

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

Giovanni Boccaccio
THE DECAMERON



A NEW TRANSLATION

CONTEXTS

CRITICISM

Translated and Edited by

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Preface

HERE BEGINS THE BOOK CALLED *DECAMERON*, ALSO KNOWN AS *PRINCE GALEOTTO*, WHICH CONTAINS ONE HUNDRED STORIES TOLD IN TEN DAYS BY SEVEN LADIES AND THREE YOUNG MEN.¹

It is a matter of humanity to show compassion for those who suffer, and although it is fitting for everyone to do so, it is especially desirable in those who, having had need of comfort, have received it from others—and if anyone ever needed it or appreciated it or derived any pleasure from it, I am one of them.² For, from my earliest youth up to the present, I have been enflamed beyond measure by a most exalted, noble love, which, were I to describe it, might seem greater than what is suitable for one in my low condition. Although I was praised and held in high regard for that love by those discerning individuals to whose attention I had come, it was nevertheless extremely painful to endure, not because of the cruelty of my beloved lady, to be sure, but because of the enormous fire produced within me by my poorly regulated appetite, which never allowed me to rest content or stay within reasonable limits and often made me feel more pain than I should have. While I was suffering, the pleasant conversation and invaluable consolation certain friends provided gave me such relief that I am absolutely convinced they are the reason I did not die. But as it pleased Him who is infinite and who has decreed by immutable law that all earthly things must come to an end, my love abated in the course of time of its own accord, although it had been more fervent than any other and could not be altered or extinguished by the force of reason or counsel or public shame or the harm it might cause. At present, love has left in my mind only the pleasurable feeling that it normally gives to those who refrain from sailing on its deepest seas. Thus, whereas it used to be painful, now that all my suffering has been removed, I feel only the delightful sensation that still remains.

But although my pain has ceased, I have not forgotten the benefits I once received from those who, because of the benevolence they felt toward me, shared my heavy burden, nor will this memory ever fade in me, I truly believe, until I myself am dead. And since, in my opinion, gratitude should be the most highly praised of all the virtues, while its contrary is to be condemned, and since I do not wish to appear ungrateful, I have decided to use what little ability I have, now that I am free of love, to try and provide some relief in exchange for that which I received. And if I cannot provide it for those who aided me, since they, thanks to their intelligence or their good luck, do not require it, I will offer it to those who do. For,

1. The title of Boccaccio's work derives from Greek and means "ten days." Prince Galeotto (Gallehaut, in French) is a character from Arthurian romance who served as a go-between in the love affair of Lancelot and Guinevere. On both the title and the alternative title, see the Introduction.
2. Boccaccio follows the principles of medieval rhetoric and opens his work with a proverb: "Misery loves company." He also personalizes the idea, for earlier in his career he had memorialized his suffering for the love of Maria d'Aquino, referring to her by the pseudonym of Fiammetta, in his work of the same name. Fiammetta (Little Flame) will reappear as one of the ten narrators of the *Decameron*. In the next sentences, he acts out one of the conventional tropes of courtly love by stressing his low condition in relationship to the beloved and to love itself (although the experience of loving was also thought in the Middle Ages to be so ennobling that it compensated for whatever degradation the lover might experience).

however slight my support—or comfort, if you prefer—might be to the needy, I nevertheless feel that it should be directed where it is more in demand, for there it will be more helpful and more appreciated.

Who will deny that it is much more fitting to give this aid, however inadequate, to charming women than to men? Out of fear and shame, women keep the flames of love hidden within their delicate breasts, and as everyone knows who has had this experience, such fires have much greater force than do those that burn out in the open. Restrained by the desires, whims, and commands of their fathers, mothers, brothers, and husbands, most of the time women remain pent up within the narrow confines of their rooms, and as they sit there in apparent idleness, both yearning and not yearning at the same time, the varied thoughts they mull over in their minds cannot always be happy ones. And if, because of those thoughts, a fit of melancholy³ brought on by their burning desire should take possession of their minds, it will inevitably remain there, causing them great pain, unless it is removed by new interests. Finally, women's powers of endurance are simply less than those of men.

As we can plainly see, this is not what happens to men who are in love. Should melancholy or burdensome thoughts afflict them, they have many ways to alleviate or remove them, for, if they wish, they never lack opportunities to get out of the house where they can see and hear all sorts of things going on, and where they can hawk, hunt or fish, go riding or gamble, or just attend to their business affairs. Each of these activities has the power to occupy a man's mind either wholly or in part and to free it from painful thoughts, at least for a while, after which, one way or another, either he will find consolation or the pain will subside.

Therefore, I wish, to some extent, to provide a remedy for the sins of Fortune, who has been more niggardly in providing support where there is less strength, as we see in the case of our delicate ladies. And so, I offer here a succor and refuge for those who are in love, whereas for those who are not, they can just make do with their needles, their spindles, and their wool winders. My plan is to recount one hundred stories, or fables, or parables, or histories, or whatever you wish to call them.⁴ They were told over ten days, as will be seen, by an honorable company made up of seven ladies and three young men who came together during the time of the recent plague that was responsible for so many deaths. I will also include some little songs sung for their delight by the ladies I mentioned. In the stories,

3. Or black humor; meant more than just an unhappy mood, as it does today. In the medical theory of Boccaccio's time, the body contained four "humors" (blood, cholera, and phlegm, in addition to melancholy) that determined both its physical functions and the mental states accompanying those functions. Good health required that all four humors be in balance, so that to have one, such as melancholy, become dominant was to suffer a serious disease.

4. Boccaccio's different names for the narratives making up his collection are not synonyms, nor can they be applied individually to distinct subsets of them. Furthermore, all of these names are, to some degree, approximations because the genres they label were rather fluid in the period. Nevertheless, some distinctions can be made among them. "Story": a late medieval descriptive term (*novella* in Italian), fairly new in Boccaccio's lifetime, that defined a story focused on a single incident. "Fable": probably refers less to something like the moralizing tales of Aesop than to what the French called a *fabliau*, a short tale usually concerned with lower-class characters in a story with an explicit, usually conventional moral, like the parables recounted by Christ in the New Testament or like similar tales told throughout the Middle Ages and typically called *exempla*. "History": identifies a narrative involving elevated and important historical persons or incidents (or "story," *istoria* in Italian).

you will see many cases of love, both pleasing and harsh, as well as other adventures, which took place in both ancient and modern times. In reading them, the ladies of whom I have been speaking will be able to derive not only pleasure from the entertaining material they contain, but useful advice as well,⁵ for the stories will teach them how to recognize what they should avoid, and likewise, what they should pursue. And I believe that as they read them, their suffering would come to an end. Should this occur—and may God grant that it should—let them thank Love who, in freeing me from his bonds, has granted me the ability to attend to their pleasures.

Day I

Introduction

HERE BEGINS THE FIRST DAY OF THE *DECAMERON*, IN WHICH THE AUTHOR EXPLAINS HOW IT CAME ABOUT THAT THE INDIVIDUALS, WHO WILL SOON MAKE THEIR APPEARANCE, WERE INDUCED TO COME TOGETHER IN ORDER TO CONVERSE WITH ONE ANOTHER, AND HOW, UNDER THE RULE OF PAMPINEA, THEY SPEAK ON WHATEVER TOPIC EACH ONE FINDS MOST AGREEABLE.

Most gracious ladies, whenever I contemplate how compassionate you all are by nature, I recognize that, in your judgment, the present work will seem both somber and painful, for its opening contains the sad record of the recent, deadly plague, which inspired so much horror and pity in all who actually saw it or otherwise came to know of it. But I do not want you to be afraid of reading beyond this introduction, as though you would always be going forward amid continual sighs and tears. You will be affected by this horrific beginning no differently than travelers are by a steep and rugged mountain,⁶ for beyond it there lies a most beautiful and delightful plain, which will supply them with pleasure that matches the difficulty of both their ascent and their descent. And thus, just as happiness at its limit turns into sadness, so misery is ended by the joy that follows it.⁷

This brief pain—I call it brief because it is contained in just a few words—will be quickly followed by the sweetness and pleasure that I have just promised you and that such a beginning would not, perhaps, have led you to expect. had I not explained what is about to happen. And truly, if in all honesty I could have led you where I want to go by any route other than by such a difficult path as this one will be, I would have done so gladly. But because, without recalling these events, I could not explain the origins of the things you will read about later on, I have been forced by necessity, as it were, to write it all down.

Let me say, then, that one thousand, three hundred, and forty-eight years had passed since the fruitful Incarnation of the Son of God when the deadly plague arrived in the noble city of Florence, the most beautiful of any in

5. Boccaccio is rephrasing the well-known and widely endorsed dictum of the Roman writer Horace, who said that art should be both *dulce* (sweet) and *utile* (useful); see his *Ars poetica* (*The Art of Poetry*) 343.

