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## THE STRUCTURE OF MESSAGES IN THE NOVELLA DEL GRASSO LEGNAIUOLO

MICHAEL SHERBERG

The "Novella del Grasso legnaiuolo"<sup>1</sup> presents an inherent disadvantage to a thorough search for its meanings: its central action, the *beffa*, is so entertaining and complex that it appears in itself to be all that the story is about. The *beffa* so overwhelms the story that it has been the central issue of Italian criticism of this *novella* in this century.<sup>2</sup> There are good reasons for the interest: the lord of the *beffa* is a historical figure, Filippo Brunelleschi, who enjoys a triumphant role; its victim is a remarkably ingenuous man; and its seemingly endless complication is enough to capture and delight any reader. Moreover, while the time of the *beffa* is only three days in the infinite time of the *novella*, the narrator's description of the former occupies almost 85% of the textual space, so it attracts attention by its very proportion. Yet a reordering of the *novella* along the temporal lines of its *fabula*<sup>3</sup> yields intriguing results. Here are the principal elements of the story in their time sequence:

- [1. Grasso's friend, Pippo Spano, has been pressuring him to come to Hungary and work in the court.]
- [2. Grasso's mother goes to Polverosa to do laundry.]<sup>4</sup>
3. Grasso fails to show up at dinner one night and as a result is the victim of a *beffa*.
4. Grasso realizes that he has been the victim of a *beffa*.
5. Grasso agrees to go to Hungary and does so, where he lives happily ever after.

The *novella* thus assumes a new interpretative possibility, as the story of how the Grasso legnaiolo ended up in Hungary and became rich and famous.<sup>5</sup> Crucial to that new reading is the existence of a pre-history for Grasso, regarding Pippo Spano, and for which conclusion the *beffa* is an elaborate motivator. So this realignment alters the thematic direction of the story, actually assigning greater importance to the moments which frame the *beffa* than to the *beffa* itself. Therein lie new and significant meanings for an otherwise merely entertaining tale.

This revised reading of the *novella* will serve another purpose as well, congruent with some of the more subtle objectives of its author. Reading the *beffa* in the context of Grasso's life, and considering its impact in transforming him from a relatively content and only vaguely ambitious man to one who realizes his full potential in an equally transformed society, one detects the presence of both aspects of the common dictum that a work of art must be both delightful and useful. A cursory look at literary culture in the Quattrocento suggests the continued validity of these rules. While our author does not express them openly, others in the *novella* genre did so; Masuccio Salernitano offers a clear example, if perhaps tongue-in-cheek.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the formalization of Humanism during these years seems to have infused new meaning into the old rule of utility, away from a moralistic religious tone to a more secular and thus immediate one. Treatises on liberal education of this period cite countless antique texts which provide examples for modern behavior.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, since this author was surely an acute reader of Boccaccio and Dante, both of whom openly held to these tenets, he could not have been unaware of these principles.

Aside from these external influences which may have contributed to the ideology supporting the *novella*, there is internal evidence of its many purposes in the way the author has disposed his narrative material. To ignore the possibility of its usefulness results in the loss of significant evidence that the *novella* is above all a work of Humanist literature, motivated by an understanding of the importance of Humanism as a new way of living and interpreting life, and by an awareness of its conflict with a society still rooted in other visions and which had not yet fully embraced it. This last is a fairly serious, and ironic, transgression when dealing with a *novella* that exhorts us all to be better readers.

At the level of its *intreccio*, the *novella* divides along two different planes of action, one corresponding to the frame of the *beffa* and the other to the *beffa* itself.<sup>8</sup> The initial and concluding scenes of the *novella* provide the key elements of the frame. In the initial scene, Brunelleschi and his "brigata"<sup>9</sup> observe that Grasso had not come to dinner and decide to punish his absence; at the end, Grasso realizes that he has been victimized and responds by removing himself from Florentine society and into the more congenial world of the Hungarian court, where his newfound wealth matches the fame he painfully enjoys as the hapless object of so much scorn. Other narrative details found elsewhere belong to this plane, either furthering the action of the *beffa* or describing the pleasure it brings to the *beffatori*.

