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'POLYPHONIC' PARTHENOPE:
BOCCACCIO'S LETTER XIII AND HIS 'PLEBEIAN'
NAPLES, ACCORDING TO DOMENICO REA

"È chiaro che preferisco il Boccaccio realistico
e napoletano, quello scrittore che non riesce
a staccarsi dalla realtà e che invano tenterà d'imitare
il venerato Dante e l'adorato amico Petrarca"
(Rea, "Boccaccio a Napoli" 264).

In 1960, Domenico Rea wrote "Boccaccio a Napoli" (*Il re e il lustrascarpe* 252-274). In this article, he passionately but, alas, unsuccessfully tries to prove that Boccaccio had a sincere desire to describe realistically the condition of the Neapolitan poor. In any case, Rea's article allows us to reconsider the impact that both courtly and plebeian Naples had on Boccaccio's imagination: What was Naples for the young Boccaccio? A peaceful, elegant court or a "falling forest"? Was it aristocratic or exclusively plebeian? At different times, Boccaccio expresses different feelings toward this city: he speaks highly of it, but also condemns it as a "selva, perché come nelle selve dimorano gli animali bruti, così nelle città abitano gli uomini bruti, i quali nello stile predetto talora si chiamano pecore, talora capretti e buoi" ("Naples is a forest, for just as wild animals live in the woods, so do men in the cities, and, similarly, I sometimes call men sheep, goats, and oxen" Letter XXIII,9 ed. Auzzas).¹

In the attempt to provide, if not an answer, then a further consideration of these questions, I will examine two of Boccaccio's letters, XIII to Francesco Nelli, which is at the focus of Rea's article, and the so-called Neapolitan Letter to Franceschino. Finally, I will discuss Boccaccio's Neapolitan works to show that his interest in the lower classes does not extend to a concern for their faith, as Rea claims. A relevant trace of the plebeian or 'other' Naples can definitely be found by adopting a different point of view; that is, by recognizing Boccaccio's auditory sensitivity in rendering the *vocio*, the din of voices rising from the city, a strictly Neapolitan form of polyphony. With all due respect to the historical and hermeneutic

value of Bakhtin's critical category I use the term *polyphony* here to refer specifically to the *vocio*. I believe that Boccaccio's accurate reproduction of the *vocio* can be found in all his Neapolitan works and, interestingly enough, even in Rea's own novel *La Ninfa plebea* as well as his critical essay on Neapolitan writers and playwrights in his anthology *Il re e il lustrascarpe*.

Remembering that Boccaccio spent almost ten years in Naples (1327-1340) is crucial to understanding some aspects of his work. If, by now, the strong influence of the French Angevin court on Boccaccio's courtly and chivalric production is well established, little is known about the impact of popular Naples on his sensibility and imagination. As Salvatore Battaglia realized: "In all Boccaccio's works -from the *Filocolo* to the *Decameron* - there is an element of fantasy and creativity and, above all, a healthy love for life, mankind, events, and passions that bears the sign of Naples, of a free, instinctive, spontaneous environment in which reality always holds the fascination of things that renew themselves, in particular the feeling of a confident, free, and easy delight in living." (*Il Filocolo*, 582). Is Battaglia referring to a *napoletaneità* inspired by the aristocratic and courtly Naples of the House of Anjou frequented by Boccaccio, as other scholars, such as Torraca, would have it?² For Torraca, the Naples that Boccaccio knew best was the one he describes in pages that also document the history of customs; namely, the courtly Naples.

Rea does not share Torraca's view and believes that Boccaccio showed a certain ambivalence in his "double life" as man and writer: "Boccaccio's double life would thus proceed along two lines, sometimes clearly separated and sometimes blurred and blended." On the one hand, according to Rea, Boccaccio loved and admired the elegant life of the court and theatres; on the other, he was sympathetic to the plight of the common people who lived in wretched poverty. Rea concludes that Boccaccio was more sympathetic toward the common people than to the court of King Robert, to the point of denouncing their miserable living conditions. Rea seems to forget that Boccaccio at times shows a certain indignation toward the common people and likens their dwellings to Hell, as in Letters II and XIII. I do not intend to establish which of the "two lives" or two sides of the city most inspired Boccaccio: the aristocratic Naples or the harbour and streets; it would be an idle exercise. However, Rea exclusively discusses neglected and definitely uncourtly evidence of passages about Naples in Boccaccio's work. According to Rea, Boccaccio in the Partenopeian city "prepared himself not only to become Boccaccio but, in the process, became a great writer, because he first became a Neapolitan" ("Boccaccio a Napoli" 262-263).³

Certainly, Boccaccio's early works reveal how he perceived the courtly city of the "secondo Salomone", as he called King Robert of Anjou in the *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium* (XIV, 9). It is also true that, as Charmaine Lee highlights, "although Boccaccio spoke highly of Naples, his relationship with Robert was never that enjoyed by Petrarch. Boccaccio, like Dante, had very little good to say about Robert, whom he considered rather dull witted" (146). Boccaccio came into contact with the French vernacular tradition at the court, but outside Robert's restricted intellectual circle. It would be interesting to ascertain if Boccaccio was ever concerned with the lower classes, as Rea claims about Naples.

