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RELICS AND ARTIFACTS: THE MATERIALITY OF HOLY BODIES IN ITALIAN
CULTURE FROM 14TH CENTURY NOVELLA TO MODERN FILM

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This work examines the materiality of holy bodies in the form of relics and religious artifacts across centuries of Italian cultural production. Throughout my project, I offer a new perspective on the centrality of relics and religious artifacts in a series of literary and filmic texts, from Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1353) to Alice Rohrwacher's *Corpo Celeste* (2011). One of the main goals of my study is, on the macro-level, to investigate the reasons why discourse on the sacred (body) so radically pervades Italian popular culture and, consequently, its literary and filmic production. The Italian literary and filmic traditions are exceptionally rife with texts that involve relics and religious artifacts, and my study aims to contribute to an interdisciplinary understanding of specific practices and features of the cult of sacred bodies in Italian culture. Accordingly, I hope that a study like mine—which contemplates a constant dialogue between novellas and the cult of relics, consulting features from other fields of study such as theology, anthropology, sociology, and religion—will contribute to a slightly richer understanding of these literary works. At the same time, it is vital to document the valuable information that these oeuvres have to offer in order to better understand such cult.

The main argument of my thesis is built on determining whether the Trebatius/Agamben definition of *profanation* is a better tool for contemplating the peculiarities of Italian culture more effectively when compared to the idea of secularization, a theory that many of its advocates now reconsider or disregard. Indeed, though the process of secularization is inexorable to a certain extent, I argue that secularization should be understood not as religion-in-decline *per se*, but rather as the declining scope of religious authority. With my study, I attempt to demonstrate

that Agamben's idea of profanation might be a better lens for a more productive analysis of Italian culture, which readily appropriates narration of the sacred and renders it free to use.

My study was driven by research questions that have been neglected for too long but should be of great interest. For instance, one of the main inquiries of my dissertation is to shed light on how it was possible for Boccaccio and other Italian *novellisti* of the 14th and 15th centuries—like Franco Sacchetti and Masuccio Salernitano—to include so freely in their works sexualized angels or saints' undergarments. In addition, in the last part of my dissertation, I show that this proclivity to profane the sacred body in Italian culture is still very much alive. I maintain that just as (or because) Boccaccio uses the body of the Archangel Gabriel in his *Decameron* (IV, 2), Italian *registi* of the 20th and 21st centuries like Federico Fellini and Alice Rohrwacher can stage a boy who asks St. Louis if he masturbates or a teenage girl who experiments with her sexuality on a human-size crucifix.

In order to trace this arch, I investigate how sacred discourse, once the prerogative of the highly-educated—almost exclusively ecclesiastical—class, became free to use for commoners. In this direction, I examine the *volgarizzamenti* of the sacred narration and *contaminationes* among different genres to attest to whether these phenomena assisted the novella in profaning the sacred narration. Concurrently, I attempt to provide a specific reading of a few tales of the *Decameron* that allow us to better appreciate the mastery of Boccaccio in relation to his outstanding ability to profane sacred matter. It must be noted that Boccaccio's acts of profanation read not only in a comical tone, like in the well-known tale of Frate Cipolla (VI, 10), but also sorrowfully like that of Lisabetta and Lorenzo, a tale which I demonstrate is abundant in hagiographical elements that evoke various aspects of the cult of relics.

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INTRODUCTION

It has become a truism in archaeology, anthropology, and the social sciences and humanities very broadly to recognize a 'return to things' over recent years in contrast to the earlier focus on representation, and to the long scholarly tradition that separated subject from object, mind from matter. Numerous different perspectives have converged on some version of the idea that subject and object, mind and matter, human and thing co-constitute each other. In these different approaches it is accepted that human existence and human social life depend on material things. (Hodder 155)

In the last decades, the study of material culture, at the center of literary and cultural studies since the 1980s, has gained new centrality thanks to the inquiries into the relationship between human and nonhuman, problematizing the relationship between *human* and *object*, as we see in studies such as Roberto Esposito's *Persons & Things* (2015), Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* (2013), and Ian Hodder's *Human-thing entanglement: towards an integrated archaeological perspective* (2012). Through this new critical trend, works such as Bynum's *Christian Materiality: An essay on religion in late medieval Europe* (2011), Julia MH Smith's *Portable Christianity: Relics in the Medieval West* (2012), Ugo Fabietti's *Materia sacra. Corpi, oggetti, immagini, feticci nella pratica religiosa* (2014) show that this discussion also involves the interactions between humans and the sacred matter, in particular relics and religious artifacts.

Particularly significant for this analysis is Hodder's work on the "human-thing entanglement." This study is explicitly directed "towards an integrated archaeological perspective," which can also offer an anthropological viewpoint on the analysis of the literary and filmic texts like the ones I examine in this work. After offering new approaches in the study of the human-thing relationship in archeology, Hodder highlights that, "we can say with some confidence that there would be general agreement in archaeology, as well as in related disciplines, with the idea that humans and human social life depend on things" (155).

Furthermore, Brown's *Thing Theory* and the numerous scholars who follow this approach

provide a useful tool for the study of relics in analyzing the relationship between humans and religious items.

Commenting on Clifford Geertz, the American anthropologist well-known for his study on Symbolic Anthropology and his *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), Fabietti states that,

Per quanto “spirituale” possa essere una religione, non c’è modo di separarla da una sua base materiale fatta di oggetti manipolabili, di gesti, di immagini reali. Il rito non è, certo, soltanto manipolazione di oggetti, ... ma è sempre e comunque un modo di rapportarsi con oggetti, spazi, luoghi, materia: tutte cose che rendono estremamente concreta l’esperienza religiosa. (153-154)¹

Thus, by keeping at the center this essential tie amongst objects, spaces, matter, and the religious experience, my dissertation will offer a new perspective on the centrality of relics and religious artifacts in a series of literary and filmic texts from the Italian tradition. My research will further attempt to study relics and religious artifacts as a fundamental component of Italian cultural heritage. According to UNESCO, “the term cultural heritage encompasses several main categories of heritage” that include two main classes, “tangible” and “intangible” (Unesco.org). As Marilena Vecco points out,

starting in the mid 1970s, international documents were drawn up in an attempt to define the general criteria, with the aim of codifying in all the documents, tangible or intangible expressions of human action which, having acquired a value, need to be protected. (323)

My study will be aware not only that relics and religious artifacts are tangible pieces of cultural heritage (more precisely “movable cultural heritage”), but also that they generate “intangible

¹ As "spiritual" as a religion might be, there is no way to separate it from its material base made of manipulable objects, gestures, real images. The ritual is not, of course, only the manipulation of objects, ... but it is always and in any case a way of relating with objects, spaces, places, matter: all things that make the religious experience extremely concrete. (My translation)

cultural heritage.” The study of relics and religious artifacts has a long tradition in fields such as cultural heritage and preservation studies and in subjects such as history, history of art, religion, and anthropology. Nonetheless, with my research I intend to explore the study of relics and religious artifacts also from a literary perspective. Thus, if there is a growing “awareness that conservation can no longer be based on the object’s intrinsic quality,” and that today’s “talk is about a heritage that is not just tangible but also intangible, and therefore is not closely linked to the physical consistency of the heritage” (Vecco), I consider the need to extrapolate intangible heritage by re-reading a multiplicity of texts of all kinds. I believe that my dissertation will contribute to this debate because it will highlight the abounding variety of intangible cultural heritage related to relics contained in Italian literary and filmic texts from 14th century novellas to modern films.

My study will have two main goals. First, I will stress the role that all these matters play in the framework of the literary texts themselves. Alongside the growing propensity to protect intangible cultural heritage, UNESCO further created a “Register of Good Safeguarding Practices” (Unesco.org); I believe that the literary debate should embrace this new tendency and contribute to the preservation of these practices. Second, I will work to highlight the narration of relics and religious artifacts in these oeuvres, attempting to extrapolate all the practices and rituals related to their cult. I hope that this specific reading will favor the growth of awareness that these literary works are great resources to preserve and narrate intangible Italian cultural heritage. In other words, I intend to investigate the relics and religious artifacts *for* the text and *from* the text. I hope that my study will benefit a double, yet circular, debate in which the in-depth study of these religious elements will contribute to a more complete reading of the text

itself, and concurrently the reading of the oeuvre will provide details about the rituality connected to those sacred items. I will now offer examples of this double direction.

Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, a 14th-century collection of novellas, is a prime example of the abundance of relics in medieval literary texts. Besides the well-known case of Frate Cipolla (*Decameron* VI, 10), in which Boccaccio unambiguously discusses relics, there are other fundamental portions of his masterpiece that I will analyze in my dissertation, such as the tale of Lisabetta from Messina and the corpse of her beloved (IV, 5). In this tale, Lisabetta's brothers kill her beloved and bury him far away to hide any evidence; then, in a dream, the young man tells Lisabetta the truth and the exact place in which he was buried. By emphasizing the exceptional similarities between the concern for the burial of Lorenzo's body and the rituality and the practice of the entombment of a holy body (*inventio* and *translatio*), we can obtain a more complete understanding of the reasons for which Lisabetta manipulates Lorenzo's body the way she does. This is just one example of how the in-depth study of relics and religious artifact can benefit the reading of a literary text. On the other hand, the study of these sacred elements can benefit from the toolbox used in literary analysis.

Some of the literary and filmic texts that I will analyze offer a secular perspective that can complement the religious and canonical study of relics, and they can help us obtain some specifics that a strictly theological analysis cannot fully provide. For instance, literary analysis can offer details about the illicit trade of relics, as we can read in Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's *Leopard*. Moreover, in texts like Boccaccio's *Decameron*, we can observe not only the perspective of the clergy toward relics, but also the crowd's response to the announcement of the displaying of a relic—the heat, the rituality, and all the feelings that the followers experienced in approaching and welcoming the relic. In this text, as in all the ones that I will

study, relics are not just spiritual entities; indeed, they are tangible and visible items. For instance, in the last part of the tale of Ser Cepperello (*Decameron* I, 1), we read,

E oltre a queste, molte altre cose disse della sua lealtà e della sua purità; e in breve colle sue parole, alle quali era dalla gente della contrada data intera fede, sì il mise nel capo e nella divozion di tutti coloro che v'erano che, poi che fornito fu l'ufficio, colla maggior calca del mondo da tutti fu andato a baciargli i piedi e le mani, e tutti i panni gli furono in dosso stracciati, tenendosi beato chi pure un poco di quegli potesse avere; e convenne che tutto il giorno così fosse tenuto, acciò che da tutti potesse essere veduto e visitato. Poi, la vegnente notte, in una arca di marmo seppellito fu onorevolmente in una cappella, e a mano a mano il dì seguente vi cominciarono le genti ad andare e ad accender lumi e ad adorarlo, e per conseguente a botarsi e ad appiccarvi le immagini della cera secondo la promession fatta. E in tanto crebbe la fama della sua santità e divozione a lui, che quasi niuno era, che in alcuna avversità fosse, che ad altro santo che a lui si botasse, e chiamaronlo e chiamano san Ciappelletto; e affermano molti miracoli Iddio aver mostrati per lui e mostrare tutto giorno a chi divotamente si raccomanda a lui.²

In this fragment of the tale, we can witness all the rituality involved in the *post mortem* phase of a body treated as sacred; this tale thus offers a literary example of the *inventio* of a new saint and,

² And much beside he told of his loyalty and purity; and, in short, so wrought upon the people by his words, to which they gave entire credence, that they all conceived a great veneration for Ser Ciappelletto, and at the close of the office came pressing forward with the utmost vehemence to kiss the feet and the hands of the corpse, from which they tore off the cerements, each thinking himself blessed to have but a scrap thereof in his possession; and so it was arranged that it should be kept there all day long, so as to be visible and accessible to all. At nightfall it was honourably interred in a marble tomb in one of the chapels, where on the morrow, one by one, folk came and lit tapers and prayed and paid their vows, setting there the waxen images which they had dedicated. And the fame of Ciappelletto's holiness and the devotion to him grew in such measure that scarce any there was that in any adversity would vow aught to any saint but he, and they called him and still call him San Ciappelletto, affirming that many miracles have been and daily are wrought by God through him for such as devoutly crave his intercession. (All the references to the *Decameron* in English included in my study are extracted from *The Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio by J. M. Rigg's translation (1921)).

consequently, the *creation* of his new relics, which include not only his body but also his clothes (“tutti i panni gli furono in dosso stracciati, tenendosi beato chi pure un poco di quegli potesse avere”³).

For a more complete study of the culture of relics and religious artifacts, I will explore in detail five elements: invention/creation, sensorial experience, manipulation, display, and profanation. If human social life depends on things, we can also speculate that human religious life reflects this need. We can perceive and attest to this phenomenon thanks to relics and artifacts. The creation, the storing, and the handling of a new artifact and a new relic entail a series of concerns. If the labelling of a relic might seem close to that of an artifact, dealing with a *new* relic presents additional concerns originating from the fact that relics are, in many cases, dead bodies. This phenomenon involves, on the one hand, the canonical *inventio*, which is the actual finding of saints’ relics and, on the other hand, the invention of a new relic. With the latter phenomenon, I would like to index not only the creation of a significant number of spurious relics, but also the alteration of the (hi-)story of that relic to obtain political, sexual, and economical power. A clear example of alteration is the story of the body of St. Mark and the diatribe about the ownership of his relics. As reported by Charles Freeman in his *Holy Dust: How Relics Shaped the History of Medieval Europe*, the Venetian account of 1050 introduces two merchants from the Venetian lagoon land in Alexandria and claims that the body of Mark officially “belonged” to Aquileia. Once brought to Venice, the doge ordered the construction of a new *martyrium* for the body (157). The narration becomes more picturesque when Martino da Canal, in his *Les Histoire de Venise* (1267-1275), alters the story of Mark and Hermagoras—

³ “from which they tore off the cerements, each thinking himself blessed to have but a scrap thereof in his possession”.

originally narrated in support of Aquileia's claim—in order to legitimize Venice's right to keep the body.

To develop my study of how relics and religious artifacts are worshipped, I will analyze the sensorial experience connected to the cult of these sacred elements. Throughout the reading of the texts, besides the analysis of the intangible cultural heritage linked to relics and religious artifacts, I will also investigate those corporeal aspects that make spiritual and celestial bodies very tangible. As Shulman points out, “God is physical, not metaphysical,” and that there “is a moving insistence on touching and being touched; what is god is ‘only’ an intensified mode of this sensate givenness” (30). This specific approach will allow me to study the human bond with relics and religious artifacts as a physical and not merely a metaphysical experience, stressing and problematizing the materiality of the sacred.

Throughout my dissertation, I will highlight the fundamental role of touch. Touching or kissing a relic or a religious artifact, or wearing it as a necklace, or any other form of physical contact leads to different doctrinal implications. The study of the sensorial experience of the cult of relics will occupy a substantial portion of my dissertation and it will include not only the touch but also the visual.

One of the main foci of my study will be the manipulation of relics. As Julia M. H. Smith thoroughly analyzes in her *Portable Christianity: Relics in the Medieval West (c. 700-1200)*, relics were labeled, preserved, and stored. I will attempt to detect if these practices actually make a body or a piece of body—also but not exclusively—*objects*. To observe this phenomenon, I will study the meticulous wrapping of relics that we might observe in many tales, from Boccaccio's *Decameron* (more specifically, I, 1; II, 1; IV, 2, 5; VI, 10) to Sacchetti's *Trecentonovelle* (XXIV, LX, CLVII, CCVII). There is an emblematic example in which a

novella debates the practice of exposure and vision of the dead body of a saint, which is tale CLVII in Sacchetti's *Trecentonovelle*. This story talks about the Lord of Cortona, who invites his guest to see the body/relic of St. Ugolino. In this tale we can observe the description of the wrapping and conservation of a holy body and a manifest concern about the exposure of the dead body.

The fifth element that I will analyze in my dissertation will serve to investigate and problematize whether the use of Giorgio Agamben's theory on "*profanazione*" could benefit the study of the interactions about relics and religious artifacts between the ruling class (both secular and religious), the *vulgo*, and holy bodies. I will try to determine if we can reasonably discuss *profanation* when, for example, the ruling class uses a relic—thus the linked holy figure—as a political tool, or when the *vulgo* treats a spiritual figure as a companion who helps harvests and cures diseases. If, for the Italian philosopher, "Profanare significa restituire all'uso comune ciò che è stato separato nella sfera del sacro⁴," we can speculate that - as in the cases of St. Mark and St. Germinianus - when the leading class or the plebs take possession of spiritual bodies for their secular needs, we are witnessing a *profanation*.

Additionally, I will try to determine if, in many cases, it would be more appropriate to use Agamben's term *profanation* rather than *secularization* because there is "considerable confusion on the subject" (Sommerville 249). Even if, to a certain degree, the process of secularization is inexorable, one might argue that the detachment from the sacred requires further study that considers all parties involved. I agree that "Secularization is most productively

⁴ "if "to consecrate" (*sacrare*) was the term that indicated the removal of things from the sphere of human law, "to profane" meant, conversely, to return them to the free use of men". Throughout my dissertation, I used two editions of Giorgio Agamben's *Profanazioni*, in Italian (Agamben, Giorgio. *Profanazioni*. Roma, Nottetempo. 2005) and in English (Agamben, Giorgio. *Profanations*. New York, Zone Books, 2007, translated by Jeff Fort).

understood not as declining religion, but as the declining scope of religious authority” (Chaves 749), and that in defining the process of *secularization*, we need to discern a “secular society” from a “religious population” (Sommerville). Thus, Agamben’s idea of *profanation* can help to better observe this phenomenon because it dismisses power relations between the Church-as-institution and the *vulgo*, but at the same time does not deny the idea of the divine. *Secularization*, on the contrary, is by definition the “Dissociat[ion] or separat[ion] from religious or spiritual concerns” (OED).

My dissertation will aim to contribute to an interdisciplinary understanding of the concept of relics and religious artifacts. On the one hand, if the study of these religious elements is extensive in fields like theology, anthropology, and archeology, I believe that it still a relatively unexplored subject in the literary and filmic critical debate. On the other hand, literary and filmic texts can also enrich the canonical study of relics because they provide concrete examples of the interactions between many actors within Italian society and the sacred matter.

