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The Function of Dioneo's Perspective in the Griselda Story

By Itala Tania Rutter*

The novella which concludes the narrative of the *Decameron* is extremely puzzling. It represents the last link in the story-telling chain of the Tenth Day, the theme of which was announced at the conclusion of the Ninth Day by Panfilo:

“Voglio che domane ciascuna di voi pensi di ragionare sopra questo, cioè: di chi liberalmente ovvero magnificamente alcuna cosa operasse intorno a' fatti d'amore o d'altra cosa.”¹

In accordance with this proposal, the various narrators generally tell novellas in which noble characters perform deeds exquisite for their generosity and magnificence. The last novella, however, narrated by Dioneo, deals with the maltreatment of beautiful young Griselda by her husband, the noble Gualtieri. Among the cruelties to which he subjects his obedient wife are the apparent killing of their children, her banishment to her father's cottage and the request that she serve his supposed new bride at their wedding feast. His *liberality* is such that he allows her only a nightshirt on her departure from his household. The novella concludes with Gualtieri's praise of Griselda's wisdom and patience, the revelation that he was merely testing her virtues and that the new bride is really their daughter grown to lovely womanhood. This resolution appears unsatisfactory, not only because it seems inappropriate that such harsh punishment should be meted out by the noble Gualtieri to the patient Griselda for no other purpose than to confirm her obedience and to test her constancy, but especially in light of the proposed framework of *magnificenza* of the Tenth Day. In the diffusion of the novella which followed Petrarch's Latin translation from Boccaccio, authors felt compelled to give a different twist to the plot.² Chaucer, for example,

greatly emphasized Walter's *obsession* and attributed Griselda's steadfastness to a resolution to keep her vow of obedience. This interpretation makes Gualtieri seem less than human and Griselda's virtue dangerously close to mere obduracy.

Human values and standards are called into question by every version of the narrative. The folk prototype of the story tells of the marriage of a mortal to an immortal, thus juxtaposing two moral systems, one of which cannot be acceptable or even completely intelligible on a human level;³ and this primitive source points toward a possible interpretation of Boccaccio's own tale. In the following study, I shall examine the way in which Boccaccio manipulates Dioneo, his narrator, in order to weave different levels of meaning into his novella.

Dioneo is an apt narrator for the last novella. His character has been subtly drawn by Boccaccio and its main distinction is a zest for *delighting*, which explains his penchant for *motti* and for the unexpected. In the introduction to the *Decameron*, Dioneo is proclaimed among the whole company as being *il quale oltre ad ogni altro era piacevole giovane e pieno di motti* (p. 39).⁴ At this point he declares he is not disposed to do anything but enjoy himself, to laugh and sing, having left his thoughts behind him in the troubled city. In keeping with this resolve, all his tales but two, VI,x and X,x, are ribald and salacious. He rules over the Seventh Day, that most especially dedicated to the ascendancy of women; and then, capriciously and characteristically, tells the end novella, in which sins with women, and perhaps by implication women themselves, are dismissed with gentle laughter and mockery.

But the greatest indicator of the ambivalent function of Dioneo as an Eiron-alazon type⁵ of character is given in his own words in the introduction to the last novella of the Ninth Day:

Leggiadre donne, infra molte bianche colombe aggiugne più di bellezza uno nero corvo, che non farebbe un candido cigno; e così fra molti savi alcuna volta un men savio è non solamente uno accrescere splendore e bellezza alla loro maturita', ma ancora diletto e sollazzo.

Per la qual cosa, essendo voi tutte discretissime e moderate, io, il qual sento anzi dello scemo che no, facendo la vostra virtù più lucente col mio difetto, più vi debbo esser caro. . .

(IX,x, p. 1088)⁶

Dioneio's self-definition as a foil for others' virtues is of extreme importance in examining the last novella. Boccaccio, who structured the *Decameron* as a masterpiece of equilibrium on every level, had a definite purpose in choosing Dioneio as the narrator of the concluding novella, on the Day which represents a re-integration and indicates a resolve to move toward a civilized ordering of the future.⁷

Dioneio prepares us for his peculiar perspective in this novella by responding to the preceding one in a manner differing completely from that of every other listener. By a jesting allusion to the first novella of the Seventh Day, he emphasizes the point of view of the disappointed would-be groom:

“Il buon uomo che aspettava la seguente notte di fare abbassare la coda ritta della fantasima, avrebbe dati men di due denari di tutte le lode che voi date a Messer Torello.”