The other narrative plane is that of the *beffa* itself, the elaborate fiction created to convince Grasso that he has metamorphosed into another man, a certain Matteo who is known to him. This plane depends completely upon the frame, not merely circumstantially, inasmuch as the events of the frame give birth to the *beffa*, but also because the signifieds of all signs used in the course of the *beffa*, both by the narrator and by the *beffatori*, correspond to previously established signs and signifieds in the frame. The successful imposition of signs and signifieds between these two planes is the function mostly, but not always, of the *beffatori*, liaisons between the two worlds. They obey the same scheme that Cesare Segre has outlined for the relationship between narrator and reader:<sup>10</sup>

sender _____	message _____	receiver
( <i>beffatori</i>		(Grasso)
and others		
involved)		

Messages exist at both the frame level and the *beffa* level, and will be the subject of later discussion. The elements of the *beffa*, considered always as functions of the frame, correspond to signifiers. At the level of the frame they realize their true signifieds.

The primary link between the two planes becomes apparent at the dinner which opens the story. It is customary for the artists and artisans in Brunelleschi's circle to gather for dinner and talk shop. On this particular evening in 1409, however, Grasso is not present. The *brigata* wonders why. His absence provokes

the scorn of his friends, because they are socially superior to him, and Grasso therefore has neither the right to insult his companions nor to act independently of them.<sup>11</sup> In the midst of a discussion of possible punishments, Filippo Brunelleschi speaks up: “ ‘Modo ho pensato, che noi gli faremo credere, che fusse diventato un altro, e che non fussi più el Grasso legnaiuolo.’ ” (770) The others agree, and the following night the *beffa* begins: all those who encounter Grasso address him as Matteo, and another “Grasso” materializes to replace him. The *beffatori* no longer recognize his existence as Grasso; he no longer is a part of their world. They punish his absence at dinner by absenting him from life as Grasso, thus destroying his only frame of reference. The *beffa* thus assumes a new dimension: more than just a *beffa*, it is a *contrappasso*. This fact suggests that the program of the *beffa* is far more deliberate than it might appear. The various moments and elements of the joke cease to be capricious, aimed solely to delight the *beffatori* and the reader; instead they begin to reveal themselves as saturated with meaning for Grasso, as justly they should be, inasmuch as the explicit purpose of the *beffa* is to teach him a lesson.<sup>12</sup> Those meanings extend to the reader as well, who, through identification with Grasso, learns his lessons as well as some others.

Moreover, the construction of a *contrappasso* represents an important development in the nature of the *beffa novella* as a genre from the time of Boccaccio. The author achieves this step forward through the adaptation of a structural model which Boccaccio does not use: Dante. The *beffe* in the *Decameron*, with the exception of the scholar's retribution against the widow, do not have explicitly punitive motives, and so do not furnish a model for this sort of literary theme. The *Divine Comedy* does, of course, and if Antonio Manetti is the author of this story, as many have suggested, then it is not surprising that he may have depended upon Dante. Manetti's involvement with the master, even to include a copy of the *Comedy* in his own hand, would suggest that his understanding was intimate enough to allow him to borrow from its author.<sup>13</sup>

The *contrappasso* unfolds through three primary elements. One has a clearly literary value that lends structure to the *novella* and directs a

message toward the reader; the other two carry messages for Grasso. The first element is the motif of the dinner, which recalls that first fateful dinner at the beginning of the story and which always seems to spell danger for Grasso. The other two are elements of guilt and shame which mean to cause Grasso psychological agony and so to punish him. One is the spectre of Grasso's mother, conveniently absent throughout the story but always active in his world; the other is the constant threat of repudiation by all Florence. The deleterious effect of the manipulation of the latter two elements carries over when Grasso is permitted to re-join the real world, and explains in large part why the story ends as it does, with his departure.

