other.

\(\textbf{(p.144)}\) Mary Shelley’s use of storytelling to negotiate emotional trauma anticipates the narrative turn of contemporary psychological research, much of which is based on the study of refugees who have been forced to leave their country of birth because of war or political persecution. David Lichtenstein’s work on narratives from immigrant communities suggests that the ‘home may take the form of an object in itself only when it is lost, when it becomes an object of longing, a place to return’; at this point, a version of home can be salvaged by ‘the conjoining of disparate threads and personal narratives’; this art, Lichtenstein claims, is the only way of reconciling the desire to recreate the old country and simultaneously to adapt to the new. The view that home is invisible while one lives in it does not, I think, apply fully to those who do the housework, but the argument that the loss of domestic security brings its value sharply into focus is irrefutable. The trauma of being uprooted is addressed in the earliest forms of history (Herodotus and the Old Testament), the epic (Virgil), the novelle of Boccaccio’s \textit{Decameron}, and Shakespeare’s history plays and late romances. All these texts appear in the list of books that the Shelleys read aloud to each other in the evenings in Italy.
Mary’s detailed historical research means that Valperga’s exploration of exile has been eclipsed in excellent discussions of the novel by Nora Crook and Stuart Curran, both of whom concentrate on Shelley’s generic competitiveness or ambition to redress Scott’s masculine history; Deidre Lynch views the novel as a way of asserting the value of fiction over history.\(^\text{85}\) If we read Valperga alongside Matilda, as stories written about exile, we can appreciate the ways in which narrative in both fictive and historical forms functions as consolation and consolidation—the sole ground of identity when the regular patterns of life and ties with a home culture (p. 145) have been severed. The word ‘exile’ echoes throughout the opening chapters of Valperga as Mary Shelley sets up the conflict between the Ghibelenes and the Guelphs. When Euthanasia bids farewell to the young outcast Castruccio, she meditates on ‘two kinds of separation’ and defines the leading paradox of exile, which is both a severance with the past and an attempt to hold on to it. In one form of separation, she suggests:

we suffer time to obliterate the past, as we should if death, that parting to which no meeting succeeds, or a meeting in which all private ties are superseded, had been the cause of the separation. But there is another; when we cherish the memory of the absent, and act for them as if they were with us; when to remember is a paramount duty.\(^\text{86}\)

A similar weighing of different forms of exile takes place in The Last Man, when Adrian expounds on the difference between the ‘voluntary exile of old’, who could resume his place in society and the more radically dislocated ‘remnant’, for whom ‘the name of England died when we left her’.\(^\text{87}\) Valperga is the lost home that Euthanasia tries to recover by holding a court centred on the art of narrative: ‘the storytellers … repeated various anecdotes and tales which they had collected in their rambles; they seldom invented a new story; but an old one well told, or some real occurrence dressed up with romantic ornaments, formed the subjects of their narratives’.\(^\text{88}\) This recreates the setting of Boccaccio’s Decameron, and it alerts us to the way that the circle of storytelling is itself a metaphor for home. Shelley devotes great attention to the bower that Borsiere creates in Valperga for the entertainment of the company:
The boughs of the trees were bent down, and fastened to the rock, or to the roof of the alcove, and then, being interlaced with other boughs, formed a web on which he wove a sky of flowers, which shut out the sun’s rays, and, agitated by the gentlest airs, cast forth the most delicate scents: the artificer of the bower had despoiled an hundred gardens to decorate only the floor of the platform, forming a thousand antic devices with the petals of various flowers. Anemones, narcissi, daffodils, hyacinths, lilies of the valley, and the earliest roses, had all lent their hues, making a brief mosaic of these lovely and fragile materials ... Seats were placed round in a semicircle for the company; from hence they could behold the whole country ... An exclamation of delight burst from all lips, as they entered this flowery paradise.