(X, x, p. 1217)⁸

This shift in focus from the obvious – here the rejoicing of man and wife – to a view of the forgotten lover, clearly implies that Dioneio's perspective will be eccentric. In this novella we shall be directed to search for the minority view, the less visible explanation.

While introducing his tale, Dioneio gives a further hint as to its ambivalence:

‘ . . . vo' ragionar d'un marchese, non cosa magnifica, ma una matta bestialità, come che bene ne gli seguisse alla fine.’

(X, x, p. 1218)⁹

And completely in accordance with his contradictory character, announces his intention of reversing the order of the day: he will speak of an example of *matta bestialità*, rather than of *cosa magnifica*. This binary division will be shown to function throughout the novella, representing two levels of perspective operating side by side, the necessity for their coexistence being finally delineated only in the conclusion.

From a structural viewpoint, the novella may be divided into six main narrative sequences: I. Gualtieri as bachelor who loves to hunt; II. marriage of Gualtieri and Griselda; III. married life; IV. rejection of Griselda; V. Gualtieri's introduction of new wife; VI. conclusion and explanation by Gualtieri. The evolution of the plot, until the final moment, may be viewed from three perspectives, those of Gualtieri, of

Griselda, and of all the others: *uomini*, the servant, *donne*, and Giannucolo. Dioneo's own perspective as narrator is superimposed on these; although it seems to merge with that of the *others* at certain points in the novella, it is directly visible at the beginning and can be inferred in the conclusion. At this last point a fifth, absolute perspective, that of Dioneo's manipulator, Boccaccio, is also inextricably interwoven.

Let us examine the progression of the different perspectives in the main narrative sequences. I. Initially the *savio* Gualtieri (Dioneo's perspective) refuses to marry. Here Gualtieri's perspective conflicts with that of his *uomini* since he sees marriage as chains in which he would not perforce be bound.

II. The reluctantly acquiescent marquis sees Griselda, poor but beautiful, as a suitable wife. Griselda's viewpoint is not explored; only her willing obedience is indicated: "Signor mio, si'." It is in this sequence that the folk-tale origin of the novella seems to surface; for in Griselda's drawing water from the spring may linger the symbolism of a mythic transformation. According to Northrop Frye, the water motif is often associated with rebirth or passage to another, often supernatural, state of being. The entire marriage scene has a magic tonality, from the arrival on horseback to the disappearance into the hut, to the public dressing and undressing and wedding.¹⁰ In this second stage, the others marvel at Gualtieri's bizarre choice of a mate.

III. Gualtieri's choice proves to be a happy one; he marvels at Griselda's constancy and praises her as *savia* when she responds without changing expression to his *nuovo* thinking.¹¹ The *uomini*, first marvelling as strongly at Gualtieri's wisdom in recognizing virtue hidden under poor robes as they had earlier marvelled at his poor choice, finally condemn him as a cruel man. Here their perspective corresponds to that of Dioneo earlier.

IV. Griselda calmly acquiesces to her banishment from Gualtieri's household. From the point of view of the audience, her perspective is always the most difficult to ascertain. Although we are always made privy to Gualtieri's rationale for his acts, however perverse we may judge them, and are never without the vociferous, if volatile, viewpoint of the *uomini*, Griselda keeps a *closed face* to all viewers. Such dichotomy is especially true in this narrative moment:

La donna, udendo queste parole, non senza grandissima fatica, oltre alla natura delle femine, ritenne le lagrime, e rispose:
"Signor mio, io conobbi sempre la mia bassa condizione alla

vostra nobilità in alcun modo non convenirsi, e quello che io stata son con voi, da Dio e da voi il riconoscea.”

(X, x, p. 1227)¹²

As Griselda at first equated Gualtieri's actions with those of fortune, so at this moment in her acceptance of banishment do Gualtieri and God¹³ appear firmly connected. Two other elements should be noted at this point: the *Grandissima fatica, oltre alla natura delle femine* and Griselda's statement of her *bassa condizione*. On the semantic as well as on the literal level, these phrases place Griselda in two extreme positions on the scale of human attainment – the highest and the lowest. Griselda's speech of acceptance and the characterization of her endurance as being beyond the nature of woman indicate the existence of another level of perception than that of the *uomini*. Clearly, a higher kind of wisdom is here at work.