Rea uses Letter XIII to Francesco Nelli to prove Boccaccio's consciousness of the lower classes. This letter was written in 1363 and evokes the very much desired, but frustrating journey he made to Naples in 1362 following an invitation from Niccolò Acciaiuoli, the Grand Seneschal to Joan I and Louis of Taranto.⁴ Boccaccio vigorously replies to Francesco Nelli, who in a previous letter had called Boccaccio a "uomo di vetro" ("a man of glass"), but he is mainly upset with Niccolò, and not only because the Grand Seneschal used to call him "Iohannes tranquillitatum"! In fact, since the moment of his departure from Florence, toward the end of 1341, Boccaccio had been waiting for Niccolò to offer him a position at the court of Louis in Naples or at the court of the Grand Seneschal's protector, Caterina of Courtenay.⁵ Niccolò finally invited Boccaccio to Naples in 1362 (Léonard, "Boccace et Naples" 75-78; Foresti, "L'egloga ottava" and *Aneddoti* 327 ff.) but, instead of welcoming him in one of his palaces, sent him to "una fetida e abominevole sentina, degna da essere fuggita da' corbi e dagli avvoltoi" ("a stinking and abominable hut worthy of being avoided even by crows and vultures" Letter XIII).

An echo of the frustrating experience Boccaccio had in Naples following Niccolò's disappointing invitation can also be found in Letter XXIII (1370?), addressed to the theologian Martino da Signa. Boccaccio introduces his *Eclogues*, specifying that if the names of the characters do not carry any particular meaning, the titles of each eclogue have been "carefully chosen."⁶ He does not hesitate to satirize the kingdom of Naples and Acciaiuoli's involvement in the assassination of King Andrew (September 1343), Queen Joan's consort before she married Louis of Taranto. Boccaccio's resentment toward the Grand Seneschal is particularly evident in a 1348 letter, "Quam Pium," to Zanobi da Strada (ed. Auzzas 544-549) and especially in his third and eighth eclogues; they both clearly satirize and allegorize Acciaiuoli. Like the letter to Nelli, Eclogue VIII probably originated from Boccaccio's other disappointing journey to Naples in

1355.⁷ Damon encounters Pythias (Boccaccio) in the Neapolitan fields and suggests that Pythias leave, if he does not want to be caught by Midas (the Grand Seneschal), a thief (839 n. 10, ed. Auzzas and Levarie Smarr, *Eclogues* 217).⁸ The disappointed Pythias, who regrets abandoning the dry rivers of Florence for the Vesuvius, tries to explain that Midas himself had invited him. The allusion to Acciaiuoli's invitation is clear as is that to his involvement in the assassination of the young king Andrew at the end of the eclogue (cf. Léonard, *Boccace et Naples* 75-78; "Legloga ottava" and *Aneddoti* 327 ff.). Therefore, while Boccaccio was not indifferent to the drama of the Neapolitan poor, to assert that Letter XIII is either problematic or evinces a sense of the tragic, as Rea claims, goes too far. On the contrary, in two instances, when comparing Neapolitans to beasts with whom he does not want to be associated, Boccaccio is extremely concerned to remind Nelli of his familiarity with the Naples of theatres and banquets: "conobbi dalla mia puerizia costumi de' cortigiani e la vita loro [...] se tu nol sai, amico, io sono vissuto, dalla mia puerizia infino in intera età nutricato, a Napoli ed intra nobili giovani" ("From childhood, I have been familiar with the habits and lifestyle of the courtiers, and, in case you were not aware, my friend, I have lived and been raised, since my early years well into adulthood, in Naples and among young noblemen" XIII, 33-37).

In Letter II (1339), Boccaccio again presents himself as a victim. Here, he wants to recount, probably to his dear friend Petrarch, a vision that he had in Naples when walking by Virgil's tomb. He defines himself and the common people:

Here Cum me igitur vester subditus, ignorantie tenebris involutus, rudis ens, in hers indigestaque moles, informis, sine titulo vivens, cum toto mei curriculo temporis sim Fortune ludibulis conquassatus; meme prorsus miserie palliatus, ad fumos stigios rusticorum, semper respiciens lutum agrestium villicorum, audiendo latratus brunellicos corundem, degustans ligustrica alimenta, odorans fetida que conturbant, tangendo vespres cuiuspian ruditatis, virgiliana teneret Neapolis

I, your servant, wrapped in the darkness of ignorance, an uncouth being, inert and heavy, shapeless, and living without a title, finding myself for my entire life shaken by the strokes of Fortune, wrapped in misery, always coming and going in a dark labyrinth, in the stygian smoke of uncouth people, the mud of the rustic peasants ever before my eyes, listening to them braying like donkey, feeding myself with grass, smelling odours that disgusted me, touching rough thorns (Boccaccio. *Opere*, ed. Ricci 1064)

One may agree with Rea that the prose in Letter XIII is straightforward compared to the others. In fact, Letter XIII is a merciless representa-

tion of plebeian Naples with which he is clearly familiar. To be sure, Boccaccio was not indifferent to the drama of the poor? note his mention of "la loro vita trista e continua battaglia," ("their wretched sad life and their continuous struggle")?but to conclude that he had any real interest in their problems or any intention of realistically depicting them in order to denounce them is too risky. I would say that such an interpretation betrays Boccaccio's sense of irony, which is, in Auerbach's words, "a type of mediate discourse, indirectly insinuating," and which, as in the *Decameron*, "tends to lower once again his realism to a stylistic level devoid of problems and conflicts" (cf. also Russell Ascoli).

