[34]August Nitschke, "Brunhilde und Hiltgund: Beobachtungen zum Verhaltenswandel der Frauen im frühen Mittelalter," *Sprache und Recht im Mittelater: Beiträge zur Kulturgeschichte des Mittelalters: Festschrift für Ruth Schmidt-Wiegand zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Karl Hauck (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1980), 532-563.

[35]See Nitschke (note 32), 539-547; the charms are printed in Schlosser (note 29), 254.

[36]See Werner Schröder, "Kontinuität oder Diskontinuität in der Frühgeschichte der deutschen Literatur," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum* 100 (1971), 195-213.

[37]*Mäzene im Mittelalter* (München: Beck, 1979), 135, 231-243.

[38]James Westfall Thompson, *The Literacy of the Laity in the Middle Ages*, University of California, Berkeley Publications in Education 9 (Berkeley: U of California P, 1939), rpt. Burt Franklin Research and Source Work Series 2 (New York: Burt Franklin, 1960); Bumke (note 37) 56, 66f., 242f., 318, n. 83.

[39]See for example the contributions in Classen (note 1).

[40]Elisabeth von Houts, "Women and the Writing of History in the Early Middle Ages: The Case of Abbess Matilda of Essen and Aethelweard," *Early Medieval Europe 1* (1992), 53-68, here 54.

[41]See Stefan Sonderegger, *Grundzüge deutscher Sprachgeschichte: Diachronie des Sprachsystems 1, Einführung - Genealogie - Konstanten* (Berlin & New York: de Gruyter, 1979), esp. 219-319.

[42]"Learned Women of Early Modern Italy: Humanists and University Scholars," *Beyond their Sex: Learned Women of the European Past*, ed. Patricia N. Labalme (New York: New York UP, 1980), 91-116, here 91.

[43]See Duby (note 5), p. 89: 'a history of silences'; Christine Klapisch-Zuber, ed. *Silence of the Middle Ages*.

PASOLINI'S *DECAMERON* AND TEACHING THE MIDDLE AGES

Medievalism, in the classroom, is a two-edged sword. When teachers use later art, literature and film to liven up the Middle Ages for our students, we have to wonder, wincing, what misapprehensions we're planting, what clichés we're inadvertently reinforcing. Despite these risks, my courses on medieval culture usually do include film versions of works either medieval or medievalizing: *The Return of Martin Guerre, Sorceress, Excalibur, The Name of the Rose*, the accidentally hilarious *First Knight* and most often the *Decameron*. Looking critically at films as readings of their sources helps students to understand the poetics of borrowing, adaptation, and appropriation which governed literary activity in the Middle Ages. Moreover, using films to teach medieval literature adds a metadisciplinary gloss: films dramatize how much modern medievalists shape our discipline by our critical practice.

No longer seen solely as an independent entity requiring objective analysis, the Middle Ages is also an object of study that we construct on the basis of unstated critical and ideological assumptions. Even our most positivist analyses are more truly interpretations: we choose which texts to count and which to discount, which features to address and which to ignore, according to an interpretive and ideological agenda of which we may be only vaguely aware. That the Middle

Ages can be used to endorse an implicit agenda is perhaps most visible in avowedly creative works about the period. The medievalism of Romantic poets, pre-Raphaelite painters, modern science-fantasy writers, and directors of both commercial and "art" films, can tell us a great deal about our own. While students initially tend to judge films as more or less "accurate" or "faithful" representations of a fixed and objective original, in discussing and disagreeing with each other they learn that there is no tangible "reality" to which a rewriting may conform, either adequately or inadequately. The Middle Ages cannot exist as an object, a thing-in-itself; every version of it, including history and literary history, reflects the choices, experiences, and idiosyncrasies of the observer.

For an example I will use one politically motivated filmmaker who in the early 1970s adapted medieval literature to stage a social critique. To study Pasolini's *Decameron* students must examine both the original literature, with its poetics of borrowing and adaptation, as well as our own reading strategies with which we approach medieval texts.

Borrowing and adaptation: It always surprises me that students can find Boccaccio reprehensible and obscene, and yet take exception to Pasolini's modifications to the *Decameron*. Students resent Pasolini's radical rewriting of the frame-story and his casual presentation of sex, among other things. Discussing their resistance, and locating its origin, brings out the central concept that what has been "misrepresented" is not really Boccaccio's text, but their own ideal vision of that text.