6. Recalls the opening of the *Divine Comedy* in which Dante is trying without success to climb a mountain (*Purgatory*).

7. Cf. Proverbs 14.13.

Italy.⁸ Whether it descended on us mortals through the influence of the heavenly bodies or was sent down by God in His righteous anger to chastise us because of our wickedness, it had begun some years before in the East, where it deprived countless beings of their lives before it headed to the West, spreading ever-greater misery as it moved relentlessly from place to place.⁹ Against it all human wisdom and foresight were useless. Vast quantities of refuse were removed from the city by officials charged with this function, the sick were not allowed inside the walls, and numerous instructions were disseminated for the preservation of health—but all to no avail.¹ Nor were the humble supplications made to God by the pious, not just once but many times, whether in organized processions or in other ways, any more effective. For practically from the start of spring in the year we mentioned above, the plague began producing its sad effects in a terrifying and extraordinary manner. It did not operate as it had done in the East, where if anyone bled through the nose, it was a clear sign of inevitable death. Instead, at its onset, in men and women alike, certain swellings would develop in the groin or under the armpits, some of which would grow like an ordinary apple and others like an egg, some larger and some smaller. The common people called them *gavoccioli*,² and within a brief space of time, these deadly, so-called *gavoccioli* would begin to spread from the two areas already mentioned and would appear at random over the rest of the body. Then, the symptoms of the disease began to change, and many people discovered black or livid blotches on their arms, thighs, and every other part of their bodies, sometimes large and widely scattered, at other times tiny and close together.³ For whoever contracted them, these spots were a most certain sign of impending death, just as the *gavoccioli* had been earlier and still continued to be.

Against these maladies the advice of doctors and the power of medicine appeared useless and unavailing. Perhaps the nature of the disease was such that no remedy was possible, or the problem lay with those who were treating it, for their number, which had become enormous, included not just qualified doctors, but women as well as men who had never had any training in medicine, and since none of them had any idea what was causing the disease, they could hardly prescribe an appropriate remedy for it. Thus, not only were very few people cured, but in almost every case death occurred within three days after the appearance of the signs we have described, sometimes sooner and sometimes later, and usually without fever or any other complication. Moreover, what made this pestilence all the more virulent was that it was spread by the slightest contact between the sick and the healthy just as a fire will catch dry or oily materials when

8. For Florentines in this period, the year began on March 25, the date of the Incarnation or Annunciation, and in fact, the plague did appear for the first time in Florence in April 1348.

9. The plague started in Asia—to be precise, in the Crimea—from which it was brought by sea to Sicily in 1346. Boccaccio offers two conventional explanations for the disease: the influence of the stars and God's anger at the sins of humans.

1. Boccaccio's description of the plague, although pretending to be an eyewitness account, is generally based on earlier accounts such as that by Paulus Diaconus in his 8th-century *Historia Longobardorum* (*History of the Lombards*).

2. Swellings or protuberances (Tuscan). *Gavocciolo* (sing.) is a diminutive and derives from the late Latin *gaba* (Italian *gozzo*), meaning goiter, crop, throat, or even stomach. These swellings are called *bubboni* in modern Italian and buboes in English (from the Greek word for groin or gland), and it is from this term that we get the name of the sickness, the bubonic plague.

3. The black spots on the body were due to internal bleeding and led to the term the Black Death.

they are placed right beside it. In fact, this evil went even further, for not only did it infect those who merely talked or spent any time with the sick, but it also appeared to transfer the disease to anyone who merely touched the clothes or other objects that had been handled or used by those who were its victims.

What I have to tell is incredible, and if I and many others had not seen these things with our own eyes, I would scarcely dare to believe them, let alone write them down, no matter how trustworthy the person was who told me about them. Let me just say that the plague I have been describing was so contagious as it spread that it did not merely pass from one man to another, but we frequently saw something much more incredible, namely that when an animal of some species other than our own touched something belonging to an individual who had been stricken by the disease or had died of it, that animal not only got infected, but was killed almost instantly. With my own eyes, as I have just said, I witnessed such a thing on many occasions. One day, for example, two pigs came upon the rags of a poor man that had been thrown into the public street after he had died of the disease, and as they usually do, the pigs first poked at them with their snouts, after which they picked them up between their teeth and shook them against their jowls. Thereupon, within a short time, after writhing about as if they had been poisoned, both of them fell down dead on the ground, splayed out upon the rags that had brought about their destruction.

These things and many others like them, or even worse, caused all sorts of fears and fantasies in those who remained alive, almost all of whom took one utterly cruel precaution, namely, to avoid the sick and their belongings, fleeing far away from them, for in doing so they all thought they could preserve their own health.

Some people were of the opinion that living moderately and being abstemious would really help them resist the disease. They, therefore, formed themselves into companies and lived in isolation from everyone else. Having come together, they shut themselves up inside houses where no one was sick and they had ample means to live well, so that, while avoiding overindulgence, they still enjoyed the most delicate foods and the best wines in moderation. They would not speak with anyone from outside, nor did they want to hear any news about the dead and the dying, and instead, they passed their time playing music and enjoying whatever other amusements they could devise.

Others, holding the contrary opinion, maintained that the surest medicine for such an evil disease was to drink heavily, enjoy life's pleasures, and go about singing and having fun, satisfying their appetites by any means available, while laughing at everything and turning whatever happened into a joke. Moreover, they practiced what they preached to the best of their ability, for they went from one tavern to another, drinking to excess both day and night. They did their drinking more freely in private homes, however, provided that they found something there to enjoy or that held out the promise of pleasure. Such places were easy to find, because people, feeling as though their days were numbered, had not just abandoned themselves, but all their possessions, too. Most houses had thus become common property, and any stranger who happened upon them could treat them as if he were their rightful owner. And yet, while these people behaved

like wild animals, they always took great care to avoid any contact at all with the sick.

In the midst of so much affliction and misery in our city, the respect for the reverend authority of the laws, both divine and human, had declined just about to the vanishing point, for, like everyone else, their officers and executors, who were not dead or sick themselves, had so few personnel that they could not fulfill their duties. Thus, people felt free to behave however they liked.

There were many others who took a middle course between the two already mentioned, neither restricting their diet so much as the first, nor letting themselves go in drinking and other forms of dissipation so much as the second, but doing just enough to satisfy their appetites. Instead of shutting themselves up, they went about, some carrying flowers in their hands, others with sweet-smelling herbs, and yet others with various kinds of spices. They would repeatedly hold these things up to their noses, for they thought the best course was to fortify the brain with such odors against the stinking air that seemed to be saturated with the stench of dead bodies and disease and medicine. Others, choosing what may have been the safer alternative, cruelly maintained that no medicine was better or more effective against the plague than flight. Convinced by this argument, and caring for nothing but themselves, a large number of both men and women abandoned their own city, their own homes, their relatives, their properties and possessions, and headed for the countryside, either that lying around Florence or, better still, that which was farther away. It was as if they thought that God's wrath, once provoked, did not aim to punish men's iniquities with the plague wherever it might find them, but would strike down only those found inside the walls of their city. Or perhaps they simply concluded that no one in Florence would survive and that the city's last hour had come.

Of the people holding these varied opinions, not all of them died, but, by the same token, not all of them survived. On the contrary, many proponents of each view got sick here, there, and everywhere. Moreover, since they themselves, when they were well, had set the example for those who were not yet infected, they, too, were almost completely abandoned by everyone as they languished away. And leaving aside the fact that the citizens avoided one another, that almost no one took care of his neighbors, and that relatives visited one another infrequently, if ever, and always kept their distance, the tribulation of the plague had put such fear into the hearts of men and women that brothers abandoned their brothers, uncles their nephews, sisters their brothers, and very often wives their husbands. In fact, what is even worse, and almost unbelievable, is that fathers and mothers refused to tend to their children and take care of them, treating them as if they belonged to someone else.

Consequently, the countless numbers of people who got sick, both men and women, had to depend for help either on the charity of the few friends they had who were still around, or on the greed of their servants, who would only work for high salaries out of all proportion to the services they provided. For all that, though, there were few servants to be found, and those few tended to be men and women of limited intelligence, most of whom, not trained for such duties, did little more than hand sick people the few things they asked for or watch over them as they died. And yet, while per-

forming these services, they themselves often lost their lives along with their wages.

As a result of the abandonment of the sick by neighbors, friends, and family, and in light of the scarcity of servants, there arose a practice hardly ever heard of before, whereby when a woman fell ill, no matter how attractive or beautiful or noble, she did not object to having a man as one of her attendants, whether he was young or not. Indeed, if her infirmity made it necessary, she experienced no more shame in showing him every part of her body than she would have felt with a woman, which was the reason why those women who were cured were perhaps less chaste in the period that followed. Moreover, a great many people chanced to die who might have survived if they had had any sort of assistance. In general, between the inadequacy of the means to care for the sick and the virulence of the plague, the number of people dying both day and night was so great that it astonished those who merely heard tell of it, let alone those who actually witnessed it.