If realism is at stake here, it has to be taken into account that Boccaccio wrote this letter when he was fifty; that is, when he had already explored all the possibilities of realistic representation. His extensive use of irony in Letter XIII is evident in his depiction of the hut and the other people living in his unfortunate Naples lodging. He is simply upset and clearly very resentful toward Niccolò Acciaiuoli.

Rea, however, is not Auerbach. The Neapolitan critic is mainly bothered by the "letteratura dei piagnistei" ("the literature of whining"), as he calls it, and strongly believes that behind those faces, those dripping noses, those livid faces, that unavoidable cough of people the same colour as sweating wax were the Neapolitan slums (cf. Letter XIII 24), Boccaccio already shows "the sentimentality, the sanctimony, the miserable folklore, and natural dirt of people who generate compassion" ("Boccaccio a Napoli" 256). Not that he attributes any trace of sentimentality, pity, or compassion to Boccaccio; Rea does not make the same mistakes as later Neapolitan writers who obscured the truth of the Neapolitan psyche ("Boccaccio a Napoli" 268).⁹Rea obviously idealizes Boccaccio and declares him the champion of a realistic literature of the Neapolitan lower classes that is neither colourful nor connected to folklore.

Rea's reading of Letter XIII attributes his own polemical stand against modern Neapolitan literature to Boccaccio. Rea despises both his contemporaries and their predecessors because they offer their readers a picture-postcard Naples. He ends up writing an essay on Boccaccio in Naples that is, interestingly enough, published with another critical essay on Neapolitan writers, "Il filo perduto" (*Il re e il Lustrascarpe* 418-423), in which he condemns Mastriani, Imbriani, Serao, Di Giacomo, Marotta, De Filippo, indeed all Neapolitan writers except Boccaccio, for their portrayal of lower-class Naples. Why? The answer is in another essay on "I figli": "As long as the 'poor' stories of Naples move one to laughter, their protagonists will remain a miserable lot" (*Il re e il Lustrascarpe*, 50).

Boccaccio is the only one who represents Neapolitans as they are and not as they would like to be. Referring to the tale of Peronella, Rea says:

Boccaccio, pragmatically, rendered a precise portrayal of the Neapolitans according to his practical, mercantilist imagination. He searched for their true cipher beyond their tears, their appearances, and their poverty, which may be just as deceitful as wealth itself. After Boccaccio, anything that was written about the complex world of the soul felt inescapably superficial and resulted in a literary tradition that represented Neapolitans not quite the way they were but the way they would have liked to be. A population that, in order to be recognised as Neapolitan, had to be *Neapolitanised* ("Boccaccio a Napoli" 269).

Rea blames Di Giacomo for his "limite signorile" (aristocratic limitations); that is, his ability to look deeply into people's hearts, while disdaining "to descend into them and touch the good and the bad, orchestrating them as required by their powerful vulgarity." In other words, Di Giacomo's books stroll around Naples without really coming close to its people. The poet, according to Rea, has no pretensions to realistic depiction. He is indifferent to the social conditions of his own people. He represents "their gestures, the facts. . . in their final phase of comedy and never in the initial phase, which was tremendously tragic" (*Il re e il lustrascarpe* 96). The same harsh judgment is reserved for De Filippo, who would help to discover the past of Naples, but not its future, and for the movie directors Vittorio De Sica and Francesco Rosi, the latter for his film *La sfida*.

Returning to the essay on Letter XIII, it becomes evident that what Rea quotes as examples of Boccaccio's *napoletaneità* (elements that Rea finds in the letter and in some stories of the *Decameron*, namely Peronella in VII, 2 and Andreuccio da Perugia in II, 5) is a transposition to Boccaccio of his own prejudices and parameters in evaluating the Neapolitan people. In the final analysis, Rea seems to recruit Boccaccio for his own battle for the re-evaluation of Naples.¹⁰

In another essay, "Le due Napoli," Rea continues to champion Boccaccio's realism by looking more closely at the tale of Andreuccio da Perugia and continuing his attack against the "limitations" of the most prominent Neapolitan writers:

If we were to indicate a writer who saw Naples in a kind of plastic truth and her people chained to a silent 'omertà' of interests, we should read again the story of Andreuccio from Perugia by Boccaccio in his *Decameron*. He wrote the most realistic Neapolitan story of a baffling actuality... There is no sort of picaresque at all; on the contrary, Boccaccio

is one the very few writers who could see the people of Naples as real, positive, somehow concrete men in their wickedness, certainly to be preferred to punchinellos or buffoons (*I Racconti* 271-294, esp. 286-287).¹¹

Here are the premises on which Rea bases his view of Boccaccio's realism:

If, by some misfortune, no proof were to have remained of Boccaccio's stay in Naples and if even history contained no trace of it or, in his books, Naples and its realm were not mentioned, even if all this were buried and obliterated, there would still remain a concrete proof in the world of things and facts that he expressed ("Boccaccio a Napoli" 252).