V. In the arrival of the new bride, the *uomini* show the limitations of a simple pedestrian understanding by first asking that Gualtieri show Griselda some delicacy and lend her a new dress in which to greet the bride, but then upon viewing the bride asserting that Gualtieri *aveva fatto buon cambio*.¹⁴ The juxtaposition of low and high understanding becomes more explicit as Gualtieri again calls Griselda *savia* while she serves him and the visitors as a servant girl. It is obvious now that we are dealing with two levels. The perspective of Griselda coalesces with that of Gualtieri; the *uomini* and Dioneo do not share their view.

VI. The final moment of resolution is a masterly interweaving of perspectives:

“Griselda, tempo è omai che tu senta frutto della tua lunga pazienza, e che coloro, li quali me hanno reputato crudele e iniquo e bestiale, conoscano che ciò che io faceva, ad antiveduto fine operava, vogliendo a te insegnar d'esser moglie e a loro di saperla torre e tenere, e a me partorire perpetua quiete mentre teco a vivere avessi.”

(X, x, p. 1231)¹⁵

Gualtieri discloses his perspective while taking into account that of the *uomini* (his men, Dioneo – ourselves?) who have thought him *crudele e iniquo e bestiale*, lacking Griselda's patience and her implicit understanding of his *antiveduto fine*. It is at this moment that the two points of view briefly coincide, as the others also assert Griselda's and Gualtieri's superior, higher wisdom. The exemplary aspect in Gualtieri's

disclosure of his purposes should not be lost.¹⁶ The audiences, both that of readers and of the *others* within the novella, are made privy to Gualtieri's designs and at the same time, given a moral lesson. Gualtieri as teacher of a higher wisdom, praises his chosen wife, admonishes his society for their base understanding and assigns himself a superior standing with respect to all who surround him. He thus places himself and Griselda on a moral plane far above that of common reality, of common understanding. And he instructs his society to learn from his example, which, albeit on a lower level, is the only one possible in a human context.¹⁷ This double perspective keeps the moral coherence of the novella, but accounts also for its ambiguity. The exemplary purpose of Gualtieri's explanation escapes Dioneo, who here operates only on the human level and is clearly not Boccaccio's mouthpiece.¹⁸

That Dioneo is not privy to Gualtieri's and Griselda's *higher wisdom* is made clear in his final comment on the tale. His mocking laughter attempts to dissolve the coherence:

"Che si potrà dir qui, se non che anche nelle povere case
piovono dal cielo de' divini spiriti, come nelle reali di
quegli che sarien più degni di guardar porci che d'aver
sopra uomini signoria?"

(X, x, p. 1233)¹⁹

In Dioneo's ambivalent conclusion, again two levels are implied and interwoven. The *divini spiriti* can refer either to Griselda, who lived in a poor house, or to Gualtieri, who came on horseback to descend into her poor house. Similarly, *guardar porci* can refer either to Griselda who *watched* over animals, sheep, or to Gualtieri, who ruled over men. Griselda's supernatural virtue is underscored even by the hypotactic structure of Dioneo's phrase:

". . . chi avrebbe, altri che Griselda, potuto col viso non
solamente asciutto ma lieto, sofferire le rigide e mai più
udite prove da Gualtieri fatte?"

(X, x, p. 1233)²⁰

We now perceive Griselda's perspective as Dioneo does not. Griselda's wise and serene acceptance of Gualtieri's harsh treatment represents a higher understanding; the trials imposed on her can only be comprehended in light of the earlier connection she made between God's will and her husband's.

In the final movement of his conclusion Dioneo makes clear his adherence to the common vision, to a lower level of meaning:

“ . . . al quale non sarebbe forse stato male investito d'essersi
abbattuto a una, che quando fuor di casa l'avesse in camiscia
cacciata, s'avesse sì ad un'altro fatto scuotere il pellicione . . . ”
(X, x, p. 1233)²¹

The statement represents a logical conclusion to the superficial interpretation offered by Dioneo since the beginning of the novella.²² The salacious tone links it to the tale of the *fantasima* (VII, i). But by now we see this as a mere trick of rhetoric on Boccaccio's part. Dioneo's vision always remains on a conventional human level and sometimes, as here, descends to the lowest common denominator of human perception. His bawdy motto serves to emphasize the base condition of human existence when perceived on a merely natural level. Human vision parallels that of animals when one's concerns are firmly centered upon a *pellicione*.

