

## **Boccaccio's *Decameron* 6.10 and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* VI.287-968: Thinking on Your Feet and the Set-Piece\***

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Both Boccaccio, in his *Decameron*, and Chaucer, in *The Canterbury Tales*, place sermons delivered by highly skilled preachers very nearly at the centre of their story collections. Boccaccio's Fra Cipolla appears in *Decameron* 6.10 and Chaucer's Pardoner, in *Canterbury Tales*, VI.287-968 ("The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale")—according to the order of the tales most widely adopted in modern editions, that of the Ellesmere manuscript (San Marino, California, Huntington Library MS EL. 26. C. 9).<sup>1</sup> Boccaccio gives particular emphasis to the importance of his Cipolla by placing the master preacher in the last tale told on the sixth day of storytelling (the day when wit is the common theme of all ten tales). Chaucer's preacher appears in the tale preceding Fragment VII of the *Canterbury Tales*; it is in Fragment VII that poetic language becomes a central theme. In both Boccaccio's *Decameron* 6.10 and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* VI.287-968, words are power, and in both tales it is significant that those words appear in sermons, a popular form of medieval literature listened to by literate and illiterate, aristocrats and lowly alike. Preachers of sermons in the Middle Ages were as much literary figures as were storytellers; they competed with the secular entertainers for the attention of popular audiences and resorted to "artifices similar to those of their old rivals."<sup>2</sup> My concern in

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1 The Ellesmere manuscript, produced in 1410, is generally thought to have arrived at the best order of the fragments which were left unordered after Chaucer's death.

2 Owst, *Literature and Pulpit*, 16.

this essay is to compare the oratorical performances of Fra Cipolla and the Pardoner—one an improvisation and the other, a feat of memory. Memorized delivery assures coherence and exactness; impromptu speech has the virtue of naturalness and liveliness. Quintilian, one of the classical rhetoricians admired in the Middle Ages and actually named in Boccaccio's tale, favoured the well-memorized speech because it could be made to seem extempore. The coincidence in genre, character, theme, and placement of Boccaccio's *Decameron* 6.10 and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* VI.287-968 becomes especially interesting if there is even a chance that Chaucer knew the *Decameron* and its tale of Fra Cipolla.

The consensus of Chaucer scholars prominent in the 1930s and 40s was that Chaucer did not know Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Fairly representative was the opinion of Robert A. Pratt and Karl Young that appeared in the 1941 publication *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*: "Chaucer does not mention the *Decameron*, he borrows no stories directly from it, and no copy or translation of it can be traced in England during the period of his life."<sup>3</sup> In recent years, however, several major Chaucer scholars have concluded that, on the contrary, the English poet was influenced by Boccaccio's *Decameron*. In her discussion of the frame of the *Canterbury Tales*, Helen Cooper affirms that "The *Decameron*... is Chaucer's primary model for his collection of stories."<sup>4</sup> In his biography of Chaucer, Derek Pearsall reaches the same conclusion: "There had been many story collections before... but the only one that decisively influenced Chaucer was Boccaccio's *Decameron*."<sup>5</sup> So does David Wallace: "the most significant witness to the *Decameron*'s influence in England is Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*."<sup>6</sup>

There are impressive parallels between Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Boccaccio's one hundred Italian novellas written forty years earlier as the *Decameron*. Among analogues between the English and Italian tale collections are "The Shipman's Tale" and *Decameron* 8.1, "The Franklin's Tale" and *Decameron* 10.5, "The Clerk's Tale" and *Decameron* 10.10, and, more remotely, "The Man of Law's Tale" and *Decameron* 5.2, "The Reeve's Tale" and *Decameron* 9.6, and "The Miller's Tale" and *Decameron* 3.4.<sup>7</sup> Not

3 Bryan and Dempster, eds., *Sources and Analogues*, 20.

4 Cooper, "The Frame," I: 13.

5 Pearsall, *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 240.

6 Wallace, *Giovanni Boccaccio*, 111.

7 For a discussion of the relationship between "The Man of Law's Tale" and *Decameron* 5.2 see Heffernan, *The Orient in Chaucer*, 23-44 (chap. 2). See also Heffernan, "Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* and *Reeve's Tale*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, and the French *Fabliaux*," 315-18, for a discussion of close parallels between Chaucer's "Reeve's Tale" and *Decameron* 9.6.

only are one quarter of Chaucer's tales analogues to tales in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, but both the English and Italian authors apologize for their more churlish tales (Boccaccio in his "Conclusion" and Chaucer in the Prologue to the "Miller's Tale" [I.317-375]), both place multiple storytellers within a frame which creates the illusion of historicity (a pilgrimage in Chaucer, a retreat to the countryside during the Black Death in Boccaccio), and both storytellers are felt as presences within their collections of tales (Chaucer as one of the Canterbury pilgrims and Boccaccio as a narratorial voice outside of the frame which, nevertheless, frequently intrudes).