One of the important markers of the time of the *novella* are the dinner scenes, four in all. The first, already discussed, is the initial and important frame scene which opens the *novella*. The second dinner occurs twenty-four hours later, as Grasso finds himself, as Matteo, in debtors' prison. The invention of real economic debts substitutes the social ones the *brigata* feels Grasso must pay, suggesting once again a *contrappasso* relationship between crime and punishment, frame and *beffa*. At this second dinner the atmosphere is as dark for Grasso as it was in his absence at the first. He tells his fellow prisoners, his new "brigata", that he will pay his debts and leave prison in the morning. They respond: "—Tu vedi, noi siamo per cenare, cena con esso noi e poi domattina ti spaccerei; ma bene t'avvisiamo, che qui si sta sempre qualche tempo più che altri non si crede. . . ." (774) It is a sinister foreboding of what awaits Grasso, as the prisoners are correct: not only must he wait until nightfall of the following day before departing, but he must also remain in the metaphoric prison of the *beffa* far longer than his stay in this concrete jail. At the third dinner he encounters real dangers: Matteo's brothers slip him a soporific so that they may carry him unconscious back to his workshop. Grasso does not understand the fateful import of the dinners, but the reader does: their parallel constructions bind the planes of the story and, if they ultimately suggest anything at all to Grasso, given his unfortunate nickname, it is that he would be better off on a diet. The fourth dinner marks Grasso's departure from Florence with a newly formed *brigata* consisting of all the *beffatori*. The action closes as it began, with Grasso's absence; only by now that temporary absence has become permanent.

The second element from Grasso's real world involves his mother, a structural as well as a thematic element in the story. As a structural element, her absence at various critical moments permits the action to develop as it does. Grasso lives with his mother, but as the *novella* begins she is off in Polverosa doing laundry. Her absence from their home allows the *beffa* to commence, for Brunelleschi, aware that Grasso has left his door unlocked so that his mother might re-enter upon her return, slips into their home and locks the door. When Grasso arrives, Brunelleschi imitates both Grasso's and his mother's voice so to suggest their presence in the apartment. It would appear from this scene that Grasso is not particularly kind to the woman: he hears Filippo, as Grasso, berate his mother and, so tells the narrator, he recognizes the voice, as well as "tutti i suoi atti e modi", as his own. His mother's absence also enables the *beffatori*, undiscovered, to return Grasso to his workshop after they drug him at the third dinner. Grasso himself uses his absent mother as a structural element: when explaining to Pippo Spano his decision to go to Hungary, he cites certain differences he has had with her.<sup>14</sup>

As a thematic element, the *beffatori* manipulate the image of "mother" to hurt their victim. As soon as Grasso enters the prison as Matteo, just about everyone reminds him of the enormous shame and discomfort he must be causing his mother. Matteo's brothers scold him for it; they also use their mother's potential agony to convince a priest, whom not surprisingly they know not well, to speak to Grasso-Matteo and urge him to become more of a "valente uomo". The priest, duly moved, then repeats the argument to the prisoner. Ironically the "mother" of whom everyone speaks with such concern is not Grasso's mother. "Mother" as a sign is always Matteo's mother; as a signified she is Grasso's mother. While Grasso may assume that "mother" is the woman who bore the Matteo he has become, he must certainly understand her only in the context of his relationship with his real mother. This is unfortunate for him, since if he ever had reason to regret his treatment of his mother, that regret would by now be overwhelming. In fact the *beffatori* provoke such shame in him that rather than await her return from Polverosa to explain his departure personally, Grasso leaves her a note and then steals off to Hungary. The act is not very

"valente" but rather a reflection of the extent to which the *beffa* has shattered his life.

From guilt about his mother Grasso moves to a larger sphere, that of shame before all Florence. Grasso himself is the first to recognize the possibilities for humiliation. After dinner in the jail, he considers sending a messenger to his home to see if his mother has returned, but then decides against such a move, for if "Grasso" were there as well, "'e' si faranno beffe di me'." (774) The pun on the word *beffa*, with its meaning as a practical joke and as "far beffe"—to make fun of somebody, persists throughout the story. The irony is clear: Grasso fears such a fate, but he fails to realize that it has already befallen him. Thus the narrator leads the reader back to his initial and oft-repeated thesis that Grasso is an exceptionally stupid person. But there is more to the theme than just Grasso's stupidity: it is a reflection of the real and severe social pressures felt in the small world of Quattrocento Florence. Grasso runs with a smart group of accomplished and creative people whose cunning and wit lead them as far as this elaborate and, to them, thoroughly delightful joke. The constant echo of shame in front of his peers during the time of the *beffa*, as expressed by Matteo's brothers, the priest, and others, prepares Grasso psychologically for the mortification he feels at the end of the *novella*. It is a shame not felt because of his prison debts, but because he has been gullible enough to believe the ruse. Once again a parallelism is at work: the *beffatori* create the shame of the prison experience as a way of expressing to Grasso their real contempt for him, for his social debts, and as a way of making him realize his own true inferiority. Grasso understands the truth of the messages once he recovers from the *beffa*, and he feels the full weight of social shame. When he agrees to go to Hungary, he shrinks from facing Brunelleschi, and insists that he and Spano leave at once.

