

Visitors from beyond the Grave

Ghosts in World Literature

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ON WOMEN'S FAITHFULNESS AND GHOSTS: ABOUT *DECAMERON* 7. 1¹

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ABSTRACT: The seventh day of *Decameron* is devoted to “policies and deceits that women have used for beguiling of their husbands, either in respect of their love, or for the prevention of some blame or scandal”. The first story of this section is preceded by the exegetical paratext “Gianni Lotteringhi hears knocking at night on the door; he awakens his wife, and she makes him believe that it is the ghost; they conjure him with a prayer, and the knocks cease”. In this chapter I aim to analyze the ghost as a comic and pseudo-religious motif in this novella. The role of the tale within its literary frame will be studied in order to determine the function of the delusion concocted by the wife in the global context in which it appears. The tale will also be analyzed taking into account the different roles of its characters and the dichotomy between feminine and masculine worlds it implies since its very beginning.

KEYWORDS: *Decameron*, Giovanni Boccaccio, women in Middle Ages, short-story, Medieval comicality.

GHOSTS IN MEDIEVAL ITALIAN LITERATURE

Ghosts are not very frequent motifs in Medieval Italian literature, as it is normal in that period. In fact, the very few appearances of these elements are either marginal from the point of view of the plots –in the case of literary works– or they are mere excuses for dissertation –within theoretical treatises.

With respect to the Medieval Italian terms used in reference to ghosts, the *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana* (*GDLI*) shows two different entries, which share etymological roots and which could be considered two variants of the same word: ‘fantasima’ and ‘fantasma’. In both cases, the word these terms derive from is the Greek *phantasma*, -atos through the Latin noun *phantasma*, -ātis. The result of the first of these variants, ‘fantasima’, comes from the addition on an epenthetic ‘i’ to the desinence -sma².

In terms of meaning, both entries could be interpreted as synonyms in a certain way since the *GDLI* shows approximately the same definitions for both

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² Even if this phenomenon is typical of the popular language and could be described as vulgar in its roots, a similar process can be observed in solutions whose use has been accepted with the pass of time, such as ‘cresima’ or ‘spasimo’.

nouns. Nevertheless, if the order of the presentation of these definitions is to be taken into account, 'fantasma' seems to be a more specific word, typical of cultivated language and even technique, related to philosophy. As a matter of fact, among the sixteen meanings of this term included in the *GDLI*, the first three entries refer to philosophy:

1. Filos. Immagine, rappresentazione soggettiva di un oggetto, di una realtà percepita attraverso i sensi (nella filosofia aristotelica); la sensazione, la percezione stessa considerata da parte di chi la riceve. In partic. nella filosofia tomistica, l'immagine sia delle cose presenti sia di quelle passate [...].
2. L'immagine, la visione o l'intuizione propria dell'artista, che con essa comincia a prendere coscienza di quel mondo poetico che tradurrà poi in parole o suoni, colori, ecc. In senso generico: prodotto della fantasia poetica [...].
3. Immagine, visione o pensiero, sensazione, moto dell'animo suscitato dalla fantasia o dalla memoria; il ricordo stesso, reminiscenza; idea confusa, indefinita, appena abbozzata.

As for its use, 'fantasma' can be documented in Italian with these meanings from the 15th century onwards –in effect, the first known text in which the term is used in the Thomistic way was written by Leon Battista Alberti³.

In contrast with these three initial definitions and with a more restrictive, less common meaning, the fourth definition is much closer to what could be translated as 'ghost': "la forma materializzata secondo una comune credenza, dello spirito di un trapassato; spettro, ombra, apparizione notturna". Examples of this use can be found in Italian documents since the 13th century, which proves that –despite being more frequent– the previous definitions arrived to Italy much later and probably as cultivated loanwords from Greek or Latin⁴, which are completely alien to Italian lexicon⁵. An additional definition can be found inside this fourth entry, which is also relevant for the current use of 'ghost'. This new entry is explained as "creatura dell'oltretomba, spirito infernale"; in

³ Alberti wrote in his *Discorso sulla nobiltà della pittura* "essendo che [il pittore] si serve molto sottilmente dell'apprensione in questo che volendo dipingere bisogna che abbia i sensi acuti e molto buona imaginativa, in la quale apprenda le cose poste dinanzi agli occhi e acciò quelle entrate dipoi alla presenza, e transformate in fantasmati perfettamente riduca all'intelletto", in Bottari 1845: 284.