One of the reasons why it is worth investigating the Italian literary and filmic tradition is the pervasive presence of relics and religious artifacts. The persistent narration and involvement of such religious elements provide an extraordinary window to explore details of the various religious practices, a topic that is exponentially growing, also thanks to UNESCO’s preservation of intangible cultural heritage in the last years. The presence of these religious elements is so pervasive that they visibly mold the Italian marked Culturescape. I am borrowing the expression "marked Culturescape" from the anthropologist Jack Santino, who, dissimilar to other scholars who use the term “Culturescape” with various connotations, used this concept to describe “not simply [...] the ways people have shaped the land, but [...] the many markings left on the

environment, both built and natural ... that are ubiquitous on the towns, cities, and even the country” (517).

It is fundamental to recognize that the Italian literary and filmic tradition is exceptionally rich with texts that involve relics and religious artifacts. The tale of Frate Cipolla in Boccaccio's *Decameron* (VI, 10) is surely one of the most renowned examples of literary work that involves relics in the medieval Italian context. In this tale a friar announces the showing of a series of extraordinary relics, including the feather of the Archangel Gabriel. What I would like to highlight about this tale is that this character seems to be able to cross any boundary, temporal or spatial. As a matter of fact, he fits not only in a medieval tale based in Tuscany (*Decameron* VI, 10), but he is also perfectly aligned with a 1984 film titled *Bertoldo, Bertoldino e Cacasenno* in neither a time nor a space that Boccaccio originally assigned to the character. This film is directed by Mario Monicelli and is based on a story narrated and written by Giulio Cesare Croce in the 17th century, in which Fra Cipolla is from “Frosolone”⁵ and not from Certaldo (a characteristic that is meaningful for Boccaccio and his tale for a variety of reasons). This peculiarity of Fra Cipolla can help to understand that the debate on relics transcends space and time.

A subject that is partially unexplored, and that I intend to scrutinize, is the phenomenon in which the crowds are unwilling to abandon the veneration of the saints and their relics even though science and/or religious institutions might show their falseness. Without an in-depth analysis, one might be tempted to state that this is a phenomenon that we can only observe in the past and that reactions like that of the crowd in the tale of Frate Taddeo and St. Catherine’s third

⁵ Frosinone, a city near Rome in Lazio, Italy.

arm⁶ (*Il Trecentonovelle*, LX) cannot happen today. On the contrary, the debate over relics, religious artifacts, and superstition is still present in Italian popular culture. For example, in one of the most important Italian newspapers, *Il Corriere della Sera*, in an article entitled “Il miracolo di San Gennaro tra Chiesa e politica,”⁷ Sergio Romano responds to Pierluigi Ziliotto who, talking about an atheist politician (Bassolino) and the Pope kissing St. Januarius’ blood, writes, “Che senso ha avvalorare ... una realtà inesistente?”⁸

Roberto Saviano, in another renowned Italian newspaper, *la Repubblica*, remarks that during the Second Vatican Council, the Church—which for years was diffident towards the miracle of St. Januarius’ blood— even decided to remove St. Januarius from the calendar. This decision strongly clashed with the Neapolitan community ready to fight if their saint had not regained his place. Thus, the Roman Church had to retrace its steps, degrading it—few people know it—to the rank of local saint.⁹ This is an example of how the discussion on relics in Italy still conjures and problematizes elements of regional and local identity, class distinction, and power dynamics.

I will focus on the great variety of examples of relics’ manifestations that we encounter in the Italian *novellista* tradition from the Late Middle Ages until the Late Renaissance/Baroque period. The texts that I will examine include many that openly talk about relics but also some that, I argue, attest to the relics’ survival in representation. Although all the texts that I selected,

⁶ The friar openly states that he saw St. Catherine’s body with two arms; thus, the one that he is showing cannot be hers unless she had three arms. The crowd reacts by laughing at the friar’s revelation and keeps venerating the spurious arm.

⁷ “St. Januarius’ miracle between the Church and politics” (My translation)

⁸ “What is the sense of validating ... a nonexistent reality?” (My translation). Sergio Romano, “Il miracolo di San Gennaro tra Chiesa e politica”, *Corriere della Sera*, October 28, 2007.

⁹ “decise persino di depennare San Gennaro dal calendario. Ma si scontrò con la comunità napoletana pronta alle barricate se il suo santo non avesse riavuto il posto che gli spettava. Così la Chiesa dovette tornare sui suoi passi, degradandolo - in pochi lo sanno - al rango di santo locale.” (“*Saviano: vi racconto il mio San Gennaro- Il sangue del santo- Il mio San Gennaro*”)

both literary and filmic, present a great number of relics and/or religious artifacts worthy of study, I believe that the Italian novella tradition is the greatest vessel of examples of these items, both qualitatively and quantitatively. The novella tradition, even beyond Boccaccio, provides remarkable case studies for the analysis of the representation of relics. In *Il Trecentonovelle*, a collection of short stories from the 14th century, Franco Sacchetti writes that, “Molte volte interviene che delle reliquie si truovano assai inganni”¹⁰ (LX). In the same tale, Frate Taddeo is asked to show the relic of St. Catherine’s arm. The incredulous friar replies, “Io sono stato al Monte Sinai, e ho veduto il suo corpo glorioso, intero con le due braccia e con tutte l’altre membra.”¹¹ The *pretoni* then respond that, “Bene sta; noi tegnamo che questo sia veramente il suo braccio,”¹² and despite Frate Taddeo’s attempt to dissuade them from showing the spurious relic, he eventually had to open and show the casket. While displaying the relic to the crowd, he says, “ho veduto il corpo di santa Caterina tutto intero, e massimamente con due braccia; s’ella ne ebbe tre, quest’è il terzo.”¹³ As we can observe, Frate Taddeo’s words reveal that the relic of St. Catherine’s arm he displays is undoubtedly spurious because he saw her whole body/relic with both arms somewhere else. What deserves further discussion is not the spurious relic *per se* but rather the reaction of the crowd directly after listening to a member of the clergy who openly states that the relic is a fake (“Gl’intendenti di questo risono, parlando tra loro; molti uomini e femine semplici si segnarono devotamente, come quelli che non intesono frate Taddeo, né avidonsi mai di quello che avea detto”¹⁴). Sacchetti describes this reaction almost as a missed

¹⁰ “VERY often doth it happen that relics are found to be deceitful” (Translation by Mary G. Steegmann).

¹¹ “I have been to Mount Sinai and I have seen her glorious body, complete with her two arms and all her other members.” (Translation by Mary G. Steegmann)

¹² “That is all very well, but we hold that this is truly her arm.” (Translation by Mary G. Steegmann)

¹³ “I have seen the body of St. Catharine all complete, and especially with two arms; but if she had three arms, this is the third” (Translation by Mary G. Steegmann).

¹⁴ “Those who were intelligent laughed at this, speaking amongst themselves; but many simple men and women crossed themselves devoutly, as though they had not understood Brother Taddeo nor perceived that which he said.” (Translation by Mary G. Steegmann)

feedback of the crowd that seems to completely ignore the friar's revelation. Thus, the study of the relic in this tale will afford a more thorough comprehension of the tale itself and, simultaneously, will provide more details about the intangible cultural heritage around the trade and display of spurious relics in the Middle Ages. In the following chapters I will mostly analyze tales from Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Franco Sacchetti's *Il Trecentonovelle*, and Masuccio Salernitano's *Novellino*. The novellas that I selected will help us better understand the sensorial experience, the manipulation, and the display of relics between the 14th and 16th centuries. Likewise, we will see that the study of the cult of relics can help the textual analysis of the tale, adding peculiarities that we can only appreciate through a specific reading key that is aware of the customs of such cult.

My dissertation will be articulated into four chapters organized as follows. In the first chapter, I will provide an overview of the historical background that will allow me to undertake the discourse on the cult of relics. In this portion of my dissertation, I will more deeply scrutinize specific elements that will guide my study and help the textual analysis of the novellas that I will examine in the last part of the chapter. I will first examine relics' authenticity, authority, labelling, and storing, and then provide further analysis on non-body-part relics, reliquaries, and some peculiarities of secretions and liquids in the cult of relics.

The second chapter is dedicated to the *Volgarizzamenti* and *Contaminationes* of the narration of the sacred in Italian culture between the 13th and 15th centuries, with particular attention paid to the role of Boccaccio's novella. In this part of my study, I will describe two movements that I define as top-down and diagonal. The first movement regards the phenomenon in which the narration of the sacred becomes more accessible to the *vulgo* and stops being a monopoly of a highly-educated class. I will illustrate that even the perception of sanctity evolves

to a more practical imitation of Christ (*imitatio Christi*) that overtakes the old model which envisioned saints as heroes who performed heroic deeds (*militia spiritualis*). I will show that this evolution affects the depiction of the saints that we read in Boccaccio's masterpiece, more specifically St. Ciappelletto (*Decameron* I, 1) and St. Arrigo (*Decameron* II, 1). The second movement that I will analyze in this chapter regards those *contaminationes* among sacred and profane. Although being strictly connected to the first top-down movement, this second phenomenon is diagonal and concerns more the literary level. I will focus on the discourse of the sacred in different literary genres, specifically novella, hagiography, *exempla*, and chronicles, highlighting lexical and content similarities, such as the use of specific words, characters, *topos*, etc.

In the third chapter I present a case study, analyzing Boccaccio's tale of Lisabetta and Lorenzo (*Decameron* IV, 5) and reading the corpse of Lorenzo almost as a relic. More specifically, I will focus on how Boccaccio describes the character's several sepultures using many specific features that echo the *inventio* and *translatio* of a saint, such as the practice of wrapping a body part and preserving it in a container, pouring liquids into a reliquary, the connection with fertility and germination, the odor (of sanctity), the *visio in somnis*, the concealing of the body, etc.

The fourth and final chapter will be dedicated to films and to 19th and 20th century novellas, such as Giovanni Verga's *Vita dei campi* (1880), Grazia Deledda's *Leggende Sarde* (1893-1894), Luigi Pirandello's *Novelle per un anno*, and Italo Calvino's *Fiabe italiane* (1956). On the one hand, I would like to emphasize that these films, like many of the medieval tales that I analyze in the first three chapters, use relics as a tool to expose the superstition of the lower classes, always using the kind of humorous tone that we also see in Roberto Rossellini's *Roma*

Città Aperta, and Federico Fellini's *Amarcord*. On the other hand, other works that I analyze, like Michelangelo Frammartino's *Le Quattro Volte* and Alice Rohrwacher's *Corpo Celeste*, help demonstrate that the profanation of the sacred body in Italian culture is not necessarily accompanied by a comic tone. In addition, a section of this chapter will be dedicated to the sexualization of the sacred body that, as we will see, can be narrated with or without a comical drive.

CHAPTER 1: THE PROFANATION OF THE CULT OF RELICS

As Umberto Eco claimed, “Una delle cose più invisibili che ci siano è il Sacro.”¹

Nonetheless, there are “modalità che sono state usate per rendere visibile ciò che per natura non lo è”² (24). Indeed, as Fabietti (153) points out, as spiritual as a religion might be, there is no way to separate it from its material base made of manipulable objects, gestures, or real images. In this paradigm, the cult of relics represents a vivid example of the materiality of religion.

Although the Christian cult of relics has specific characteristics, some of its features are recognizable in other polytheistic religions. For instance, Plutarch (5th century BC) in his *Life of Cimon* presents practices that we might observe in the Christian cult, such as the creation of dedicated altars for heroes, the meticulous attention to their sepulture, and a noticeable concern for their bones as reflected in the return of Theseus’ osteogenic remains to Athens (Primerano). The blossoming of Christianity soon re-functionalizes the figure of the heroes who could thus take on a new life through the martyrs (Ibid.). One can also argue that Christian relics are a sort of evolution of the *pignora imperii* that we read of in Maurus Servius Honoratus’ commentary on Virgil (*In Vergilii Aeneidem commentarii*³): sacred objects thought to hold special powers which linked the Ancient Romans to their gods. Besides, we should keep in mind that we can also find traces of the power of relics in the Bible. For instance, in 2 Kings 13:20-21, we observe that the corpse of a sacred man was considered the bearer of his *virtus*:

¹ “One of the most invisible things there are is the Sacred” (my translation).

² “Modalities that have been used to make visible what is not visible by nature” (my translation).

³ “septem fuerunt pignora, quae imperium Romanum tenent: acus matris deum, quadriga fictilis Veientanorum, cineres Orestis, sceptrum Priami, velum Ilionae, palladium, ancilia.” (*In Vergilii carmina comentarii ad Aen VII*, 188)

And Eliseus died, and they buried him. And the rovers from Moab came into the land the same year. And some that were burying a man, saw the rovers, and cast the body into the sepulchre of Eliseus. And when it had touched the bones of Eliseus, the man came to life, and stood upon his feet.

Furthermore, in Matthew 9:20-22 we read that a woman wants to touch Jesus' cloak because she believes that, by touching it, she can be healed ("She said to herself, 'If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed'" (9:20)). Although Jesus will eventually heal her as a reward for her faith,⁴ this passage shows that the woman perceived Jesus' clothing to be the holder of His *virtus*, which is one of the essentials of the cult of relics.⁵

As Charles Freeman points out in his *Holy Bones, Holy Dust: How Relics Shaped the History of Medieval Europe*, "Medieval Christianity had its distinctive qualities but it shared many of the features of the polytheistic religions that had been traditional to the Mediterranean for many centuries before Christ," and, "The creation of an altar or shrine over the body of a 'hero' was a very ancient practice." (9) Freeman adds that, "Later generations created a tomb for the mythical Achilles, and Alexander the Great visited it when he arrived in Asia in 334 on his conquest of Persia," taking a "relic" from the shrine's temple with him as a talisman (Ibid.). The new "'Heroes', namely saints and martyrs, translated easily into the Christian world" (Ibid.), and early Christian rituals were close to those observable in the pagan world. This correspondence is so vivid, even in spatial terms, that it is difficult to provide a precise mapping of the spread of

⁴ "Jesus turned and saw her. 'Take heart, daughter,' he said, 'your faith has healed you.' And the woman was healed at that moment." (Matthew 9:22)

⁵ There are several scriptural passages that support the veneration of relics. For example, the Israelites took Joseph's bones when they departed Egypt (Ex. 13:19). The bones of Elisha came into contact with a dead person who then was raised to life (2 Kings 13:21). The same Elisha took the mantle of Elijah and fashioned a miracle with it (2 Kings 2:13). The Christians of Ephesus, by using handkerchiefs and cloths which touched St. Paul's skin, effected the healing of the sick (Acts 19:12) (Saunders).

early Christian rituals as “the tombs of martyrs echoed those at pagan shrines” (Ibid., 10). Pilgrimages, of course, were not a Christian invention. Indeed, those “visitors to oracle sites, such Delphi, or sanctuaries such as that of Artemis in Ephesus or Aesclepius at Epidaurus” or “those Jews scattered by the diaspora who returned to Jerusalem” were “surely pilgrims too” (Ibid.). Nonetheless, the cult of relics, together with all the other Christian practices, had the opportunity to spread more openly and freely when Emperors Constantine and Licinius in 313 not only reaffirmed toleration for persecuted Christians,⁶ but also determined the obligation to return all places, goods, and possessions previously purchased, requisitioned, or stripped from Christians during the long period of persecutions. With these premises, Christians were not only able to freely profess their faith, but they also (re)acquired a legitimate space where they could do so. The veneration of saints, martyrs, and thus their relics could now freely blossom to the point that it became a “custom to place them in the central altar of the new basilicas” (Ibid., 13). Christians could endorse this practice as it is legitimized by Revelation 6:9 (“I saw under the altar the soul of hem that were slain for the word of God and the testimony which they held”), which provided “an effective link between Scripture and the veneration of Christian martyrs” (Ibid.).

Although the presence of relics in cemeteries and altars was already abundant, Freeman suggests that it was in the Roman Mediolanum (today’s Milan), in the 380s, that “Christian relics first became part of a dramatic display” (Ibid., 15). The scholar adds that it was Ambrose who created a precedent that was to be of vital importance in establishing cults in Early Medieval Europe. This was to dramatise relics so that they became a public

⁶ It was the Roman Emperor Galerius who, with the *The Edict of Serdica* in 311, officially ended the persecution of Christianity in the Eastern Roman Empire. (Arnaldo)

demonstration of sacred power. And this power could be channeled to achieve the ends of the celebrant who controlled it. Ambrose was manipulating centuries-old rituals of display in a completely new context, the proclamation of the majesty of God ... as supreme even over an emperor. (Ibid., 17)

As we can observe, the political implications and the clash over temporal power would grow exponentially from that point on until it reached its peak (or one of its peaks) with the assumed *Donation of Constantine*. With this document, which Lorenzo Valla in 1440 empirically demonstrates to be false and dates back to the 8th-9th century, the Pope would receive power, control, and ownership over a considerable number of territories, not to mention his leadership over the emperor.

Another fundamental moment that shaped the history of relics, sacred images, and the balance of power between Church and State is certainly the *Second Council of Nicaea* in 787. As Grant points out,

historically, it marks the end of early church history and the dawning of the Middle Ages. There was a fundamental change in church-state relations. For centuries Roman emperors had intermittently persecuted Christians; now the Roman emperor took his seat among the bishops and discussed theology with them. (1)

One of the main goals of this council was to discuss on the Iconoclastic Controversy fomented by Byzantine Emperor Leo III, who in 726 issued a decree against the worship of icons. John of Damascus is among the main protagonists of such controversy. He defended the cult of saints (as well as their relics and images), stating that they are to be venerated for the special relationship they found with God. A further distinction that John of Damascus highlighted, and that the

Second Council of Nicaea validated, was between the concepts of *veneration* and *honor* towards saints, relics, consecrated objects, etc. and *worship*, which is exclusively reserved for God. In addition, the council reiterated that every altar must contain a relic. Much later, Thomas Aquinas reaffirmed the concept of *adorare* (*cultu duliae relativae*; *Summa* III:25:6). This means they deserve a form of “veneration which is not that of latria (divine worship) and which though directed primarily to the material objects of the cult—i.e., the bones, ashes, garments, etc.—does not rest in them”; on the contrary, it “looks beyond to the saints they commemorate as to its formal term” (Thurston).