(p.146) This ekphrastic moment is a reworking of the rural Tuscan setting of the Decameron, where the mansion is set up on a hill (‘sopra una piccolo montagnetta’), built around a courtyard (‘un palagio con e gran cortile nel mezzo’), and surrounded by flowers (‘con giardini maravigliosi ... e ogni cosa di fiori’), which the company fashion into garlands (‘belle ghirlande di varie frondi faccendosi’), before sitting in a circle to tell tales (‘in cerchio a sedere’). The company of storytellers is set apart from and above the rest of the world, the locus classicus of exiled social commentators. Mary links the artistry of storytelling with the art of weaving, the same metaphor that Percy employs at the beginning of the ‘Letter to Maria Gisborne’, and the one Mary makes prominent use of in her mythological Proserpine (1820), which begins with women’s voices telling and retelling stories of violent historical change, flight, transformed lives, and new homes.
The *Decameron*’s endurance of life-changing events underlies the patterns of Mary Shelley’s fiction, in which we can see many of the processes that contemporary psychologists have analysed in narrative therapy: emotional catharsis; the creation of a linguistic account of the painful event; the tempering of anxiety through coherent expression of it; empathic witnessing of injustice; and the identification of purpose and value in adversity. We can trace all these activities in the Shelley circle’s reading of and literary responses to Boccaccio, mirroring the healing process that goes on within the *Decameron* itself. Amongst Boccaccio’s fair brigade, discussion of the stories helps to consolidate the bond between them and creates a shared core of meaning and ethical value. In reading Boccaccio aloud, the Shelleys are reinforcing very similar roles: Mary and Claire side with the ladies of the company, who weep over the story of Guiscardo and Ghismonda, as opposed to the king, who is frequently unmoved by tales of suffering and keen to move on to a new topic. Reading and re-reading the tale of Ghismonda’s desolation, Mary and Claire rehearse the tragedies of their own lives, just as Beatrice and Euthanasia in *Valperga* find some comfort in conversation: ‘These two ladies, bound by the sweet ties of gratitude and pity, found in each other’s converse some balm for their misfortunes.’
At the end of *Valperga*, Euthanasia rises to the challenge of exile because she retains eloquence. As she approaches the coast, ‘She looked up, and exclaimed in her own beautiful Italian, whose soft accents and expressive (p.147) phrases then much transcended all other European languages—‘What a brave canopy has this earth, and how graciously does the supreme empyrean smile upon its nursling!’ 93 Mary Shelley records this sentiment in English, blending the linguistic resources of Hamlet’s ‘this most excellent canopy the air’ (II. 2.299–300) with a more maternal image of the sky as a nursing mother. Her quotation of the words of a ‘Florentine peasant’ (‘È bellisima,’ replied her guide, ‘ma figuratevi, Madonna, se è tanto bello sul rovescio, cosa mai sarà al dritto’), provides an authentic Tuscan proverb in the manner of Boccaccio, but also consolidates the perspective first suggested when Euthanasia leaves her prison: ‘the stars shone intensely above; the bright assemblage seemed to congregate from the far wastes of heaven, and to press in innumerable clusters upon the edge of the visible atmosphere, to gaze upon the strange earth beneath’. 94 The view of the earth from an infinitely higher vantage point recalls the end of Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, when Troilus looks down upon ‘This litel spot of erthe’ (V, 1815–16), and laughs. 95 Though she does not laugh as she leaves Italy, Euthanasia gains a serene distance from earthly events before boarding the ship that we know will be wrecked on the way to Sicily. Euthanasia’s philosophical composure dovetails with that of the narrator to recreate the hard-won equanimity of the *Decameron*.