As for "The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale" and *Decameron* 6.10, a few Chaucerians—primarily concerned with other matters—did couple Boccaccio's Fra Cipolla with Chaucer's Pardoner as early as the 1970s and 80s, a period when most Chaucer scholars were still unwilling to concede that there was any evidence at all that Chaucer made use of the *Decameron*. Jill Mann, in her discussion of the Pardoner in *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*, places Chaucer's preacher within the context of literature satirizing false relics, and after a brief survey of works by Guiot de Provins, Gautier de Coincy, and Adam de la Halle comments, "Such satire on the clerical use of false relics attains its most sophisticated development in the *Decameron*."<sup>8</sup> She then proceeds to summarize Boccaccio's novella of Fra Cipolla. The Italian author's handling of the friar's relics, Mann suggests, raises the possibility that Boccaccio is a doubter of religion itself: "In describing relics that never existed, Boccaccio seems to come near to satirising the whole nature of religious belief—the abandonment of a 'common-sense' basis for belief means also an inability to distinguish genuine mystery from fraudulent mystification."<sup>9</sup> Ten years later, in an essay that ranges broadly over the works of Chaucer and Boccaccio and takes as its purpose to "draw attention to the dissimilarities between the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Decameron*," Robin Kirkpatrick, discussing witty language as "an essential feature of Boccaccio's comedy," makes an allusion to "Cipolla—Boccaccio's Pardoner."<sup>10</sup> By 1990, in *Chaucerian Theatricality*, John Ganim undertakes a comparison of the Pardoner and Ciappelletto—not Cipolla, but another character (and, like Cipolla, a liar) who appears in *Decameron* 1.1—in order to consider "ways in which Chaucer's poetic project constitutes a reading, or a response, to Boccaccio's."<sup>11</sup> Ganim's 1990 publication appears on the threshold of the decade in which the pendulum begins

8 Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*, 151.

9 Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*, 152.

10 Kirkpatrick, "The Wake of the *Commedia*," 201 and 213.

11 Ganim, *Chaucerian Theatricality*, 57.

to move towards the idea that Chaucer did know Boccaccio.<sup>12</sup> Ganim, in fact, suggests that he might as usefully have discussed *Decameron* 6.10. He points out that “There are other confidence men in Boccaccio worthy of comparison with the Pardoner. The story of Cipolla... is one of those.”<sup>13</sup> Most recently, in a volume of essays which focuses on the story collections of the two fourteenth-century authors, Linda Georgianna uses Boccaccio’s Cipolla and Chaucer’s Pardoner to illustrate the difference between their views on anticlericalism. Georgianna calls the Pardoner “Chaucer’s reinvention of a quintessentially Boccaccian character.”<sup>14</sup> In contrast to Jill Mann who finds Boccaccio’s tale of Fra Cipolla a serious satirical comment on religion, Georgianna argues that it is less “biting” than Chaucer’s portrait of the Pardoner.

In the soon-to-be-completed update of *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales*, Mary Hamel does not include *Decameron* 6.10 among the sources of the “Pardoner’s Prologue and Tale.”<sup>15</sup> She does, however, allow that two Florentine sources for the Pardoner’s *exemplum* about the three rioters who go in search of Death—a novella from the *Libro di Novelli et di Bel Parlar Gentile* and a play, *Rappresentazione di Sant’ Antonio*—suggest “that Chaucer came across the story in the course of his visit to Florence in 1373.”<sup>16</sup> It seems to me equally likely that Chaucer might have come across the *Decameron* and the story of Fra Cipolla in that same year. Two years earlier, in 1371, Boccaccio had returned to Florence from Naples and recopied and revised the *Decameron*, already a popular work throughout Europe.<sup>17</sup> In 1373, while Chaucer visited Florence, Boccaccio began to lecture on Dante, a poet who influenced both the Italian and English poets. Though there is no evidence that Chaucer attended these lectures, there is no doubt that he would have been interested enough in both the subject and the speaker to have sought them out. Linda Georgianna’s judgement of the relationship of the “Pardoner’s Tale” to *Decameron* 6.10 is that Boccaccio’s tale is “its analogue.”<sup>18</sup>

The term “analogue” seems appropriate only in the most general sense of one tale being like the other in some of its aspects. They are not strict literary analogues like the story of the pound of flesh in the *Gesta Romanorum* which may be thought of as an

12 See Peter Beidler’s summary of shifting scholarly attitudes concerning Chaucer’s knowledge of Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, “Just Say Yes, Chaucer Knew the *Decameron*,” 25-46.