Nonetheless, the Protestant Reformation triggered by Martin Luther in 1517, the so-called Counter-Reformation, and the Council of Trent (1563) all had a major impact on Christianity and, consequently, the cult of relics and sacred images. Many prominent thinkers like Erasmus, Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin openly condemned the traditional beliefs about saints, especially those to do with relics and sacred images. In this direction, we can certainly consider John Calvin’s *Traité des reliques* (1543) as an open invective against such cult. In this period, there are records of the destruction of relics and images, of tombs of saints being smashed, and of the remains being thrown into charnel houses; “statues were decapitated and burned; reliquaries were melted down; paintings were defaced and covered with whitewash” (Butterfield). In response to this, the Roman Catholic Church initiated the process that led to the Council of Trent in 1563. The congregation of bishops reiterated that holy bodies of holy martyrs must be venerated by the faithful because God bestows many benefits unto humankind through these very bodies. In addition, in the same section (XXV7), the council, openly quoting the deliberations of the Second Council of Nicaea, also reaffirmed that sacred images must be

⁷ December 3-4, 1563.

honored and venerated as long as such practice does not stoop to idolatry. This is a fundamental passage not only for the history of relics and religious artifacts, but also for the formation of some aspects of the European identity.

It is here, I argue, that the path of Italy⁸ diverged from those of the other European territories. More precisely, the Northern European countries took a drastically different route, while Italy⁹ was less affected. Although this certainly deserves a much more thorough analysis, we can speculate that the Italian peninsula never actually experienced the profundity of the Protestant Reformation, or at least we can agree that Protestant philosophy had a substantially smaller impact when compared to Germany, France, and England, just to name a few. Emblematic is the example of Frederick the Wise, an early protector of Martin Luther, who by the middle of the 16th century had thrown out or melted down his entire collection of more than 17,000 relics; while in “Catholic Spain and Italy, by contrast, the demand for relics and reliquaries continued well into the seventeenth century” (Butterfield).

Nonetheless, even in Italy, “the link between image and relic changed. In the Middle Ages, the ideal representation had been a heaven-sent icon” (Ibid.). Starting from the Renaissance and continuing into the Baroque period, “paintings and sculptures were valued not only for their sacral function, but also as works of art, creations of human genius” (Ibid.). The new aesthetic ideals led to an appreciation of the artifact itself, which acquired a new cultural authority independent of its religious purpose. In Northern Europe, the decline of relics continued into the 18th century. Progressively, as Enlightenment thinking took hold in Europe with different paces and outcomes, relics became a symbol of superstition. Emblematically, in

⁸ Although such supposition requires a dedicated study, I am inclined to also add Catholic Spain.

⁹ And probably Spain.

his *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (1751-65), Diderot refers to relics as evidence of the superstition and irrationality of the Middle Ages.

After this historical digression, if we take into consideration the dichotomy of consecration and profanation, which Agamben explicates in his *Profanations* (“if “to consecrate” (*sacrare*) was the term that indicated the removal of things from the sphere of human law, “to profane” meant, conversely, to return them to the free use of men.” (73)), we discern two opposite movements. On the one hand, in the first centuries of Christianity, the appropriation of pagan rituals, and the requalification of such practices to worship the holy bodies of martyrs, almost appear as an act of *sacrare*. On the other hand, I will argue that the Italian novella tradition from the 13th century until today profanes such a cult, making these holy bodies available for the free use of men.

In this chapter, I will focus on two main points, which are the paradoxical conception that intangible sacred bodies are able to generate tangible relics that are not necessarily part of their own bodies, and the authenticity, labelling, and storing of relics. I will argue that the imaginary relics about which we laugh while reading some novella are not simply the fruit of an entertaining verbal selection or blatant reference. Indeed, the images that they evoke are also created out of consideration for a series of features present in the actual cult of relics. Accordingly, to better comprehend the peculiarities of the relics in the tales, we need a digression that will supply our reading with a historical and methodological framework that will then guide the textual analysis of the tales.

1.1 SECRETIONS, LIQUIDS, AND NON-BODY-PART RELICS

One aspect worth analyzing is the ability of celestial bodies to release or secrete substances despite their lacking corporality. Lucy Donkin, discussing the “Stones of St. Michael,” dedicates a full chapter¹⁰ not to “the bodies of saints, but of the ground they had trodden” (23). She states that, “Relics of this kind were especially associated with those who had left few or no corporeal remains, such as Christ, Mary and the angels” (Ibid.). In this particular case, she studies the shrine of St. Michael at Monte Sant’Angelo on the Gargano Peninsula in Apulia which claims that “it was marked by the footprints of the saint” (Ibid., 24). Donkin explains that, “According to the 7th or 8th-century foundation legend in the *Liber de apparitione sancti Michaelis*, the saint told the bishop of Siponto in a dream that the site was sacred, leaving his *vestigia* in the rock as a sign of his presence and confirmation of his words” (Ibid.). The same thing happened with many churches which claimed to have “a relationship with Gargano and its relics as part of their foundation legends” (Ibid.). One emblematic example is Mont Saint-Michel in Normandy. Donkin states that,

The *Revelatio ecclesiae sancti Michaelis*, thought to have been composed in the early 9th century, recounts how the archangel thrice appeared in a dream to Aubert, bishop of Avranches, commanding him to build a church. The bishop then sent monks to the shrine to collect tokens (*pignora*) of the saint: part of the red cloth he had left on the altar and part of the rock on which he had stood. (Ibid.)

¹⁰ Donkin, Lucy. “Stones of St Michael: Venerating Fragments of Holy Ground in Medieval France and Italy.” *Matter of Faith: An Interdisciplinary Study of Relics and Relic Veneration in the Medieval Period*, edited by Robinson, James, Lloyd De Beer, and Anna Harnden, eds. British Museum, 2014.

These two testaments from the cult of the archangel Michael¹¹ show that even angels are not exempt from leaving tangible traces on Earth. If angels have always been depicted as intangible creatures, and thus do not have corporeal bodies, the need for materiality finds a way to obtain elements that can be seen and touched (in this case the *vestigia* and *pignora*).

Brazinski and Fryxell state that there are several examples of holy substances secreting from saints' bodies throughout medieval Europe, "such as the remains of Saint Thecla and Saint Demetrios in Thessaloniki, which reputedly exuded myrrh" (10). One of the most common secretions in the cult is certainly *manna*. The presence of this substance is abundant in both the Old and the New Testaments, where we can also read about its earthy aspect and color ("... manna was like coriander seed, of the colour of bdellium" (Numbers 11:7)). It refers to the nutriment that God gave the Israelites ("the bread that came down from heaven" (John 6:59)) throughout their wandering in the desert. Even today in the Italian language, the popular expression "una manna dal Cielo!"¹² refers to a (mostly unexpected) lucky event or person that betters one's life. However, in the cult of relics this term indicates the substance, typically liquid in the form of pure water, that is secreted from relics, whether they are bodies, reliquaries, marble tombs, etc. (Brazinski and Fryxell).

In the cult of relics, liquids are very popular and controversial.¹³ An indicative example is the blood of Christ, presumably the most important liquid-relic, which was particularly acclaimed since the beginning of the cult. An example of how highly-requested this relic was can

¹¹ Which both include a dream (*visio in somniis*) as an element of legitimization (of which I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter Three).

¹² Literally, "(a) manna from the sky/Heaven"

¹³ Many liquid-relics, including manna, share a characteristic that allows believers and the clergy to renovate the showcasing and worshipping of the given relic. Some famous examples are the blood of St. Januarius which liquifies three times a year; and the manna of St. Nicholas that is extracted from the saint's body yearly on May 9, an occasion of festivity that, still today, recalls the *translatio* of these relics.

be found in *Histoire Universelle de Église Catholique* in which Rohrbacher recounts that during the sack of Constantinople, when they were splitting all the relics, both the Doge of Venice and the Balduin of Flanders claimed and obtained a phial with the blood of Christ. A controversial liquid-relic is certainly the Sacred Milk of the Virgin Mary. We have numerous accounts¹⁴ of this type of relic;¹⁵ and in Bethlehem, not far from the Basilica of the Nativity, stands the Chapel of the Milk Grotto. This cult has its origins in a 6th century legend which narrates that when Herod ordered the massacre of the innocents, the Holy Family temporarily hid in this cave before fleeing to Egypt. In the hurry of the preparations, while Mary was breastfeeding the Baby, drops of milk were to have fell on the ground and the reddish rock of the cave turned white. This cult arose in the 6th century but exploded in the 13th century. As I will expand upon in Chapter Four, this relic did not always circulate in the form of liquid; indeed, the most common usage was in dust or in stones which the believers would then dilute in water or mix with food (De Matthaeis, “Il latte...”).

Another specific practice worthy of highlight is that these sacred liquids are often collected into *ampullae*,¹⁶ and that such objects were widespread and abundantly used for pilgrimage, both then as now. Talking about the smell of relics, in particular about “Ceramic

¹⁴ Some examples of still-preserved Sacred Milk can be found a) in the Collegiate Church of San Lorenzo di Montevarchi (Arezzo); according to legend, it is kept in the Sainte Chapelle in Paris and was a gift from the French King Louis IX to Count Guido Guerra of Montevarchi for his contribution to the victory of the Guelph troops in the Battle of Benevento in 1266 alongside Charles of Anjou (De Matthaeis, “Il latte...”); b) in the Church of the Sœurs de la Charité de Notre-Dame d'Évron, venerated from the 7th century (De Matthaeis); c) in Chartres, where there were two relics of the Virgin's milk that were venerated. In the time of Bishop Fulbert of Chartres (12th century), a vial of milk from the Virgin Mary was already present, and it was said to have been collected in Judea while Mary nursed the baby. The other, however, has an even more miraculous origin. Fulbert was suffering from an incurable disease that burned his throat and tongue. One night the Madonna appeared to him and poured some of her milk into the mouth of the man, who immediately healed. The rest of the milk that remained on his cheeks was collected in a vial and kept in the cathedral treasury, together with the first. From then on, this relic solved many problems of infertility and hypoalgesia. Other relics of the Milk of the Virgin are (or were) present in Reims (France), Murcia (Spain), Naples, Genoa, Paris, Venice, Rome, and dozens of other places (De Matthaeis, “Il latte...”).

¹⁵ Sacchetti in his *Trecentonovelle* (LX) mentions this relic, as I briefly explain later in the chapter.

¹⁶ Pilgrim flasks (Brazinski and Fryxell 7).

Typologies and a Relic's Air-atmosphere Area," Brazinski and Fryxell stress that, "relics shared several common features which could have contributed to their common unique smell ... [and that the] first commonality were ampullae or pilgrim flasks" (7). Hayes adds that they "were produced in or near several holy places to serve as a portable container for sanctified liquids" (89). Furthermore, Vikan states that some ampullae served not only as containers of holy waters or oils from a pilgrim site, but they could also be worn as souvenirs, hanging around the neck as a pendant "souvenir relic" (70). Brazinski and Fryxell add that, "By sharing the same 'air-atmospheric area', the liquid scents and/or smells of holy waters or fragrant oils contained in ampullae or unguentaria may have defined a relic's aroma" (3), and that, in the sites in which archeologists find ampullae, "we can hazard that an unknown oil and/or water container, which might have contributed to a relic's unique fragrance, was probably located within the vicinity of the relic" (7).

After summarizing the methodological and historical background of such practice, which will guide the textual analysis of the tales, I will now proceed with the actual examination of the novellas that I have selected. Specifically, I will scrutinize two tales, which are VI, 10 from Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*,¹⁷ and XXIV from Franco Sacchetti's *Trecentonovelle*.¹⁸ Both collections date back to the 14th century. Sacchetti in his *Proemio* writes that his work openly

¹⁷ The Italian version of the *Decameron* that I used is Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Decameron*, edited by Vittore Branca. Torino, Einaudi, 2002; while for the English translation, I used *The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio faithfully translated by J.M. Rigg*, London, 1921 (first printed 1903).

¹⁸ For the Italian version of Sacchetti's *Trecentonovelle*, I used Sacchetti, Franco. *Il Trecentonovelle*, edited by E. Faccioli, Einaudi, 1970; while for the English translation, I used Sacchetti, Franco. *Tales from Sacchetti*. JM Dent & Company, 1908, translated by Mary G. Steegmann.

attempts to emulate Boccaccio's masterpiece, particularly in that it is envisioned as an oeuvre intended to comfort to its readers while mixing pain and laughter.¹⁹

Boccaccio's tale is the well-known and well-studied novella in which a friar, Frate Cipolla, goes to Certaldo, the author's hometown, and promises the crowd that he will show them one of the feathers of Archangel Gabriel. Then, two young men try to fool the friar by substituting the feather with coal. Despite that, the friar's brilliant oratory skills allow him to fool the crowd, saying that the coal was that which burned St. Lawrence. Sacchetti's tale is about a Christian man, Messer Dolcibene, who ends up incarcerated in a Jewish temple for having punched a Jew. During the night, needing to defecate and unable to escape the temple, he relieves himself in the middle of the temple. Once the Jews realize what he did, they intend to kill him. To save his life, Messer Dolcibene tells them that the feces were those of their Jewish god. It is worth mentioning that tale XXIV is not the only novella in which Sacchetti mentions relics. On the contrary, he copiously includes such cult in his work. As we will also see in Chapter Two, in his *Trecentonovelle*, Sacchetti often overtly criticizes the abuse of the cult of relics (CLVII), especially regarding the worship of new saints to the detriment of the veneration of major figures of Christianity such as Christ, the Virgin Mary, St. Francis, etc.

I selected these two tales for a series of reasons. Overall, I consider them to be two of the most representative tales that underline the extreme gullibility of believers in the cult of relics. They exemplify the tendency in the Italian literary and filmic tradition to present the sacred body with a marked parodic and comical tone.²⁰ These two tales also share the element that, in both

¹⁹ "... e massimamente quando danno conforto, per lo quale tra molti dolori si mescolino alcune risa; e riguardando in fine allo eccellente poeta fiorentino messer Giovanni Boccacci, il quale descrivendo il libro delle Cento Novelle per una materiale cosa, quanto al nobile suo ingegno..." (*Trecentonovelle*, Proemio).

²⁰ In Chapter Four, I will explain why the mixing of the sacred and the profane is not necessarily accompanied by a comical tone, as a more superficial analysis might suggest.

narrations, relics are the central elements of the *inganno*; and in both texts, the reader can unambiguously perceive that those relics are spurious. Boccaccio specifies that the friar's feather is that of a parrot, while the assumed relic of St. Lawrence is merely some randomly-chosen coal that the two young men take from the friar's room to deposit in the casket in place of the feather.²¹ In turn, Sacchetti makes the origin of his relic even more provocative and extreme. Nonetheless, one of the main reasons for selecting these two tales is that, in both texts, we can find relics which are not body parts, but rather secretions and products of sacred bodies. As a matter of fact, neither the feces in Sacchetti's tale nor the perspiration of Archangel Michael in Boccaccio's tale are part of a divine (assumed) body, but rather products of their bodies.

In tale VI, 10 of the *Decameron*, Frate Cipolla mentions a series of relics which specifically play with the concepts of tangibility and intangibility. In a nutshell, the friar claims to possess (tangible) relics related to intangible celestial figures. Besides the "penna dell'agnolo Gabriello," in the friar's list we find other angel-related relics, such as a "ciuffetto del serafino che apparve a san Francesco," "una dell'unghie de' Gherubini," and "una ampolla del sudore di san Michele quando combatté col diavole."²² Without a complementary study of the cult of relics, these assumed relics only appear as a series of entertaining items that lack any theological basis. Without further study, then, readers might immediately assume that since angels do not have a tangible body, they cannot produce tangible relics on Earth. Thanks to the study of some relics that believers still worship today, I suggest that we should not jump to the conclusion that the comical relics mentioned in these tales have no (theo)logical grounding. For instance, the

²¹ "... per non lasciare la cassetta vota, vedendo carboni in un canto della camera, di quegli la cassetta empierono." ("... and looking around for something to replace it, they espied in a corner of the room some pieces of coal, wherewith they filled the casket").

²² "the tuft of the Seraph that appeared to St. Francis, and one of the nails of the Cherubim, ... and a phial of the sweat of St. Michael a battling with the Devil."

apparently illogical relic of “de’ vestimenti della Santa Fé catolica” in *Decameron* VI, 10 does not seem very far from the “part of the red cloth he [the archangel Michael] had left” claimed by Mont Saint-Michel in Normandy. Indeed, both relics are pieces of clothing belonging to intangible celestial entities. Hence, by writing about the clothing of the Catholic Faith, I am more inclined to think that Boccaccio over-stresses existing features and examples taken from the cult of relics rather than simply inventing ridiculous combinations as it is popularly believed.

Among all the relics of Frate Cipolla, the one that seems in communication with Messer Dolcibene’s story seems to be the vial holding the perspiration released from St. Michael when he fought with the Devil. If I am to discuss the Archangel Gabriel throughout my dissertation, it is worth spending some words on the case of Archangel Michael. Frate Cipolla portrays the archangel in his most famous iconographic scene from the Bible, “And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels” (Revelation 12:7-12). Accordingly, we can observe that, just as with Messer Dolcibene’s relic, the perspiration of St. Michael is the result of a fight. In addition, both fights in both tales are confrontations between two otherworldly contenders, respectively the Christian god versus Jewish god in the *Trecentonovelle*, and Archangel Michael versus the Devil in the *Decameron*.

In tale XXIV, we can read that Messer Dolcibene, a man who is “vago di cose nuove,”²³ ends up punching a Jew (“diede al judeo di molte pugna”) because he was speaking against Christ, thus mocking Christianity (“dicea contro a Cristo, schernendo la nostra fede”). Witnessing this violent behavior, a group of Jews imprisoned him in a temple (“tempio de’

²³ An expression that Sacchetti frequently uses (in particular in tale CLVII) to refer to people who prefer to worship newly-made local saints over God, Jesus, or the Virgin (“li signori e gli altri viventi [che] sono sí vaghi di cose nuove che se elli potessono, muteriano la signoria del cielo, come spesso mutano quella delle terre”).

Judei”). Being secluded all night, Messer Dolcibene feels the need to defecate. Unable to find a better place, he expels in the middle of the temple (“gli venne la volontà d’andare per lo bisogno del corpo e non potendo altro luogo piú comodo avere, nel mezzo del tempio scaricò la soma”). The morning after, when some Jews entered the temple, they saw this “bruttura”²⁴ in the middle of their sacred place. They immediately blame the Christian and assault him. It is here that Messer Dolcibene needs to generate a witty *inganno* to escape the danger. In his defense, he tells the Jews,

Io non fui io; ascoltatemi, se vi piace: stanotte in su la mezza notte io senti’ gran romore in questo luogo; e guardando che fosse, e io vidi lo Dio vostro e lo Dio nostro che s’aveano preso insieme e dàvansi quanto piú poteano. Nella fine lo Dio nostro cacciò sotto il vostro, e tanto gli diede che su questo smalto fece quello che voi vedete.