By this Rea does not refer only to such Neapolitan tales as Andreuccio and Peronella, but to the pillars that support most of Boccaccio's Neapolitan works. As I mentioned, Rea maintains that Boccaccio's narrative production is based on an ambivalence that stems from a double life that unfolds on two fronts, sometimes clearly separated, sometimes not.¹² This ambivalence expresses a frustration caused by the clash of reality with dreams and ideals, an opposition that, apparently, is typically Neapolitan. At this point, Rea's analysis appears especially unconvincing, since the division he offers is too sharp to represent plausibly Boccaccio's experience: on one side, courtly Naples; on the other, lower-class Naples. It is hard to detect in Boccaccio any real concern for the fate of the Neapolitan lower classes. Remarkable, instead, is his youthful fascination with Robert of Anjou's court.

The Parthenopeian city remains the space where Boccaccio let the "questioni d'amore" unfold; that is, as in the *Elegy of Fiammetta*, the place of "lietissime feste abbondevole." The same worldly and hedonistic spirit characterizes the *Teseida*, marking its clear distance from Stazio's *Tebaide*, as Rita Librandi points out in reference to Arcita and Palemone's pastimes: "They are knights, but knights of the Angevin Naples" (70). In 1332, Robert tried to ban tournaments because of their violence; the fact that they were still held reveals the persistence of chivalric ideals among the nobility. Tournaments are more a ludic and hedonistic event than violent fights in the style of the Old French epics (Lee 147; Caggese 361; Librandi 60).¹³ Unlike Petrarch and King Robert, who condemned the numerous tournaments in Naples, Boccaccio was fascinated by their theatricality. Introducing the tournament between Arcita and Palemone, who fight for Emilia's love, Teseo defines it as a "palestral gioco."

If Rea's analysis of Boccaccio's experience as a merchant in Naples, developing a realistic style to show sympathy with the destiny and condi-

tions of the lower classes, is unconvincing, his description of Boccaccio's "auditory" experience of the city, although *en passant*, is. Once Boccaccio left Naples, says Rea, he remembered of the city "only the human, visual, auditory part that he felt and fully experienced." Rea is right, since it is in the auditory experience of the polyphonic *vocio* that Boccaccio's Naples, the 'other' Naples, can be found. This polyphony also characterizes Rea's essays and his last novel, *Ninfa Plebea*, which opens with a powerful image:

Il canto era come il vapore di una pentola (pasta e fagioli) che salisse da tutti i cortili. All'inizio, verso il tramonto, fortissimo con voci d'utero-dalle corde di violino alle canne d'organo sfiate – di vecchie e giovani, giovanette e bambine accovacciate fra le gambe delle più grandi, nonne, madri, zie, cugine, amiche e, alla fine, a sera inoltrata, sperduto come un vocio.

Their song was like steam from a pot of boiling pasta e fagioli in all courtyards. At first, toward sunset, it sounded like primitive voices emerging from violin strings and organ canes, sung by old or young women, babies or maids crouched down between the legs of the oldest, their grandmothers, aunts, mothers, cousins, friends. (*Ninfa Plebea* 1)

Throughout the novel, Rea makes different voices mingle. Sometimes other narrators are included: "la vuoi sentire la storia di Catuccio e del barone Airola?" (do you want to hear the story of Catuccio and the baron Airola?), the grandfather asks his niece Miluzza. Catuccio's tale occupies five pages of the novel. This confirms Rea's strong penchant for a choric narration and also his attempt to preserve the oral tradition of the storytelling.

In an essay titled, "Voices," Rea says that the poetry of two of the most representative Neapolitan poets, Di Giacomo and Viviani, "is interwoven with *voices*" (*Il Re e il lustrascarpe* 152-153). Voices furnish the background for Rea's encounter with Benedetto Croce: "Il balcone era appannato e lasciava filtrare il vocio di Spaccanapoli simile a quello di una gigantesca conchiglia" (*Il Re e il lustrascarpe* 29). How evocative this image is of Spaccanapoli, a quarter of Naples!