13 Ganim, *Chaucerian Theatricality*, 59.

14 Georgianna, “Anticlericalism in Boccaccio and Chaucer,” 167.

15 Hamel, “The Pardoner’s Prologue and Tale,” I: 267-319.

16 Hamel, “The Pardoner’s Prologue and Tale,” I: 280.

17 Wallace, *Giovanni Boccaccio*, xiii.

18 Georgianna, “Anticlericalism in Boccaccio and Chaucer,” 167.

analogue to the episode in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* with a similar plot. The tales by Boccaccio and Chaucer, after all, have obviously different storylines, but they do have in common the fact that Dioneo's novella about Fra Cipolla's sermon and the Pardoner's tale are both essentially examples of the most common literary genre encountered by the average medieval person—the sermon—and that they are delivered by corrupt preachers who exemplify mastery of their craft. Boccaccio is more comfortable than is Chaucer with the implicit parallel between the verbal artistry of his corrupt preacher and his own. This may be because the novella about Fra Cipolla appears in Day Six wherein the theme of words coming to the rescue repeats the underlying premise of the entire *Decameron*; that is, that storytelling can be a defense, even against the horrors of the plague. The controlling theme for all the stories of Day Six of Boccaccio's *Decameron* is set at the conclusion of the fifth day of storytelling:

chi, con alcuno leggiadro motto tentato, si riscosse, o con pronta risposta o avvedimento fuggì perdita, pericolo o scorno.<sup>19</sup>

[those who, on being provoked by some verbal pleasantry, have returned like for like, or who, by a prompt retort or shrewd manoeuvre, have avoided danger, discomfiture or ridicule.]<sup>20</sup>

*Decameron* 6.10, approximately the midpoint of Boccaccio's collection of novellas, is the story of a preacher, Fra Cipolla, whose quick-witted oratory and improvisational skill enable him to escape from a potentially embarrassing practical joke. Among the other tales of Day Six that take up the subject of wit are *Decameron* 6.5 concerning Giotto's reply to Forese's jibe about being dressed poorly and *Decameron* 6.7, which includes Madonna Filippa's speech against the unjust punishment of adulterous women. The eloquence of Madonna Filippa in *Decameron* 6.7 not only saves her from death—the punishment for adultery—but persuades the legislators of Prato to change the unfair law governing the penalty against women convicted of adultery. But many of Boccaccio's best characters have great wit. One of these is Ciappelletto who appears outside of Day Six (in *Decameron* 1.1). Ciappelletto, among the worst men in the world, creates such a picture of virtuous life in his false deathbed confession that his lies convince his confessor of his holiness; moreover, Ciappelletto becomes venerated as a saint after the confessor delivers a hagiographical sermon.

19 Boccaccio, *Decameron*, edited by Vittore Branca, vol. II, p. 118. Subsequent citations refer to this edition.

20 Boccaccio, *Decameron*, translated by G. H. McWilliam, 441. All subsequent passages in English translation are taken from this work.

Like Boccaccio, Chaucer places an accomplished preacher—the Pardoner—near the midpoint of his tale collection. Although the “Pardoner’s Tale” concerns an “artist of language,” as C. David Benson has described the Pardoner,<sup>21</sup> it is in Fragment VII, which follows, that Chaucer makes the subject of poetic language a prominent theme in such tales as “Sir Thopas” and “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale.” By the end of his tale words fail the Pardoner, however. Harry Bailly’s vulgarity rises to meet the Pardoner’s invitation to buy his patently false relics and, like Boccaccio’s unlettered<sup>22</sup> Fra Cipolla, the rude Host manages to turn the tables on the clever man who seeks to make a fool of him:

Thou woldest make me kisse thyn olde breech,  
And swere it were a relyk of a seint,  
Though it were with thy fundement depeint!  
(VI.948-50)<sup>23</sup>

Chaucer makes the incapacity of the Pardoner manifest at the conclusion of his tale by giving him no words: “This Pardoner answerde nat a word; / So wrooth he was, no word ne wolde he seye” (VI.956-57). It takes the quick manoeuvre of the pilgrim knight to ease the tension by getting Harry and the Pardoner to “kiss-and-make-up.” Thus, a major difference between the tales is that at their conclusion, Boccaccio’s Fra Cipolla is triumphant while Chaucer’s Pardoner is defeated.