Thus part of Grasso's inferiority, as the *beffatori* define it, is certainly intellectual; but it is rooted not merely in his failure to comprehend instantly the existence of a *beffa*. His plight involves as well his entire way of apprehending life, his failure to have learned certain lessons which the author of the *novella* sees as crucial to a Quattrocento Florentine understanding of the world. It is here, in the contextualization of Grasso's experience within contemporary ideology, that the *novella* pro-



jects its message of utility to the reader and assumes its post as Humanist literature.

Much of the *beffa*'s success in convincing Grasso of his metamorphosis into Matteo depends not merely upon the intervention of the *beffatori*, but also on some purely coincidental events at the jail. Here Grasso meets a judge, a "valente uomo", who convinces him that he has indeed become Matteo. The judge, because he divines instantly the truth of the *beffa*, is a character who belongs to the frame of the *novella*. Thus even while the *beffatori* have not planted him at the jail to work more magic on Grasso, he becomes a co-conspirator as soon as he decides to play along with the joke. His efforts are crucial, for he is able to furnish Grasso with the one absolute proof that he has changed: precedents. Grasso himself displays much concern with precedents. He begins his story to the judge with the words: "' . . . forse cosa . . . non avvenne mai più a persona del mondo.'" (777) He closes with a plea: "'—Ché so che avete lungamente lette di molte cose e storie d'antichi e di moderni e di uomini che hanno scritto molti avvenimenti: trovasti voi mai simile cosa?—'" (777) The judge responds first with literary examples of metamorphoses: Apuleius (actually Lucius; the judge is mistaken), who became an ass, and Actheon, who became a stag. The judge knows these are fictions, but Grasso, certain that the "valente uomo" knows whereof he speaks, accepts them as facts, and suddenly the whole weight of human history bears down on him to force acceptance of his fate. If that is not enough, the judge has a final proof: "'Io ebbi già un mio lavoratore, a cui intervenne questo caso medesimo.'" (778) The eyewitness account of a trustworthy teller is, of course, irrefutable, as it has been throughout the story. Grasso says nothing, but sighs with resignation. Increasingly nervous, he turns to the judge twice more during his stay for a reconfirmation of the incident, only to discover that the laborer in question never returned to his original self.

The scene reveals why Grasso falls for the *beffa* and, as well, establishes the *novella*'s self-consciousness as a work of literature. Here is a man, the Grasso legnaiolo, who cannot tell the difference between fact and fiction.<sup>15</sup> Even if he were able to read, which is doubtful, he would probably accept the *Golden Ass* as history and not myth. For Grasso, everything is truth, even eventually the fact that he must be

Matteo. As a reader of signs in everyday life he tends to accept them all as true, rather than question their veracity and conclude their falsehood. His is the perfectly untrained, and therefore, susceptible mind. But where the *beffatori* trip and fall is in their equation of lack of education with stupidity. For Grasso is not stupid: he learns a great deal from the *beffa*, above all that there are fictions in the world and that a good reader, of any sign, must know how to spot the difference. Which is also what the *novella* seeks to tell the reader about how to approach literature, that is, as an account of events which must be measured against what the reader knows to be true and possible in life. It also seeks to help the untrained reader, by adding a new precedent to the classical ones cited by the judge, and so to aid new Grassos to learn to read well. For here, instead of a story of men who metamorphosed and never turned back, is the story of a man who was supposed to metamorphose, but never really did.