A final, integrating *view from the top* can be sought outside of the novella proper. In the conclusion of the Tenth Day, Panfilo recalls the words and theme Dioneo had assigned Gualtieri in his disclosing speech:

. . . il senno de' mortali non consiste solamente nell'avere a
memoria le cose preterite o conoscere le presenti, ma per l'una
e per l'altra di queste sapere antive der le future . . .
(X, p. 1234)²³

Several connections can be made between this passage and the novella of Griselda and Gualtieri. *Senno* echoes the *savio*, *savia*, *savissima* applied to our characters: e.g., “egli era da reputar molto savio” (p. 12, 9, v. 4); “dove dir solieno Gualtieri aver fatto come poco savio d'averla per moglie presa, che egli era il più savio e il più avveduto uomo” (p. 1223, v. 25); “dove come savia lei parlò cognobbe” (p. 1226, v. 38); “e savissimo reputaron Gualtieri” (p. 1232, v. 66); “e sopra tutti savissima tenner Griselda (p. 1233, v. 67).²⁴ The concerns of *mortali* recall those of the volatile *uomini* who were aware only of the present and capable only of reacting to the immediate past: foreseeing the future (*antiveder*) was the privilege of the higher wisdom exhibited by Griselda and Gualtieri and praised by him: “ciò che io faceva, ad *antiveduto* fine operava” (X, x, p. 1231, v. 61).

Thus has Dioneo accomplished his function as *corvo nero*, the black raven: by using his perspective as a foil for the higher understanding

which transcends natural vision, Boccaccio has illuminated the high virtue which a surface reading cannot reveal.

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NOTES

1. Tomorrow, I wish each of you to think about discussing this subject, namely: of one who performed either liberally or magnificently concerning affairs of love, or other matters." Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ed. Vittore Branca (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1965), pp. 1094-1095. All citations refer to this edition.
2. For a thorough charting of the travels of this novella, see Vittore Branca, "La diffusione della Griselda," *Studi Petrarqueschi*, VI (1956), 221-224. Boccaccio's sources in oral tradition are traced by Dudley D. Griffith, *The Origin of the Griselda Story* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1931). Wirt Armistead Cate in "The Problem with the Origin of the Griselda Story," *Studies in Philology*, 29 (1932), 385-405, points to the Cupid and Psyche subgroup of folk-tales as the specific preliterate antecedents for this novella. However, Cate also implies that Boccaccio was not entirely aware of the nature of the material he was retelling. While this *lacuna* seems to be true of his imitators, it cannot obtain for Boccaccio. Since Vittore Branca initiated the study of the *Decameron* as an integral whole, critics have always found Boccaccio to be a self-conscious artificer fully in control of his material.
3. For exploration of this theme, see Marga Cottino-Jones, "Realtà e Mito in Griselda," *Problemi*, 11-12 (1968), 522-523.
4. "The one who was, above all others, a pleasant youth, full of witticisms."
5. The trickster, who discloses by means of irony. An especially clear exploration of these distinctions is given by Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), pp. 226-228.
6. "Gracious ladies, amid a crowd of white doves a black raven adds more beauty than would a white swan; even as, among many sages, sometimes one who is not nearly as wise not only (by comparison with their maturity) greatly increases

their splendour and beauty, but also adds delight and pleasure. For which reason, since you are all extremely discreet and temperate, I, who am rather foolish, by rendering your beauty more splendid by comparison with my defects, should be dearer to you."