Before the final silence, however, Chaucer’s Pardoner has had much to say. His “Prologue” (VI.329-462) explains his preaching technique, and his “Tale,” which like Dioneo’s novella about Cipolla is almost all sermon, displays two distinct rhetorical styles—one loose (VI.463-660) and the other tight (VI.661-903). The loose style—full of apostrophe, exclamation, illustration, digression, and other rhetorical devices—strikes out noisily at the vices of the tavern (gluttony, gambling, and swearing). By contrast, the *exemplum* about the three rioters is “tight,” that is to say, highly focused and restrained. Augustine called this style “subdued,” appropriate to teaching.<sup>24</sup> Apart from the explanatory prologue, it is clear that the Pardoner, in contrast to Fra Cipolla of Boccaccio’s novella, delivers the same sermon (VI.463-903) over and over again. It is a set-piece: “I kan al by rote that I telle. / My theme is alwey oon, and evere was” (VI.332-33). Had the Pardoner been free to deliver “som myrthe or japes” (VI.319) as Harry Bailly requested after the maudlin “Physician’s Tale,” the pilgrims might have witnessed an impromptu

21 Benson, *Chaucer’s Drama of Style*, 44.

22 Boccaccio, “niuna scienza avendo,” II: 173; McWilliam, “illiterate,” 469.

23 All references to Chaucer’s work refer to *The Riverside Chaucer*, edited by Larry D. Benson.

24 Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Bk. 4, ch. 19, 145.

performance. His quick assent to the Host's request—"It shal be doon...by Seint Ronyon!" (VI.320)—indicates that he is willing enough, even if he seems to need to buy time by stopping to eat: "'But first,' quod he, 'heere at this alestake / I wol bothe drynke and eten of a cake'" (VI.321-22). The *gentils* object, however, to hearing any "ribaudye" (VI.324) and close off the Pardoner's chance to try out something new in a merry key. Although he consents to telling them "som moral thyng" (VI.325), he repeats that he needs to pause for refreshment and thought: "I moot thynke" (VI.327). If his theme is always the same—*Radix malorum est Cupiditas*—and his sermon is memorized, about what does he pause to think? The one new element that he decides to insert before his set-piece: the "Pardoner's Prologue." Since he has the "moral thyng"—the "Pardoner's Tale"—"by rote" (VI.332), the only thing that he needs to pause over and think through is his analysis of his preaching. That revelation is what he refers to as "som honest thyng" (VI.328).

The Pardoner makes the "Prologue" an opportunity not only to analyse his preaching technique but to discuss candidly what motivates his life's work. "First" (VI.335), he explains, a preacher needs to win the confidence of his audience by displaying his credentials. The Pardoner begins his sermons, therefore, by showing his listeners the bishop's seal on his letter of authorization and his papal bulls. Also, he tells his fellow pilgrims that he speaks a few words of Latin before making a pitch for his dubious relics (i.e., the shoulder bone of the holy Jew's sheep that heals sick cattle, cures sheep of scabs, causes farm animals to multiply, and brings about trust in jealous husbands, or the mitten that brings abundance to the land of the farmer who wears it when sowing his fields). He brags about the trick that has yielded "An hundred mark" (VI.390): that is, he announces to the congregation that only those without sin can benefit from his relics. Then, having described the effectiveness of his props and very profitable "gaude" (VI.389), the Pardoner gives an account of animated gesture in preaching:

Thanne peyne I me to strecche forth the nekke,  
 And est and west upon the peple I bekke,  
 As dooth a dowve sittynge on a berne.  
 Myne handes and my tonge goon so yerne  
 That it is joye to se my bisynesse.

(VI.395-99)

To what end? His stated reason for preaching is straightforward: "I preche of no thyng but for coveityse" (VI.424). The Pardoner is conscious, furthermore, of the irony that his constant theme is the same as his dominant personal vice: "Thus kan I preche agayn that same vice / Which that I use, and that is avarice" (VI.427-28). Money enables him

to avoid physical labour—"I wol nat do no labour with myne handes" (VI.444)—and continue the clean work of preaching. After just 133 lines, the Pardoner turns to his regular set-piece by gracefully acknowledging the desire of his fellow travelers—"Youre likyng is that I shal telle a tale" (VI.455).