Finally, although Sabatini claims that Boccaccio's *napoletaneità* cannot be found in any specific manifestation,¹⁴ I believe that Boccaccio's Naples and the 'other' Naples, the plebeian world, far away from the life of the theatres and the court, can still be found, but not in his realistic representation of the Neapolitan slums, as Rea asserts on the basis of the letter to Nelli and the novella of *Decameron* VII, 2. On the contrary, traces of the 'other' Naples can be identified in the paradigmatic image of the opening of *Ninfa plebea* as Rea himself offers it in the passage already quoted "un

vapore della pentola che sale da tutti i cortile." The soul of the 'other' Naples is in the concert of different voices curious about, or actively involved in, their neighbours' troubles. Sabatini rightly asserts that Boccaccio's Neapolitan heritage shows itself in the *Decameron* through the "warm participation"¹⁵ of its characters in a tumultuous reality, but the same can be said of the Neapolitan works as well: *Teseida*, *Filostrato*, *Filocolo*, *Caccia di Diana*.

One scene from the *Teseida* is particularly telling on the role of the compassionate crowd. A scene in Book IX (8-9) is reminiscent, as Limentani says, of an "interno trecentesco o una 'pietà'" (238). Many Greek women join Emilia and Hippolyta in their grieving. In the same way, on the occasion of a tournament, the citizens and all the lovely ladies arrive and some offer prayers for one or another of the lovers. "Un gran mormorio" ("a loud murmur"; I, 122) rises from several scenes:

nulla persona in Attene rimase,
giovane, vecchio, zita overo sposa,
che non corresse là con l'ale spase
onde venia la coppia gloriosa.
le vie e' campi e i tetti e le case
tutt'eran pien di gente letiziosa; ...
E spesse volte, le prede mirando,
le guaste veste e i voti destrieri,
li givan l'uno e l'altro dimostrando,
dicendo: —Quel fu del tal cavalieri,
e questo del cotale—;e ammirando,
le cose state più che volentieri
recitavan fra lor, ch'avean vedute
il dì, com'eran gite e come sute

There was no person, young or old, maiden or wife, in Athens who did not run there with spread wings as that glorious couple approached. The roads and the fields and the roof tops and the houses were all crowded with jubilant people. Everybody chanted the glory of Arcites and the new bride he brought with him. And many a time, as they observed the booty, the ruined garments, and the riderless horses, they began to point them out to one another and say, 'they belonged to such and such a knight, and this belonged to so and so.' As they gazed, they told one another eagerly the events that had taken place and that they had seen them that day, and how things had gone, and what they were like. (*The Book of Theseus* IX, 41-42).

The crowd's role is central in the *Teseida*, whereas a sense of the chorus remains in the background in Statius (Limentani 240).

Nevertheless, if, for Limentani, those choral scenes remind us of certain paintings of the time?the pilgrimage of the Magi amid throngs of people?the mystery plays, and, in the secular world, the *cantari* tradition, in my opinion, they also convey scenes that Boccaccio would have witnessed daily in Naples, as is clear from the letter he wrote in Neapolitan dialect to Francesco de Bardi (1339) on the occasion of a christening. It faithfully represents the aristocratic/mercantile society in Naples (*Epistole* V, 860).¹⁶ It shows the same tendency toward the visual, light sketch, as Auzzas remarks, the participation of the people in the joyful christening. Each one plays a role: the godfathers offer the best octopus in the market; Ja' Squarcione brings the torch; and more than one hundred girls of the piazza and other, nearby piazze visit the new mother with pearls and gold.

Caccia di Diana represents an unusual, but interesting case of the choric in Boccaccio's Neapolitan works. It very successfully celebrates the noble women of Naples, creating an acoustic experience of the Partenopeian city that Boccaccio would not have found at the court but in the harbour and the streets. If it is true, as Branca points out, that the *Caccia*, like *Il Filocolo* (the prologue and the "Questioni d'amore" in the *Filocolo* Book IV), ideally transposes the habits of Anjou society and "an ideal continuity of inspirational themes" (11),¹⁷ it is also true that a continuity between the two works can be found in a particular type of chorus. In the *Caccia*, the action takes place against a rich background of sounds that are not exclusively human voices: the *Caccia* means getting close to the refined Anjevin society and its habits, but it also means experiencing sounds: hunting horns, noises of wild pigs, branches falling from the trees, barking dogs, and other animals running through the forest. The scene is a typical description of a hunt, but with a speed, a vitality that Boccaccio drew from the 'other' Naples and blends with the classical and romance literary models identified by Branca (5-8). The opening, when "uno spirito gentil volando forte [...] in voce alta gridando" ("a gentle spirit come flying fast, calling" I 7-8) invites the lovely ladies: "donne leggiadre, venite ormai, venite alla gran corte dell'alta idea Diana, che elette v'ha in Partenope per sue consorti" ("Lovely ladies now come to the great court of the high goddess Diana, who has chosen you as her companions in Parthenope" I 9-12) reminds us of vendors in the harbour crying their wares, not to mention the echoing women's voices that Boccaccio must have heard in the *vicoli*, the narrow streets of Naples. The most eloquent scene in this sense is when Diana orders one of them to go up the hill and call, one by one, all the women and girls, and their calls come from afar to their ears, "sì che come agli orecchi di coloro da lunga venne il chiamar di colei, tutte s'apparecchiar

sanza dimoro" ("as her call came from afar to their ears, each one prepared without delay to come down to her quickly" XVI 15).