As a result of the plague, it was almost inevitable that practices arose among the citizens who survived that went contrary to their original customs. It used to be the case, as it is again today, that the female relatives and next-door neighbors of a dead man would come to his house and mourn there with the women of the household, while his male neighbors and a fair number of other citizens would assemble in front of the house with his male relatives. After that, the clergymen would arrive, their number depending on the social rank of the deceased, who would then be carried on the shoulders of his peers, amid all the funeral pomp of candles and chants, to the church he had chosen before his death. As the ferocity of the plague began to increase, such practices all but disappeared in their entirety, while other new ones arose to take their place. For people did not just die without women around them, but many departed this life without anyone at all as a witness, and very few of them were accorded the pious lamentations and bitter tears of their families. On the contrary, in place of all the usual weeping, mostly there was laughing and joking and festive merrymaking—a practice that women, having largely suppressed their feminine piety, had mastered in the interest of preserving their health. Moreover, there were few whose bodies were accompanied to church by more than ten or twelve of their neighbors, nor were they carried on the shoulders of their honored and esteemed fellow citizens, but by a band of gravediggers, come up from the lower classes, who insisted on being called *sextons* and performed their services for a fee. They would shoulder the bier and quick-march it off, not to the church that the dead man had chosen before his demise, but in most cases, to the one closest by. They would walk behind four or six clergymen who carried just a few candles—and sometimes none at all—and who did not trouble themselves with lengthy, solemn burial services, but instead, with the aid of those *sextons*, dumped the corpse as quickly as they could into whatever empty grave they found.

The common people and most of those of the middling sort presented a much more pathetic sight, for the majority of them were constrained to stay in their houses either by their hope to survive or by their poverty. Confined thus to their own neighborhoods, they got sick every day by the thousands, and having no servants or anyone else to attend to their needs, they almost invariably perished. Many expired out in the public streets both

day and night, and although a great many others died inside their houses, the stench of their decaying bodies announced their deaths to their neighbors well before anything else did. And what with these, plus the others who were dying all over the place, the city was overwhelmed with corpses.

For the most part, the neighbors of the dead always observed the same routine, prompted more by a fear of contamination from the decaying bodies than by any charity they might have felt. Either by themselves or with the aid of porters, whenever any could be found, they carried the bodies of the recently deceased out of their houses and put them down by the front doors, where anyone passing by, especially in the morning, could have seen them by the thousands. Then the bodies were taken and placed on biers that had been sent for or, for lack of biers, on wooden planks. Nor was it unusual for two or three bodies to be carried on a single bier, for on more than one occasion, they were seen holding a wife and a husband, two or three brothers, a father and a son, or other groups like that. And countless were the times when a couple of priests bearing a cross would go to fetch someone, and porters carrying three or four biers would fall in behind them, so that whereas the priests thought they had one corpse to bury, they would have six or eight, and sometimes more. Even so, however, there were no tears or candles or mourners to honor the dead; on the contrary, it had reached the point that people who died were treated the same way that goats would be treated nowadays. Thus, it is quite clear that things which the natural course of events, with its small, infrequent blows, could never teach the wise to bear with patience, the immensity of this calamity made even simple people regard with indifference.⁴

There was not enough consecrated ground to bury the enormous number of corpses that were being brought to every church every day at almost every hour, especially if they were going to continue the ancient custom of giving each one its own plot. So, when all the graves were full, enormous trenches were dug in the cemeteries of the churches, into which the new arrivals were put by the hundreds, stowed layer upon layer like merchandise in ships, each one covered with a little earth, until the top of the trench was reached.

But rather than go on recalling in elaborate detail all the miseries we experienced in the city, let me just add that the baleful wind blowing through it in no way spared the surrounding countryside. The fortified towns there fared just like the city, though on a smaller scale, and in the scattered villages and farms the poor, wretched peasants and their families died at all hours of the day and night. Without the aid of doctors or help from servants, they would expire along the roads and in their tilled fields and in their homes, dying more like animals than human beings. They, too, became as apathetic in their ways as the city dwellers were, neglecting their property and ignoring the work they had to do. Indeed, since they thought every day was going to be their last, they consumed what they already had on hand, neglecting what they might get in the future from their animals and fields and from all their past labors. Thus it came about that oxen, asses, sheep, goats, pigs, chickens, and even dogs, who are so loyal to men, were driven from their homes and left to roam freely

4. Boccaccio is, of course, being ironic. Those "things," which the wise, like the simple, must learn to bear, are the suffering and death that are part of the "natural course of events"—i.e., the human condition.

through fields in which the wheat had not even been reaped, let alone gathered in. Nevertheless, many of the animals, as if they were rational beings, would eat well there during the day and then return home full at night, needing no shepherd to guide them.

To leave the countryside and return to the city: what more can be said except that the cruelty of the heavens—and perhaps, in some measure, that of men, too—was so great and so malevolent that from March to the following July, between the fury of the pestilence and the fact that many of the sick were poorly cared for or abandoned in their need because of the fears of those who were healthy, it has been reliably calculated that more than one hundred thousand human beings were deprived of their lives within the walls of the city of Florence, although before the outbreak of the plague perhaps no one would have thought it contained so many.⁵

Oh, how many great palaces, beautiful houses, and noble dwellings, once filled with lords and ladies and their retainers, were emptied of all their inhabitants, down to the last little serving boy! Oh, how many famous families, how many vast estates, how many notable fortunes were left without a legitimate heir! How many valiant men, how many beautiful women, how many lovely youths, whom Galen, Hippocrates, and Aesculapius⁶—not to mention others—would have judged perfectly healthy, dined in the morning with their families, companions, and friends, only to have supper that evening with their ancestors in the next world!

Since my own grief will be increased if I continue to meditate any longer on so much misery, I want to pass over what I can suitably omit and tell what happened one Tuesday morning while our city was in these straits and had been practically deserted. As I later learned from a trustworthy person, seven young women, who had just attended divine services and who, in keeping with the requirements of the times, were dressed in mourning attire, found themselves in the venerable Church of Santa Maria Novella, which was otherwise almost empty. Each one was the friend, neighbor, or relative of one of the others, none had reached her twenty-eighth year or was under eighteen, and all were intelligent, wellborn, attractive, and graced with fine manners and marvelous honesty. I would tell you their real names, but there is a good reason that prevents me from doing so, which is that I do not want any of them to feel shame in the future because of the ensuing stories, which they either listened to or told themselves. For the rules concerning pleasure, which are rather strict today, were then, for the reasons I have already given, very lax, not just for women of their age, but even for those who were much older. Nor do I wish to supply the envious, who are ready to censure the most praiseworthy life, with material that might allow them to denigrate the honesty of these worthy ladies in any way by means of their filthy gossip. However, so that what each one said may be understood without confusion, I intend to identify them by means of names that are either wholly, or partially, adapted to their characters. We shall call the first of them, who was also the oldest,

5. Boccaccio's estimate of the number of deaths due to the plague is somewhat exaggerated, perhaps for the sake of rhetorical effect. Historians, relying on various 14th-century chroniclers, think that about 60 percent of the population, or anywhere from fifty to eighty thousand people, perished in Florence and the surrounding countryside. Boccaccio's interest in rhetorical effect is also evident in the heightened language of the following paragraph.

6. The Greco-Roman god of medicine (Asclepius in Greek), Galen (2nd century C.E.) and Hippocrates (5th century B.C.E.) were the two most famous doctors of the ancient Greek world.

Pampinea, and the second Fiammetta; the third and fourth, Filomena and Emilia; then let us say that the fifth is Lauretta and the sixth Neifile; and to the last, not without reason, we will give the name Elissa.⁷

By chance rather than some prior agreement, they had all come together in one part of the church and were sitting down more or less in a circle. After finishing their prayers, they heaved a deep sigh and began talking among themselves about the terrible times they were going through. After a while, when all the others had fallen silent, Pampinea began to speak as follows:

"My dear ladies, we have all heard many times that there is no harm in exercising our rights in an honest way. Now, every person on earth has a natural right to maintain, preserve, and defend his life to the best of his ability. In fact, the proof that we all take this for granted is that men are judged innocent if they sometimes kill others in self-defense. Thus, if the laws, to which the welfare of every human being has been entrusted, concede such a thing, how can it be wrong, provided no one is harmed, for us or for anyone else to use whatever remedies we can find in order to preserve our lives? When I pause to consider what we have been doing this morning as well as on previous mornings, and when I think about the subjects we have discussed and what we have had to say about them, I realize, just as you must realize, too, that each of us fears for her life. I am not surprised by this, but considering that we all have the natural feelings shared by women, what really does surprise me is why you have not taken any steps to protect yourselves from what each of you has a right to fear.