The first part of the "Pardoner's Tale"—the part I have called stylistically "loose"—plays to the crowd. This is the part of the Pardoner's sermon that in its freewheeling style most resembles Fra Cipolla's. The Pardoner ranges over the sins of gluttony, gambling, and swearing in a way that takes every opportunity to sensationalize and to turn histrionic. After, for example, reminding the listening pilgrims that drink led Lot to commit incest with his daughters and caused Herod to permit the murder of John the Baptist, the Pardoner falls into an harangue that recalls the hysterical style of the Prioress recounting the murder of the little clergeon. Full of emotionalism, he exclaims,

O glotonye, ful of cursednesse!  
 O cause first of oure confusioun!  
 O original of oure dampnacioun,  
 Til Crist hadde boght us with his blood agayn!  
 (VI.498-501)

After attributing the loss of Paradise as well as sour breath, slurred speech, and impaired faculties to gluttony, the Pardoner indulges in a picturesque digression. If, as a late medieval tractate on preaching says, "Preaching...is the fitting and suitable communication of the Word of God," this digression takes the Pardoner far from his announced text in 1 Timothy 6:10, *Radix malorum est cupiditas*.<sup>25</sup> His digression evokes faraway places in Spain and France which supply red and white wines to the shops of London:

Now kepe yow fro the white and fro the rede,  
 And namely fro the white wyn of Lepe  
 That is to selle in Fysshstrete or in Chepe.  
 This wyn of Spaigne crepeth subtilly  
 In othere wyne, growynge faste by,  
 Of which ther ryseth swich fumositee  
 That whan a man hath dronken draughtes thre,  
 And weneth that he be at hoom in Chepe,  
 He is in Spaigne, right at the toune of Lepe—  
 Nat at the Rochele, ne at Burdeux toun.  
 (VI.562-71)

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25 Translated by Harry Caplan in *Of Eloquence*, 52-78. The line appears at page 54.

Just three glasses of the powerful wine of the Lepe district will make a Londoner drinking at home in Chepe feel transported to Spain. The digression makes the sort of claim that might seem to defeat the Pardoner's ostensible purpose, but he takes the risk to achieve the colourful effect. Besides, by this point he has said nearly all he set out to about gluttony and is ready to move on to the next two sins. These get far less space than gluttony, the sin with which the Pardoner captured his audience's attention (in 105 lines). He moves rapidly through gambling (39 lines) and swearing (31 lines) and closes in on his sermon's *exemplum*: "now wol I telle forth my tale" (VI.660).

The *exemplum* about the three rioters who set out to slay Death is the "tight" part of the Pardoner's set-piece. It even connects smoothly to the preceding loose harangue about the sins of the tavern because the rioters have been drinking there "Longe erst er prime" (VI.662) when they swear revenge on Death for having slain a friend of theirs, "Fordronke, as he sat on his bench" (VI.674). The Pardoner's *exemplum* is a fine instance of the kind of illustrative stories with pointed morals that were used to great effect by such preachers as Jacques de Vitry and Caesarius of Heisterbach.<sup>26</sup> The *exemplum* focuses sharply on the Pardoner's theme of avarice. The three rioters find Death by following the Old Man's directions to "this croked wey" (VI.761) whereby they discover gold florins, desire for which causes them to kill one another as each of them tries to gain sole possession of the treasure. The two older men stab the youngest of the trio to death after he returns with a meal of bread and wine only to die themselves from a poison the young man put in the wine which is so exotic that even Avicenna "Wroot nevere in no canon, ne in no fen, / Mo wonder signes of empoisonyng" (VI.890-91). Having brought his set-piece to this customary highpoint, the Pardoner falls back into the loose style of the sermon's first half—"O cursed synne of alle cursednesse! / O traytours homycide" (VI.895-96)—and quickly moves into his regular call for the buying of pardons (which elicits Harry's uncommon reaction):

Myn hooly pardoun may yow alle warice,  
So that ye offre nobles or sterlynges,  
Or elles silver broches, spoones, rynges.