The frame-story: Pasolini has dissolved the frame-story, transforming it into a loose connective context which on first viewing works more to disorient the viewer than to organize the narration. It is not always clear when a scene shift marks the end of an episode, and when the insertion is momentary (for example, the tableaux vivants of Brueghel paintings, inserted into the Ciappelletto episode). The Neapolitan storyteller's oral narration of *Dec.* IX.2 yields to a shot of a convent, suggesting a dramatization of that tale; but what follows is, in fact, a different convent-story, III.1. The Isabetta story ends not with her death, as in the original, but with her gazing up at the pot of basil; so that when we then see a horse market, without any mediating commentary we cannot know that the shift marks the end of one episode and the beginning of another. It is tone alone that tells the viewer that a new episode has begun: the sunny outdoor market, the noisy crowd, the absurd face of Don Gianni, Pietro's kisses distributed liberally over the horse's rump, break with the oblique visual world of Isabetta.

Boccaccio's frame-story had created a stable and maximally coherent narrative context for the tales; Pasolini's isn't even discernible, let alone decipherable,

without repeated viewings. First-time viewers cannot know the link between the murderer in the film's opening scene, and the character who will lie his way into canonization at the end of the first half. We do not know that the scattered scenes in which this character commits murder, steals, solicits sex from a boy, and so on, are dramatizations of the opening portrait of Ciappelletto in *Dec.* I.1; indeed, we may not even recognize the character as the same in them. This dissolution of the highly intelligible *Decameron* frame into an impressionistic collage which requires repeated exposure to be decoded is an artistic choice, not (as some students complain) an inept imitation. Discussing the initially incoherent, but ultimately enriching, film frame leads students to conclude that an adaptation is not really right or wrong. The director takes what is useful to his narrative agenda and discards the rest; like any medieval author, he chooses which features of the source to emphasize and which to downplay.

Pasolini's decision to suppress the story-telling frame of the original *Decameron* entails abandoning the sequential progression of the tales. The unifying factor had been their overt presentation as consecutive narrations occurring in the homogeneous social and temporal setting of the *brigata*. In transforming the frame, Pasolini replaces this social and temporal homogeneity with the spatial unity of a set of episodes all unfolding at the same time and in the same place. The film's second half, for example, is punctuated by the artist's visits to the market, establishing that the episodes of Isabetta (*Dec.* IV.5), Caterina (*Dec.* V.4), of Don Gianni (*Dec.* IX.10), and Tingoccio and Meuccio (*Dec.* VII.10), occur simultaneously with his painting of the fresco in Santa Chiara.

Other juxtapositions of locale, characters, and musical score serve to unite the film into a tumbled simultaneity. The peasant who lends his rags to Giotto's disciple in one episode is later seen celebrating a wedding in another. The Neapolitan dialect and gesticular language of the characters replace the lofty speech of Boccaccio's aristocratic Tuscan narrators. The song we hear strummed and sung during the Andreuccio episode recurs in the Isabetta tale. The tune played on a mandolin in one episode at the beginning of Part II returns in the episode of Ricciardo and Caterina, and in a third when it is whistled by the painter's assistants. The jaw-harp, the Miserere and Kyrie from the Tournai Mass, the nuns' psalm, all work similarly as links within and among episodes which purport not to be narrated, but simply to occur.

But the presence of an artist-figure recognizably played by the director makes the film involuted and self-reflexive, calling attention to its status as an artifact (Lawton, 206). The painter is set up as the creative genius par excellence: Giotto's "best disciple," too absorbed in his work to eat, dreamer of glorious visions. By inserting the tableaux vivants, Pasolini foregrounds his new form of narration as

well: if paintings are staged in the film, the film is the director's painting. Overtly artful techniques recur: the snatch of a still-life in the Andreuccio episode, Isabetta's Vermeer-like pose, and the grandiose stagings of major paintings by Brueghel and Giotto, make the film thematize the process of its own creation, countering the narrative pretense that these episodes occur unmediated. The overlap of Pasolini's character's artistic creation, and the director's own in making the film, removes the problematic of appropriation and retelling to the metanarrative plane of the entire film, rather than in the single episodes.