"Instead, here we sit, in my opinion, as if our sole purpose were to count the number of corpses being carried to their graves; or to hear whether the friars inside the church, whose numbers have practically dwindled away to nothing, are chanting their offices at the specified hours; or to exhibit, by means of our clothing, the quality and quantity of our miseries to anybody who might show up here. And if we go outside, either we see the dead and the sick being carried everywhere about us; or we see people, once condemned and sent into exile for their misdeeds by the authority of the civil law, mocking that law as they rampage through the city committing acts of violence, knowing that those who enforce the law are either sick or dead; or we are tormented by the dregs of our city who, thirsting for our blood, call themselves *sextons* now and go about everywhere, both on horseback and on foot, singing scurrilous songs to add insults to our injuries. And all we ever hear is 'So-and-so is dead' and 'So-and-so is about to die.' If there were anyone left to grieve, we would hear nothing but doleful laments everywhere.

"And when we return home, I do not know whether you have the same experience that I do, but since, out of a large household of servants, there is no one left except my maid, I get so frightened that I feel as if all the hairs on my head were standing on end. And what terrifies me even more is that wherever I go in the house, wherever I pause for a moment, I see the shades of those who have passed away, and their faces are not the ones I was used to, but they have strange, horrible expressions on them that come from who knows where. For these reasons, whether I am here or outside or in my house, I am always anxious, and all the more so, because

7. On the names and the number seven, see p. xlv.

it seems to me that there is no one possessing sufficient means and having some place to go to, as we do, who is left in the city except us. And as for the few people still around, they make no distinction, as I have often heard and seen for myself, between what is honest and what is not, and prompted only by their appetites, they do what promises them the most pleasure, both day and night, alone and in groups. Moreover, I am not speaking only of laymen but also of those cloistered in monasteries, who have convinced themselves that such wicked behavior is suitable for them and only improper for others. Breaking their vows of obedience, they have given themselves over to carnal pleasures, and in the belief that they will thereby escape death, they have become wanton and degenerate.

"And if (this is so—and it most manifestly *is* so—) then what are we doing here, what are we waiting for, what are we dreaming about? Why are we lazier and slower than all the other inhabitants of this city in providing for our safety? Do we consider ourselves less valuable than they are? Or do we believe that our lives, unlike those of others, are tied to our bodies by chains so strong that we need not worry about all these things that have the power to harm them? We are mistaken, we are deceived, what bestial stupidity for us to think this way! The clearest argument against us is the frequency with which we are forced to recall the names and conditions of the young men and women who have been struck down by this cruel pestilence.

"Although I do not know if things appear to you the way they do to me, for my part I have come to the conclusion that the best thing for us to do in our present situation would be to leave the city, just as many have done before us and many are still doing, lest we fall prey through timidity or complacency to what we might possibly avoid if we desired to do so. We should go and stay on one of our various country estates, shunning the wicked practices of others like death itself, but having as much fun as possible, feasting and making merry, without ever overstepping the bounds of reason in any way.

"There we will hear the little birds sing and see the hills and plains turning green, the fields full of wheat undulating like the sea, and thousands of kinds of trees. There we will have a clearer view of the heavens, for, even if they are sullen, they do not for all that deny us their eternal beauties, which are so much more attractive to look at than are the walls of our empty city. Moreover, the air is much fresher in the country, the necessities of life are more abundant, and the number of difficulties to contend with is smaller. Although the peasants are dying there in the same way that the city dwellers are here, our distress will be lessened if only because the houses and the people are fewer and farther between. Besides, if I am right, we will not be abandoning anyone here. Rather, we can truly say that we are the ones who have been abandoned, for our relatives, by dying or fleeing from death, have left us alone in the midst of this great affliction as if we were no kin of theirs. Nor will anyone reproach us if we adopt this plan, whereas if we do not, we will be facing sorrow and grief and possibly death itself.

"Consequently, if you please, I think it would be a good idea for us to do what I suggest, taking our maidservants with us and having everything we need sent after. We can live in one place today and another tomorrow, pursuing whatever pleasures and amusements the present times offer. And

if death does not claim us before then, let us go on living this way until such time as we can perceive the end that Heaven has decreed for these events. Just remember that it is no less unseemly for us to go away and thus preserve our honor than for the great majority of the others to stay here and lose theirs."

Having listened to Pampinea, the other women not only applauded her advice, but were so eager to take it that they were already beginning to work out the details among themselves, as though they were going to get right up out of their seats and set off at once. But Filomena, who was very prudent, declared: "Ladies, although what Pampinea has argued is very well said, that is no reason for us to rush into it, as you seem to want to do. Remember, we are all women, and every one of us is sufficiently adult to recognize how women, when left to themselves in a group, can be quite irrational, and how, without a man to look after them, they can be terribly disorganized. Since we are fickle, quarrelsome, suspicious, weak, and fearful, I am really worried that if we take no guide along with us other than ourselves, this company will fall apart much more quickly, and with much less credit to ourselves, than would otherwise be the case. We would be well advised to deal with this problem before we start."

"It is certainly true," said Elissa, "that man is the head of woman,⁸ and without a man to guide us, only rarely does anything we do accord us praise. But how are we to get hold of these men? As we all know, the majority of our male relatives are dead, and the others who remain alive not only have no idea where we are, but are fleeing in scattered little groups from exactly the same thing we seek to avoid ourselves. Nor would it be seemly for us to take up with those who are not our kin. Therefore, if self-preservation is the purpose of our flight, we must find a way to arrange things so that no matter where we go in quest of fun and relaxation, trouble and scandal do not follow us there."

The ladies were engaged in their discussion, when lo and behold, who should come into the church but three young men, though none so young as to be under twenty-five, in whom neither the horrors of the times, nor the loss of friends and relatives, nor fear for their own lives had been able to cool down, let alone extinguish, the love they felt. The first was named Panfilo, the second Filostrato, and the last Dioneo, all of them very pleasant and well bred.⁹ In the midst of all this turbulence, they were seeking the solace, sweet beyond measure, of catching a glimpse of the ladies they loved, all three of whom just so happened to be among the seven previously mentioned, while several of the others were close relatives of one or another of the men. No sooner did they catch sight of the ladies than the ladies caught sight of them, whereupon Pampinea smiled and began: "Look how Fortune favors us right from the start in placing before us three discreet and worthy young men who will gladly guide us and serve us if we are not too proud to ask them to do so."

Neifile's entire face had turned scarlet with embarrassment because she was the object of one of the youths' affections. "Pampinea, for the love of God," she said, "be careful about what you are saying. I know for certain that nothing but good can be said of any one of them, and I believe they

8. Cf. Ephesians 5,23.

9. On the names and the number three, see p. xlv.

are more than competent to carry out this task. I also think they would provide good, honest company not only for us but for many women more beautiful and finer than we are. But since it is perfectly obvious that they are in love with some of us here, I am afraid that if we were to take them with us, through no fault of theirs or of our own, we would be exposed to censure and disgrace."

"That really does not matter in the least," said Filomena. "If I live like an honest woman and my conscience is clear, let people say what they like to the contrary, for God and Truth will take up arms on my behalf. Now, if only they were disposed to accompany us, then we could truly claim, as Pampinea has said, that Fortune favors our plan."

Having heard what Pampinea had to say, the other ladies stopped talking and unanimously agreed that the men should be called over, told about their intentions, and asked if they would like to accompany them on their expedition. And so, without another word, Pampinea, who was related by blood to one of the men, got up and went over to where they stood gazing at the women. After giving them a cheerful greeting, Pampinea explained their plan and asked them on behalf of all the women if, in a spirit of pure, brotherly affection, they might be disposed to accompany them.

At first the young men thought they were being mocked, but when they saw that Pampinea was speaking in earnest, they replied happily that they were ready to go. In order to avoid delaying their project, they all made arrangements then and there for what they had to do before their departure. The next day, which was a Wednesday, after having carefully prepared everything they needed down to the last detail and sent it all on ahead to the place where they were going, they left the city at the crack of dawn and started on their way, the ladies traveling with a few of their maids, the three youths with three of their servants. Nor did they go more than two short miles from the city before they arrived at their first destination.

The place in question was some distance from any road, situated on a little mountain that was quite a pleasant sight to see with all its shrubs and trees decked out in their green foliage.¹ At the top there was a palace, built around a large, lovely courtyard, containing loggias, great halls, and bedchambers, all of which were beautifully proportioned and adorned with charming paintings of happy scenes. Surrounded by meadows and marvelous gardens, the palace had wells of the coolest water and vaulted cellars stocked with precious wines, wines more suitable for connoisseurs than for honest, sober ladies. When they got there, the company discovered to their great delight that the palace had been swept clean from top to bottom, the beds had been made up in their chambers, every room had been adorned with seasonal flowers, and the floors had been carpeted with rushes.