Edward Williams, the Shelleys, and Boccaccio

When she was back in London in the early 1830s, Mary wrote the biographical entry on Boccaccio for Lardner’s *Lives of the Most Eminent Literary and Scientific Men of Italy, Spain, and Portugal*. 96 In her introduction, she translated Boccaccio’s account of the *Decameron* as a work for women:
And who will deny that this book belongs rather to women than men. Fearfully and with shame they conceal within their tender hearts that flame which is fiercer when hidden; and who, besides this, are so restrained from the enjoyment of pleasure by the will of those around them, that they most frequently struggle with their feelings, and revolve divers thoughts, which cannot be all gay, within the little circuit of their chamber, which must occasion heavy grief and melancholy, if unrelieved by conversation. All which things do not happen to men; who, if afflicted can frequent society – hunt, shoot, ride, and play – and have a thousand modes of amusing themselves.

Mary Shelley singles out Boccaccio as a comforter of women, allowing us to intuit the loneliness of the last years of her marriage and the longer ones of widowhood. The arrival of Edward and Jane Williams in Pisa in January 1821 made an immediate difference to Mary, whose journal at the start of the year had been a dreary record of reading, writing, and the rain. In a letter to Claire, she provided an evaluation of the new arrivals:

Jane is certainly very pretty but ... her conversation is nothing particular ... Ned ... is lively and possesses great talent in drawing so that with him one is never at a loss for subjects of conversation – He seems to make all that he sees subjects of surprize & pleasure – cannot endure Miss Edgeworth’s novels & is the opposite of a prude in every way ... M. [edwin] has no sympathy with our tastes or conversation – he is infinitely common place and is as silent as a fireskreen but not half so useful; except that he sometimes mends a pen.

Mary’s exacting assessment of other people’s conversational skills indicates the intense boredom of exiled life, especially when the weather made walking difficult. Her hunger for talk and her impatience with Medwin’s ‘silence’ (only expressed now that alternative company had arrived on the scene) reveal her isolation. In the observation that Edward is ‘the opposite of a prude in every way’, we can detect Mary’s relief that she has encountered a couple with similarly unconventional domestic arrangements.
Mary’s journal entries reveal how swiftly the two families became an interdependent ménage, meeting each other almost daily. As Joan Rees points out, much attention has been given to Percy’s attraction to Jane Williams, but comparatively little has been written about the way in which Edward Williams stimulated Mary at a time when she had been withdrawing from the world. Her later portrait of Boccaccio’s conversations with Petrarch is a thinly veiled account of the idealized bucolic retreat that the Shelleys and Williamses enjoyed together:

*Petrarch was then residing at Padua, and his friend remained some weeks at his house. Boccaccio read or copied Petrarch’s works, while the other pursued his ordinary studies; and in the evening they sat in the poet’s garden, which was adorned with the flowers and verdure of spring, and spent hours in delightful conversation. Their hearts were laid bare to each other, they sympathised in their taste for ancient learning, in their love for their country, and in the views they entertained for the welfare of Italy.*