So the *novella* carries many messages. For Grasso, they are messages of contempt. As soon as he apprehends them the *beffatori* lose their power over him, both rhetorically since he understands that they are liars, and physically since he leaves Florence. At the same time, however, Brunelleschi and company succeed completely in their efforts: Grasso does become wiser, not necessarily to his having committed any sort of transgression in his relationship with them, but more importantly, to the need to live life more critically and to pursue more self-centered goals which in turn benefit the whole society. In going to Hungary Grasso realizes his economic potential and reverses his fortune, earning fame for his artistic productivity and not just his laughability. Ideologically such ends would be entirely consonant with the social demands of his world which, far from permissive, insists that each of its members realize his full potential. Similar messages pass on to the reader, who must learn how to structure his comprehension along the new secular lines of Humanism and its concomitant social demands, and failing that must be prepared for derision by those who have made the proper transition and who are therefore equipped to succeed where others will fail. Thus Grasso's transformation becomes emblematic, and the *beffa* serves above all to catalyze that change. Therein lies the importance of understanding the context of the *beffa* in order to fully understand the story. For such a comprehensive reading grows from an

active search of the structures that govern the entire *novella*, rather than from a passive absorption of its most entertaining part.

## Notes:

1. I am following the redaction of the "Novella del Grasso legnaiuolo" attributed to Antonio Manetti, in *Prosatori volgari del Quattrocento*, edited by Claudio Varese (Turin-Milan: Ricciardi, 1955), pp. 769–802. All page numbers in parentheses refer to this edition. There are two other Quattrocento versions of the *novella*. One, similar to the "Manetti" version, is found in the *Libro di novelle e del bel parlar gentile*, edited by D. M. Manni (Florence: Lorenzo Vanni, 1782), II, pp. 248–279. The other, quite different, was first published by Michele Barbi, "Una versione inedita della 'Novella del Grasso legnaiuolo,'" in *Studi di filologia italiana*, I (1927), pp. 133–144. The Accademia della Crusca then published it in a separate volume, *Novella del Grasso Legnaiuolo* (Florence, 1968).

2. Important critical studies of the *novella* include Fredi Chiappelli, "La novella del Grasso legnaiuolo," in *L'Approdo*, I–3 (July–September 1952), pp. 79–82, and Arturo Pompeati, "Un Pirandello per ridere nel Quattrocento," in *Rivista d'Italia*, XXX–4 (April 15, 1927), pp. 651–663. An unpublished master's thesis at the University of California, Los Angeles, discusses at length the art-historical questions raised by the *novella*, and concludes that the *beffa* was an experiment devised by Brunelleschi to test his ideas about perspective. See Emily Jayne, "The Story of the Fat Carpenter attributed to Antonio Manetti" (Department of Art, University of California, Los Angeles, 1972). The most massive study of the *novella* is by André Rochon, "Une date importante dans l'histoire de la *beffa*: 'La nouvelle du Grasso legnaiuolo,'" in Marietti, *et al.*, *Formes et significations de la "beffa" dans la littérature italienne de la Renaissance* (Centre de Recherche sur la Renaissance Italienne, 4) (Paris: Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1975), pp. 211–376. Rochon argues convincingly for an attribution to Manetti; see p. 242ff.

3. I have adopted Cesare Segre's terminology as presented in *Le strutture e il tempo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), for which *fabula* is the "unità di contenuto riordinate secondo successione logico-temporale", and the *discorso* is the "assieme delle unità di contenuto corrispondenti al livello del discorso" ("Analisi del racconto", p. 14).

4. I have placed elements 1 and 2 in brackets because they are presented out of temporal order in the *intreccio*. The *intreccio* begins at element 3.

5. Brunelleschi himself alludes to this purpose in the closing paragraph of the story, although his words seek more to rationalize his own behavior than to explain the *novella*.