The *Caccia* is Boccaccio's most musical work, but the choric, which I intend here as a concerned participation in the vicissitudes of others, expresses itself as *ragionamenti* (conversations). In at least two eloquent scenes in the *Filostrato*, the Trojan women visit first Criseida and then Troiolo:

Ma come noi veggiamo ch'egli avviene,
che l'una donna l'altra a visitare
ne' casi nuovi va se le vuol bene,
così sen vennero molte a dimorare
con Criseida tutto il giorno, tutte piene
di pietosa allegrezza, ed a contare
le cominciarono per ordine il fatto,
com'ella era renduta, e con che patto.
Diceva l'una:-certo assai mi piace
che tu torni al tuo padre e sii con lui. —
L'altra diceva- E a me, ma mi spiace
vederla dipartir quinci da nui. —
L'altra diceva [...]. Questi e molti altri parlar femminili,
quasi quivi non fosse, udiva quella
 sanza risponder, tenendoli vili

But as we see it happens that one lady, if she is fond of another lady, goes to visit her when new events affect her, if she wishes her well, so many ladies came to pass the day with Criseida, all full of sympathetic joy, and they began to tell her about the event with its arrangements: how she was being exchanged and on what terms. Said one, 'Certainly it pleases me greatly that you will return to your father and are to be with him.' Another said ... This and much other womanly talk she heard without answering, almost as if she were not there, for she despised it. (*Il Filostrato* IV 80–82).

Following this episode, Boccaccio comments on the "cinguettare invano" (vain chirping) of the women that Criseida cannot stand, just as Troiolo cannot not bear the presence, somehow annoying, of the women in his room:

in poco d'or la sua camera piena
di donne fu e di suoni e di canti [...];
e molte di lui cognate e parenti raccolte.
Ciascuna a suo poter il confortava,
e tale il domandava che sentia;
esso non rispondea, ma riguardava
or l'una o l'altra

In but a little time, the chamber was filled with ladies and music and song ... and many sisters-in-law and female relatives were gathered together. Each one comforted him as far as lay within her power, and someone asked him how he felt (*Filostrato* VII 84)

The choral Neapolitan book par excellence before the *Decameron* is the *Filocolo*. The crowd plays an important role in its crucial episodes. When Biancifiore is condemned to death, the day's events pass from one *ragionamento* to another.

cominciossi per la corte un gran mormorio [...]. Tutti i baroni e l'altra gente, chi in una parte e chi in un'altra ne ragionavano. E altri diceano.... Alcuni diceano ciò non porria essere ... e altri ne ragionavano in altra maniera. E molti ve n'avea che, se non fosse stato per tema di dispiacere al re, avrebbe parlato molto in difesa di Biancifiore [...]. E così d'uno ragionamento in altro il giorno passò.

All the barons and the other folks were talking about it, some in one group and some in another.... And others said ... Others said ... Others argued in a different way ... and there were many who, if they had not feared to displease the king, would have taken up arms if necessary, some for love of her and some for love of Florio. And so between one conversation and another, the day passed. (*Filocolo* II 49, 1-5)

She was surrounded by a vast throng, "niuno era in Marmorina tanto crudele che di tale accidente non piangesse, e l'aere era pieno di dolenti voci" (II, 54, 20; "there was no one in Marmorina so stern as not to weep at this event, and the air was full of sorrowing voices"). When Florio and Biancifiore are both condemned to death, Boccaccio provides us with a delightful sketch of "le vaghe giovani," other prisoners, who are moved as they watch from the top of the tower the tragic destiny that seems about to befall the young lovers:

. . . vaghe giovani che pietose, riguardavano dall'alta torre. Le loro lacrime crescono per l'uccisione, e con quelle la loro speranza della salute di Biancifiore: e molte non potendo sostenere di vedere l'uccisione, se ne levano. Altre porgono pietose orazioni agl'iddii per lo salvamento della picciola schiera: altra va e torna, altra alcuna volta non si parte, disiderando di vedere la fine

The tears of the fair maidens who were watching in pity from the meadow increased on account of the killing, and so did their hope of Biancifiore's rescue; and many of them could not bear watching the slaughter but got up. Others offered pious prayers to the gods for the salvation of the little group; some went off but returned, some did not leave at all but wished to see the end (*Filocolo* IV 139, 1-2)

The choric manifests itself everywhere in the *Filocolo*: even when shepherds shelter from the sun under a pine tree that is the metamorphosed Idalogos entertain themselves in *ragionando*,² talking about the travails of the two unfortunate lovers Florio and Biancifiore (V 10). A *vocio* whispers constantly throughout the novel; everybody narrates the story of Florio and Biancifiore: the *compositore*,² the composer of the work; the characters; Fame; the crowd. Even when no one is recounting Florio and Biancifiore's story, the *ragionare* keeps going (Morosini, "Per difetto rintegrare" and "La morte verbale"). A detail from the illuminated manuscript Can. It. 85 at the Oxford Bodleian Library eloquently shows how the *ragionare* holds an important place in the *Filocolo*: a group of young men are represented "in lieti conversari in the *Filocolo*." Interestingly enough, the same scene is now the cover of the most recent edition of the *Filocolo* (ed. Quaglio 1998).