In this portrait, it is possible to detect Mary’s nostalgia for the summer of 1821, when the Shelleys moved to Bagni di Pisa and the Williamses to Pugnano, where they rented the villa of the Marchese Poschi. Retrospectively, the thwarted dramatic labours of Percy and Edward turned into an Edenic period of creative collaboration: ‘I weep to remember Pugnano’, Mary wrote in October 1822, ‘Do you remember … how we used, like children, to play in the great hall or your garden & then sit under the cypresses & hear [Edward] read his play?’ Both Percy and Edward were attracted to the possibilities of stage drama, rather than mental theatre: Shelley considered writing a play about Troilus and Cressida, but abandoned this idea in favour of a historical drama on Charles I. Edward Williams turned to Boccaccio.
Williams’s five-act Romantic comedy, *The Promise; or A Year, A Month and a Day*, is based on two stories which he entwined from the *Decameron*. The draft of the play in the Bodleian Library is in a notebook of Edward Williams, comprising the drafts of Acts II, IV, and V, and annotated by Percy Shelley throughout. The manuscript is a document of shared exile, revealing the extent of Williams’s collaboration with Shelley and their joint obsession with the metaphor of the shipwreck. Williams and Shelley borrowed Boccaccio to dramatize some of their experiences of ostracism and to address English audiences with their perspective on Boccaccio’s lore. It is necessary to summarize the plot, if only to explain why the play was rejected. The stories are from Day 1, story 3, in which Melchizedek, a Jew, is set a trick question by Saladin, Sultan of Babylon, who needs the resources of his wealth to fight a war. Being asked to state which of three religions, Jewish, Saracen, or Christian, he considered to be the true one, Melchizedek tells a story about a father who loved all his sons equally and could not decide which one should inherit his estate. He had three identical gold rings made and gave one to each son secretly, telling them that whichever one had his father’s ring after his death would be his heir. As all three sons could lay equal claim to possess the heir’s ring, the estate remained in dispute. This outcome reveals, Melchizedek explains, exactly the state of the three world religions (Judaism, Islam, and Christianity), as each one believes that it is the chosen one. The story probably appealed to Williams because it undoes the claims of orthodox Christianity to hold a monopoly on the truth.
The main plot line is the ninth story from the tenth day. It again involves Saladin, who travels from Alexandria to Italy disguised as a Cypriot merchant, and accepts the generous hospitality of Torello di Stra, a gentleman of Pavia. Saladin is overwhelmed by Torello’s kindness, which includes a gift of robes handmade by his wife, Adaletta, and swears to repay the kindness if he ever can. The men part affectionately and although Torello suspects that Saladin is not a merchant, he cannot guess his true identity. Shortly afterwards, Torello leaves Italy to take part in a crusade. He tells his wife that if she does not hear from him, she should accept remarriage a year, a month, and a day after his departure. Torello is taken captive by Saladin and brought to Alexandria, where he becomes Master of Falcons in Saladin’s court. He sends a letter to his wife to let her know that he is still alive. Eventually, Saladin recognizes Torello and Torello is distraught to learn when the interval of a year, a month, and a day has nearly elapsed that the letter he sent home has miscarried in a shipwreck. Saladin kindly puts the services of the court magician at his disposal. On the eve of his wife’s remarriage date, Torello is placed in a sumptuous bed; Saladin loads the bed with jewels and Torello wakes up in the Church of San Piero in Pavia in time to avert the wedding.

Like many comic plots, *The Promise* is over-complicated and Williams had obvious difficulty in splicing two of Boccaccio’s tales. His journal shows that revisions to Act III (the Saladin and Melchizedek plot) took a lot of time, and when Mary later wrote to John Howard Payne about the play, he told her bluntly:

The whole affair of the Jew is an excrescence. The trick is unworthy of Saladin. Stage heroes are not expected to account for the ways in which they raise money. Mr. Rothschild would make but a sorry figure in a play about the battle of Waterloo.
Sharing the flaws of most Romantic attempts to write commercially successful drama, Williams’s play was not well adapted for the contemporary (p.151) stage. Percy Shelley and Medwin tried to help and suggested many cuts and changes. The final note in Shelley’s hand at the end of the manuscript reads: ‘There is no hope that they will ever act a thing of this length unless curtailed’. Williams sent off the revised fair copy on 5 December 1821 and it was rejected by John Fawcett, the manager of Covent Garden, on 9 January 1822. In the manuscript of The Promise, however, we can see how Williams and Shelley thought they might deploy the lyrical and satirical voices of Boccaccio’s tales to challenge the assumptions of the audience back in England.

One of the most obvious satirical dimensions of the play is the presentation of the Christian church and Boccaccio’s familiar use of the corrupt and mercenary priest. When Saladin first appears in Italy, with heavy dramatic irony and an echo of ‘Tintern Abbey’, he salutes the honesty of Christian culture:

_Saladin_: These Christians
Have such a frankness in their look it strikes
Home to the heart, and puts to blush the forms
The ceremonies where no friendship is,
Those lip-deep nothings.  