6. In the dedicatory letter of his *Novellino*, addressed to Ippolita Sfozta Visconti

d'Aragona, duchess of Calabria, Masuccio defends himself against possible attacks from religious hypocrites on his first ten stories, which in turn describe the "scelerata vita e nefandi vizi" of same: "Anzi, per non tacere il vero, ho voluto ad alcuno gran principe e ad altri mei singolari amici dare notizia di certi moderni e d'altri non molto antichi travenuti casi, per li quali se potrà comprendere con quanti diversi modi e viziose arti nel preterito gli sciocchi o vero non molto prudenti seculari siano da' falsi religiosi stati ingannati, a tale che gli presenti faccia accorti, e gli futuri siano provisti che da sì vile e corrutta generazione non si facciano per lo inanzi sotto fede di ficta bontà avviluppare." Masuccio Salernitano, in *Prosatori volgari del Quattrocento*, p. 807.

7. See for example the *De Liberatorum Educatione* of Enea Silvio Piccolomini (later Pope Pius II), which contains an ample reading list in both religious and secular texts and itself demonstrates the utility of literature, by quoting great authors whose words have been instructive. Aeneae Silvii, *De Liberatorum Educatione*. A Translation, with an Introduction, by Brother Joel Stanislaus Nelson (The Catholic University of America Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Latin Language and Literature, Vol. XII, 1940).

8. Fredi Chiappelli has also suggested such a division in his analysis of the story.

9. The use of a lexicon which includes entries such as "brigata" underscores this author's indebtedness to Boccaccio. Although I doubt the necessity of further evidence of the relationship between the Quattrocento *novella* and its Trecento master, here is a completely pedestrian and delightfully unsubtle example, the first sentence of the redaction of the "Novella del Grasso legnaiuolo" unearthed by Michele Barbi: "Fu [sic] in Firenze nel 1410 certi giovani che dubitandosi di pistolenza per alquanti che di ciò s'ammalarono, la qual pistolenza seguì l'anno seguente 1411; onde e detti giovani, per fuggire quegli pensieri, si ragunavano quasi ogni sera a cena insieme, quando a casa d'uno e quando a casa de l'altro, con facendo insieme molte piacevolezze e giuochi." (*Studi di filologia italiana*, I (1927), p. 133.) The intensity of this literary *topos* is somewhat surprising in a *novella* which at the same time insists upon its undiluted historicity: a curious example of how literature suddenly becomes life. It is also a reason to conclude the inferior sensibilities of this narrator to those of Manetti: the former doesn't understand the difference between fiction and reality any more than Grasso does.

10. Segre, p. 29.

11. Recently, Salvatore di Maria has stated that "Manetto's [i.e., Grasso's] behavior is a flagrant violation of social norms because it contravenes the humanist sense of friendship and of human 'consortium.'" (See "Structure of the Early Form of the 'Beffa' in Italian Literature, *Canadian Journal of Italian Studies*, 4 (1980-81), pp. 227-239.) Such a reading requires the superimposition of our understanding of that code upon a text that asserts fairly straightforwardly another motivation for the *brigata's* resentment: "Il che tenendosi da lui un poco scornati, perché generalmente erano quasi tutti di migliore qualità e condizione di lui. . . ." (770) Di Maria's reading is by no means outlandish, however, and is acceptable as long as we remember that the Humanist code Grasso violates belongs to the author of the *novella* and not necessarily to Brunelleschi, for this is most certainly the author's story and not the architect's.

12. “. . . e fantasticando piacevolmente come di questa ingiuria vendicare si potessero, disse quello che aveva prima mosso le parole: —E' se gli potrebbe fare qualche giarda e farnelo più savio per un'altra volta.—” (770)

13. Rochon discusses Manetti's relationship to Dante: see pp. 243–244 and 256.

14. Brunelleschi also uses his mother as a structural element. He fabricates an accident which involves her in order to leave Grasso's workshop and go to his apartment, where he waits until Grasso's arrival shortly thereafter.

15. The narrator offers further evidence of Grasso's confused understanding of history and literature early on in the *novella*, when Grasso first discovers that his friends no longer recognize him as Grasso. He says: “ ‘Ohimè! sarei io mai Calandrino, ch'io sia sì tosto diventato un altro senza essermene avveduto?’ ” (773) The allusion seems to be to the Calandrino story in which he becomes pregnant, though Grasso's precise understanding of the tale is unclear. In any event, it is another example of how Grasso confuses fiction, probably through its oral retelling, for history.