7. The inner equilibrium of the *Decameron* is discussed in analyses by: Mario Baratto, *Stile e Realta nel Decameron* (Vicenza: N. Pozza, 1971); Vittore Branca, *Boccaccio medievale* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1956); Giovanni Getto, *Vita di forme e Forme di vita* (Torino: Petrini, 1958); Luigi Malagoli, *Decameron e primo Boccaccio* (Pisa: Goliardica 1961); Giuseppe Petronio, "La Posizione del *Decameron*" *Rassegna Bibliografica*, 2 (1957), 189-207; Raffaello Ramat, *Scritti su Giovanni Boccaccio* (Firenze: L.S. Olschki 1964); and Cesare Segre, "Funzioni, opposizione e simmetrie nella Giornata VII del *Decameron*," *Studi sul Boccaccio*, 6 (1971), 81-108.
8. "The good man who in vain awaited the following night in order to lower the phantom's erect tail, would have given less than two pennies for all the praises you've heaped on Messer Torello."
9. "I want to discuss not a magnificent matter, but a mad bestiality concerning a marquis, even though all went well for him in the end."
10. See also Mircea Eliade, esp. *Birth and Re-birth: The Religious Meanings of Initiation in Human Culture* (New York: Harper, 1958) and *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper, 1968). The latter provides a brief but concise discussion of the relation between myth and fairy tales.
11. The adjective *nuovo* can perhaps be taken as a clue in the context of a miraculous transformation indicated by the second moment. The connotation of *nuovo* with wondrous, miraculous is frequent in this epoch.
12. "The woman heard these words, not without the greatest travail, going beyond the feminine nature's capacity for bearing pain, but she held back her tears and answered: 'My lord, I always realized that my low condition was totally unworthy of your nobility and I know that that which I became was entirely due to God and to you'."
13. For a discussion of Griselda as a possible emblematic Christ-figure, see Marga Cottino-Jones, "Fabula vs. Figura: Another Interpretation of the Griselda Story," *Italica*, 50 (1973), 38-51.
14. "had made a good trade" (p. 1230).
15. "Griselda, it is now time that you gather the fruits of your patience and that those who have thought me cruel, iniquitous and bestial understand that all I have done proceeded according to a foreseen end, since I wished to teach you how to be a wife, to others how to choose and keep one, and for myself, I wanted to create perpetual peace while I lived by your side."

16. Boccaccio often made use of social and literary traditions which would have been familiar to his audience. It has been noted (e.g., by Ciro Trabalza, *Studi sul Boccaccio*, 1906) that the novella of Nastagio degli Onesti (V, 8) bears a striking resemblance to the *exemplum* of Fra' Iacopo Passavanti in *Specchio della vera Penitenza*, II, 2. Although it is not clear which work is earlier, it is obvious that both derive from the pre-existing tradition of moral *exhortatio* often presented from the pulpit by medieval *predicatori*, such as Benedictine and Dominican friars.
17. The interweaving of levels of moral virtue and understanding in the *Decameron* is also indicated in Luigi Malagoli, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-68.
18. Many critics have asserted this position for Dioneo, taking evidence of Boccaccio's predilection for his personality as proof of his self-identification with the engaging youth. This view is a common flaw when one deals with styles rich in irony or perspectivism, as demonstrated by Leo Spitzer, "Linguistic Perspectivism in *Don Quixote*," *Linguistics and Literary History* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 41-73.
19. "What can one say about this, if not that divine spirits rain down from heaven to the poorest houses, even as in royal ones drop those who are more worthy of watching pigs than of ruling over men?"
20. "Who, other than Griselda, would have been capable of suffering with a dry and serene countenance the harsh and unheard-of trials imposed by Gualtieri?"
21. "... to whom it would not have been such a bad lot, perhaps, to have run into someone who, when he threw her out of the house in her undershirt, would have shaken the fur of another [in order to get out of it a fine dress].
22. In this context, Wirt Armistead Cate, *op. cit.*, makes a more inexcusable error when he claims that it is Boccaccio, not Dioneo, who exhibits annoyance with Gualtieri:
- In the treatment of the irrational and uncontrolled character of Gualtieri, Boccaccio throughout and particularly towards the latter part of the novella, evidences a certain annoyance.
- (p. 405)
23. "The wisdom of mortals does not only consist in remembering past occurrences or in being acquainted with present ones, but, through the ones and the others, to know how to foresee the future . . ."
24. "he was deemed very wise"; "as they were wont to say he'd been very unwise to have taken her to wife, (now they said) he was the wisest and most prudent man"; "he realized that she spoke as a wise woman"; "and they deemed Gualtieri the wisest of all men"; "and wisest above all others they deemed Griselda."