With this ironic and fantastic narration of a fight between gods, Messer Dolcibene saves his own life and becomes the subject of greater fortune (“da guadagnare di molti doni, raccontandola a’ signori...”). Hence, he turns his “*bruttura*” into a relic, exploiting the gullibility of the believers. Indeed, the Jews trust without hesitation the man’s words, screaming, “Ecco le reliquie del Dio nostro,” treating his feces as a relic. In the tale we read,

Udendo li Judei dire questo a messer Dolcibene, dando alle parole quella tanta fede che aveano, tutti a una corsono a quella feccia, e con le mani pigliandola, tutti i loro visi s’impiastrarono... E chi piú si studiava di mettersene sul viso, a quello pareva essere piú beato; e lasciando messer Dolcibene, n’andorono molti contenti, con li visi cosí lordi ...

²⁴ eyesore or ugly thing (my traslation).

In these lines we can perceive that once the believers think of the feces as a relic, they feel the need to reach and physically touch it, placing their bodies in contact with the sacred matter; they even take some of it with them (“n’andorono molti contenti, con li visi così lordi”). Moreover, by introducing feces as relics, we might speculate that Sacchetti’s act of profanation also includes the subversion of a distinctive element of the cult of relics, which is the pleasant smell. As many scholars such as Vikan, Hayes, Brazinski and Fryxell, to name a few, widely demonstrate in their research, this feature is extensive in the storing and displaying of relics.

Continuing our parallel between these two tales, we can observe that Sacchetti employs the same paradigm that Boccaccio uses with Frate Cipolla when he is about to display the feather to the crowd. Indeed, when the friar realizes that the casket contains coal and not the feather, he does not panic. In fact, it is at this very point where he performs his finest speech, claiming that it was not a mistake, but that it was God, Himself who invited him to show the coal and not the feather:

Il quale io non reputo che stato sia errore, anzi mi pare esser certo che volontà sia stata di Dio e che Egli stesso la cassetta de’ carboni ponesse nelle mie mani, ricordandom’io pur testé che la festa di san Lorenzo sia di qui a due dì. E per ciò, volendo Iddio che io, col mostrarvi i carboni co’ quali esso fu arrostito, ... aperse la cassetta e mostrò i carboni; li quali poi che alquanto la stolta moltitudine ebbe con ammirazione reverentemente guardati, con grandissima calca tutti s’appressarono a frate Cipolla e, migliori offerte dando che usati non erano, che con essi gli dovesse toccare il pregava ciascuno.²⁵

²⁵ “That not seldom I mistake one for the other, which has befallen me on this occasion; for, whereas I thought to have brought with me the casket wherein is the feather, I have brought instead that which contains the coals. Nor deem I this a mischance; nay, methinks, 'tis by interposition of God, and that He Himself put the casket of coals in my hand, for I mind me that the feast of St. Lawrence falls but two days hence. Wherefore God, being minded that

As we can read, just like Messer Dolcibene, by cleverly exploiting the cult of St. Lawrence, the friar manages to save himself and even profit from his spurious makeshift relic (“migliori offerte dando che usati non erano”). In addition, also in this tale, we witness the believers’ tendency to get physically closer to the relic (“con grandissima calca tutti s’appressarono a frate Cipolla”) and touch it or be touched by it (“che con essi [i carboni] gli dovesse toccare il pregava ciascuno”).

In conclusion, we see that both Boccaccio and Sacchetti push the irony to the limit to stress the absolute *credulitas* that surround the cult of relics. On the one hand, the Certaldesi in the *Decameron* believe Frate Cipolla to the point that they are convinced he even owns material relics generated from elements which are collectively recognized as intangible, like sunrays (“alquanti de' raggi della stella che apparve a' tre Magi in oriente”), and sound (“una ampolletta [con] alquanto del suono delle campane del tempio di Salomone”). On the other hand, the Jews in tale XXIV of the *Trecentonovelle* believe the extreme assumption that one can find touchable feces expelled from God, who is the intangible creature *par excellence*. Nonetheless, it appears clearer now that those fictional relics are not simply witty jokes because the *novellisti* mold them with existing (theo)logical basis from the actual cult. This concept is fundamental to understanding that both Boccaccio and Sacchetti built their fictional and provocative relics not merely upon their rhetorical mastery, but also by employing theological doctrines from the same cult of relics that they are trying to mock. Thanks to these crossed studies with the cult of relics, we can now perceive that those relics which might seem absurd when we first read these novellas are not that far from the actual relics that believers still worship, even if it is about the clothing of

by shewing you the coals, with which he was roasted ... opened the casket, and shewed the coals. Whereon the foolish crowd gazed a while in awe and reverent wonder, and then came pressing forward in a mighty throng about Fra Cipolla with offerings beyond their wont, each and all praying him to touch them with the coals.”

the Faith and the feces of a god.

We can speculate that Sacchetti's antisemitic tale not only presents the Jews as extremely gullible, but also renders them the victims of multiple *beffa*. Not only do they believe that his feces are relics from their god; he further convinces them that their god was defeated by his god, and that He defecated because of how strong the Christian god beat the Jewish god ("Nella fine lo Dio nostro cacciò sotto il vostro, e tanto gli diede che su questo smalto fece quello che voi vedete"). In addition, the tale also tries to deride Jewish theological knowledge. If we focus on Messer Dolcibene's explanation, we can observe a theological incongruence. Indeed, the fight between the two gods cannot even be theoretically conceived. We can summarize that the Christian conception of god mainly diverges from Judaism because it conceives of this figure as part of a Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Ghost). Given that, essentially, both faiths venerate the same god/creator. Accordingly, we can conclude that the hypothetical fight that Messer Dolcibene describes appears to be even more absurd. Finally, we can agree that the most evident *beffa* is the basic fact that Messer Dolcibene actually defecates in a Jewish temple, and this despicable gesture is probably the most emblematic to taunt someone.

1.2 RELICS' AUTHENTICITY, AUTHORITY, LABELLING, AND STORING

A concept that exemplifies the act of profanation of the sacred body is, without a doubt, the labelling of relics. As a matter of fact, if there is one thing that we use to make any object a commodity, it is a label. Thanks to this custom, people can make practically any object into a product that can then be identified, arranged, stored, and sold. In other words, labelling any item, including a body part, makes it available for the free use and commerce of men.

The attentive preservation of relics is a distinctive aspect of such cult. The act of “dressing the relics,” as Martina Bagnoli defines it, includes both a wrap and a label. Smith, who analyzes this practice in detail, states that,

[Relics] were commonly wrapped in scraps of linen or brightly patterned silks, probably cut from discarded church hangings or liturgical vestments, and tied firm. Sometimes, the fabric was stitched into small pouches, which helped keep friable matter together. From the seventh century, if not earlier, labels on scraps of parchment (and, in the very early Middle Ages, papyrus) identified the contents of each package, but might be replaced when they tore, became detached or were no longer legible. (147)

Bagnoli describes these labels (*cedulae* or *authentiques*) as “small strips of parchment attached to the pouches to identify the relics,” and adds that, “They provided a sort of ‘proof’ of the authenticity of relics” (*Dressing the Relics*... 106). Smith proposes three main properties of relics, which are “incompleteness,” “indeterminacy,” and “portability” (*Portable Christianity*). In her brilliant analysis, the scholar summarizes that relics

were fragments of larger wholes, detached particles that came into existence by being removed, torn, cut, poured or even bitten off in deliberate acts of selection. They were *reliquiae*, left-overs: tangibility combined with incompleteness. Furthermore, that very incompleteness reduced substances to indeterminacy. By violating the completeness of an object—whether corpse, garment, tree, or riverbed—the act of detachment or selection deprived the retrieved substance of any self-evident identity or obvious context. (150)

Hence, given relics’ “lack of individuality,” it is fundamental to highlight that “Only careful labelling will distinguish one stone, scrap of fabric or particle of dirt from another” (*Ibid.*, 152),

or a saint's bone from any other, for that matter. Gallan in his *Les Authentiques de Reliques du Sancta Sanctorum* remarks that only careful labelling will allow their individuality.²⁶

Smith adds that, no matter the material used (papyrus or parchment), "labels in pre-Carolingian cursive script must have taxed the paleographical skills of later clerics" (Ibid.); as result, in 1396, the author of the inventory of relics held at Mont Saint-Michel recurrently complained that some labels were too old or too blackened to read (Cordez). Accordingly, it is worth underlining that the absence of a readable label "could jeopardise religious significance" (Smith 152). As Smith points out,

when those labels fell off, or became torn or illegible, the objects' primary identity might be forgotten ... Just as they existed at the intersection of matter and belief, so relics were prone to slide into the interstices of identity and anonymity. Shorn of their labels, these objects became merely 'things'²⁷, indeterminate, ambiguous, unspecified, and devoid of relationship to those who encountered them. (Ibid.)

Given that, we can speculate that the act of labelling a relic participates in a process that turns a relic into an *object*. Consequently, it seems fundamental to highlight the paradoxical fact that an action which can prevent a relic to lose its identity – and thus its religious significance in the cult – is to label it, which is the quintessential act of profanation of a relic. In other words, a sacred body, to become a recognizable relic, must be profaned.

²⁶ "'De duodecim lapides quos portaverunt fili Israhel in Jordanem', cf. 'lapidem de spelunca ubi Elisaiuet cum Johanni fugiens'. Prou and Chartraire, 'Authentiques de reliques de la cathédrale de Sens', nos. 1 and 2, p. 141; cf. Galland, *Authentiques de reliques du Sancta Sanctorum*, no. 99, p. 131." (cited in Smith's *Portable Christianity* 152, note 25).

²⁷ As Bill Brown indicates in his *Thing Theory*.

We have seen that one of the pivotal characteristics of relics' labels is their contribution to help the issue of authenticity. As one can easily imagine, with the intensification of the relic trades and the displacement of bodies, mostly dismembered in parts all over the Euro-Mediterranean area, the need of validating a relic with a tag also increased significantly. This need was becoming more and more felt; and even though "it is unclear whether each relic received its own individual tag or whether a collection or grouping of relics, such as two arms of the same saint, required only one tag," many scholars agree that "most legitimate relic sales were accompanied with an authenticity tag similar to modern antiquities practice" (Brazinski and Fryxell 6). One of the issues that also helped counterfeiters spread spurious relics was that these tags were very easily made since they "were rudimentary slips of paper," and since "they were not written on a standardized or special type of paper ... thieves often travelled to locations where real relics were located to produce a false authenticity for their fake products," and that "was not very difficult to accomplish" (Ibid.).

If we consider that "Detached from the objects they formerly accompanied, relic labels survive in large numbers" in "inventories made for medieval bishops and abbots keen to keep track of the relic collections" (Smith 148), we can make a series of conjectures. First, relic labels "reveal a world of material holiness which ignored or subverted learned attempts to impose meaning and order on it" (Ibid.). Second, "They suggest a much more imaginative and intuitive response to the problem of giving tangible form to the sacred than the formulations of canonists and theologians" (Ibid.). In other words, labelling relics gives further tangibility to the cult of relics and becomes the perfect example of an act of profanation which allows humans to concretely collect, store, and trade the sacred body. Thanks to labelling, a corpse could easily become a venerable and available relic, and such a gesture was immediate; and as Smith reminds

us, it was also able to bypass convoluted theological doctrines. Accordingly, we can conjecture that labelling somehow helped the less-educated to actively participate in the cult of relics, and that it was not, by any means, a prerogative of the high/educated class.

We can agree that the concept of relic in itself fundamentally challenges the thing/object dichotomy. If we summarize Heidegger's idea in his *The Thing, in Poetry, Language, Thought*, we can assume that an object becomes a thing when it is not able to serve its common function. As Bill Brown later expanded upon his "Thing Theory,"²⁸

We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. (4)

By oversimplifying this complex theory, which according to its own author "sounds like an oxymoron" (Ibid., 5), we can agree that, to some extent, the dichotomy of thing/object is inevitably dictated by the relation between the human and a given non-human element. In a nutshell, we consider the same item as a thing or as an object mainly depending on the function that that item serves for the human. By keeping this idea in mind and applying it to the cult of relics, on the one hand, we can speculate that relics' qualities, such as "incompleteness" and "indeterminacy," could somehow lead towards Brown's concept of *thingness*. Furthermore, if we consider that the word *relic* comes from the Latin *rēliquiae* (which conjures the idea of remains,

²⁸ In *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2001, pp. 1–22.

remnants, or leftovers), one can argue that a relic is *something* incomplete that does not function for the purpose for which it was originally intended. Nonetheless, we still need to contemplate that with the term *relic*, we indicate a vast variety of elements. This word comprises items (such as rings, garments, etc.) which belonged to a saint, but also particles (such as dust, etc.) which were in contact with the body of a saint or even a reliquary or any other item that previously touched another relic. Notoriously, and most problematically, with the word *relic*, we also refer to human corpses or pieces of corpse.

Consequently, if we wish to enter a deeper and more appropriate analysis in order to explore how relics can problematize the thing/object dichotomy, we must discern the specificities of all kinds of relics. For instance, some of them, such as the *Sacra Cintola*²⁹ or the *Santo Anello*,³⁰ were originally *objects* designed to serve the (human) life of the saints. After the saints' death, these *objects* can follow different paths. If we take the Holy Belt as an example, we can conjecture that if it had not been labelled and preserved in the way it has, we would have lost the connection between that object and the Virgin Mary. This could have led to different outcomes. In the range of possibilities, we can contemplate that that belt could have been abandoned in some storage closet, and, without a label, its religious value would have been forgotten forever. In this case, the belt – which was once an *object* – loses its religious significance, becoming a *thing*. In other words, the belt is *something* no longer useful neither to function as a belt, because it was abandoned, damaged, or with some of its components lost or

²⁹ Also known as The Girdle of Thomas, the Virgin's Girdle, or the Holy Belt, preserved in Prato's Cathedral (in Tuscany, Italy).

³⁰ According to popular belief, it is the wedding ring that St. Joseph gave to Mary. In Europe, there are three assumed rings belonging to St Joseph. Two of them are preserved in Italy (the wedding ring at St. Lawrence's Cathedral in Perugia and the "*giornaliero*" – daily – ring at St. Joseph's Church in Messina) while the engagement ring is in France (Notre-Dame in Paris).

deteriorated, nor as a relic, because we do not have anything that proves its relationship with the saint. In a nutshell, the belt simply stops working for us.

Another possible outcome can be that the same Holy Belt, from being an *object* supposedly used by the Virgin Mary, converts into a different, but this time non-religious, *object*. For instance, if someone takes that abandoned belt to a museum (or to a historian, collector, etc.), once recognized as an item that dates to the 1st century, it becomes a new *object*. This time, not thanks to the label but to the authority of an expert, this once-*object* becomes a different, re-qualified *object* since it has established a different relationship with the human (e.g. from a piece of clothing to a piece exposed in a museum's exhibit).

This premise is necessary to understanding that in establishing this belt as an *object*, we must contemplate an authority which can determine its authenticity. Although it would be almost impossible to list all of the possible scenarios that determine whether an old item without a label is a *thing* or an *object*, we should underline the fact that the lack of a label can be replaced by another authority, like an expert or – even better – through scientific testing (such as carbon-14 dating, etc.). If, for the recognition of the belt as an item that dates back to the 1st century, we can have an – almost irrefutable – authority, the attribution of religious significance to the same item can become more complicated. As mentioned earlier, labels can function authoritatively, and even if they are not indisputable (because they are easily reproducible), it is difficult and sometimes practically impossible to countercheck. In the example of the belt, even if we can double check the approximate date, there is no factual proof to establish whether the belt belonged to the Virgin Mary or to another person who lived around the same time and place.

The issue of authority over relics is briefly discussed by Annabel Jane Wharton in her "Relics, Protestants, Things"³¹. In this work, she further offers an intriguing and well-argued paradigm in which she wisely enriches the discussion on the dichotomy *objects/things*, proposing a different archetype, that is, "*Sacra*, things, and commodities" (425). She summarizes these concepts in the following table.³²

Table 1: "*Sacra*, things, and commodities" as presented in Wharton's "Relics, Protestants, Things"

	<i>Sacrum</i> (relic, icon, idol, totem, fetish)	Thing (object or artwork)	Commodity
Source	Epiphanic	Encountered or worked	Industrially produced
Attribute	Aura-powerful	Affect-potent	Passive-powerless
Value	Priceless (gifted, stolen, not legally sold)	Valuable (vendable but sometimes enclaved)	Determined solely by the market
History	Known	Knowable	Erased
Authorization	Community	Individual	Market
Protestant reaction	Destroy	Collect, textualize, commoditize	Consume

³¹ *Material Religion* 10.4 (2014): 412-430.

³² I accurately reproduced "Table 1 Distinctions: *sacrum*, things, commodities" (page 415).

Wharton also adds that, “*Sacra*, things, and commodities have their spatial equivalents: sacred spaces (temenos, church, grove); place (home, museum, arena); mass-produced space (airports, office buildings, hotels)” (415). Although this table and these reflections offer an enormous source for discussion, I would like to underline a few major points that I believe are fundamental to include in the theoretical framework that will guide my textual analysis of the literary and then filmic texts.

First and foremost, in an academic debate on *things*, there is a valid necessity to add a category that is dedicated to the *Sacrum*, since this group has peculiarities that other *things* do not have. Indeed, one of the greatest problems with relics that we often underestimate is that the word *relic* is an umbrella term which includes a great number of variables to be classified into one homogeneous group; that is why they are divided into different classes. As we know, the term relic can refer to so many different elements, from dust that touched a reliquary to the skull of a saint. Consequently, we should always underscore the substantial differences between, for instance, an *ex indumentis* relic (e.g. a piece of a saint’s clothing) and an *ex ossibus* relic (e.g. a saint’s bone). In other words, while some relics are elements that belonged to or simply touched a given saint, other relics are – physically – the saint. For this reason, I do not believe that the thing/object dichotomy on its own, without a further distinction like Wharton’s *Sacra* group, can appropriately include an exhaustive discussion on relics. Due to their religious-yet-biological nature, body/body-part relics are certainly problematic to brand in a single category. Marking them as *corpses* would be too demeaning while, at the same time, they are substantially just that. We can observe that the Vatican authorities do not consider relics simply as *corpses* in the *Codex Iuris Canonici*. Indeed, in §2 of Can. 1237,³³ we can read that, “The ancient tradition of placing

³³ Part III, Title I (Sacred Places), Chapter IV (Altars).

relics of martyrs or other saints under a fixed altar is to be preserved, according to the norms given in the liturgical books,” while in §2 of Can. 1239 we read that, “A body is not to be buried beneath an altar; otherwise, it is not permitted to celebrate Mass on the altar.” I believe that this explicit distinction between the possibility to preserve relics (without specifying which type, thus including bodies and body parts) under an altar and the prohibition against burying a *body* beneath an altar is a significant indication that the Church authorities systematically differentiate corpses from relics.