The context of the Crusades allows criticism of ‘the pomp/And (mummery) pageantry of (the) rites (he) mis called Religion’. Achmet, Saladin’s companion, makes the point that the ethos of the Crusades is responsible for ‘arming Religion with a tyrant sword/From whose white banners gentle Peace should wave’. In Williams’s version, Adaletta’s uncle is an abbot with a venal motive for getting her to remarry. Having ordered her to forget Torello, he prompts Adaletta to observe that, ‘There’s a cold gleam around the Abbot’s heart/That’s frozen mine—Religion should be warm/To thaw despair’, and Adaletta’s brother, Vincenzo, tries to defend her against ‘The tyrant pow’r that Church or Law may warrant/To trample on the weakness of your sex’. As well as the satire directed at the contemporary church, awareness of the informants employed by English and Austrian authorities gives Torello (when he wonders about the identity of the disguised Saladin) the observation: ‘The spy’s the fawning slave of some mean State/That with a sugar’d poison baits his (thoughts) tongue/To angle for our unsuspecting thoughts’.  

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A more lyrical way in which an exiled outlook pervades the play is in its scenes of parting. In Boccaccio’s story, the deep grief of Torello’s wife (p.152) was largely unspoken. In The Promise, she is given a speech on the nature of separation and loss. The manuscript revisions on which Williams and Shelley collaborated allow us to see them working over the traditional image of the soul in exile:

Ada: ‘(Tis death to lose, what forms a part of life)  
Take from us that for which alone we live  
And this great world becomes but one dark tomb  
In which our lost and homeless spirits wonder  
And the wide world becomes but as a dark tomb  
And the wide world becomes but as a (cemetery)  
In which our lost and homeless spirits wander.'¹⁰⁸

Adaletta tells Torello: ‘I know not how my little strength will bear/This weight of separation, such is now/The heaviness that presses on my soul’; Torello seals the term of the promise, ‘Remember, Love, a year, a month and day!’ , and Adaletta reiterates it as a term of banishment: ‘That term will be my life, eternally’.¹⁰⁹ This was one of the moments when Shelley’s revised punctuation extends the temporal element of the sentence: he altered it to ‘That term will be my life—eternally—’.¹¹⁰ The emphasis on Adaletta’s experience of the separation is much more prominent than in the original tale, as is Torello’s melancholy in Alexandria. In the Decameron, Torello enjoys the company of friends and falconry. In Williams’s play, however, Torello expresses despair about being away from home:

Day after day slowly goes lagging on  
And now the restless earth has run thro’ all  
The many changes of the busy year;  
While I’ve remained in sunless winter wrap’t,  
A veil before my home, I cannot rend,  
Dark as the night that shrouds eternity –  
My God! What if my letters should have fail’d?  
Oh that I could [illegible] by thought  
Oh that I could give (wings) pinions [to my?] thoughts.'¹¹¹
The images of wings recur in the play, often connected with boats, which have a small part to play in the plot, but a much greater part to play in the imaginative orbit of the drama, and the Pisan circle’s preoccupation with liberty and loss. Saladin predicts that his ‘sharp-keeled galley’s silken (p.153) sails ... Would out-wing those unto the wild swan given’, and in a discussion of liberty between Saladin and Torello, Shelley helped Williams to produce the lines, ‘For freedom is not of the mind alone/But of the soul—and mine has dragged her chain’. One of the prescient aspects of this manuscript (given the drowning of Shelley and Williams within months of the play’s completion) is the attention they give to a single speech about a ship being lost in a storm at sea. Beyond their well-known biographical enthusiasm for sailing, both writers inherited from Boccaccio (and Shakespeare) the idea of the ship lost at sea as an image for the insecurity of life.