(VI.906-08)

So locked is the Pardoner into his memorized set-piece that he cannot stop the performance once it gains momentum. He catches himself in a memory lapse—"o word

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<sup>26</sup> The sermons of Jacques de Vitry (c. 1160-1240), a late medieval preacher, are rich in *exempla*; see *The Exempla of Illustrative Stories from the Sermones vulgares of Jacques de Vitry*, edited by Thomas Frederick Crane. The *Dialogue of Miracles* by Caesarius of Heisterbach (c. 1180-c. 1245) is a collection of moral tales which could be used as *exempla* in sermons.

for gat I in my tale” (VI.919)—inserts the nearly forgotten call to buy relics and then makes the critical error: he extends an invitation to the Host to make the first purchase. When Harry Bailly lets fly his astonishingly gross insults, the Pardoner is too stuck in his familiar sermon mode to think of a quick retort. Chaucer’s Pardoner is a highly skilled preacher, but lacks the mental agility of Fra Cipolla.

Boccaccio’s preacher can think on his feet. He is a mendicant friar who travels the countryside collecting alms for the Society of St. Anthony. Fra Cipolla is the kind of preacher who preaches in churches as well as in streets and fields and who is able to reach rustic audiences with homely stories and language. During the homily of a mass held in their local church, Fra Cipolla promises the villagers of Certaldo that later that day, outside in the public square, he will show them a feather from the wing of the Angel Gabriel (in reality a parrot feather) in return for offerings of money. Two practical jokers decide to sabotage Fra Cipolla’s afternoon performance by stealing into his bedroom while the friar is dining somewhere in town and replacing the parrot feather contained in a reliquary with a lump of coal. Later when Fra Cipolla is preaching to the crowd of *Certaldesi* who have assembled to see the Angel Gabriel’s feather and the preacher ascends to the point in his sermon where he dramatically opens the casket, he switches rhetorical gears effortlessly as soon as he sees the coals where the feather should be. In a *tour de force* of eloquence and improvisational wit, Cipolla proves himself unabashed as he launches into a bogus account of his travels to the Holy Land:

Ma non per tanto, senza mutar colore, alzato il viso e le mani al cielo, disse sì che da tutti fu udito: “O Iddio, lodata sia sempre la tua potenza.” (II: 180)

[Without changing colour in the slightest, however, he raised his eyes to Heaven, and in a voice that could be heard by all the people present, he exclaimed: “Almighty God, may Thy power be forever praised!” (474)]

As Fra Cipolla catalogues relics that he supposedly saw on a pilgrimage, his invention is boundless. He relates what the Patriarch of Jerusalem showed him:

Egli primieramente mi mostrò il ditto dello Spirito Santo così intero e saldo come fu mai, e il ciuffetto del Serafino che apparve a San Francesco, e una dell’ unghie de’ Gherubini, e una delle coste del Verbum-caro-fatti-alle finestre, e de’ vestimenti della Santa Fé catolica, e alquanti de’ raggi della stella che apparve a’ tre Magi in oriente, e una ampolla del sudore di San Michele quando combatté col diavolo. (II: 183)

[“First of all he showed me the finger of the Holy Ghost, as straight and firm as it ever was; then the forelock of the Seraph that appeared to Saint Francis; and a cherub’s fingernail; and one of the side-bits of the Word-made-flash-in-the-pan; and an article

or two of the Holy Catholic faith; and a few of the rays from the star that appeared to the three Magi in the East; and a phial of Saint Michael's sweat when he fought with the Devil." (475)]

McWilliam captures well the confusing chatter of the friar when he translates "Verbum-caro-fatti-alle finestre," which means literally "The Word made precious at the window," as "the Word-made-flash-in-the-pan" (475). In the friar's gibberish the incorporeal and abstract take on concreteness: the Holy Ghost can have a visible finger, and abstract articles of faith can be displayed. Cipolla's mystifying catalogue of relics renders the crowd ready to accept the coals as the very coals over which St. Lawrence was roasted and met his martyrdom. The simple villagers of Certaldo believe Fra Cipolla's explanation that his carrying off the wrong reliquary was an act willed by God:

"mi pare esser certo che volontà sia stata di Dio e che Egli stesso la cassetta de' carbone ponesse nelle mie mani, ricordandom'io pur testé che la festa di San Lorenzo sia di qui a due di." (II: 185)

["it was the will of God...it was He who put the casket of coals into my hands, for I have just remembered that the day after tomorrow is the Feast of Saint Lawrence." (476)]

The Friar is so secure in his having won over the crowd by playing on its credulity that he becomes even more outrageously inventive, suggesting that in exchange for their offerings he can inscribe their clothes with crosses made with St. Lawrence's coals and they will be protected thereby from fire for a whole year. In fact, he merely states the obvious: if you don't touch fire, it won't touch you ("fuoco nol toccherà che non si senta," II: 185). As he marks up their white smocks and shawls and doublets, collecting more money than ever before, he adds with further invention that the miraculous coals can never be worn down no matter how much he writes with them.