The second point that I would like to underline, which is fundamental to my textual analysis, is the authority over relics. One of the easiest mistakes that we can make is to jump to the conclusion that the Church holds a monopoly on this authorship. Conversely, many prominent scholars such as Charles Freeman in his *Holy Bones, Holy Dust: How Relics Shaped the History of Medieval Europe* explain how relics on many occasions overturned the hegemony of the clergy on their monopoly of possession and management of the sacred. Through the analysis of the relics of St. Mark in Venice and St. Germinianus in Modena, Freeman expounds upon the concept of a “political relic” (158). This aspect is fundamental to understanding how relics were, and in many cases still are, tools to reach power of any kind, including political power. Likewise, Smith elucidates that, relics “bypassed the role of ecclesiastical personnel and institutions” (145).

Despite the fact that it might or not fully succeed, it is true that the Vatican authorities did and still do attempt to discipline the cult of relics. Specifically, the *Concilium Tridentinum* (held between 1545 and 1563) meticulously structured the Catholic doctrine on the cult of saints and their relics in section 25 (*De invocatione et veneratione Sanctorum*). Later, in 1669, the direction and supervision of that which concerns relics was entrusted to the *Congregatio indulgentiarum et*

sacrarum reliquiarum which, in the year 1904, united with the Holy Congregation of Rites.

Overall, from the Middle Ages until today, various decrees were ratified to regulate the ecclesiastical discipline around relics, the rules concerning their display for veneration, and their authenticity (Turchi and Kirsch). For instance, the *Codex Juris Canonici* – an official compilation of ecclesiastical law promulgated in 1917 and revised in 1983, which replaced the *Corpus Juris Canonici*, an earlier compilation of Church law that had been in force since the Middle Ages – contains a section³⁴ entirely dedicated to “The Veneration of the Saints, Sacred Images, and Relics” (Cann. 1186-1190). If Can. 1186 roughly states that the Roman Catholic Church accepts the cult of saints,³⁵ I believe that it is worth analyzing more deeply the remaining canons of this section, from 1187 to 1190 (italics added):

Can. 1187

It is permitted to reverence through public veneration only those servants of God whom the authority of the Church has recorded in the list of the saints or the blessed.

Can. 1188

The practice of displaying sacred images in churches for the reverence of the faithful is to remain in effect. Nevertheless, they are to be exhibited in moderate number and in suitable order so that the Christian people are not confused nor occasion given for *inappropriate devotion*.

³⁴ Book IV. Function of the Church, Chapter II, Title IV.

³⁵ “To foster the sanctification of the people of God, the Church commends to the special and filial reverence of the Christian faithful the Blessed Mary ever Virgin, Mother of God, whom Christ established as the mother of all people, and promotes the true and authentic veneration of the other saints whose example instructs the Christian faithful and whose intercession sustains them.”

Can. 1189

If they are in need of repair, precious images, that is, those distinguished by age, art, or *veneration*, which are exhibited in churches or oratories for the reverence of the faithful are never to be restored without the *written permission* of the ordinary; he is to consult experts before he *grants permission*.

Can. 1190

§1. *It is absolutely forbidden to sell sacred relics.*

§2. *Relics of great significance and other relics honored with great reverence by the people cannot be alienated validly in any manner or transferred permanently without the permission of the Apostolic See.*

§3. The prescript of §2 is *valid also for images which are honored in some church with great reverence by the people.*

Although these canons are a great source for a longer discussion, I intend to limit my analysis to a few fundamental aspects that will later guide my textual analysis. For instance, it is important to notice that, very often, relics and religious artifacts, in this case sacred images, are systematically grouped in the same category (“The Veneration of the Saints, Sacred Images, and Relics” ... “is *valid also for images*,” etc.). Even the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican groups these two elements by stating that, “Saints are venerated in the Church, according to tradition, and their authentic relics and images are held in honor.”³⁶

³⁶ Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 4 December 1963, n. 111.

On the question of the authority over relics, it is undeniable that, with expressions such as “*It is permitted to*,” “*the authority of the Church*,” “*written permission*,” “*grants permission*,” “*It is absolutely forbidden*,” “*without the permission of the Apostolic See*,” etc., the Vatican establishments (try to) regulate the cult of relics and sacred images. We should not forget that these canons are full-fledged laws, but their legal power only applies within the Vatican walls. As a matter of fact, although Can. 1190 (§1) makes it very clear that, “*It is absolutely forbidden to sell sacred relics*,” we can easily witness that the relic trade is still very vivid today as it was in the Middle Ages, as demonstrated by the numerous medieval novellas and the dedicated section to “relics” on eBay.³⁷

In 2017, the Congregation for the Causes of Saints inscribes the instruction “*Relics in the Church: Authenticity and Preservation*”³⁸ in which there are numerous articles that regulate the *inventio* and *translatio* of the sacred bodies. In the Introduction, it is specified that,

Until [the mortal remains (*exuviae*) of the Servants of God and the Venerables, whose Causes of beatification and canonization are in progress] are elevated to the honors of the altars through beatification or canonization, their mortal remains may not enjoy any public cult nor those privileges which are reserved only to the body of someone who has been beatified or canonized. (Introduction)

This passage is quite emblematic as it openly mentions the “privileges” that only certain bodies/corpses have. Stating that only those bodies who/which are beatified and canonized –

³⁷ On eBay.com (US market): Collectibles>Christianity>Relics; on eBay.it (Italian market): Arte Sacra>Reliquie.

³⁸ www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/csaints/documents/rc_con_csaints_doc_20171208_istruzione-reliquie_en.html

obviously by the very same institution – may “enjoy any public cult” is a direct attempt of the Vatican authorities to monopolize the cult of relics.

A fundamental prerogative that displays this authority is an accompanying certificate of authenticity. As we have seen in the case of labels, with the spreading (and abuse) of the cult of relics, there was the need for further documentation that would demonstrate authenticity. For instance, in the canons and decrees of the Council of Trent, there are a significant number of instructions which specifically request a document, a certificate, a seal, or any other proof of legitimacy. As a matter of fact, even after the Council of Trent, we can observe a clear tendency of the Church to openly include its concerns about *authenticity*, *authority*, and certification in its most significant codes. Indeed, in the Second Vatican Council, we read that, “The saints have been traditionally honored in the Church and their authentic relics and images³⁹ held in veneration.”⁴⁰ Likewise, in the instruction “*Relics in the Church: Authenticity and Preservation*,” the Congregation for the Causes of Saints writes that, “The relics of the Blesseds and of the Saints may not be displayed for the veneration of the faithful without a proper certificate of the ecclesiastical authority who guarantees their authenticity” (Introduction). Besides the understandable will to mark its authority over a religious cult and all the power that derives from it, this attention to set rules and force documentation is moreover an attempt to contain and fight against the very problematic phenomenon that is the spread of spurious relics. For a proper analysis of relics in conjunction with and read against the Italian *novella* tradition, we must consider that though “Concerns about relics ... had first been voiced by Augustine of Hippo,” “the figure of the pardoner laden with fake indulgences and spurious relics only emerged as a

³⁹ Once again, we notice that sacred images and relics are regulated together.

⁴⁰ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*: Solemnly promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on December 4, 1963; Chapter V. The Liturgical Year, 111. URL: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html

problem during the thirteenth century” (Smith 146). The emergence of spurious relics as a problem during the 13th century will develop in the following centuries, also as attested by a great number of *novelle*, of which that of Frate Cipolla (*Decameron* VI, 10) is the most celebrated – though certainly not the only – occurrence.

Finally, the assumption that control over the cult of relics is a prerogative of the Church is at least partially wrong. There are several indicators that support this statement. For instance, suffice it to say that a catalogue which registers all the relics recognized by the Vatican currently does not exist in circulation.⁴¹ Apart from this very illustrative aspect, we will also note that, in the canons we have seen so far, the Vatican authorities also include those relics that are of particular interest to the community of believers. Indeed, we observed that Can. 1190 seems to somehow legitimize the authority of the community when in §2 it indicates that the canon applies to both “*Relics of great significance and other relics honored with great reverence by the people.*” The mentioning of this “reverence” – which in the Latin version is “*magna populi veneratione honorantur,*” and in the Italian version “*onorate da grande pietà popolare*” – is also present in §3 of the same canon. This overt consideration for those relics and religious artifacts of great relevance to the people materializes under (at least) two different perspectives that are not mutually exclusive. On the one hand, it can be a sort of permissive attitude that functions as a safety valve in the political management of a very complex cult at risk of degeneration through the “*inappropriate devotion*” that the same Church condemns in Can. 1188. On the other hand, it

⁴¹ Said Father Giuseppe Midilli, Director of the Liturgical Office of the Vicariate of Rome (cited in Principato, Gabriele. “Da Wojtyła a Francesco, il traffico di reliquie sul web”. *Linkiesta*. Jan 21, 2014. Accessed Feb 20, 2021.)

can be a genuine attempt made by a more comprehensive Church to embrace and value believers' *pietas*, theologically intended as one of the gifts of the Holy Ghost.⁴²

A historical example of the process of legitimization of a relic can be found in Rohrbacher's archives when he recounts the *translatio* of St. Mamas of Caesarea's head. In the text we read that, "Garnier, évêque de Troyes, étant mort à Constantinople le 14 avril 1205, Galon de Dampierre vint trouver le légat Pierre de Capoue, et, ... il le pria avec larmes de lui donner le chef de saint Mamas;⁴³" (294)⁴⁴ then, Pietro Di Capua granted his wish, but,

Ainsi, sans différer, de peur qu'on ne détournât la sainte relique, il alla au logis du défunt évêque et la transporta chez lui avec le respect convenable. Pour ôter tout prétexte de doute sur la vérité de la relique, il fit venir plusieurs Grecs; clercs et moines, qui, avant lu l'inscription du cercle d'argent, assurèrent que c'était le chef de saint Mamas. ... l'abbé et les moines ayant vu le chef, se prosternèrent en pleurant, le reconnurent ... Cette vérification de la relique est exprimée dans la lettre authentique qu'en donna le légat et que l'Eglise de Langres conserve encore. (Ibid.)⁴⁵

In this testimony, we can observe the authentication process of a relic. As we can see in this case, this process involves the presence of two subjects: an inscription that functions as a label ("lu l'inscription du cercle d'argent") and a community that validates it. Furthermore, we can see

⁴² By oversimplifying, piety is a combination of respect, love, and affection towards God and the sacred that is not generated by the fear of the Lord (which is another Holy Gift).

⁴³ Garnier, bishop of Troyes, died in Constantinople on April 14, 1205, Galon de Dampierre came to find the legate Pierre de Capoue, and, ... he begged him with tears to give him the head of Saint Mamas;" (my translation).

⁴⁴ Tome Septième [1198-1216]).

⁴⁵ "Thus, without delaying, for fear that the holy relic might be misappropriated, he went to the lodgings of the late bishop and transported it to his home with the proper respect. To remove any pretext of doubt about the truth of the relic, he gathered several Greeks; clerics and monks, who, before reading the inscription of the silver circle, assured him that it was the head of Saint Mamas. ... the abbot and the monks having seen the head, prostrated themselves crying, recognized him ... This verification of the relic is expressed in the authentic letter that the legate handed, and that the Church of Langres still preserves." (My translation)

that this process of “*vérification de la relique*” is then recorded in written form in a “*lettre authentique*.”

As we will see in many of the tales under analysis, the public veneration of a given relic is not excessively concerned with a counter proof/narration that could empirically demonstrate they are in the presence of a spurious relic. To give some very practical and emblematic examples and, above all, to grasp how this phenomenon is as relevant today as it was in the Middle Ages, suffice it to say that there are currently more than three assumed heads of St. John the Baptists.⁴⁶ Similarly, the popular veneration of the Shroud of Turin is still very fervent despite radiocarbon dating conducted independently by three different laboratories,⁴⁷ which dated the shroud between 1260 and 1390. Plus, for most of the scientific community, all the theories that challenge the radiocarbon dating have been systematically refuted (Gove). Despite the veracity *per se* of this relic – which is not in any way a concern of my study – the *ostensioni* of the shroud continued in grand style even after the radiocarbon dating’s results. As a matter of fact, on 30 March, 2013, the Shroud was shown to the world on television. The exposition, commissioned by the Archbishop of Turin and Papal Custodian of the Shroud, Msgr. Cesare Nosiglia, was in agreement with the Holy See.⁴⁸ My impression is that the Vatican authorities are quite cautious not to expose their positions too fully and adopt a rather ambiguous profile. For

⁴⁶ Preserved in two Catholic churches (Sancti Silvestri in Capite, Rome, and the Cathedral Basilica of Our Lady of Amiens), a mosque (Umayyad Mosque in Damascus), and even in a museum (the Residenz Museum in Munich).

⁴⁷ Oxford, Tucson, and Zurich.

⁴⁸ As shown but the “EXPOSITION OF THE HOLY SHROUD VIDEO MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS”, recorded on March, 30, 2013, and transcribed on the Vatican official website. URL http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130330_videomessaggio-sindone.html

instance, when the Shroud was shown again in 2020, Pope Francis sent a letter,⁴⁹ again to Msgr. Cesare Nosiglia, writing that (*italics added*),

I too join in your supplication, turning my gaze to *the Man of the Shroud*, in whom we recognise *the features* of the Servant of the Lord, that *Jesus* realised in His Passion: “A man of suffering, and familiar with pain ... In the face of *the Man of the Shroud* we also see *the faces* of so many sick brothers and sisters, ... As Christians, in the light of the Scriptures, *we contemplate in this cloth the icon of the Lord Jesus crucified*, dead and risen again. To *He* we entrust ourselves, in *Him* we confide. *Jesus* gives us the ...

If we are to assume from this letter that Pope Francis gives his approval and blessing to the *ostensione* of the Shroud, his words are worth further analysis. The Pope recognizes that the “Man” of the Shroud has the “*features of the Servant of the Lord*, that *Jesus* realised in His Passion,” but never clearly states that that man is Jesus Himself. Emblematically, the Pope says that, “*we contemplate in this cloth the icon of the Lord Jesus crucified*, dead and risen again.” When we read Pope Francis’ reference to the Shroud as an “icon” of the Lord, we might be still entitled to doubt if the highest Vatican authority is somehow subtly asserting that the Shroud is not a first-class relic,⁵⁰ and hence that the cloth did not touch the body of Christ. In other words, it is rather impossible to determine the Vatican’s viewpoint with certainty as the words used to describe the Shroud might hide a conscious ambiguity. Accordingly, what deserves a more meticulous study is whether, for the Vatican authorities, the Holy Shroud is an icon with the features of the Passion and Resurrection of Christ or a relic that was in contact with the body of

⁴⁹ Francis. “LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS TO MARK THE EXTRAORDINARY EXPOSITION OF THE HOLY SHROUD.” *The Holy See*, 11 April 2020, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200409_lettera-ostensione-sindone.html. Accessed 20 May 2021.

⁵⁰ Approximately, (also) anything that belonged to or simply touched Jesus.

Christ. It may seem a small detail, but this supposed ambiguity might signal the method by which the Vatican authorities keep the cult of the Shroud alive without necessarily taking a position on the veracity of the cloth. Consequently, this can serve as a concrete example of the double role of the Church, which simultaneously handles the political management of the cult and embraces and values the believers' *pietas*.

1.2.1 Reliquaries

Beside labels, Bagnoli remarks that another means of authenticating a relic is its complementary reliquary. Bynum and Smith state that historical evidence suggests the showcasing of relics in their reliquaries was a crucial custom with a series of well-regulated practices. Relics in the Middle Ages were stored in both single caskets and shared reliquaries which could contain several relics, often, but not exclusively, of the same saint (Smith). Even though different types of reliquaries coexisted for many centuries, we can attest to a phase of change in the display of relics that took place after the 12th century and had its boom in the 13th century (Bynum; Smith). From the 4th century until the 12th, in the Western part of the Roman Empire, relics were housed into jeweled caskets shaped like purses (Bynum), also called “*bursa-reliquaries*” (Smith 154; figure 1). Then, in the 12th century, due to the extensive fragmentation of bodies and the proliferation of new relics, reliquaries take on the shape of churches (figure 2), emphasizing a sense of gathering, community, and pilgrimage. In the 13th century, we can affirm the flourishing of what Germans designate as “*redende Reliquiare*,” meaning “speaking reliquaries” (Bynum; Hahn), or *reliquiari antropomorfi* in Italian (figure 3). These shrines are essentially body-shaped reliquaries of which arms, heads, and feet are among the most popular and well-preserved examples (Norville, in Hahn 36).



Figure 1: Reliquary casket ("Emly Shrine"), Early medieval, late 7th–early 8th century, Ireland.



Figure 2: Marienschrein (Shrine of Saint Mary), gold, 1230-1239, Aachen Cathedral, Aachen, Germany.



Figure 3: Arm reliquary of St. Blaise, *bottega* of Lorenzo Ghiberti, 1425, Italy.

Despite the existence of cases in which a body-shaped reliquary displays the relic in the position correspondent to that which it would be on a corpse (e.g. a skull inside a head-shaped reliquary), it is worth highlighting that “medieval body-part reliquaries are not shaped like human appendages because they hold corresponding relics; often they do not,” and that, “Given this fact, the assertion that they are simple representations of their contents falls apart” (Hahn 13). Hahn stresses that body-shaped reliquaries, “through an evocation of a life-size body-part, attest to the *presence* of the saint. Yes, a transfigured and heavenly body, but a *body* nonetheless” (Ibid., 14). Finally, we can perceive that, “in making a reliquary, the medieval artist makes a form that ‘faces’ us, confronts us, and addresses us bodily” (Ibid.). Reliquaries, then, call believers to action because they establish bodily contact with them. We can discern this particular practice from the desire and need for believers not just to see but also to touch the relic. Even today, by observing many reliquaries, we can see “spots of wear” which are “incontrovertible evidence” in determining how those reliquaries were used; arms reliquaries, for instance, “were used by the clergy as ritual objects to perform blessings and offer healing, by making the sign of the cross during ceremonies and actually reaching out to touch the faithful”

(Norville in Hahn 36). Reliquaries, then, “could bring their indexical power into operation through *physical contact* with the devotee,” and, “although the primary means of experiencing relics and reliquaries was the visual, relics call out to be touched” (Hahn 14). Hahn shows that, besides touching them with one’s hand, there are stories in which pilgrims “even bite relics in order to come into the most intimate possible contact with the object of devotion.” In that sense, reliquaries can also serve “as protection against overzealous devotees” (Ibid.), an aspect that we could include as a concrete example of the “*inappropriate devotion*” that the Vatican authorities attempt to mitigate.