As we saw above, the miscarriage of Torello’s letter in a shipwreck was part of Boccaccio’s original plan, but in the Bodleian Manuscript, this speech has multiple drafts. It appears, first of all, in what looks like Percy Shelley’s hand, cross-written on the reverse of page 25, as if they were passing the notebook between them while they worked on the same scene together (see Figure 6):

And streaming from the masts the gallant pendant (seemed)
Seemed as if some spirits of the wind were dragging
Her toward home

This appears again in Williams’s hand on the reverse of page 31:

With Fortune at the helm, we weighed from port;
The sails securely sleeping on the breeze,
And, streaming from the mast, the pendant (streamed) seemed
As if by spirits of the wind ’twere held
Dragging her towards her long-forsaken home;
(While Ocean seemed rejoicing in her speed.)
Crete’s isle was gained and then the threatening sky,
Like one that scowls upon an enemy,
By many signs gave promise of a storm –
The sails were plied and slantward braced to meet
The veering gale – but all our art was vain.  
Struggling with all the elements as foes  
Her masts in splinters – on the waves her sails  
Leeward from Sicily now she drifted  
Fast toward the shores of (rocky) savage Barba(r)y.

The line ‘And (streaming) straining from the mast the pendant (seemed) streamed’ is rewritten on the reverse of page 34, while cross-written on the reverse of page 39 there is the whole speech, ‘With Fortune at the helm … ’, with two isolated lines: ‘… as if by spirits of the wind twere/ Dragging her (p. 154) toward home’.  
Finally, three lines cross-written on the reverse of page 40 show  
Williams’s preoccupation with the storm at sea:  
When that

from hence my galley, loosed her sails  
That spread wide swelling with th’embracing wind  
That swelling spread wide pregnant with the wind –
On the reverse of page 41 there are multiple little sketches that look like designs for weather vanes (see Figure 7). No other lines in the Bodleian manuscript of *The Promise* are rewritten quite so many times and the drafting allows us to see the extent to which the image of a boat driven by the wind possessed both Williams and Shelley.

*Figure 7. Edward Williams’s Notebook. MS. Shelley adds. d. 3, fol. 41v*

By kind permission of The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford.
The ultimate destination of any ship is ‘home’, and we can read Williams and Shelley’s urgent writing and rewriting of this section of the play (p.156) as an index of their anxiety about the dragging of anchors and the loss of home. In his exploration of the metaphor of exile, Edward Said offers an implicit correction of Hazlitt when he suggests that ‘[a]n intellectual is like a shipwrecked person who learns to live in a certain sense with the land, not on it, not like Robinson Crusoe, whose goal is to colonize his little island, but more like Marco Polo, whose sense of the marvelous never fails him, and who is always a traveler, a provisional guest, not a freeloader, conqueror, or raider’.¹¹³ Shelley and Williams were both mental travellers with an ambivalent attitude to a home that was both desired and feared. Like Boccaccio's tale, The Promise concludes with a marriage. Percy Shelley wrote the ‘Epithalamium’ for Williams: it is woven with images from Italian skies, gardens, and ‘sea of glassy weather’, but as with the progress of the Decameron, the undertow of fear that one will never be able to go home disturbs the serenity of the final act, as we are reminded that ‘le cose di questo modo non avere stabilità alcuna ma sempre essere in mutamento’ (‘The things of this world do not have any stability and are always subject to change’).¹¹⁴ Many critics have noted the ways in which Shelley’s drowning was foretold in his writing. The over-rehearsed nature of the shipwreck in which Shelley and Williams were lost was, to some extent, due to the roles both of them had been playing as exiles.

Notes:


(³) See Pite, The Circle of Our Vision; Braida, Dante and the Romantics; Burwick and Douglass (eds), Dante and Italy in British Romanticism; Zuccato, Petrarch in Romantic England.

(⁴) PBSL II, 121.
Boccaccio’s lore


(6) Jeffrey N. Cox, ‘Re-Visioning Rimini: Dante in the Cockney School’, in Burwick and Douglass (eds), *Dante and Italy in British Romanticism*, p. 185.