Soon after reaching the palace, they sat down, and Dioneo, who was the merriest of the young men and had the readiest wit, said: "Ladies, we have been led here more by your good sense than by our own foresight.

1. Although some scholars have attempted to identify this palace with a specific country villa Boccaccio owned, the ensuing description is so general and so idealized—and is so similar to the description of the palace to which the group goes at the start of Day 3—that it makes more sense to see it as being inspired not by Boccaccio's recollection of a specific place but by the literary tradition of the *locus amoenus* (pleasant place) that serves as a setting for pastoral poetry. This tradition lies behind similar descriptions in Boccaccio's earlier works and in such medieval classics as *The Romance of the Rose*.

Now, I do not know what you intend to do with all your troubles, but I left mine inside the city gates when I passed through them with you just a short while ago. Hence, you must either prepare to have fun and to laugh and sing along with me—as much as is consistent, of course, with your dignity—or you should give me leave to go back there to reclaim my troubles and stay in our afflicted city.”

As though she, too, had gotten rid of such thoughts herself, Pampinea replied to him gaily: “Very well said, Dioneo. We should have fun while we are living here, for that is the very reason we fled our sorrows back there. But since things that lack order will not last long, and since I am the one who initiated the discussions that led to the formation of this fair company, I think that if we are to preserve our happiness, we have to choose a leader from among ourselves, someone whom we will honor and obey as our superior and whose every thought will be aimed at enabling us to pass our time together agreeably. Moreover, to allow us all to experience the heavy burden as well as the pleasure of being in command, and thereby to prevent those who are not in charge from envying the person who is, I think that the burden and the honor should be assigned to each of us in turn for just one day. The first ruler is someone we should all elect, but as for those who follow, the person who has been in charge on a particular day should, when the hour of vespers² approaches, choose his or her successor. Then this new ruler will be free to determine the place where we will go and to dictate the manner in which we are to live during the period of his or her reign.”

They were all quite happy with Pampinea's proposal and unanimously elected her Queen for the first day, whereupon Filomena quickly ran over to a laurel tree, for she had often heard people say that its leaves were quite venerable and conferred great honor on those worthy individuals who were crowned with them.³ Having gathered a few branches, she made a magnificent garland of honor, which, during the time the company remained together, was placed on each person's head as a clear sign of royal sovereignty and authority.

Once she had been crowned Queen, Pampinea summoned the servants of the three men as well as the women's maids, who were four in number. She then ordered everyone to be silent, and when they were, she said:

“So that I may begin by setting an example for you all that will allow our company to be able to live free from shame and will make our experience here an ever more orderly and pleasurable one for as long as we choose to stay together, let me first appoint Parmeno,⁴ Dioneo's servant, as my steward and entrust him with the care and management of our entire household as well as everything pertaining to the service of our dining hall. I want Sirisco, Panfilo's servant, to be our buyer and treasurer and to carry

2. Evening. On the canonical hours, see p. xlv.

3. Crowning a victorious athlete or a poet with leaves from the laurel tree, which was sacred to Apollo, was an ancient Greek custom; the Romans awarded such a wreath to a victorious general. The custom of crowning writers and poets with laurel wreaths was revived in 1315 by the citizens of Padua for the humanist scholar Albertino Mussato. More famously, on April 8, 1341, Petrarch was crowned poet laureate by the Roman Senate on the Capitoline Hill.

4. The names of all the servants who accompany the group into the countryside have Greek roots, although they are taken by Boccaccio, for the most part, from Roman comedy and satire. They function generically as “names for lower-class servants” rather than pointing, through their etymologies, to specific qualities the individual servants might possess.

out Parmeno's orders. Tindaro, who is in Filostrato's service, shall take care of his master's bedchamber as well as those of the other two men whenever their own servants are prevented by their duties from doing so. My maid Misia will be in the kitchen full-time with Filomena's maid Licisca, where they will diligently prepare all the dishes ordered by Parmeno. We want Chimera, Lauretta's maid, and Stratilia, Fiammetta's, to act as the ladies' chambermaids and to clean all the places we frequent. Finally, if they wish to stay in our good graces, we desire and command all of the servants to take care that, no matter what they see or hear in their comings and goings, no news from the outside world should ever reach us unless that news⁵ is good."

Having summarily given out her orders, which everyone commended, she rose gaily to her feet and declared: "Here there are gardens and meadows and lots of other truly delightful spots in which we are free to walk and enjoy ourselves. However, at the stroke of tierce,⁶ let us all return here so that we can eat while it is still cool."

After the merry company was given leave to go by the Queen, the young men and their lovely companions set off on a leisurely walk through one of the gardens, talking of pleasant matters, making lovely garlands out of various types of foliage for one another, and singing songs of love. Then, when they had spent as much time there as the Queen had allotted them, they returned to their lodging where they found Parmeno had been quite diligent in carrying out his duties, for when they entered one of the great halls on the ground floor, they saw that tables had been set up, laid with the whitest tablecloths on which there were goblets gleaming like silver, and that the whole room had been adorned with broom blossoms. At the Queen's behest they rinsed their hands in water and went to sit in the places Parmeno had assigned them.

Exquisitely prepared dishes were brought in, the finest wines were at the ready, and without a sound the three servants began waiting on them. The entire company was delighted that everything was so beautiful and so well presented, and all through the meal there was a great deal of pleasant talk and much good cheer. Since everyone knew how to dance, as soon as the tables were cleared away, the Queen sent for musical instruments so that a few of their number who were well versed in music could play and sing, while all the rest, the ladies together with the young men, could dance a *carola*.⁷ At her request, Dioneo took up a lute and Fiammetta a viol,⁸ and the pair began playing a melodious dance tune together, whereupon the Queen, having sent the servants away to eat, formed a circle with the other ladies and the two young men, and all began dancing at a stately pace. After that, they sang a number of pleasant, happy little songs and continued to entertain themselves in this manner until the Queen, thinking it was time for a nap, dismissed them. The three young men consequently retired to their bedchambers, which were separated from those of the ladies. There they found not merely that their beds had been neatly

5. Translates Boccaccio's *novelle*, which can also mean "stories."

6. Midmorning. On the canonical hours, see p. xlv.

7. A dance in which the dancers joined hands and moved in a clockwise direction, usually accompanied by music and the singing of the dancers themselves.

8. Boccaccio writes *viuola*; the more common French name was *vielle*. A stringed instrument like the modern violin but with a longer, deeper body and an indeterminate number of strings. It could be bowed or plucked and was used to accompany singing or dancing.

made, but that their rooms were as full of flowers as the hall had been, and the ladies made a similar discovery, whereupon the entire company undressed and lay down to rest.

Not long after nones⁹ had struck, the Queen got up and had the young men and all the other women awakened, declaring that it was harmful to sleep too much during the day. They then went off to a little meadow where the grass, shaded everywhere from the sun, grew lush and green, and where, feeling a gentle breeze wafting over them, the Queen asked them to sit down in a circle on the green grass. She then spoke to them as follows:

"As you can see, the sun is high, the heat is intense, and nothing can be heard but the cicadas up in the olive trees. To take a walk and go somewhere else right now would be the height of folly, since it is so lovely and cool here, and besides, as you can see, there are boards set up for backgammon and chess. However, although we are free to amuse ourselves in whatever way we like, if you would take my advice in this, we should not spend the hot part of the day playing games, for they necessarily leave one of the players feeling miffed, without giving that much pleasure either to his opponent or to those who are watching. Rather, we should tell stories, for even though just one person is doing the talking, all the others will still have the pleasure of listening. And by the time each one of you will have told his or her little tale, the sun will be setting, the heat will have abated, and we will be able to go and amuse ourselves wherever you choose. Now, if you like what I am proposing, let us put it into effect, but if you dislike it, since my only desire is to carry out your wishes, let us all go and spend our time doing whatever we please until the hour of vespers."

The entire company, the ladies and the young men alike, praised the idea of telling stories.

"Then, if that is your pleasure," said the Queen, "my wish is that, on this first day, we should all be free to speak on whatever topic each of us finds most agreeable."

Turning to Panfilo, who was seated to her right, the Queen graciously asked him to start things off with one of his stories. Upon hearing her command, Panfilo responded with alacrity, and as all the others listened, he began speaking as follows.