It is worth mentioning that complementary reliquaries “frequently became objects of veneration in their own right” (Brazinski and Fryxell 6), often even if empty. As Blick points out, “Although the relic came first ... often the reliquary container became a focus of devotion. Pilgrim ampullae, for instance, by virtue of once containing the sacred, retained the power to console” (Blick 112). Remarkably, “tombs where saints were once laid such as that of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury and St. Swithun at Winchester continued to attract devotees, even when vacant” (Ibid.).

Another aspect that will prove beneficial to the textual analysis of the tales is that which happens inside the reliquaries. In the cult of relics, we can find examples of tangible matter that regenerates. For instance, we have cases in which sacred bodies are not only uncorrupted, but also present prodigious growth of nails, hair, or beard, like in the case of St. Gaudentius (4th-5th century), St. Amand (6th-7th century), St. Judoc (St. Joyce; 7th century), Blessed Helen of Arcella (13th century), and Blessed Maria Llorença Llong (15th century; Fallica).

After observing some of the fundamental properties of reliquaries, we can see that further studies are necessary to analyze the role of these elements in the shift between sacred space and

sacred people. On the one hand, we can state that reliquaries are products of the veneration of sacred people, as they are made to serve the purpose of preserving relics and displaying the sacred person for veneration. On the other hand, it is true that we must further study the ramifications of one of their main characteristics, *portability*. Further studies are necessary to determine whether this peculiarity of reliquaries renders them more than mere tools needed for the veneration of a sacred person. Indeed, if we consider that reliquaries, even if empty, frequently became objects of veneration in their own right, and that the reliquary container often became a focus of devotion, we can speculate that they are also an alteration of the veneration of the sacred space; and thanks to their portability, the sacred space is mobile rather than static. This concept might be reinforced by two elements. Firstly, we read that reliquaries are spaces in which miracles might happen. Secondly, we cannot ignore the fact that an incredibly large number of reliquaries were fashioned in the shape of a church, and that this might be connected to their modality as *portable*-sacred spaces. Furthermore, thanks to this new possible understanding of the role of reliquaries, it would be intriguing to establish their placement in the thing/object/sacrum paradigm through further study.

1.2.2 Textual analysis of the novella

In this last part of the chapter, I will undertake an analysis of a few selected tales from the Italian medieval and Renaissance novella tradition starting from the theoretical premises that I present in the first section. For instance, the fact that Church authorities have been setting rules over the centuries can easily lead us to perceive that they felt the need to define that which they refer to as “*inappropriate devotion*.” As we will now see in the textual scrutiny of these tales, the principles expressed in the Church codes and standards are almost antithetical to the behavior of

the protagonists of the tales. The tales that I will examine in greater detail are the following: Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* VI, 10; Franco Sacchetti's *Trecentonovelle* LX; and Masuccio Salernitano's *Novellino*⁵¹ IV. I grouped these particular tales because, as in the case the tale of Messer Dolcibene in *Trecentonovelle* XXIV, spurious relics are the protagonists of each plot. In all these tales, the reader – contrarily to the believer depicted in the tales – knows that those relics do not correspond to that which the protagonist of the tale claims.

Table 2: Scheme of the three tales under analysis

Novella	Date	Friar	Saint	Relic
<i>Decameron</i> VI, 10	1349-53	Frate Cipolla	St. Lawrence	Coal
<i>Trecentonovelle</i> LX	c. 1390	Frate Taddeo	St. Catherine	Arm
<i>Novellino</i> IV	1475	Fra Girolamo	St. Luke	Arm

As we can see in Table 2, despite being counterfeit, these relics (coal and two arms) still maintain their material essence and they do not play with the intangible-made-tangible, like the feces of God (in *Trecentonovelle* XXIV) and the feather of Archangel Gabriel (in *Decameron* VI, 10). We might speculate that the selection of these two types of relics is not random at all. Certainly, the arm is already a relevant relic, but it carries even more spiritual and political power if it belongs to saints who were renowned for their writings. Following this logic, the arm of an Evangelist is significantly more prestigious than the arm of another saint. Frate Gerolamo (in

⁵¹ All of the references to *The Novellino* in Italian are taken from Masuccio Salernitano, *Il Novellino*, edited by Alfredo Mauro, Laterza, 1940; while those in English are extracted from Masuccio, Salernitano, Ernest Richard Hughes, and William George Waters. *The Novellino of Masuccio. Now First Translated Into English by WG Waters. Illustrated by ER Hughes. FP. Lawrence & Bullen, 1895.*

Novellino IV) remarks on this aspect when he says that, “questa è quella beata mano la quale non solo scrisse tante eccellentie de la gloriosa Vergine Maria, ma anche la sua figura più volte in propria forma ritrasse.”⁵² Generally it seems clear that, to the cult, a body-part relic or item that was particularly important in the saint’s life is considered to be a higher and more prestigious/powerful relic. Even Frate Cipolla (in *Decameron* VI, 10) remarks that the coal was that which was used for St. Lawrence’s martyrdom, which was a pivotal episode in the tradition of the saint (“de’ carboni, co’ quali fu il beatissimo martire san Lorenzo arrostito”).

The premises of authenticity – the storage and labelling of relics anticipated in the previous section – allow for the possibility to undertake an analysis of the reliquaries of Frate Cipolla and provide an additional reading of the tale that is only detectable thanks to this specific focus. In the tale, when two young men named Giovanni del Bragoniera and Biagio Pizzini try to steal Frate Cipolla’s feather, we read that they,

...entrati [nella camera di Frate Cipolla, la quale aperta trovarono], la prima cosa che venne lor presa per cercare fu la bisaccia nella quale era la penna; la quale aperta, trovarono in un gran viluppo di zendado fasciata una piccola cassetina; la quale aperta, trovarono in essa una penna di quelle della coda d’un pappagallo, la quale avvisarono dovere esser quella che egli promessa avea di mostrare a’ certaldesi.⁵³

From this moment on, throughout the tale, this “cassetina” will have an essential role in the economy of the novella. Indeed, when the two young men take the feather, they replace it with

⁵² “this is the blessed hand which not only wrote down so many excellent things concerning the glorious Virgin Mary, but likewise many times made a picture of her face and figure as she was in the flesh.”

⁵³ “... entered Fra Cipolla's room, which was open, and lit at once upon the wallet, in which was the feather. The wallet opened, they found, wrapt up in many folds of taffeta, a little casket, on opening which they discovered one of the tail-feathers of a parrot, which they deemed must be that which the friar had promised to shew the good folk of Certaldo.”

coal, which they store in the casket in the same manner they would if it were a new relic (“Contenti adunque i giovani d’aver la penna trovata, quella tolsero e, per non lasciare la cassetta vota, vedendo carboni in un canto della camera, di quegli la cassetta empierono; e richiusala e ogni cosa racconcia come trovata avevano...”⁵⁴). When Frate Cipolla is about to show the relic to the crowd, we read,

... fatta prima con gran solennità la confessione, fece accender due torchi e soavemente sviluppando il zendado, avendosi prima tratto il cappuccio, fuori la cassetta ne trasse. E dette primieramente alcune parolette a laude e a commendazione dell’agnolo Gabriello e della sua reliquia, la cassetta aperse.⁵⁵

Despite the obvious falsehood of the relic, we notice how Boccaccio stresses that the reliquary was well-preserved, wrapped in the “zendalo,”⁵⁶ and stored in a casket. These two elements together with the lighting of the two torches, the removing of the hood, some *laude* to Archangel Gabriel, and a confession highlight the solemnity of the ritual that the friar was performing (also emphasized by the expression “con gran solennità”).

In addition, Frate Cipolla’s witty speech is fundamentally based on the practice of preserving relics in caskets. Boccaccio includes the story of this container and its power in the tale. When the friar realizes that the casket contains the coal and not the feather, he says it is true that he owns the feather of Archangel Gabriel, but that he got confused because, in order to preserve his relics, he uses two different caskets that look alike:

⁵⁴ “So the young men, having found the feather, took it out with great glee; and looking around for something to replace it, they espied in a corner of the room some pieces of coal, wherewith they filled the casket; which they then closed, and having set the room in order exactly as they had found it.”

⁵⁵ “... caused the confiteor to be recited with great solemnity, and two torches to be lit by way of preliminary to the shewing of the feather of the Angel Gabriel: he then bared his head, carefully unfolded the taffeta, and took out the casket, which, after a few prefatory words in praise and laudation of the Angel Gabriel and his relic, he opened.”

⁵⁶ Of which I will discuss further in Chapter Two and Chapter Three.

Vera cosa è che io porto la penna dell'agnol Gabriello, acciò che non si guasti, in una cassetta e i carboni co' quali fu arrostito san Lorenzo in un'altra; le quali son sì simiglianti l'una all'altra, che spesse volte mi vien presa l'una per l'altra, e al presente m'è avvenuto: per ciò che, credendomi io qui avere arrecata la cassetta dove era la penna, io ho arrecata quella dove sono i carboni.⁵⁷

These lines allude to two pivotal aspects of the cult of relics that deserve further analysis.

First, even if mentioned in a fictional story, we can experience a practical example of the need for labelling relics. The impossibility of the friar to distinguish one relic from the other (“le quali son sì simiglianti l'una all'altra, che spesse volte mi vien presa l'una per l'altra”) somehow recalls Smith's idea of relics' “lack of individuality.” Even though it would be quite easy to discern a feather from coal, we must remark that the two young men's *burla* is precisely based on the fact that they want to hear “quello che Frate Cipolla, in luogo della penna trovando carboni, dovesse dire.”⁵⁸ In order for this *inganno* to work, the friar must not be able to see the content of the “cassetta” before it is fully exposed to the crowd. In other words, the plot of this tale can only work if, as it is the case, Frate Cipolla's reliquaries take the form of caskets and lack labels. Given the impossibility of distinguishing one relic from the other, we can consider that, before Frate Cipolla's speech, both the feather and the coal have some sort of *thingness*. These two relics will then become re-qualified *objects* at the moment in which the friar will use them to make money; specifically, when he will draw crosses on the followers' clothes using the coal, and when in the following year he will exploit the feather (“[I due giovani] gli renderono la

⁵⁷ “But, fearing to trust them to another, I always carry them with me; and to tell you the truth I carry the feather of the Angel Gabriel, lest it should get spoiled, in a casket, and the coals, with which St. Lawrence was roasted, in another casket; which caskets are so like the one to the other, that not seldom I mistake one for the other, which has befallen me on this occasion; for, whereas I thought to have brought with me the casket wherein is the feather, I have brought instead that which contains the coals.”

⁵⁸ “what Fra Cipolla would say when he found the coals in its stead”

sua penna; la quale l'anno seguente gli valse non meno che quel giorno gli fosser valuti i carboni.”).

The second aspect that I would like to investigate is Frate Cipolla's theological background when he explains the reasons behind his confusion and brings the coal of St. Laurence instead of the feather of Archangel Gabriel. In the tale, we read,

Il quale io non reputo che stato sia errore, anzi mi pare esser certo che volontà sia stata di Dio e che Egli stesso la cassetta de' carboni ponesse nelle mie mani, ricordandom'io pur testé che la festa di San Lorenzo sia di qui a due dì. E per ciò, volendo Idio che io, col mostrarvi i carboni co' quali esso fu arrostito, raccenda nelle vostre anime la divozione che in lui aver dovete, non la penna che io voleva, ma i benedetti carboni spenti dall'omor di quel santissimo corpo mi fe' pigliare. ... Frate Cipolla, recatisi questi carboni in mano, sopra li lor camiscion bianchi e sopra i farsetti e sopra li veli delle donne cominciò a fare le maggior croci che vi capevano, affermando che tanto quanto essi scemavano a far quelle croci, poi ricrescevano nella cassetta, sì come egli molte volte aveva provato.⁵⁹

Aside from the numerous exquisite references to fire in the tale⁶⁰ (“arrostito ... raccenda nelle vostre anime la divozione ... carboni spenti”), in this portion of the tale we can discern how the

⁵⁹ “Nor deem I this a mischance; nay, methinks, 'tis by interposition of God, and that He Himself put the casket of coals in my hand, for I mind me that the feast of St. Lawrence falls but two days hence. Wherefore God, being minded that by shewing you the coals, with which he was roasted, I should rekindle in your souls the devotion that you ought to feel towards him, guided my hand, not to the feather which I meant to take, but to the blessed coals that were extinguished by the humours that exuded from that most holy body ... Fra Cipolla took the coals in his hand, and set about making on their white blouses, and on their doublets, and on the veils of the women crosses as big as might be, averring the while that whatever the coals might thus lose would be made good to them again in the casket, as he had often proved.”

⁶⁰ With an absurd reference to St. Anthony/fire, a theme that I will discuss in depth in a complementary (in progress) study titled, “Di questo ingrassa il (Guccio) Porco sant'Antonio”.

casket – and not just the coal – might become an “object of veneration in [its] own right,”⁶¹ because it is the protagonist of two supposed miracles, which are probably connected to each other. First we read that, according to an almost *certain* Frate Cipolla, it is God, Himself who first wishes (“mi pare esser certo che volontà sia stata di Dio”; “volendo Idio che”; “mi fe”) and then passes the casket to the friar. In this case, by using verbs such as “ponesse [nelle mie mani]” and “[mi fe] pigliare,” Frate Cipolla portrays God’s act as a very physical, and thus human, gesture. Second, when we read, “affermando che tanto quanto essi [questi carboni] scemavano a far quelle croci, poi ricrescevano nella cassetta, sì come egli molte volte aveva provato,” we attest to a second miracle, that is the regeneration of the coal. If we pay further attention to the tale, we notice that the miracle of the regenerating coal does not occur in the hands of the friar. Indeed, when the friar draws the crosses on the believers’ clothes, the coal is consumed (“scemavano a far quelle croci”) and regrows when it is in the casket (“ricrescevano nella cassetta”). Thanks to this specific analysis, we can speculate that the casket itself had some sort of power that – just as in the cases of St. Gaudentius, St. Amand, St. Judoc, Blessed Helen of Arcella, and Blessed Maria Llorença Llong⁶² – produced a prodigious growth of tangible matter. This aspect might allow us to consider Frate Cipolla’s reliquary as a *portable* sacred space in which miracles can happen. Moreover, Boccaccio does not seem to suggest to the reader whether this miracle is one of Frate Cipolla’s astute stratagem or not, simply saying, “sì come egli molte volte aveva provato” (“as he had often proved”), which is rather ambiguous.⁶³ We can also

⁶¹ One of reliquaries’ characteristics; cited previously (Brazinski and Fryxell 6).

⁶² This will be examined in Chapter Three.

⁶³ Boccaccio is also quite ambiguous when narrating on (at least) one other miracle, that of the bells that ring without human intervention in *Decameron* II, 1 (a tale I will discuss more in detail in Chapter Two). In the tale we read, “there was at Treviso a German, named Arrigo ... [who] was respected by all, being accounted not only an honest but a most holy man; insomuch that, whether truly or falsely I know not, the Trevisans affirm, that on his decease all the bells of the cathedral of Treviso began to toll of their own accord. Which being accounted a miracle, this Arrigo was generally reputed a saint.” As it happens in the case of the miracle of the re-growing coal in Frate Cipolla’s tale, by writing “whether truly or falsely I know not” (“Per la qual cosa, o vero o non vero che si fosse”),

speculate that this miracle is somehow emphasized by the *touch* of God's hands when He passes the reliquary to Frate Cipolla ("ponesse [nelle mie mani]" and "[mi fe'] pigliare").

Finally, as we have observed, reliquaries can take the shape of a human body (with an abundant presence of hand-shaped specimens); thus we may catch a basic glimpse of how, in the history of the cult of relics, matching the image of a reliquary to that of a human body (especially to hands) is not rare. Moreover, we have seen and can still observe in today's practices that believers need to see and physically touch a relic and/or a reliquary. If we then apply these principles to the tale of Frate Cipolla, we notice that the friar's speech, besides being a rhetorical masterpiece, is also imbued with the theological foundations of the cult of relics. Hence, if we contemplate that a reliquary can take the shape of a hand, and that this hand-reliquary can be touched, we can enrich the reading of Frate Cipolla's speech about the reliquaries. According to these premises (though the friar's reliquaries appear in the form of a casket ("cassettina")), the hand of God physically passing the container to the friar appears less absurd to an audience that is accustomed to bodily "fac[ing]," "confront[ing]," and "address[ing]" reliquaries (Hahn 14). As Hahn suggests, instead of objects that are purely "representational," relics and reliquaries,

are complexly 'metaphorical' and 'relational.' They show the saint to be the active 'limb' of the 'body' of the Church. They allow the clergy to point and to 'extend' its reach, perhaps in the form of miracles of healing, perhaps in the form of theatrical liturgies where such a prop could bless the crowd. (13)

Boccaccio seems not to want to provide the reader with an univocal truth, as he does, for instance, when he specifies that the feather in *Decameron* VI, 10 is that of a parrot. A dedicated study should be conducted to determine more structurally if Boccaccio, as I suspect, ponderously leaves more dogma- and faith-related concerns open to interpretation. In this direction, the tale of Melchisedech (I, 3) is a very clear example.

In other words, we can consider that Frate Cipolla's attempt to feed the crowd the idea that God, Himself physically passed him the casket with the coal is supported by the tactile experience undoubtedly included in the cult of relics. Reliquaries ask to be reached and physically touched in order to transmit their *virtus*, and when we read Frate Cipolla saying, "Ma prima voglio che voi sappiate che chiunque da questi carboni in segno di croce è tocco, tutto quello anno può viver sicuro che fuoco nol cokerà che non si senta,"⁶⁴ we perceive that he is using this very concept to lure the devotees.