It is, of course, verbal wit not physical hocus-pocus that defines Fra Cipolla's improvisational exuberance and gets him out of the tight corner into which the two young pranksters put him. From the outset of *Decameron* 6.10, its narrator, Dioneo, sets the friar's rhetorical powers before his listener by likening his unlettered genius to the skills of classical rhetoricians:

e oltre a questo, niuna scienza avendo, sì ottimo parlatore e pronto era, che chi conosciuto non l'avesse, non solamente un gran retorico l'avrebbe stimato, ma avrebbe detto esser Tulio medesimo o forse Quintiliano. (II: 173)

[He was quite illiterate, but he was such a lively and excellent speaker, that anyone hearing him for the first time would have concluded, not only that he was some great master of rhetoric, but that he was Cicero in person, or perhaps Quintilian. (470)]

Medieval treatises on *ars praedicandi* adapted classical rhetoric. St. Thomas Aquinas was one of those who approved of the use of the pagan arts of rhetoric by Christian preachers, as taught by ancient rhetoricians like Cicero and Quintilian. His warning about the arts of persuasion, however, underscores what is reprehensible in a preacher like Fra Cipolla (or Chaucer's Pardoner):

He who strives mainly for eloquence does not intend that men should admire what he says, but rather tries to gain admiration for himself. Eloquence is commendable when the speaker has no desire to display himself, but wishes only to use it as a means of benefiting his hearers, and out of reverence for Holy Scripture.<sup>27</sup>

Guibert de Nogent, a twelfth-century Benedictine Abbot of St. Mary of Nogent and a master of Ciceronian rhetoric, strikes a similar note in his *Liber quo ordine sermo fieri debeat* (*A Book about the Way a Sermon Ought to be Given*). Trying to account for the fact that many in the religious life refuse to preach, Guibert explains,

Some...despise it because of pride: they see that many preachers display themselves arrogantly and for the sake of vanity, and they wish to avoid the epithet "sermonizers," which describes so contemptible a breed, a class which Gregory Nazianzen called "ventriloquists, because they speak for the belly's sake (*pro suo ventre loquuntur*)."<sup>28</sup>

Well before the practical joke puts the novella in motion, Fra Cipolla's delight in language is displayed in the way he is said to present his servant of three names—"Guccio Balena" (Whale), "Guccio Imbratta" (Befoul), "Guccio Porco" (Pig) (II: 175)—to his friends. Fra Cipolla tells everyone that Guccio had nine failings, and when asked what they were, he would answer in a virtuouoso display of rhymed epithets: "egli è tardo, sugliardo e bugiardo: nigligente, disubbidente e maldicente: trascutato, smemorato e scostumato" (II: 173) ["he's untruthful, distasteful and slothful; negligent, disobedient, and truculent; careless, witless and graceless," 471]. The clever wit of Cipolla's sermon is less directed towards the religious education of the illiterate Certaldo rustics than it is intended to demonstrate to his fellow Florentine pranksters that he is cunning enough to preach his way out of their trap. Style, not content, is what counts in Fra Cipolla; he is far more concerned with secular rhetoric (and self-aggrandizement) than he is with Christian teaching. Hence, Boccaccio's observation about the friar, "niuna scienza avendo" [he

27 The passage is quoted by Walsh, "St. Thomas on Preaching," 13. Walsh locates the passage in Aquinas's *Opuscula* without naming the specific short work. I am grateful to Dr. Inez I. Ringland, Rebecca Crown Library, Dominican University, for sending me this obscure article. I was led to this article by a citation in Caplan, *Of Eloquence*, 41.

28 Guibert de Nogent, *A Book about the Way a Sermon Ought to be Given*, 163.

was quite illiterate]. The fourteenth-century preaching manual *Forma Praedicandi* (*The Form of Preaching*), the only known work by Robert of Basevorn, makes clear how dangerous ignorance in a preacher is. Basevorn writes that a “need for one actually preaching is competent knowledge...otherwise, *the blind leads the blind, and both fall into the ditch* (Matt. 15:14, Luke 6:39).”<sup>29</sup>