Everything is discussed in Boccaccio's Neapolitan" works.¹⁸ Sabatini refers to Boccaccio's ability "to gather and to bring the voices of this closed and unknown world to the world of official Italian culture." However, by *voices*,² he essentially means the popular songs of Neapolitan girls and remembered in *Rime*, *Amorosa Visione*, and *Decameron*, in the famous episode of Lisabetta from Messina.¹⁹ Without denying Boccaccio's concern with the representation of the oral tradition, as clearly shown in the works mentioned by Sabatini, a contemporary Neapolitan writer, Luciano De Crescenzo, summarizes and epitomizes (are these words different in this context?) the choric and, by analogy, how it functions in Boccaccio's works. In his novel *Così parlò Bellavista*, a man has gone to buy a ball for his nephew, and a thief "mariuolo" steals his car.

... ma che è successo?

Non lo so, io adesso sono venuto

Ma di che si tratta?

Ma se non mi sbaglio pare che hanno preso un mariuolo

No, no, lo stavano prendendo, ma poi quello se n'è scappato. Folla enorme. Un centinaio e forse più di persone si accalca in piazza Mercato davanti a un negozio di giocattoli. Ho fatto tardi e vorrei correre a casa ma la mia natura napoletana si ribella ad andar via senza essere prima informato della 'cosa.' Insomma diciamo così che vorrei almeno sapere di che si tratta. "Ma scusate, sapete che è successo?"

What happened?/ "I don't know. I just arrived"/ "But, what happened?"/ "Excuse me, do you know what happened?" / "If I am not wrong, it seems that they caught a thief." / "No, no, they were going to catch him, but he ran away."/ A huge crowd. Hundreds of people or maybe more crowded the piazza Mercato in front of a toy shop. I am late and would like to run home, but my Neapolitan nature is rebelling against the idea

of leaving without first finding out about the “thing.” In other words, let’s say I would like to know at least what it is all about. “Excuse me, do you know what happened?” (*Così parlò Bellavista* 215)

This question is repeated numerous times, and every time somebody new arrives, a “vice-narrator” gives a slightly different version of the facts.

The *Filocolo* exemplifies Boccaccio’s Neapolitan polyphony, reflected in modern times in Rea’s *La Ninfa Plebea* and, more ironically, in De Crescenzo. At the close of the *Filocolo*, one remembers not so much the details of the story with its happy ending, but rather the ensemble of voices. Boccaccio’s Neapolitan works are an everlasting polyphony.

In the final analysis, Rea’s study of Boccaccio in Naples offers proof not of Boccaccio’s so-called realism or social consciousness, but of Rea’s own battle against a perception of Naples as “the land of singing” and against the Neapolitan intellectuals, writers, and movie directors who have sympathized with the poor without capturing their tragic sense of life. Rea’s continuous attempt is to discredit the folkloristic and annoying legend of Naples as a “baraccone delle meraviglie” (“cabinet of marvels”). True enough, Boccaccio did not pursue this goal, at least he did not consciously chose to do it.

Rea constantly and vigorously tried to debunk the numerous stereotypes and legends relating to Naples, as all his critical essays show. If he does not prove his point about Boccaccio’s experience of the ‘other’ Naples, he still recognized the importance of the complex polyphony at work in Boccaccio’s Neapolitan writings.²⁰

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NOTES

¹In this letter to Martino from Signa (1307?), Boccaccio coldly describes Naples as a “una selva cadente,” a falling forest which is the title of Eclogue V (Levarie Smarr 43-51). Interestingly enough, in the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta* (II 6), Naples is “joyous, peaceful, abundant, generous,” as opposed to a Florence “full of miserly and envious people.” All the translations from Italian are mine except for Letter XXIII, for which I used Levarie Smarr’s English edition of Boccaccio’s *Eclogues*.

²On Boccaccio in Naples, see also Sabatini; Battaglia 1965; Wilkins; Léonard 1944 and 1954; Bruni; Lee; Branca 1981; Librandi; De Blasi and Varvaro; Padoan; Rea, “Boccaccio a Napoli” 252-74; Kirkham 2001.

³Rea ("Boccaccio a Napoli" 262) also believes that, in Naples, "Boccaccio acquired the vast tragic sense of life, of a life in movement, without scruples, spent by and in action, without compromises, intense in both good and bad, in both profane and celestial love."

⁴In Letter XIII, Boccaccio states that he has been twice cheated and disappointed by Niccolò ("due volte da queste promesse ingannato"), but it is not clear in which year he received the first invitation from Acciaiuoli, probably in 1355 judging from Eclogue VIII and Petrarch's Letter *Fam.* 15. For more on Boccaccio and the years he visited Naples and Acciaiuoli, see Sabbadini; Falco; Léonard (all his works) and Morosini, "Boccaccio and the Mediterranean legend," Spring 2003 and the entry on "Niccolò Acciaiuoli" with an updated bibliography in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*.