In *Il Trecentonovelle*, a collection of short stories from the 14th century written by Franco Sacchetti, we can find a novella – LX⁶⁵ – that is openly against the abuse of the cult of relics in a very explicit manner. As a matter of fact, it begins with a clear and strong warning, "Molte volte interviene che delle reliquie si truovano assai inganni."⁶⁶ Soon after, the author also provides a concrete – rather than subtle or alluding – example of an episode that recently occurred ("come poco tempo intervenne a' Fiorentini")⁶⁷ in which believers worshipped a clearly false relic ("Avendo aúto di Puglia un braccio, il quale fu dato loro per lo braccio di santa Reparata, e facendolo venire con gran cerimonia, e mostrandolo parecchi anni per la sua festa con gran solennità, nella fine trovarono il detto braccio esser di legno").⁶⁸ In this tale, the main protagonist, Frate Taddeo Dini, is asked to show a large crowd the supposed arm of St. Catherine. The friar first refuses to do it because he is certain that the relic was spurious, but he

⁶⁴ "But first of all I would have you know, that whoso has the sign of the cross made upon him with these coals, may live secure for the whole of the ensuing year, that fire shall not touch him, that he feel it not."

⁶⁵ "Frate Taddeo Dini, predicando a Bologna il dí di Santa Caterina, mostra un braccio contro a sua volontà, gittando un piacevol motto a tutta la predica." ("Brother Taddeo Dini, preaching at Bologna upon the Feast of Saint Catharine, sheweth an arm against his own will, affording a diverting jest unto all the congregation").

⁶⁶ "VERY often doth it happen that relics are found to be deceitful."

⁶⁷ "...as chanced unto the Florentines a little while ago."

⁶⁸ "They had received from Apulia an arm, which was given unto them as being an arm of Saint Reparata; and they brought it to Florence with great ceremony and showed it at her feast with much solemnity for many years; but at last the said arm was found to be made of wood."

is then forced against his will to display the relic to the crowd. When he is asked to present the relic, the incredulous friar tells the *pretoni*⁶⁹ that it is not possible that what they have in front of them is an arm of the saint because he saw her whole body with both arms attached (“Io sono stato al Monte Sinai, e ho veduto il suo corpo glorioso, intero con le due braccia e con tutte l’altre membra”⁷⁰). The other priests then respond, “Bene sta; noi tegnamo che questo sia veramente il suo braccio”⁷¹ and, despite Frate Taddeo's attempts to dissuade them from showcasing the spurious relic, he eventually must open and exhibit the casket to the believers. When he displays the relic to the crowd, the friar still maintains his argument, saying “ho veduto il corpo di santa Caterina tutto intero, e massimamente con due braccia; s’ella ne ebbe tre, quest’è il terzo.”⁷² As we can see, Frate Taddeo’s words openly reveal to the crowd that this perceived relic of St. Catherine’s arm is undoubtedly spurious because he saw her whole body/relic with both arms somewhere else.

What deserves further discussion is not the spurious relic *per se*, but rather the reaction of the crowd right after witnessing a member of the clergy openly state that the relic is a fake: “Gl’intendenti di questo risono, parlando tra loro; molti uomini e femminelle semplici si segnarono devotamente, come quelli che non intesono frate Taddeo, né avidonsi mai di quello che avea detto.”⁷³ Sacchetti describes this reaction almost as missed feedback of the crowd as the throng seems to completely disregard the friar’s revelation, and they even laugh at him. At this point, it seems appropriate to briefly analyze the relations of power and authorship between the devotees

⁶⁹ “the other priests”

⁷⁰ “I have been to Mount Sinai and I have seen her glorious body, complete with her two arms and all her other members.”

⁷¹ “That is all very well, but we hold that this is truly her arm.”

⁷² “I have seen the body of St. Catharine all complete, and especially with two arms; but if she had three arms, this is the third.”

⁷³ “Those who were intelligent laughed at this, speaking amongst themselves; but many simple men and women crossed themselves devoutly, as though they had not understood Brother Taddeo nor perceived that which he said.”

and the ecclesiastical institution. Without counting the role of the reader, in this tale we have at least three distinct perspectives and subjects that must be taken into consideration, which are: a) each ecclesiastical character of the tale save for Frate Taddeo; b) Frate Taddeo (and most likely the author himself); c) and the crowd. For instance, we see that the *pretoni* tell frate Taddeo how they believe the arm is actually that of St. Catherine (or at least they say they do), despite the friar's testimony. Afterwards, when Frate Taddeo tries to dissuade the other members of clergy from showing the relic using logical motivations ("con chiare ragioni diceva non esser da mostrarlo"), we read that the abbeess pressured the friar to do so, maintaining that the relic must be shown in order to maintain devotion to the monastery ("la Badessa, sentendo questo, lo mandò pregando il dovesse mostrare; però che, se non si mostrasse, la devozione del monastero si perderebbe"). With these words, we can observe that the abbeess is pushing Frate Taddeo to show the relic not for spiritual reasons, but rather to preserve the monastery's power. It is worth specifying that this tale takes place at St. Catherine's Monastery in Bologna during the celebration of the festivity of the same saint.⁷⁴ As for the case of the coal of St. Lawrence, in the tale of Frate Cipolla (*Decameron* VI, 10),⁷⁵ the involvement of St. Catherine's arm is also directly interconnected with a celebration dedicated to the same saint. If, on the one hand, this might appear to be a small detail, for anyone who has experienced a given saint's festivity, it is easy to visualize the volume of people and money (and thus power) that such events implicate, even today.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ "... il dí di Santa Caterina a Bologna; e al monistero di Santa Caterina per la festa ..."

⁷⁵ "... anzi mi pare esser certo che volontà sia stata di Dio e che Egli stesso la cassetta de' carboni ponesse nelle mie mani, ricordandom'io pur testé che la festa di san Lorenzo sia di qui a due di."

⁷⁶ This demonstrates the fact that, whether for its religious nature or for folkloristic reasons that shape the *culturescape* of Italy, the presence of the body of the saints has far from vanished, even in what some describe as a secularized society.

Another point worth mentioning is that the figure of Frate Taddeo is not fictional. Indeed, he was a Dominican friar born in Florence between 1283-84 and was famous for his sermons (Vecchio). We can perceive that Sacchetti aligns himself with the friar's quarrel because both the friar and Sacchetti the narrator explicitly condemn the abuse of (spurious) relics. More importantly for this study, their words communicate not only the *credulitas* of the crowd, but also the power of the community of devotees. Indeed, even though the friar offers "chiare ragioni" that empirically prove the falsehood of the relic, the believers boost the adoration and the festivity around St. Catherine, also and especially thanks to a relic that they decided as a community to believe true. It seems that the words and the role of the ecclesiastical figure is ignored by the crowd that Sacchetti refers to as "uomini e femelle semplici," just like Boccaccio in the tale of Frate Cipolla.⁷⁷

In contrast to the case of Frate Cipolla, in *Decameron* VI, 10, Frate Taddeo almost looks like the victim of the *beffa* ("Gl'intendenti di questo risono, parlando tra loro; molti uomini e femelle semplici si segnarono devotamente, come quelli che non intesono frate Taddeo, né avidonsi mai di quello che avea detto") as the crowd actually laughs at him and completely ignores his disclosure. Frate Taddeo, just like Frate Cipolla, knows that the relic is false, but his witty speech is not about trying to justify its truthfulness, but rather to tell the crowd that it is clearly false ("ho veduto il corpo di santa Caterina tutto intero, e massimamente con due braccia; s'ella ne ebbe tre, quest'è il terzo"). It is emblematic that the reaction of the two crowds toward the two relics is similar – as they continue to worship *their* relic – notwithstanding the two ecclesiastical authorities presenting the relics are the antithesis of each other. This demonstrates

⁷⁷ "Gli uomini e le femine semplici che nella chiesa erano, udendo che veder dovevano la penna dell'agnol Gabriello dopo nona..." and "stolta moltitudine" (*Decameron* VI, 10).

that the last word on which saint, relic, or miracle⁷⁸ to believe is in the hand of the community of devotees, which I claim to be the most powerful authority over the cult of relics and saints in general,⁷⁹ even today (given that, to name just one example from the myriad of cases, there are still more than three assumed heads of St John the Baptists⁸⁰ currently venerated in 2021).

As we have seen, Sacchetti begins his novella LX with an open polemic on the gullibility of people towards the worshipping of spurious relics, and he provides a non-fictional example of recent events in his own society (“Molte volte interviene che delle reliquie si truovano assai inganno ... come poco tempo intervenne a’ Fiorentini”). At the end of the tale, he intensifies his dissent with what appears to be an actual invective against the cult of spurious relics:

La fede è buona e salva ciascuno che l’ha; ma veramente solo il vizio dell’avarizia fa di molti inganni nelle reliquie; che è a dire che non è cappella che non mostri aver del latte della Vergine Maria! ché se fusse come dicono, nessuna sarebbe più preziosa reliquia, pensando che del suo corpo glorioso alcuna cosa non rimase in terra; ed e ’si mostra tanto latte per lo mondo, dicendo esser del suo, che se fosse stata una fonte ch’avesse più dí rampollato, quello si basterebbe. Se se ne potesse far prova, come frate Taddeo fece del detto braccio, ciò non avverrebbe. Ora la fede nostra ci fa salvi; e chi archimia sí fatte cose, ne porta pena in questo o nell’altro mondo.⁸¹

⁷⁸ As we will see in Chapter Two

⁷⁹ As the case of St. Januarius and the Neapolitan community, to name a vivid example, is relevant even today

⁸⁰ Preserved in two Catholic churches (Sancti Silvestri in Capite in Rome and the Cathedral Basilica of Our Lady of Amiens), a mosque (Umayyad Mosque in Damascus), and even in a museum (the Residenz Museum in Munich).

⁸¹ “Faith is a good thing, and saveth all who have it; but truly the vice of avarice causeth much deceit in the matter of relics. It may be said that there is not a church which doth not pretend to possess milk of the Virgin Mary! If it were so, there could be no relic more precious, seeing that nothing of her glorious body remaineth upon the earth; but there is so much milk shown in the world, said to be hers, that it would suffice for a fountain flowing many days! If this thing could be proved, as Brother Taddeo did with that arm, it would not continue. Our faith is our salvation, and whoever imagineth such inventions will be punished for it either in this world or in the next.”

Although this quotation looks like an extract from one of the invectives that John Calvin writes in his *Traité des reliques* (1543), it hails from an Italian novella dated about two centuries earlier. As we see, Sacchetti does not condemn the cult of relics itself, but the “avarizia” and “inganni” that exploit such cult, and actually praises genuine faith and *pietas* (“La fede è buona e salva ciascuno che l’ha ... Ora la fede nostra ci fa salvi”). After condemning the veneration of two false arms, that of St. Reparata and that of St. Catherine, the text here denounces the abuse of the Sacred Milk of the Virgin Mary, a highly popular relic discussed in the subchapter *1.1 Secretions, liquids, and non-body parts relics*. Sacchetti, just like Frate Taddeo, provides “chiare ragioni” that explain why theologically, according to the tradition of the Assumption of Mary, the fact itself that one can conceive tangible remains (*reliquus*) of Mary goes against any dogmatic premise. In this case, I argue that “pensando che del suo corpo glorioso alcuna cosa non rimase in terra” is in conversation with Frate Taddeo’s “ho veduto il corpo di santa Caterina tutto intero, e massimamente con due braccia; s’ella ne ebbe tre, quest’è il terzo.” In other words, it seems that Sacchetti is asking how it is possible to have tangible relics of the Virgin Mary if she ascended to Heaven with both her body and soul, in the very way that Frate Taddeo asks how it is possible to be in the presence of St. Catherine’s arm if she already has two attached to her body elsewhere. In a sense, we can consider the narrator’s approach as the counter-response to and antithesis of Frate Cipolla. Indeed, the former attempts to remind that an intangible sacred body cannot produce tangible relics, while the latter bases most of his relics exactly on the opposite idea, which is, for instance, that an angel can leave his feather or perspiration on Earth, and that even the sound of bells can be stored into a container.⁸² The narrator in the *Novellino* continues by reporting the fact that even empirical evidence demonstrating the falsehood of a

⁸² These are just a few examples of Frate Cipolla’s relics that I will study throughout my work.

relic is not powerful enough to stop people from worshipping it (in this case the Sacred Milk, “Se se ne potesse far prova, come frate Taddeo fece del detto braccio, ciò non avverrebbe”). The aforementioned example of the radiocarbon dating conducted by three different laboratories on the Sacred Shroud of Turin⁸³ confirms that we can also apply this archetype to the contemporary cult of relic. All this proves – once again – that the community of devotees has the power to legitimize the cult of any given relic and that the approval of the Church as an institution is supplementary and not indispensable.

Another Italian novella framed by the paradigm in which a crowd of devotees authorizes the cult of a given (spurious) relic is novella IV from Masuccio Salernitano’s *Novellino*, a collection of 50 novellas published posthumously in 1476, a year after the author’s death. Masuccio Salernitano’s work is certainly inspired by Boccaccio’s *Decameron* both in form and content. Aside from numerous similarities between this tale and that of Frate Cipolla (*Decameron* VI, 10), what I prefer to highlight now is the endorsement of the crowd, this time presenting a few peculiarities worth analyzing.

In this tale, a friar from Spoleto, Frate Girolamo, decides with the complicity of his collaborator Frate Mariano to obtain the right arm of a corpse belonging to a valiant knight and to claim it as the arm of St. Luke the Evangelist. The body of this knight is described as exceptionally well-preserved despite his death many years before (“da lunghissimi anni passato”)⁸⁴; thus, it would perfectly suit the plan to go around and show it off as a relic. The two friars were sailing towards Calabria⁸⁵ when inauspicious weather forced them to reach the coast

⁸³ As I examined in the section 1.1 *Secretions, liquids, and non-body parts relics*.

⁸⁴ I will further analyze the ambiguity of Masuccio Salernitano in describing this corpse in Chapter Two.

⁸⁵ The narrator describes Calabria as a “provincia da grossa e incolta gente abitata” (“province inhabited by a very gross and stupid race of peasants”), an epithet that will shortly be addressed to Sorrento and its inhabitants.

of Sorrento, which is considered to be a place inhabited by people as gullible as the Calabrians (“non meno che in Calabria, il suo deliberato disegno riuscire”).⁸⁶ Frate Girolamo asks the local ecclesiastical superiors to gather the masses because he is going to exhibit a miraculous relic. Once the crowd has assembled, the friar shows the relic. Although this is a fictional tale, the author offers a well-depicted illustration of the rituality involved in the displaying of a relic in the 15th century. First, Frate Girolamo says, “Per tanto, brigata mia, che Iddio vi benedica, ognuno con devotione se tragga il cappuccio a veder questo tesoro,”⁸⁷ and then we read,

Frate Girolamo la sua composta favola ordinatamente pronunciata, fattasi dare la cassetta dai suoi compagni ove era il santo braccio, e fatto alluminare di molte torce, inginocchiato, e con gran reverenza in mano tenendola, divotamente con gli occhi pieni di lacrime basato prima l’orlo de la cassetta ove la sua reliquia vi era, per ingannare altrui, con solennità voltatosi a li compagni una divota laude di Santo Luca pontificalmente cantarono. E veduto finalmente tutto il popolo stare ammirato, aperta la cassetta, de la quale uscì mirabile odore, rimossi i viluppi del zendado, e presa la reliquia, e scoperta la mano con un poco del braccio, così disse: Questa è quella felice e santa mano del fedelissimo secretarlo del Figliuol di Dio, questa è quella beata mano la quale non solo scrisse tante eccellentie de la gloriosa Vergine Maria, ma anche la sua figura più volte in propria forma ritrasse.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Tommaso Guardati, of the real name Masuccio Salernitano, is member of the Guardati, a powerful family from Sorrento; he was most probably born in Salerno or, less likely, in Sorrento (De Propriis). We observe that he uses the people from his own homeland to mock the gullibility of the masses, just as Boccaccio does with the Certaldesi in the tale of Frate Cipolla (*Decameron* VI,10).

⁸⁷ “On this account, my friends here gathered together, let each one of you in devout fashion uncover his head before looking at this precious treasure which our great God ...”

⁸⁸ Fra Girolamo, as soon as he had delivered in due course the fictitious story which he had concocted for the occasion, called to his associates and bade them bring to him the casket wherein had been placed the holy arm. Then, having kindle great quantity lights round about he went down his knees and holding the sacred relic his hand with mighty show reverence and with his eyes full tears he first all kissed the border the casket which was shut up

Through this extract, we become privy to the various steps that accompany the showcasing of a relic. As we can see, many of the phases are also revealed in Frate Cipolla's tale.⁸⁹ I summarized the most explicit ones below⁹⁰:

Frate Cipolla (*Decameron* VI,10)

Frate Girolamo (*Novellino* IV)

“fece accender due torchi”

“e fatto alluminare di molte torce”

“e soavemente sviluppando il zendado”

“rimossi i viluppi del zendado”

“avendosi prima tratto il cappuccio”

“ognuno con devotione se tragga il cappuccio”

...

“figliuoli benedetti, trarretevi i cappucci”

“fuori la cassetta ne trasse”

“presa la reliquia”

“la cassetta aperse”

“aperta la cassetta”

“E dette primieramente alcune parolette a
laude e a commendazione dell'agnolo
Gabriello e della sua reliquia”

“Questa è quella felice e santa mano del
fedelissimo secretarlo del Figliuol di Dio,
questa è quella beata mano la quale non solo

this false relic which he had prepared for the beguiling others Next he turned with great solemnity towards his companions and then straightway began sing pious laud Saint Luke with full pontifical rites. At last, when he marked that all the people were standing were wonder-stricken, he opened the casket and immediately there issued therefrom most marvellous odour. Next he removed the wrappings of fine taffeta, and, having taken up the relic and uncovered the hand thereof and a small portion of the arm, he spake in this wise: “This thing which I have here is the blessed and holy hand of that most faithful scribe of the Son of God ; this is the blessed hand which not only wrote down so many excellent things concerning the glorious Virgin Mary, but likewise many times made a picture of her face and figure as she was in the flesh.”

⁸⁹ In the above-mentioned extract from *Decameron* VI, 10 we read, “... fatta prima con gran solennità la confessione, fece accender due torchi e soavemente sviluppando il zendado, avendosi prima tratto il cappuccio, fuori la cassetta ne trasse. E dette primieramente alcune parolette a laude e a commendazione dell'agnolo Gabriello e della sua reliquia, la cassetta aperse.”

⁹⁰ I preferred not to provide translations into English because I would like to emphasize the morpho-lexical similarities among the original texts (which might be lost in translation).