⁴ See chapters 1, 2, 3, 6 and 7 of this book.

⁵ The testimonies collected in the *Tesoro della lingua italiana delle origini (TLIO)* seem to support our hypothesis, since the definition of the entry 'fantasma' as "presenza maligna, apparizione di persona morta che tormenta i vivi" is shown as the sixth of six meanings, even if it is documented for the very first time in the so-called *Laude cortonesi*, a series of verses written in 13th century, where the following lines can be read: "sconiuoro te per Dio, et sì te dico / sì tu se' phantasma o nimico, / ke tu te parti et non stea più con meco", in Varanini 1981: 85 (<http://tlio.ovi.cnr.it/TLIO/>, 05/05/2016).

other words, and in opposition with the previous meaning –which seems to be more restrictive–, a ‘fantasma’ could exist in an autonomous way and not as the mere manifestation of somebody who previously lived and died and –according to this new definition– evil is a constituent part of its nature.

Returning to the *GDLI*, the entry ‘fantasima’ shows a slightly different situation, firstly because this variant is defined as typical of the literary language, but also due to the fact that the four meanings of this noun have a negative connotation and all of them are related to the supernatural world, as can be easily deduced from the first of these definitions, “essere mostruoso e terrificante creato dalla fantasia popolare; spettro, fantasma”. The first time this term was used can be traced back to Italian documents, within the so-called *Tristano Riccardiano*, whose unknown author wrote in the 13th century “venne uno nano ala corte der ree Marco, lo quale iera figliuolo di re, e lo padre l’avea cacciato inpercioe ch’egli iera zenbo dinanzi e di dietro e pparea pur una fantasima”⁶.

As already mentioned, the variant ‘fantasima’ is widely used in literary texts and it goes back to the 13th century, which implies –if compared to the definitions of ‘fantasma’– that the supernatural nuance in these terms is related to the very root of their use in Italian, even if the technical, specialized treatises written during the Renaissance shunted this meaning in the frequency of cultivated use. In addition, as it will be proved in the following section, canonical authors such as Boccaccio were completely oblivious to the solution without the epenthetic ‘i’.

BOCCACCIO, ‘FANTASIME’ AND WOMEN

‘Fantasima’ is the only term used by Boccaccio in the three passages of his works where he talks about ghosts⁷, conceived as terrifying, supernatural beings that frighten people. Linguistically, this fact could be explained taking, as a basis, the dialectal origins of the process of addition of the epenthetic ‘i’, which could be considered as a mark of the Tuscan speech used by Boccaccio⁸.

1. *Il corbaccio*: an isolated mention

The latest work of the Certaldese in which the noun ‘fantasima’ appears is *Il corbaccio*. This narration, dated around 1365, is structured according to the

⁶ Parodi 1896: 64. As far as this case is concerned, we cannot agree with the explanation given by the *TLIO*, which classifies the *Tristano Riccardiano* quotation as an example of “immagine vana e irrealre, creata dalla mente”, in other words, as a neutral term. In our view, the intention with which the noun is used in this sentence is clearly negative, being the prince compared to an awful, uncanny creature.

⁷ As we will see, these passages belong to *Il corbaccio* and to *Decameron* 7 and 10.