Overlapping elements of the film, then, both establish simultaneity and foreground the director's creation. Pasolini also uses meaningful juxtaposition to create interior commentary on the events: his choices of which tales to film, how to place them, and how to link them, make them gesture to and gloss each other. The episodes of Isabetta and of Caterina come to mind, since their inclusion, similarity, and proximity make them illuminate each other (Lawton, 214). Moreover, by means of visual echoes, as it were, and repetition in the film score, Pasolini can link even apparently disparate episodes, and make the viewer recognize a thematic link. The visual repetition of the nuns' hands plucking delightedly at Masetto, and the devout hands plucking at the shrouded corpse of Ciappelletto link the two false miracles as the director's implicit criticism of the church's exploitation of the poor (Lawton, 215). Another distinctive image that links disparate tales is the white-shrouded corpse that appears in one tableau vivant, in the Ciappelletto episode, and in the Tingoccio episode. The two gasp-of-discovery reaction shots in the Caterina episode reprise that of the two nuns on first seeing Masetto's manhood; perhaps the director retrieves the latter scene in the middle of the former to suggest that Caterina's parents, eager to snag a rich son-in-law, are as exploitative as the two nuns (Lawton, 315).

Sex: Pasolini's approach to sex seems, at first glance, cruder and more voyeuristic than Boccaccio's, and many students respond ambivalently to a film which is, after all, rated X in the U.S. Where Boccaccio uses euphemisms, such as Don Gianni's "tool for planting men," Pasolini shows sexual activity unvarnished: a modern director has to up the ante to produce the same effect that Boccaccio did in his time. Discussion brings out the fact that what students are uncomfortable with is not sex per se, but sex unembellished by the film conventions of physical beauty, glamorizing cinematography, sentimental attachment, or gender-specific camera treatment. Exploring why they squirm at the proposition that *all* humans—clergy and lay, young and old, attractive and repellent—are sexual beings, students realize that Pasolini has only rephrased Boccaccio's human comedy in terms which can shock the modern.

That Pasolini's strategy is deliberate and satirical is clear from his inversion of standard film clichés in portraying sex. Perhaps his most overt dig at glamorized

but ideologically questionable sexual exposure is the discovery of Ricciardo and Caterina by her parents. We note with amusement that the woman's body, in most films the default object of the erotic gaze, is covered with a blanket throughout, and it is the man's body that is completely exposed in full frontal technicolor nudity, "nightingale" and all. Similarly, in the Masetto episode, as two nuns walk through the orchard singing a chant, they see Masetto working in a tree; they stop singing, with a gasp. With a low-angle point-of-view shot, the camera places us in their position below him as they gaze fixedly at the bulge in his breeches. As Masetto pretends to be oblivious, they conspire to exploit his supposed muteness to experience sex with him. One sister pokes him on the thigh with a long stick, a deft and funny displacement of the part to which they have reduced him; and we recall that in film it is usually the woman who is reduced to her single sexual function. The old Abbess' varicose veins, the kiss the young Gemmata gives her very elderly husband, the laughably improbable instantaneous climax of the nuns who first try out sex with Masetto, and Masetto's equally improbable sexual potency, all call attention to the skewed treatment of sex in the cinema outside the *Decameron*.

Interpretative analysis: When students initially criticize Pasolini's *Decameron*, they cite several of his choices: the episodic discontinuity of the tales' juxtaposition and distribution; the choice of tales for inclusion, disproportionately lewd; the sex, ubiquitous and demystified, which corresponds to their cultural construct neither of the Middle Ages nor of sex. On the positive side, they praise Pasolini's larger-than-life portrayal of the Middle Ages, with caricatural color, sound, and gesture; this seems to answer a favorite brightly-colored image of the period. When pushed, though, they recognize that what they are responding to is not Pasolini's adherence to the "real" *Decameron*, but rather to how congruent Pasolini's vision is with their *own* interpretation of the *Decameron*. The *Decameron* exists as a virtual entity, primarily within a reader's conceptual grid, and only abstractly as a self-defining and self-contained object of inquiry. And in this way Pasolini's interpretation of Boccaccio precisely reenacts the medieval writer's interpretation of his sources.

One step further back, however, studying Pasolini's reading (and appropriation) of Boccaccio and the Middle Ages helps them think analytically about critical practice. While students and critics easily acknowledge the role of perspective in interpreting literary texts, we tend to accord greater autonomy to historical writing, hoping it might possess more objectivity. But implicit ideological agendas shape our methodological practice, determining what questions we will want to ask of historical as well as literary texts—questions about gender, social class, circumstances of production, rhetorical strategies, linguistic codes, archetypes, reader response, conflicting forces in the text's articulation, and so

on. Critical approaches are not ideologically neutral, in either the hard or humanistic, analytical or esthetic, disciplines. Students learn a great deal about the ethical and ideological freight of analytical practice by beginning to recognize this dynamic in interpretative practice.

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