⁵See Letter V, "Niccola se a' miseri," written to Acciaiuoli 28 August 1341, a few months after Niccolò returned to Naples from an expedition to Greece. Like the *Ameto* and *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*, it shows how unhappy Boccaccio was in Florence ("dell' essere mio in Firenze contra piacere niente vi scrivo, però che più tosto con lagrime che con inchiostro sarebbe da dimostrare") and his expectations from the Grand Senechal; cf. also Auzzas, *Epistole e Lettere*, 542-543.

⁶"Et ob id, cum desideres tam titolorum quam etiam nominum colloquendum in eglogis meis sensum, nolo mireris, magister optime, si absque significato nonnulla colloquendum nomina comperies: de titulis non sic, omnes enim accurate apposui," writes Boccaccio, in Eclogue XXIII. More on Boccaccio's *Eclogues* in Levarie Smarr, "Boccaccio pastorale tra Dante e Petrarca" 237-254.

⁷For further inquiries into the debate concerning the complex chronology of this eclogue, see Foresti, *Aneddotti* 399-400; Léonard, *Boccaccio et Naples* 75-78; Hauvette, 159 ff. and my n. 8.

⁸Andrew of Hungary was the consort of the young Queen Joan the First. He was the youngest son of the King of Hungary, and his murder brought about the Hungarian invasion of Naples in 1347-1348. Cf. "Niccolò Acciaiuoli", Cachey and Baransky, eds., *Dictionary*. About the Eclogues, it must be said that in two of them, the fifth and sixth, Boccaccio praised King Louis of Taranto. In Eclogue VI, Boccaccio was still hoping to be invited to Naples in 1348, when the king and queen returned, and he celebrates Acciaiuoli's achievements (see Léonard, *Boccaccio et Naples* 34-44).

⁹In another critical essay dedicated to "Mastriani romanziere" (*Il re e il lus-trascarpe* 47-48), Rea tends to be openly polemical toward his predecessors Eduardo De Filippo, Salvatore Di Giacomo, and Matilde Serao. To a certain extent, he respects Mastriani, "who would have been the first Neapolitan novelist (because there is yet to be one), while now he must content himself with being the muddled author of a muddled world;" in the same vein, Rea writes very critically an essay on Mastriani, Serao, Di Giacomo and De Filippo in "Le due Napoli" (*I Racconti* 275-296). More on Rea and the other Neapolitan writers on Morosini, "A 'plebeian nymph' in Naples."

¹⁰In "Un mare diffamato" (*Il re e il lustrascarpe* 218) Rea says that "Naples must be considered a modern city. Its reduction to the land of singing, beautiful moons, beautiful sun, appears to us insulting and offensive."

¹¹Pulcinella is a Neapolitan mask, originating in the region of Campania, that looks like a cockerel. It is worn in the role of a stupid servant.

¹²Rea ("Boccaccio a Napoli" 270) says that Boccaccio has "one foot in the world of the upper classes and the other foot, along with his a good part of his torso, in the world of merchants, brokers, speculators, customs officers, with the common people that the courtly milieu and the Angevin world, a superhuman world, ignores."

¹³Lee (147 n. 23) rightly claims that, during Robert's reign, "tournaments do not have the aggressiveness that used to characterize them and now have become an occasion for entertainment with a theatrical component that merely exemplifies group activities and how a certain aristocracy organizes its free time."

¹⁴According to Sabatini (*Napoli Angioina* 110), napoletaneità can be seen "in the dominant consideration Boccaccio gives to women, first of all, as readers, as narrators, and also as protagonists in his tales or in the large presence of courtly and 'sublime' themes, either by their milieu or by the high tragedy of the sentiments, such as delicate and violent passions and magnificent actions, which Boccaccio attributes to great figures of southern history."

¹⁵Sabatini (*Napoli Angioina* 111) claims that "the Neapolitan heritage manifests itself also in the sense of warm participation in a tumultuous and adventurous reality that constitutes the subject matter of the tales which are not by chance set in southern lands and on its open seas."

¹⁶On this letter, see also Monti 226; Niccolini 5-12; Sabatini, "Prospettive sul parlato nella storia linguistica italiana (con una lettura dell' *epistola napoletana* del Boccaccio)" 434-466.

¹⁷One may also think of course of the Florentine works as well: the *Decameron* but also the *Corbaccio*. Here the need to comment on what has happened to other people, leads the protagonist to meet with "una compagnia assai utile, colla quale, primieramente cominciammo a ragionare con ordine assai discreto" *Corbaccio* 473).

¹⁸Sabatini (*Napoli Angioina* 112), cites *Rime*, Sonetti IV, V, VI, LXV; *Amorosa visione*, XLI, 10 ff., 58 ff.; and *Fiammetta* V 27.

¹⁹See Rea's colorful essay on Neapolitan street vendors' voices, "Voci," *Il re e il lustrascarpe*, 152-156.

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