⁸ As a matter of fact, other cases of words with epenthetic ‘i’ appear frequently in Boccaccio’s works, such as the verbs ‘biasimare’ and ‘ispasimare’ (and their derivative forms), the adjectives ‘medesimo/a/i/e’ or the noun ‘quaresima’.

form of a Medieval dream vision and tells the story of a desperate, unrequited lover that falls asleep and has a series of revelations about the woman he loves that make him take the decision of both stopping loving her and writing a treatise through which men will be advised of the female evil. As it could be easily deduced, in the entire *Il corbaccio*, misogynist elements predominate and it is within one of these dissertations against women that the allusion to 'fantasima' occurs:

Esse si mostrano timide e paurose; e comandandolo il marito, quantunque la cagione fosse onesta, non sarebbono in niuno luogo alto, ché dicono che vien meno loro il cerebro; non entrerebbono in mare, ché dicono che lo stomaco nol patiscie; non andrebbono di notte, ché dicono che temono gli spiriti, l'anime e le fantasime. Se sentono un topo andare per la casa e che'l vento muova una finestra o che una piccola pietra caggia, tutte si riscuotono e fuggono il sangue e la forza, come se a un mortale pericolo soprastessono⁹.

The word 'fantasima' is used here just as one element belonging to a larger series of examples whose aim is to illustrate women's behavior. However, in contrast to what could be thought of this passage, the author's critique does not address female weakness, but its falseness and pretense, since –according to Boccaccio– women are fragile and irresolute only in appearance, and with this subterfuge they just expect to gain their husbands' confidence so that they can deceive them more easily. As a matter of fact, in the same fragment of *Il corbaccio*, the Tuscan writer, trying to reveal the truth about female nature, also asserts:

[C]olei che in questa moltitudine più casta e più onesta ti pare, vorrebbe avanti solo un occhio avere, che esser contenta solo d'un uomo; e se forse due o tre ne bastassero, saria qualche cosa, e forse saria tollerabile, se questi due o tre avanzassero i mariti, o fossero almen loro pari. La loro lussuria è focolosa e insaziabile, e per questo non patisce nè numero nè elezione: il fante, il lavoratore, il mugnaio, e ancora il nero etiopo, ciascuno è buono sol che possa¹⁰.

Even if the role of the word 'fantasima' in *Il corbaccio* could not be described as particularly relevant, it is meaningful that the context of its appearance shows wide parallelisms with the other cases in which the term is documented in Boccaccio's works, more specifically in *Decameron* 7. 1, since feminine lust is, in a certain way, the element that provokes the allusion to the supernatural world.

⁹ Boccaccio 1968: 75.

¹⁰ Boccaccio 1968: 75.

2. *Decameron*

As happened in *Il corbaccio*, also in Boccaccio's masterpiece, *Decameron*, the term 'fantasima' occurs and, what is more, not only does it appear with a higher frequency¹¹, but –as previously mentioned– its recurrence is also connected to female lust and carnal desire; in addition, the ghost is one of the central elements in the first tale of the seventh day. The plot of this day, under Dioneo's command, should be "[le] beffe, le quali o per amore o per salvamento di loro le donne hanno già fatte a' suoi mariti, senza essersene avveduti o sì"¹², and Emilia, the first of the narrators, decides to tell a story preceded by the exegetical paratext "Gianni Lotteringhi ode di notte toccar l'uscio suo; desta la moglie, e ella gli fa accredere che egli è la fantasima; vanno a incantare con una orazione, e il picchiare si rimane"¹³.

As far as the origin of this tale is concerned, Branca stated not to have found any real antecedent to this *novella*¹⁴. It is truth that Landau¹⁵ linked this story both to the *fabliau* titled *Le revenant*¹⁶ and to a popular Swedish composition¹⁷, but in both cases and as Branca observed, parallelisms could be described as mere coincidences. In addition and in our view, the large number of allusions to the history and to citizens of Florence indicates the possibility of a popular, regional root as the multiple elements concerning Thompson's index seem to prove¹⁸.

In spite of the allusion to female sexual desire, the context of *Decameron* 7. 1 could be described as diametrically opposed to *Il corbaccio*, mainly because of the differences in the audience towards which the work is addressed. While the latter had a preferential masculine public, *Decameron* as a whole seems to be predominantly dedicated to women¹⁹; as a matter of fact, in the introduction to 7. 1 Emilia, the narrator, claims for the attention of the other women in the group and she asserts that her narration will provide them with useful

¹¹ The ten appearances of the term 'fantasima' are documented in *Decameron*. Eight of them belong to 7. 1, another appears in 7. 3, within an allusion to the tale narrated in 7. 1. The last of the cases, also linked to sexual connotations, can be found in the introduction to 10. 10.