(8) Thornton Hunt (ed.), *Correspondence*, I, 153. For Hunt’s advocacy of Italian models, see Timothy Webb, ‘Syllables of the Sweet South’ and Cox ‘Re-Visioning Rimini: Dante in the Cockney School’, in Burwick and Douglass (eds), *Dante and Italy in British Romanticism*, pp. 183–203, 205–24.

(9) Thornton Hunt (ed.), *Correspondence*, I, 123.

(10) *BC* X, 134.


(20) Hobhouse’s description; *CPW* II, 243.

(21) *MWSL* I, 165.
Boccaccio’s lore


(24) Lady Morgan notes that Italian editions were also usually adapted for women readers. See *Italy*, 2 vols (London: Henry Colburn, 1821), I, 204.


(35) PBSL II, 122.

(36) PBSMW, p. 698.


(38) BLJ V, 251.

(39) BLJ VI, 166.

(40) BLJ VII, 252.
Boccaccio’s lore


(44) *BLJ* VIII, 48.


(47) *CPW* II, 244.


(49) *PBSL* II, 122.

(50) *PBSL* II, 122.


(53) *MWSL* I, 104.


(56) *PBSL* II, 122.


(58) *Don Juan* III, 95.

Hunt, *Lord Byron and Some of his Contemporaries*, II


For further discussion of Keats and Reynolds’s use of Boccaccio, see Jeffrey N. Cox, *Romanticism and the Culture of the Napoleonic War Years* (forthcoming).

Boccaccio, *Decameron*, II, 687.


Mary *Mariap.* 69

Stocking (ed.), *The Journals of Claire Clairmont*, p. 72.


Clemit (ed.), *Novels*, II, 359.

Clemit (ed.), *Novels*, II, 28.

*MWSL* I, 161.


Clemit (ed.), *Novels*, II, 40, 43.

Boccaccio’s lore

(77) Clemit (ed.), Novels, II, 44.

(78) Clemit (ed.), Novels, II, 29ManfredCPW


(81) Clemit (ed.), Novels, II, 59.

(82) Scrivener, The Cosmopolitan Ideal, p. 211.


(84) Laurel J. Kiser et al., ‘Who We Are, but for the Stories We Tell: Family Stories and Healing’, Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy 2.3 (September 2010): 243–9


(88) Crook (ed.), Novels, III, 111.

(89) Crook (ed.), Novels, III, 110.

(90) Boccaccio, Decameron, I, 41–7. Borsiere himself features in Day I, novella 8; Shelley also cites Boccaccio’s work when she describes the functions of the Uomini di Corte.

(91) MWSJClemit (ed.), Novels, II, 19.
Boccaccio’s lore

(92) Crook (ed.), *Novels*, III, 248.

(93) Crook (ed.), *Novels*, III, 320.

(94) Crook (ed.), *Novels*, III, 318-19.


(98) MWSL I, 180.


(101) MWSL I, 280.

(102) I am grateful to the Keeper of Collections, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford for permission to quote from Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Shelley adds. d. 3. As Peck notes, Shelley makes alterations to individual words and punctuation, in order to improve the metrical flow of lines, but new attention to the manuscript shows that his contribution is often more significant than that. The manuscript holds an intrinsic interest for Shelley scholars, as it contains his drafts of the ‘Epithalamium’, first published by Rossetti in 1870.


(104) MS. Shelley adds. d. 3. 7r.

(105) MS. Shelley adds. d. 3. 11r.

(106) MS. Shelley adds. d. 3. 27r; d. 3. 54r.
Boccaccio’s lore

(107) MS. Shelley adds. d. 3. 16r.


(109) MS. Shelley adds. d. 3. 19v; d. 3. 53r.

(110) MS. Shelley adds. d. 3. 19v.

(111) MS. Shelley adds. d. 3. 28r.

(112) MS. Shelley adds. d. 3. 50r.

(113) Said, ‘Intellectual Exile’.

(114) Boccaccio, Decameron, II, 1261.

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