Story 1

SER CEPPARELLO DECEIVES A HOLY FRIAR WITH A FALSE CONFESSION AND DIES, AND ALTHOUGH HE WAS ONE OF THE WORST OF MEN DURING HIS LIFE, HE IS REPUTED AFTER HIS DEATH TO BE A SAINT AND IS CALLED SAINT CIAPPELLETTO.¹

Dearest ladies, it is fitting that everything man does should take as its origin the wonderful and holy name of Him who was the maker of all things. Thus, since I am the first and must begin our storytelling, I intend to start off with one of His marvelous works so that, once you have heard it, our hope in Him, as in that which is immutable, will be strengthened, and we will forever praise His name. Now, it is clear that the things of this world

9. Mid-afternoon. On the canonical hours, see p. xlv.

1. There is no specific source for this story, although hypocrisy is frequently a subject of satire in the Middle Ages, and there were occasional cases in various countries of criminals and the like actually being venerated as saints.

are all transitory and fading, so that both in themselves and in what they give rise to, they are filled with suffering, anguish, and toil, as well as being subject to countless dangers. We, who live in the midst of these things and are a part of them, would certainly not be able to resist and defend ourselves against them, if the special grace of God did not lend us strength and discernment. It is wrong to believe that this grace descends to us and enters us because of any merit of our own. Rather, it is sent by His loving kindness and is obtained through the prayers of those who, though mortal like us, truly followed His will while they were alive and now enjoy eternal bliss with Him. To them, as to advocates informed by experience of our frailty, we offer up prayers about our concerns, perhaps because we do not dare to present them personally before the sight of so great a judge. And yet in Him, who is generous and filled with pity for us, we perceive something more. Although human sight is not sharp enough to penetrate the secrets of the divine mind in any way, it sometimes happens that we are deceived by popular opinion into making someone our advocate before Him in all His majesty whom He has cast into eternal exile. And yet He, from whom nothing is hidden, pays more attention to the purity of the supplicant than to his ignorance or to the damned state of his intercessor, listening to those who pray as if their advocate were actually blessed in His sight. All of this will appear clearly in the tale I intend to tell—clearly, I say, not in keeping with the judgment of God, but with that of men.

The story is told that Musciatto Franzesi, an extremely rich and celebrated merchant in France, who had been made a knight, was once supposed to move to Tuscany with Lord Charles Sans Terre, the King of France's brother, whom Pope Boniface² had sent for and was encouraging to come. Musciatto recognized that his affairs, as those of merchants often are, were tangled up here and there and could not be put right quickly and easily, but he thought of a number of different people to whom he could entrust them and thus found a way to take care of everything. There was, however, one exception. He was unsure whom he could leave behind to recover the loans he had made to quite a few people in Burgundy. The reason for his uncertainty was that he had heard the Burgundians were a quarrelsome lot, evil by nature and untrustworthy, and he could think of no one he could rely on who would be sufficiently wicked that his wickedness would match theirs. After he had given the matter a great deal of thought, there came to mind a certain Ser Cepparello da Prato,³ who was often a guest in his house in Paris. Because the man was small of stature and dressed like a dandy, the French, not knowing what "Cepparello" signified and thinking it meant "hat," that is, "garland," in their language,

2. Musciatto di Messer Guido Franzesi (d. 1310) was a merchant from Tuscany who grew rich in France where he served as a counselor to the French King Philip the Fair (Philippe le Bel; b. 1268; r. 1285–1314), who did, in fact, make Musciatto a "gentleman." The latter wickedly advised the King to falsify his coinage and to plunder the Italian merchants living in France. King Philip's brother, Charles Sans Terre (Charles Lackland, 1270–1325), was the third son of Charles III. Although the Count of Valois, Maine, and Anjou, he owed his nickname "Lackland" to his failure to acquire a kingdom. In 1301 he was invited by Pope Boniface VIII (b. c. 1235; pope 1294–1303) to bring an army to Italy to support papal forces fighting the Florentines. Note that Tuscany was often used in this period to refer to all of northern Italy.

3. Or Ciapperello Dietiauti da Prato, a historical personage whose name appears in documents from the period as a receiver of taxes and tithes for King Philip and Boniface VIII. Although he did have business relations with Musciatto Franzesi, he was not, as Boccaccio says, a notary; moreover, he was married and had children. "Ser": short for Messere; on titles and forms of address, see p. xlvf.

called him, because he was small as we have said, not Ciappello, but Ciappelletto.⁴ And so, he was called Ciappelletto everywhere, while only a select few knew he was really Ser Cepparello.

Let me tell you about the kind of life this Ciappelletto led. A notary, he would feel the greatest shame if even one of the very few legal documents he drew up was found to be other than false. He had composed as many of these phony ones as people requested, and he did so for free more willingly than someone else would have done for a sizable payment. Furthermore, he supplied false testimony with the greatest delight, whether it was asked for or not, and since people in France in those days placed the greatest trust in oaths, and since he did not care if his were false, he won a great many law cases through his wickedness whenever he was asked to swear upon his oath to tell the truth. Because it gave him real pleasure, he went to great lengths to stir up bad feelings, hatred, and scandals among friends and relations and everyone else, and the greater the evils he saw arise as a result, the greater his happiness. Invited to be an accomplice in a murder or some other criminal act, he would never refuse to go. Indeed, he would do so with a ready will and often found himself happily wounding or killing men with his own hands. He was the greatest blasphemer of God and the Saints, and since he would do so at the slightest provocation, he came off as the most irascible man alive. He never went to church and used abominable words to mock all its sacraments as being beneath contempt. On the other hand, he happily spent time in taverns and frequented other places of ill repute. Of women, he was as fond as dogs are of being beaten with a stick, and he took more delight in their opposite than any degenerate ever did. He would rob and steal with a conscience like that of a holy man giving alms. He was a total glutton and a great drinker, so much so that sometimes it would make him disgustingly ill. Plus, he was a devout cardsharp and gambled with loaded dice. But why do I lavish so many words on him? He was perhaps the worst man who had ever been born. For a long time his wickedness had preserved the wealth and rank of Messer Musciatto who often protected him from both private persons, who were frequently the victims of his abuse, and from the courts, which always were.

Thus, when this Ser Cepparello crossed the mind of Messer Musciatto, who was well acquainted with his life, he thought to himself that this would be just the man he needed to deal with the wickedness of the Burgundians. He therefore had Ciappelletto sent for and spoke to him as follows:

"Ser Ciappelletto, as you know, I am about to leave here for good, and since, among others, I have to deal with the Burgundians, who are full of tricks, I know of no one more qualified than you to recover my money from them. Since you're not doing anything at present, if you take care of this business for me, I intend to obtain the favor of the court for you here and to award you a fair portion of what you recover."

Ser Ciappelletto, who was indeed unemployed and in short supply of worldly goods, saw the man who had long been his refuge and defense about

4. Cepparello is the diminutive (-*ello*) of *Ciapo*, short for Jacopo (James), although Boccaccio plays with the fact that *ceppo* meant "log" or "stump." Cepparello could thus be translated as Little Log. The French-speaking Burgundians mistake his name, thinking it sounds like their word for "hat" or "garland," *chapelet*, and transform it into the half-French, half-Italian Ciappelletto, or Little Garland. In the course of the 14th century, *chapelet* also acquired the meaning of "rosary," so his name could also mean Little Rosary.

to depart, and so, without a moment's hesitation, constrained, as it were, by necessity, he made up his mind and said he would be more than willing to do what Musciatto wanted. The two of them then worked out the details of their agreement, and Ser Ciappelletto received Musciatto's power of attorney as well as letters of introduction from the King. Soon after Messer Musciatto's departure, Ciappelletto went off to Burgundy, where almost no one knew him. There, in a kind and gentle manner quite beyond his nature, as though he were holding back his wrath till the end, he began recovering Musciatto's money and taking care of what he had been sent to do.

Before long, while he was lodging in the house of two Florentine brothers who lent money at interest and who treated him with great respect out of love for Messer Musciatto, he happened to fall ill. The two brothers immediately sent for doctors and servants to take care of him and to provide him with everything he might need to recover his health. All their help was in vain, however, for, in the opinion of the doctors, the good man, who was already old and had lived a disorderly life, was going from bad to worse every day, as people did who had a fatal illness. The two brothers were very upset about this, and one day, right next to the bedroom in which Ser Ciappelletto lay sick, they began talking together.

"What are we going to do about this guy?" said the one of them to the other. "We've got a terrible mess on our hands on account of him, because if we kick him out of our house, as sick as he is, people would condemn us for doing it. Plus, they'd really think we're stupid since we didn't just take him in at first, but also went to great lengths to find servants and doctors for him, and now, although he couldn't have done anything to offend us, they see him suddenly kicked out of our house when he's deathly ill. On the other hand, he's been such a bad man that he won't want to make his confession or receive any of the sacraments of the Church, and if he dies without confession, no church will want to receive his body, and they'll wind up tossing him into some garbage pit⁵ like a dog. But if he goes ahead and makes his confession, the same thing will happen. Since his sins are so many and so horrible, no friar or priest will be willing or able to absolve him, and so, without absolution, he'll be tossed into a garbage pit just the same. And when that happens, the people of this town—both because of our profession, which they think is truly wicked and which they bad-mouth all day long, and because of their desire to rob us—well, they'll rise up and riot when they see it. And as they come running to our house, they'll be screaming, 'These Lombard⁶ dogs that the Church refuses to accept, we won't put up with them any longer!' And maybe they won't just steal our stuff, but on top of that, they'll take our lives. So, no matter how things work out, it'll be bad for us if this guy dies."