¹² Boccaccio 1992: 785.

¹³ Boccaccio 1992: 789.

¹⁴ Boccaccio 1992: 789. In fact, the critical works about 7. 1 mentioned in the introduction of Branca's edition to *Decameron* (cfr. Boccaccio 1992: CIX) are quite general, especially if compared to the thoroughness with which the roots of other tales are analyzed. The references to 7. 1 are reduced to Bottari 1818, Perito 1901, Segre 1974, Sinicropi 1975, Fido 1977, Falassi 1977, Celati 1986 and Mazzotta 1986.

¹⁵ Landau 1869: 86.

¹⁶ See Montaiglon and Raynaud 1872-1890, vol. 6: 138.

¹⁷ See Afzelius 1872, vol. 2: 279.

¹⁸ Specifically, motifs K 1546, 1961; V 66.1; X 441.

¹⁹ In the beginning of 1. 1, Boccaccio addresses to the "graziosissime donne" (Boccaccio 1992: 13).

advice: "ingegnerommi, carissime donne, di dir cosa che vi possa essere utile nell'avvenire"²⁰.

The way Emilia starts her tale is very meaningful too, in order to try to understand Boccaccio's intention with 7. 1: the narrator says that her story will be useful to the audience, so that a didactic purpose could be expected from her words. Nevertheless, the narration could be read as an exaltation of adultery and, besides, the author specifies that Emilia starts her tale "sorridendo"²¹. Hence, irony and mockery are present from the very beginning of the story, and irony and mockery are, indeed, the main keys for reading the whole narration.

The explanation that Emilia gives about the utility of her tale is both ironic and mocking, and in this elucidation, there are remarkable parallelisms with the previously mentioned passage of *Il corbaccio* and its critic about the falsity of women's weakness:

[S]e così son le altre [donne] come io paurose e massimamente della fantasima (la quale sallo Iddio che io non so che cosa si sia né ancora trovai che'l sapesse, come che tutte ne temiamo igualmente), a quella cacciar via quando da voi venisse, notando bene la mia novella, potrete una santa e buona orazione e molto a ciò valevole apparare²².

The counterpart of irony and mockery, as elements providing the key for the interpretation of the narration, seem to be the main features of the description of the three characters. Boccaccio sets from the opening that Gianni is a "uomo più avventurato nella sua arte che savio in altre cose"²³, focusing on his foolishness; in contrast, Tessa is described as "savìa e avveduta molto"²⁴ and, above all, completely aware of "la semplicità del marito"²⁵, whereas Federigo is characterized as "bello, fresco e giovane"²⁶ in clear contrast with Gianni. Characters in this tale are quite simple and, in fact, the plot derives from the combination of the foresaid features with the general irony and mockery provided by Emilia. This combination forces some parallel situations to emerge in which contextual differences are stressed, such as the divergences between the sexual use of the bed that Tessa and her lover use ("Federigo [...] in sul vespro se n'andò là sù e, non venendovi la sera Gianni, a grande agio con molto piacere cenò e albergò con la donna; e ella standogli in

²⁰ Boccaccio 1992: 789.

²¹ Boccaccio 1992: 788.

²² Boccaccio 1992: 789-790.

²³ Boccaccio 1992: 790.

²⁴ Boccaccio 1992: 791.

²⁵ Boccaccio 1992: 791.

²⁶ Boccaccio 1992: 791-792.

braccio la notte gl'insegnò da sei delle laude del suo marito"²⁷) and the description of the moments when wife and husband share that same bed:

Disse allora Gianni: "Va, donna, non aver paura se ciò è, ché io dissi dianzi il *Te lucis e la Ntemerata* e tante altre buone orazioni, quando a letto ci andammo, e anche segnai il letto di canto in canto al nome del Padre e del Filio e dello Spirito Santo, che temere non ci bisogna: ché [la fantasima] non ci può, per potere ch'ella abbia, nuocere"²⁸.