The rustics are robbed and cheated, but the Florentine company of storytellers, pranksters, and Boccaccio's readers are entertained. That Boccaccio's Fra Cipolla is treated as a hero of verbal wit is unsurprising as the name “Cipolla” (Onion) and the story's setting in Certaldo—the supposed birthplace of Boccaccio—suggest that the preacher is the storyteller's *alter ego*. In the third paragraph of *Decameron* 6.10, Diono, its narrator, says of Certaldo, “quel terreno produca cipolle famose per tutta Toscana” (II: 173; [“the soil in those parts produces onions that are famous throughout the whole of Tuscany,” 469]). While that might be literally true, the many layers of an onion also serve as an image for fiction, the kind represented by the *Decameron*, intended for *solace* rather than for the didactic seed of truth at its core. The vernacular novellas of the *Decameron* made Boccaccio famous not merely through all Tuscany but throughout all of western Europe.<sup>30</sup> The layers of an onion contain no seed; as Millicent Marcus well observes, “The fact that Cipolla's falsifications occasion no moralising gloss...indicates the great distance Boccaccio has traveled in freeing his fictions from any obligations to interpretive systems beyond the text.”<sup>31</sup> The reaction of Fra Cipolla's two trickster friends to his talking himself out of his predicament exactly matches that of the *brigata* of the *cornice* (or frame). The two men “avevan tanto riso, che eran creduti smascellare” (II: 186; [“laughed until they thought their sides would split,” 477]). The elegant Florentine storytellers “all laughed heartily” as well at the tale (477).

Chaucer's preacher, on the other hand, is silenced and exposed at the end of his tale so that he can do no further harm while on the pilgrimage to Canterbury among his fellow pilgrims. He had by then already delivered a serious treatment of his sermon's theme—money is the root of all evil—in his *exemplum*. By comparison to Boccaccio's Fra Cipolla, Chaucer's Pardoner is a preacher who comes close to preaching truth. He fails, in the end, because of himself, not because of his preaching technique. The Pardoner has what St. Thomas Aquinas referred to as “an orderly discourse” but he lacks

29 Robert of Basevorn, *The Form of Preaching*, 124.

30 Wallace, *Giovanni Boccaccio*, 2.

31 Marcus, *Allegory of Form*, 67. See also Georgianna's discussion of Boccaccio's emphasis on wit rather than corruption in “Anticlericalism in Boccaccio and Chaucer,” 148-76.

“the virtue of good works.”<sup>32</sup> The embodiment of cupidity, not charity, the Pardoner cannot resist trying to prey on the spiritual community of pilgrims of which he is a part. Chaucer’s confidence man is an altogether darker portrait than Boccaccio’s exuberant Fra Cipolla. The Pardoner’s memorized sermon illustrates what Bishop Kenneth Untener comments on in a recent discussion of preaching: “none of us improves simply by doing it over and over. Practice doesn’t make perfect. It makes permanent.”<sup>33</sup> Or does it?

The Pardoner’s set-piece on the theme “Radix malorum est Cupiditas” (VI.334), even if unintentionally, causes the preacher to delve into his interior to explore his own vice over and over again. According to Guibert de Nogent, “no preaching is more efficacious than that which would help man to know himself, that which brings out into the open all that is deep within him, in his innermost heart, that which will shame him, finally, by forcing him to stand clearly revealed before his own gaze.”<sup>34</sup> Guibert is, of course, discussing the effect such preaching has on the preacher’s audience. In Chaucer’s tale, however, it takes the combination of the Pardoner’s self-exposure in his “Prologue” with his attempt to sell his relics at the close of his “Tale” to provoke the vulgar insults of the Host which, in turn, shame the Pardoner into silence. The happiest interpretation of this silence is that it might signal an epiphany whereby the Pardoner is turned into the most affected member of his audience, one more ready for the spiritual journey to Canterbury. Even if we assume Chaucer knew Cipolla, we would not expect so creative a poet to merely copy him. The English poet’s having taken pains to depict his preacher as trapped in the cupidity about which he preaches reveals Chaucer’s concern with the high purpose of preaching and the problem of the relationship of art and doctrine, a concern which, in the Retraction to the *Canterbury Tales*, leads Chaucer to disown them—along with other “worldly” poems of his, such as *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Book of the Duchess*—and to thank God for his having written legends of saints, homilies, and moral works like his translation of Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*.

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32 Quoted by Walsh, “St. Thomas on Preaching,” 11, who indicates the source in Aquinas as his *Commentary on St. John* without further detail. The passage from Walsh is cited by Caplan, *Of Eloquence*, 48.

33 Untener, *Preaching Better*, 4.

34 Guibert de Nogent, *A Book about the Way a Sermon Ought to be Given*, 173.

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