Ser Ciappelletto, who, as we said, was lying close to where they were talking, and whose hearing was sharp, as it often is in those who are sick, caught every word they were saying about him and reacted by sending for them to come to him.

5. Like other Italian cities of the time, Florence had *fossi* (garbage pits) on its outskirts. However, *fossi* could also refer to pits dug in unconsecrated ground where suicides, heretics, the excommunicated, and even usurers were dumped. According to the chronicler Giovanni Villani (c. 1275–1348), such bodies were thrown into the *fossi*—i.e., the *fossati* or (dry) moat, outside the walls of Florence. The specific meaning of Boccaccio's term is thus hard to determine even if the general meaning of what will happen to Ciappelletto is clear enough.

6. I.e., from northern Italy.

"I don't want you to fear anything on my account," he told them, "or to be afraid you'll be harmed because of me. I heard what you were saying about me, and I'm very sure that the outcome will be exactly what you've predicted if things happen the way you've been imagining them. However, it's all going to turn out differently. I've done the Lord God so many injuries during my lifetime that doing Him one more at the hour of my death won't make a difference to Him one way or the other. So go and arrange for the holiest and worthiest friar you can find to come to me—if such a one exists—and leave everything to me, for I'm sure I can set both your affairs and my own in order so that all will be well and you'll be satisfied with the result."

Although the two brothers did not derive much hope from this, they nevertheless went off to a monastery and asked for a wise and holy man to hear the confession of a Lombard who was sick in their house. They were assigned an elderly friar, a grand master of the Scriptures, who had lived a good and holy life and was a very venerable figure toward whom all the townspeople felt an immense special devotion, and they took this man back home with them.

When the friar reached the bedroom where Ser Ciappelletto was lying, he seated himself beside the sick man, and after speaking some words of comfort, asked him how much time had passed since he had made his last confession. Ser Ciappelletto, who had never been to confession, replied to him: "Father, it used to be my custom to go to confession at least once a week, without counting the many weeks in which I went more often. Since I've been sick for about a week now, the truth is that the suffering I've endured from my illness has been so great that it has prevented me from going to confession."

"My son," said the friar, "you've done well, and you should continue that practice in the future. Considering how often you've made your confession, I don't think it will be a lot of trouble for me to hear it and to examine you."

"Messer Friar," said Ser Ciappelletto, "don't speak like that. Although I've gone to confession many, many times, I've always had a longing to make a general confession of all the sins I could remember, starting from the day of my birth and coming right down to the present. Therefore, my good father, I beg you to examine me point by point about everything just as if I'd never been to confession. And don't be concerned about me because I'm sick, for I would much rather mortify this flesh of mine than indulge it by doing something that might lead to the perdition of my soul, which my Savior redeemed with His precious blood."⁷

These words pleased the holy man immensely and seemed to him to argue a well-disposed mind. Consequently, after commending Ser Ciappelletto warmly for making frequent confessions, he began by asking him if he had ever committed the sin of lust with a woman.⁸

"Father," Ser Ciappelletto replied with a sigh, "I'm ashamed to tell you the truth on this subject for fear I might be committing the sin of pride."

7. Ciappelletto's words echo a line from the *Te Deum*: *quos pretioso sanguine redemisti* ("whom Thou hast redeemed with Thy precious blood").

8. The friar begins by asking Ciappelletto about sins of incontinence (lust, gluttony, sloth, avarice, and anger).

"Don't be afraid to speak," said the holy friar. "Telling the truth was never a sin either in confession or anywhere else."

"Since you give me such reassurance," said Ser Ciappelletto, "I'll go ahead and tell you: I'm as much a virgin today as when I came forth from my mama's body."

"Oh, God's blessings on you!" said the friar. "What a good man you've been! In fact, by acting as you have, you are all the more meritorious, because, if you had wanted to, you had more freedom to do the opposite than we and others like us do, since we are bound by the vows of religion."

Next, he asked Ciappelletto if he had displeased God through the sin of gluttony. Breathing a heavy sigh, Ser Ciappelletto replied that he had done so many times. For although it was his habit to fast on bread and water at least three days a week, in addition to doing so during the periods of fasting that devout people observed on holy days throughout the year, he had nevertheless drunk that water with as much delight and gusto as any great wine drinker ever drank his wine, and especially if he was exhausted from performing acts of devotion or making a pilgrimage. Moreover, he was often filled with a longing to have those little salads of baby field greens that women fix when they go to the country, and sometimes, as he ate them, doing so seemed better to him than it should have seemed to someone, like himself, who fasted out of piety, which was the precise reason why he was fasting.

"My son," replied the friar, "these sins are natural and quite trivial, so I don't want you to burden your conscience with them any more than necessary. No matter how truly holy a man may be, eating after a long fast and drinking after hard work will always seem good to him."

"Oh, father," said Ser Ciappelletto, "don't say that just to console me. Surely you must realize that I know how every act we perform in the service of God has to be done wholeheartedly and with an unspotted soul, and how anybody who does otherwise is committing a sin."

Feeling quite content, the friar said: "I am overjoyed that you think like this. It pleases me greatly that on this topic your conscience is pure and good. But tell me: have you committed the sin of avarice by desiring more than what was proper or by keeping what you should not have kept?"

"Father," said Ser Ciappelletto, "I don't want you to suspect me of this because I'm living in the house of these usurers. I'm not here to do business. On the contrary, I've come with the intention of admonishing and chastising them and of leading them away from their abominable money-making. What is more, I think I would have succeeded if God had not visited this tribulation upon me. Now, you should know that although my father left me a rich man, I gave away the greater part of what he had to charity after his death. Then, however, in order to sustain my life and to be able to aid Christ's poor, I've done a little bit of trading, and in doing so, I did indeed desire to make money. But I've always divided what I earned down the middle with God's poor, devoting my half to my needs and giving the other half to them, and my Creator has aided me so well in this that my business has continually gotten better and better."

"Well done," said the friar. "But say, how often have you gotten angry?"

"Oh," said Ser Ciappelletto, "that's something, just let me tell you, that's happened to me a lot. For who could restrain himself, seeing the disgusting things men do all day long, neither observing God's commandments,

nor fearing His chastisement? There've been many days when I would have preferred to die rather than live to listen to young people swearing and forswearing themselves, and to watch them pursuing vanities, frequenting taverns rather than going to church, and following the ways of the world rather than those of God."

"My son," said the friar, "this is righteous anger, and for my part, I cannot impose any penance on account of it. But was there ever a case in which your anger led you to commit murder or to hurl abuse at anyone or to do them any other sort of injury?"

Ser Ciappelletto answered him: "Alas, sir, how can you, who appear to be a man of God, speak such words? If I'd had even the teeniest little thought about doing any one of the things you've mentioned, do you think I'd believe that God would have shown me so much favor? Those are things that thugs and criminals would do, and whenever I've come upon a person of that sort, I've always said, 'Be gone! And may God convert you.'"

"God bless you, my son!" said the friar. "Now tell me: have you ever borne false witness against anyone or spoken ill of others or taken things from them without their permission?"

"Yes, sir," replied Ser Ciappelletto, "I really have spoken ill of others. Because once I had a neighbor who, without the least justification, was forever beating his wife, and so one time, I criticized him to his wife's family because of the great pity I felt for the wretched creature. Whenever he'd had too much to drink, God alone could tell you how he used to smack her around."

"Well, then," said the friar, "you tell me you've been a merchant. Have you ever deceived anyone, as merchants do?"

"Yes, sir, by gosh," replied Ser Ciappelletto, "but I don't know who he was, except that he was a man who brought me money he owed me for some cloth I'd sold him, and I put it in a box without counting it. Then, a good month later, I discovered that there were four more pennies in it than there should have been. Well, I kept them for an entire year with the intention of returning them to him, but when I never saw him again, I gave them away to charity."

"That was a trifle," said the friar, "and you did well to have acted as you did."

On top of this, the holy friar went on to ask him about many other things and got the same kind of reply in each case. But then, just as he was about to proceed to absolution, Ser Ciappelletto said: "I still have a sin or two more, sir, that I haven't told you about."