Also regarding these contradictions, the passage in which Tessa's thoughts about Federigo are exposed –while her lover is knocking at the door– is remarkable: "la donna, acciò che Federigo per avventura altro sospetto non prendesse e con lei si turbasse, diliberò del tutto di doversi levare e di fargli sentire che Gianni v'era"²⁹. This extract is strange within the kind of relationship that Tessa and Federigo have. The wife's reflection may indicate that her lover seems to claim for her faithfulness even if he knows that she is married and his relationship with her is only an affair out of the boundaries of any kind of regulation. Moreover, while Federigo understands Tessa's refusal to communicate with him while cheating on her husband, Boccaccio states that the lover was "già di gelosia uscito"³⁰; but where does this jealousy come from?

As previously said, under no circumstances could Federigo expect a complete dedication from Tessa taking into account that, given the entity of their relationship, he did not have any rights over the woman. This idea suggests another possibility to explain Tessa's concern: maybe her interest in the ghost subterfuge was not merely to make Federigo understand that she was not alone, but to make him hear her husband's voice so that he realized that she was with Gianni and not with another lover³¹.

The prayer to protect themselves from the ghost can be considered as the climax of irony and mockery, facilitated by the foresaid features of both Gianni and Tessa. From a narratological point of view, this passage implies a remarkable strategy, since in the tale there are two versions of the prayer: the first one is included in the body of the narration, whereas the second one is mentioned by Emilia in the conclusion of the tale while speaking about a possible alternative to the facts she has just told. In this chapter, both because of its more complex structure and because of its situation within the story, our attention will be focused on the first of the two testimonies: "Fantasima, fantasima che di notte

²⁷ Boccaccio 1992: 792. Mockery, even towards Gianni, is obvious in this passage.

²⁸ Boccaccio 1992: 794.

²⁹ Boccaccio 1992: 794.

³⁰ Boccaccio 1992: 795.

³¹ This interpretation could be also considered as a misogynist one, since in a certain way it implies that, as *Il corbaccio* says, female lust cannot be sedated.

vai, a coda ritta ci venisti, a coda ritta te n'andrai: va nell'orto, a piè del pesco grosso troverai unto bisunto e cento cacherelli della gallina mia: pon bocca al fiasco e vatti via, e non far mal né a me né a Gianni mio"³².

From a structural point of view, this prayer is built according to the traditional schemes of popular literature, especially verse³³, and it could be divided into two different parts. Textually speaking, the first one contains a wide range of easy rhymes based mainly on verbal desinences (vai : andrai : troverai) and on minimal pairs (mia : via); also some structural parallelisms (fantasima, fantasima; a coda ritta ci venisti, a coda ritta te n'andrai³⁴) are present. In terms of verbal forms, there are three verbal tenses belonging to two verbs very close semantically, "andare" and "venire". These forms cover the whole range of verbal time (present: vai; past: venisti and future: andrai). Nevertheless, in this first part one of the communicative purposes of the prayer and the impossibility of the sexual encounter is also introduced. In addition, it is done by anticipating how things will finish for Federigo that night: "a coda ritta ci venisti, a coda ritta te n'andrai", linking the motif of the ghost with the parodic meaning that Boccaccio confers to the term in his works.

In our opinion and in contrast with the second part of the prayer, Tessa's main goal with this opening is to imitate religious utterances so that Gianni cannot suspect neither her nor her real purposes. In this sense and as far as structure is concerned, the beginning is organized in a much more traditional and canonical way than the ending of the prayer.

On the other hand, the second part of the orison is the one in which Tessa tries to make Federigo understand the situation, and with this change in the purpose also the structure drastically changes. If in the first part the predominant function of the language was the poetic one³⁵, in the conclusion the referential function prevails³⁶. From a textual point of view this passage is mainly characterized by imperative forms (va, pon, non far) that provide Federigo with his lover's instructions and it is devoid of any structural complexity linked to liturgical rhetoric³⁷.

³² Boccaccio 1992: 795. The second version of the prayer, much shorter and structurally simpler, says "Fantasima, fantasima, fatti con Dio, ché la testa dell'asino non vols'io, ma altri fu, che tristo il faccia Iddio, e io son qui con Gianni mio" (Boccaccio 1992: 796).

³³ For analogue texts, see Amati 1866, Casini 1886, D'Ancona 1906 or Fumi 1907.

³⁴ These kinds of parallelisms are also extremely frequent in liturgical language, similar structures can be found, for instance, in the Catholic Eucharist (e.g. "pacem relinquo vobis, pacem meam do vobis", "ecce Agnus Dei: ecce qui tollit peccata mundi"...).

³⁵ It must be taken into account that even when Tessa makes Federigo understand that they will not be able to meet that night, the poetic function of the language is essential, as can be seen in the use of rhetoric forms and strategies.

³⁶ Even if some parallelisms, assonances, rhyme (via/mia) and polyptoton (mia/mio) appear, they are not as strong as in the previous part.

³⁷ Only Tessa's request to Gianni to spit could be interpreted as a ritual element, but in this

The general implication of this orison is to mock Gianni by creating a kind of utterance with which he is deeply familiarized, the religious one, but with a subversive intention that completely alters its function. Accordingly, if with a prayer the speaker expects an improvement of their current situation, the effect that the false orison has on Gianni is the very opposite one, since it contributes to the maintenance of his wife's affair. Furthermore, the mocking goal of the invocation will be confirmed and claimed by the couple of lovers themselves when Emilia tells that Federigo "dell'altre volte ritrovandosi con la donna, molto di questa incantazione rise con esso lei"³⁸.

The prayer against the ghost also contributes to the characterization of Tessa, Gianni and Federigo. As a result, two categories of characters could be drawn in this tale according to both their relationship with religion and their role in the prayer; in broad terms, this distinction could refer to Durkheim's dichotomy between profane and religious worlds³⁹. This differentiation is also related to a topic similar to Turner's theories⁴⁰: the way of understanding rituals in traditional and modern societies, about what it could be stated that when a society becomes modern, rituals are reduced and the stress on public and community life that they imply moves towards private and personal life.

Taking these ideas into consideration, it could be said that Boccaccio builds the characters of Tessa and Federigo as modern ones: they are described as people completely oblivious to any kind of supernatural world –religion included– who only focus their attention on enjoying at the most the opportunities that life gives to them. It must also be said that these opportunities are restricted because of the sacred link that unites Tessa and Gianni, but despite it –or maybe because of it– they are autonomous characters, whose behaviors come from and are explained just by themselves and by their desire to live in a private, personal sphere. On the other hand, Gianni's obsession with religion and superstition is connected to ancient societies and makes him abandon his wife. Consequently, he neglects the link of marriage and this is the essential reason why he will be punished.

CONCLUSION: ONE TALE, TWO WORLDS

Decameron 7. 1 is globally structured in a dichotomous way: female and masculine understanding of the world or, in other words, traditional and modern conceptions of live are continually opposed, dealing with topics of such

case it implies a ritual dealing with actions, not with language. In this way Pitre 1885: 233 stated that "prima e dopo il secolo XVI lo sputo fu ritenuto mirabile per certe guarigioni". See also Bonomo 1953.

³⁸ Boccaccio 1992: 796.

³⁹ See Durkheim 2003 (first published in 1912).

⁴⁰ Turner 1983: 157-158.

a relevance as religion, marriage, pleasure or the very essence of living. This double-faced feature does not merely affect Boccaccio's literary world, but it comes from and it is a consequence of the social context in which the author lived and worked, a context in which the blossoming of a new era and the death of an old one were taking place.

From a semiotic point of view and narratively speaking, it is remarkable that Boccaccio decided to embody this conflict between two opposite ways of conceiving this mutant reality in such a complex and obscure figure as a false ghost, which could be interpreted as a metaphor of the social conflict itself.