The friar asked him what they were, and Ciappelletto replied: "I remember how one Saturday I didn't show proper reverence for the Holy Sabbath because after nones I had my servant sweep the house."⁹

"Oh, my son," said the friar, "that's a trifle."

"No," said Ser Ciappelletto, "don't call it a trifle, for the Sabbath cannot be honored too much, seeing that it was on just such a day our Savior came back to life from the dead."

Then the friar asked: "Have you done anything else?"

9. According to Church law, the celebration of the Sabbath began at vespers on the preceding Saturday, and since nones (mid-afternoon) was the canonical hour before vespers (sunset), it was not officially part of the Sabbath. Out of feigned religious scrupulousness, however, Ciappelletto extends the observance of the Sabbath back to nones as well.

"Yes, sir," replied Ser Ciappelletto. "Once, not thinking about what I was doing, I spat in the house of God."

The friar smiled and said: "My son, that's nothing to worry about. We, who are in holy orders, spit there all day long."

"And what you're doing is vile," said Ser Ciappelletto, "for nothing should be kept as clean as the Holy Temple in which we offer sacrifice to God."

In brief, he told the holy friar many things of this sort, until he finally began sighing and then burst into tears—for he was someone who knew only too well how to do this when he wanted to.

"My son," said the holy friar, "what's wrong?"

"Alas, sir," Ser Ciappelletto replied, "there's still one sin of mine remaining that I've never confessed because I feel so much shame in speaking about it. As you can see, every time I remember it, it makes me weep, and I think there can be no doubt that God will never have mercy on me because of it."

"Come on now, son," said the holy friar, "what are you talking about? If all the sins that have ever been committed by all of humanity, or that will be committed by them as long as the world lasts, were united in one single man, and yet he were as penitent and contrite as I see you are, then truly the benignity and mercy of God are so great that if that man were to confess them, he would be forgiven willingly. Therefore, don't be afraid to speak."

Ser Ciappelletto continued to weep violently as he replied: "Alas, father, my sin is so great that I can hardly believe God will ever pardon it unless you use your prayers on my behalf."

"Speak freely," said the friar, "for I promise I'll pray to God for you."

Ser Ciappelletto just kept on crying and refusing to talk about it, and the friar went on encouraging him to speak. Then, after Ser Ciappelletto had kept the friar in suspense with his weeping for a very long time, he heaved a great sigh and said: "Father, since you've promised to pray to God for me, I will tell you about it. You should know that when I was a little boy, I once cursed my mama." And having said this, he started weeping violently all over again.

"Oh, my son," said the friar, "does this seem such a great sin to you? Why, men curse God all day long, and yet He freely pardons anyone who repents of having cursed Him. And you don't think that He will pardon you for this? Don't weep and don't worry, for surely, even if you had been one of those who placed Him on the cross, He would pardon you because of the contrition I see in you."

"Alas, father," replied Ser Ciappelletto, "what are you saying? My sweet mama, who carried me in her body, day and night, for nine months, and who held me in her arms more than a hundred times—I was too wicked when I cursed her! My sin is too great! And if you don't pray to God for me, it will not be forgiven."

When the friar saw that there was nothing left to say to Ser Ciappelletto, he absolved him and gave him his blessing, taking him to be a very holy man, for he fully believed that what Ser Ciappelletto had said was true—and who would not have believed it, seeing a man at the point of death speak like that?

Then, after all this, the friar said to him: "Ser Ciappelletto, with the help of God you'll soon be well, but if it should happen that God calls that

blessed, well-disposed soul of yours to Him, would you like to have your body buried at our monastery?"

"Yes, sir," replied Ser Ciappelletto. "In fact, I wouldn't want to be anywhere else, since you've promised to pray to God for me, not to mention the fact that I have always been especially devoted to your order. Therefore, when you return to your monastery, I beg you to have them send me that most true body of Christ that you consecrate upon the altar every morning, for, although I'm unworthy of it, I would like, with your permission, to partake of it, and afterward, to receive Holy Extreme Unction¹ so that if I have lived a sinner, at least I may die a Christian."

The holy man said he was greatly pleased that Ser Ciappelletto had spoken so well and told him that he would arrange for the Host to be brought to him right away. And so it was.

The two brothers, who were afraid that Ser Ciappelletto was going to deceive them, had placed themselves near a partition that divided the room where he was lying from the one they were in, and as they eavesdropped, they were able to understand everything he said to the friar. Upon hearing him confess the things he had done, they sometimes had such a desire to laugh that they almost burst, and from time to time they would say to one another: "What kind of man is this, whom neither old age, nor sickness, nor the fear of death, which is imminent, nor the fear of God, before whose judgment he must stand in just a short while, could induce him to give up his wickedness and want to die any differently than he lived?" But, seeing as how he had spoken in such a way that he would be received for burial in a church, everything else was of no consequence to them.

A little later Ser Ciappelletto took Communion, and as his condition was rapidly deteriorating, he received Extreme Unction and then died just a little after vespers of the day on which he had made his good confession. Using Ser Ciappelletto's own money, the two brothers took care of all the arrangements necessary for him to be given an honorable burial and sent word to the friars' house that they should come in the evening to perform the customary wake and take away the body in the morning.

The holy friar who had confessed Ser Ciappelletto, having heard that he had passed away, came to an understanding with the Prior of the monastery, and after the chapterhouse bell had been rung and the friars were gathered together, he explained to them how Ser Ciappelletto had been a holy man, according to what he had deduced from the confession he had heard. And in the hope that the Lord God was going to perform many miracles through Ser Ciappelletto, he persuaded the others to receive the body with the greatest reverence and devotion. The credulous Prior and the other friars agreed to this plan, and in the evening they all went to the room where Ser Ciappelletto's body was laid and held a great and solemn vigil over it. Then, in the morning, they got dressed in their surplices and copes, and with their books in their hands and the cross before them, they went for the body, chanting along the way, after which they carried it to their church with the greatest ceremony and solemnity, followed by almost all the people of the city, men and women alike. Once the body had been placed in the church, the holy friar who had confessed Ser Ciappelletto

1. A sacrament of the Catholic Church administered to those who are on their deathbed. "Body of Christ": the Host, or bread, that is eaten during Communion.

mounted the pulpit and began to preach marvelous things about him, about his life, his fasts, his virginity, his simplicity and innocence and sanctity, recounting, among other things, what he had confessed to him in tears as his greatest sin, and how he had scarcely been able to get it into his head that God would forgive him for it. After this, the holy friar took the opportunity to reprimand the people who were listening. "And you, wretched sinners," he said, "for every blade of straw your feet trip over, you blaspheme against God and His Mother and all the Saints in Paradise."

Besides this, the holy friar said many other things about Ser Ciappelletto's faith and purity, so that in short, by means of his words, which the people of the countryside believed absolutely, he managed to plant the image of Ser Ciappelletto so deeply inside the minds and hearts of everyone present that when the service was over, there was a huge stampede as the people rushed forward to kiss Ser Ciappelletto's hands and feet. They tore off all the clothing he had on, each one thinking himself blessed if he just got a little piece of it. Furthermore, the body had to be kept there all day long so that everyone could come to see him. Finally, when night fell, he was given an honorable burial in a marble tomb located in one of the chapels. The next day people immediately began going there to light candles and pray to him, and later they made vows to him and hung up ex-votos² of wax in fulfillment of the promises they had made. So great did the fame of Ciappelletto's holiness and the people's devotion to him grow that there was almost no one in some sort of difficulty who did not make a vow to him rather than to some other saint. In the end, they called him Saint Ciappelletto, as they still do, and claim that God has performed many miracles through him and will perform them every day for those who devoutly entrust themselves to him.

Thus lived and died Ser Cepparello da Prato who, as you have heard, became a saint.³ Nor do I wish to deny the possibility that he sits among the Blessed in the presence of God. For although his life was wicked and depraved, it is possible that at the very point of death he became so contrite that God took pity on him and accepted him into His kingdom. However, since this is hidden from us, what I will say in this case, on the basis of appearances, is that he is more likely in the hands of the Devil down in Hell than up there in Paradise. And if that is so, then we may recognize how very great God's loving kindness is toward us, in that He does not consider our sinfulness, but the purity of our faith, and even though we make our intercessor one of His enemies, thinking him His friend, God still grants our prayers as if we were asking a true saint to obtain His grace for us. And therefore, so that all of us in this merry company may, by His grace, be kept safe and sound during our present troubles, let us praise His name, which is what we began with, and venerate Him, commending ourselves to Him in our need, in the certain knowledge that we will be heard.

And at this point he fell silent.⁴

2. Votive offerings. The phrase means "out of or because of vows" (Latin).

3. Panfilo begins the final paragraph of his story by echoing the formulas used at the end of medieval saints' lives.

4. This is the only case in the *Decameron* in which the narrator of the story is mentioned, albeit briefly, at the end.