... “cantando una laude di san Lorenzo” ***** “forte incominciò le campanelle a sonare” *****	scrisse tante ecceilentie de la gloriosa Vergine Maria, ma anche la sua figura più volte in propria forma ritrasse” ***** “e chi a sonare le campane correva” *****
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To be fair, discerning whether – and to what extent – these steps are Masuccio Salernitano’s depiction of his own experience of a relic’s showcasing or if they derive from a sort of quote/emulation of the master Boccaccio is quite difficult and would deserve a more thorough study.⁹¹ Besides these significant similitudes, I would like to highlight one main difference between these two tales, or better, what we can find in the *Novellino* IV that we cannot find in the *Decameron* VI, 10.

In his long speech, Frate Cipolla, even if in his own phraseology with its ambiguity and mockery, provides legitimate reasons to demonstrate the authenticity of his relics. Indeed, after listing his relics, he says:

... quali cose io tutte di qua con meco divotamente le recaì, e holle tutte. È il vero che il mio maggiore non ha mai sofferto che io l’abbia mostrate infino a tanto che certificato non s’è se desse sono o no; ma ora che per certi miracoli fatti da esse e per lettere ricevute dal Patriarca fatto n’è certo m’ha conceduta licenzia che io le mostri; ma io, temendo di fidarle altrui, sempre le porto meco.⁹²

⁹¹ I will briefly engage this topic later in Chapter Two.

⁹² “All which things I devoutly brought thence, and have them all safe. True it is that my superior has not hitherto permitted me to shew them, until he should be certified that they are genuine. However, now that this is avouched by certain miracles wrought by them, of which we have tidings by letter from the Patriarch, he has given me leave to shew them. But, fearing to trust them to another, I always carry them with me.”

In this extract we read that Frate Cipolla, like Frate Geronimo, in order to secure greater authority from the crowd, evokes higher ecclesiastical figures (“il mio maggiore” and “Patriarca”). In addition, as Branca suggests, the passage “tanto che certificato non s’è se desse sono o no” hides some ambiguity, and in its footnotes (7), he suggests that it should be read as “se sono autentiche o no, oppure se esistono davvero; con una nuova e voluta ambiguità.”⁹³ I would add here that the word “certificato” can be read and translated both as the noun *certificate* and as the past participle of the verb *to certify*, that is *certified*. Consequently, in the first case, that “non s’è” should be understood as “there is not”; thus, there is not any certificate that proves these relics to be authentic. Instead, in the second reading, the meaning of “non s’è” should be read as “non si è certificato,” using the Italian passive form with the *si impersonale*⁹⁴ structure, meaning something close to “[their authenticity] has not been certified.” After that, Frate Cipolla claims more authority when he says that, given the miracles that the relics accomplished, together with the letters from the patriarch, he has the license to show them. Wittily, in this passage, he claims that he has permission to show the relics (“fatto n’è certo m’ha conceduta licenza che io le mostri”), but never states that they are authentic because of the miracles and the letters.

In the novella IV of the *Novellino*, instead, we perceive a more intense and explicit mention of certification, particularly in reference to a *bolla* (bull). In the tale we read,

Per tanto, brigata mia, che Iddio vi benedica, ognuno con devotione se tragga il cappuccio a veder questo tesoro; che esso Iddio più per miracolo che per mia operatione di veder vi ha concesso: notificandovi in prima che io ho bolla dal nostro signore il Papa,

⁹³ “if they are authentic or not, or if they actually exist; with a new and intended ambiguity.” (my translation)

⁹⁴ The *si impersonale* in Italian is widely used when one wants to stress the verb without specifying a particular subject; something close to the English “they” or “one,” or the use of the passive form.

per la quale concede grandissime indulgentie e remissioni di peccati a qualunque a detta reliquia farà qualche elemosina secondo la sua possibilitade, a tal che di quello se raduna se ne faccia un tabernacolo d'argento con alcune gioie legato, come conviensi a tanta excelsa cosa⁹⁵ ... E questo detto, cavatasi dalla manica una bolla a suo modo contrafatta, gli fu da tutti, senza altramente leggerla, donata grandissima fede: e così ciascuno s'appressava per volere la sua elemosina offerire, ancora che el potere fosse molto estremo.⁹⁶

As we can see, Masuccio Salernitano further emphasizes the need of a proper certification that will lend him and the relic more authority. Remarkably, we notice the fact that the friar's mentioning of an assumed *bolla* from the pope does not have a real effect on the crowd of devotees who do not even care to examine or read it. Paradoxically, we perceive the reaction of this crowd to have a similar attitude to that of the mass in *Trecentonovelle* LX when Frate Taddeo was trying to claim the opposite, that is that St. Catherine's arm was spurious. In other

⁹⁵ Reliquaries and tabernacles were often decorated with precious jewels that validated the relics within, based on the assumption that only reliquaries decorated with incorruptible jewels and precious stones were worthy of holding relics whose associated saints were similarly incorruptible (Bagnoli cited in Brazinski and Fryxell 6). James Robinson adds that a relic's "value lies in its succinctness and ambiguity. The 'matter' it describes is at once the question of faith that underlies the belief system and the physical substances that empower it. The substances are not, however, solely the fragments of bone, stone, wood and textiles that for the most part comprise the sacred matter used in relic veneration, but also the precious commodities of gold, silver, crystal and gemstones that were used to make the reliquaries that enshrined the relics" (in *Matter of Faith...* Preface V).

⁹⁶ "On this account, my friends here gathered together, let each one of you in devout fashion uncover his head before looking at this precious treasure which our great God, more through the working of a miracle than through any act of mine, has granted you leave to behold. Now, first I will notify to you that I hold a bull from our lord the Pope, by the terms of which he grants the highest indulgence and complete remission of sins to every man who will give alms according to his ability in honour of the relic aforesaid, in order that, with whatever treasure can be thus gathered together, we may let construct a tabernacle of silver, set and adorned with precious stones, to serve as a fitting shrine for so excellent and precious a thing ... he drew forth from his sleeve a sealed bull, forged according to a cunning device of his own, and forthwith the whole of the people who were there present believed with un questioning faith in the instrument he laid before them without ever having read a single letter of the same, and then each individual person drew near to make his offering, although it was no easy matter to do this on account of the crowd."

words, no matter what the ecclesiastical figure is trying to assert (i.e. whether or not to believe in the authenticity of the relic), the crowd as a group seems to yield the same response.

We can discern the same behavior when Frate Geronimo and Frate Mariano perform their *beffa*. According to the friars' plan, Frate Mariano is supposed to loudly reprimand the relic, telling the crowd that it is spurious, so that Frate Geronimo can prove him wrong with a fake miracle, thus obtaining the crowd's approval. Masuccio Salernitano writes,

[frate Mariano] con grandissima importunità fattosi far loco, con alte voci gridando verso il suo frate Girolamo in cotal forma cominciò a parlare: O vile ribaldo, poltrone, ingannatore de Dio e de gli uomini, non hai tu vergogna a dire sì grande ed enorme bugia, che questo sia il braccio di San Luca, attento che io so del certo che el suo sacratissimo corpo è in Padoa tutto intiero? Ma questo osso marcio lo dei tu aver tratto fuori di qualche sepoltura per ingannare altrui: ma io me maraviglio grandemente di Monsignore e di questi altri venerabili padri chierici che ti doveriano lapidare come sei degno.⁹⁷

It is emblematic that in order for this *beffa* to work, one of the two *beffatori* must loudly explain the evil plan to fool the crowd to the very same crowd. It is also indicative of how similar this discourse is to that of Frate Taddeo in *Trecentonovelle* LX, even if, again, the purpose is completely antithetical. Indeed, Frate Mariano's statement that he saw St. Luke's body "tutto intiero" somewhere else is very close to Frate Taddeo's claim that he saw St. Catherine's body

⁹⁷ "Fra Girolamo, his confederate, began to declaim against him in the following wise: 'Ah! vile rogue that thou art, coward and traitor both towards God and man, why art thou not overwhelmed with shame as thou utterest so monstrous a affirming that this thing truth the arm Saint Luke forasmuch myself know for certain that at this moment his most holy body rests entire Padua good sooth this rotten bone you have here must have been dug up by you out some grave order that you might deceive others therewith Indeed mightily astonished the conduct monsignore here and these other reverend fathers the church men who might with reason condemn thee be stoned punishment surely meet for thy offences.'"

“tutto intero” (*Trecentonovelle* LX). Even more emblematic is the fact that the reaction of the crowd is always the same. In the tale we read that, “l'Arcivescovo e tutto il popolo di tale novità non poco ammirati, le sue parole rimordendo, gli diceano che tacesse; né lui con tutto ciò del gridare si arrestava, anzi che tutta via più fervente si mostrava a persuadere il popolo die non gli credesse.”⁹⁸

As we can see, the crowd shows hostility towards anyone who contradicts the authenticity of the relic, even if the person who is denouncing the fraud is a member of the clergy (respectively Frate Mariano in *Novellino* IV and Frate Taddeo *Trecentonovelle* LX). For instance, just by reading Giovanni Verga's *Guerra dei Santi* (in *Vita dei Campi* (1880)), we realize that this defensive behavior around the local saint is very vivid and persistent throughout the centuries, despite that, for many, we are supposed to live in a secularized society.

Returning to the question of authorship and authenticity of the relic, in tale IV of the *Novellino*, we read two other references to a *bolla*. The first one is an admonishment from the narrator who condemns the use of “bolle apostoliche” and the sale of indulgences (“taccio di alcuni che con bolle apostoliche, o vere o false che sieno, rimettono i peccati, e per forza di moneta collocano ciascuno in paradiso, empiendosi a torto e a diritto le budella di fiorini, ancora che da loro santissime regole espressamente gli sia proibito”⁹⁹). The second reference, which is more relevant to my study, is related to the bureaucratic authentication of the relic. When Frate

⁹⁸ “The archbishop and all the people there assembled were not little amazed when they listened this strange saying and reproaching Fra Mariano with sharp words account his utterance they commanded him hold his peace forthwith;”

⁹⁹ “to say nothing of those others, who, by the instrumentality of papal bulls, whether these be genuine or false, grant full remission of sins, or through the power of money make promises to gain for anyone a safe abode in Paradise; thus, by hook or by crook, winning for themselves a bellyful of florins, in spite of the fact that such traffic is expressly forbidden by the most sacred rules of their religion.”

Mariano, according to their plan, accuses Frate Geronimo to be an impostor, Frate Geronimo pretends to invoke God and asks Him to perform a miracle to show the crowd that the relic is true. At this point Frate Mariano plays sick, and Frate Geronimo makes him drink a solution of holy water and a small piece of the relic's nail ("raso un poco de l'unghia de la miracolosa mano, e postala in un bicchiere d'acqua benedetta, e aperta la bocca di fra Mariano, quel pretiosissimo liquore in gola gli gittoe ..."¹⁰⁰). When the crowd and the other clergy members recognize the miracle and trigger their devotion, we read that,

Il frate non men che santo istimato e riverito fu da l'Arcivescovo e da tutto il popolo insino a casa onorevolmente accompagnato: e fatti ridurre fra Girolamo e autenticare i notabili miracoli in pubblica forma, la seguente matina veduto il tempo atto al partire, col non piccolo fatto guadagno ...¹⁰¹

In this portion of the text, we can observe that the approval of the archbishop – with the necessary recognition of the crowd ("da l'Arcivescovo e da tutto il popolo") – is followed by a notary act that is meant to register, in written form, the miracles accomplished by the relic, thus providing its validation.

In conclusion, thanks to the analysis of the tales with a specific focus on the cult of relics, we are able to understand a little more about what is often perceived as a mere parody of clergy members taking advantage of gullible people. For instance, it was possible to conjecture some possible reasons for why Frate Cipolla is able to easily instill the idea of a reliquary that is

¹⁰⁰ "taken out a little knife, pared off a small shred of the nail from the miraculous hand, which thing he put in a beaker of holy water, and then, having opened wide the mouth of Fra Mariano, he poured down his throat the precious liquor."

¹⁰¹ "Fra Girolamo, who by this time was esteemed and revered almost as a saint by the archbishop and all the people, was by them honourably escorted back to this place, and, having had these notable miracles of his publicly authenticated, he himself, with Fra Mariano and his other companions, and the great store of booty they had collected, went on board their ship the following morning ..."

somehow physically given to him by God. One can rightly argue that the tale is a derision of the crowd's *credulitas*. Consequently, it is easy to conceive that, just as the crowd believed in the perspiration of an archangel,¹⁰² etc., they would also believe that it is God, Himself who passes the reliquary to the friar, as he claims. Nonetheless, as we have seen, there are theological premises that Boccaccio molds to build the narration of these extravagant and comical relics there are too often overlooked.¹⁰³ Accordingly, to better understand Frate Cipolla's reliquary, it is fundamental to examine more in-depth what reliquaries and their properties are. Finally, thanks to a study that is more attuned to religious aspects, it is possible to provide a reading of this tale which highlights a nearly disregarded angle. Perhaps the risk of reading Frate Cipolla's speech only as a rhetorical masterpiece – which it undoubtedly is – makes the critical debate forget that, fundamentally, this tale is also about the sacred matter.

Although, as we will see in greater depth in Chapter Two, it is hard to discern to what extent the post-*Decameron* *novellisti* emulate Boccaccio's tales; in both form and content, we perceive, especially in the *Novellino* (IV), a growing necessity to regularize the cult of relics (compared to older novellas), and with notary documents that could formally attest to their authenticity. As we have seen, although these documents are obviously compiled by the ecclesiastical authorities, the real subject that can legitimize a given relic is the community of devotees. Boccaccio, in tale VI, 10, evokes this paradigm when Frate Cipolla tries to provide

¹⁰² “un ampolla col sudore ...”

¹⁰³ To the best of my knowledge, besides Usher's *Frate Cipolla's* “*Ars Praedicandi*” or “*Récit du discours*,” there is no complete study on all the relics in the *Decameron*. The only attempt that I was able to find is that of the University of Zurich which proposes, in its portal *Per un Decameron Ipertestuale*, a dedicated page to “Le reliquie di Boccaccio” (http://www.rose.uzh.ch/static/decameron/seminario/VI_10/chantal/reliqnouvelle.htm). Despite deserving credits for being a digital attempt to collect all the “reliquie di Boccaccio,” unfortunately this page lacks any form of theoretical, especially theological, background; for the most part, it is limited to some quotation from Usher's study. Furthermore, despite its title, it does not include all the relics in Boccaccio's *Decameron*; for instance, there is no trace of those of St. Ciappelletto (I, 1), or any other reference outside the tale of Frate Cipolla.

some validation of his relics, involving not only the letters from the patriarch, but also the miracles that people witnessed and recognized. This creates a sort of archive of relics which can persist in both forms, oral, via word of mouth, or written, with a *bolla*, as we have seen in *Novellino* IV. With several examples, we have seen that the real authority that can legitimize the cult of a given relic, or saint, is the community of devotees; the approval of the ecclesiastical approval is often present but not fundamental. As a matter of fact, even today, although the Vatican authorities are trying to regulate more and more the cult of saints and relics, a register does not exist that lists all authorized relics. In other words, besides the *relique insigni*, there are many relics that are not formally recognized by the Roman Church, and others towards which the Vatican has an ambiguous approach (as we have seen with the Sacred Shroud of Turin). Even today, all these relics still retain the same power of the more institutionalized *relique insigni* because the community of devotees conferred it to them.¹⁰⁴

In addition, as I have discussed, the thing/object dichotomy could benefit the study of relics if only we were not to analyze them as a whole. We should rather implement the study of this cult by applying this theory, highlighting the specificity of every single relic. Indeed, an aspect that we should never forget is how many relics are only pieces of bodies or fragments. Although Smith's ideas of "incompleteness" and "indeterminacy" help us understand a little more about relics' *thingness*, determining the place of relics in the thing/object debate as it is still remains difficult, if not impossible. For this reason, for a more fruitful study, it seems necessary to add a new category to the dichotomy that would aid in the study of relics. In this direction, Wharton's attempt to include *Sacra* in the thing/object classification should be highly appreciated and considered as a starting point to stimulate not only a debate on relics and

¹⁰⁴ As I will analyze further in Chapter Four.

religious artifacts, but also an internal discussion around the Thing Theory. Furthermore, if we consider that we also label pieces of corpses or some dust which touched them as relics, then we will perceive the extent to which relics challenge a strict thing/object dichotomy, and for this reason we should contemplate a new theoretical framework which is more perceptive of these peculiarities. This revised theory should also be able to support the study of those cases in which a relic that was once an *object* in the saint's life then enters into a new relationship with the human. It should contemplate, or at least absorb the idea, that it is mainly thanks to the community of devotees that a given object, thing, or body can be recognized as *sacrum*. For instance, if we consider the Holy Belt or the Holy Ring, we can state that they were once objects belonging to holy figures, but now belong to the church community of devotees who worship them with a precise rituality that we can also appreciate in the tales. If in this context these two items can be defined as *sacra*, the same exact belt and ring, without the recognition of the community, should be understood differently. Without the approval of the believers, those two items would likely be part of a museum exhibit or a private collection. Consequently, we can agree that their relationship with the human would be drastically different from the first case.

CHAPTER 2: *VOLGARIZZAMENTI* AND *CONTAMINATIONES* OF THE NARRATION OF THE SACRED IN ITALIAN CULTURE AND THE ROLE OF BOCCACCIO'S NOVELLA

In Italy, still today, if someone seems to have influential people around who can help them to, for instance, land a desirable job or to sneakily skip a long line, etc., we say that they “*hanno santi in Paradiso*” (literally, “they have saints in Paradise”). Likewise, when a situation is rather complicated and there is no way out, or when someone is stubbornly convinced of something and cannot be persuaded, we say, “*non ci sono santi*” or “*non c'è santo che tenga*” (literally, “there are no saints” and “there is no saint who can hold/keep up with [the situation]”). These are only a few examples among many that demonstrate how discourse around the sacred enters into everyday life in a profaned form that, I argue, is free from (purely) religious constraints but still involves that which should belong only to the sacred sphere. Given that, one of the main goals of my study is, on the macro-level, to investigate the reasons why discourse on the sacred (body) so radically pervades Italian popular culture and consequently its literary and filmic production. To better investigate this aspect, in this chapter I will examine two different movements that concern the narration of the sacred starting from the 12th-13th centuries. I will conventionally call the first movement *top-down*, as it regards the *volgarizzamenti*¹ of sacred discourse, which somehow ceases to be a monopoly of the highly-educated class and becomes

¹ A borrowed term from Carlo Delcorno's *Predicazione Volgare e Volgarizzamenti*.

accessible to the *vulgo*. The second one, instead, is more *diagonal*, as it concerns the *contaminationes*² among sacred and profane literary genres.

In addition, I will emphasize how the Italian novella played a fundamental role in both these movements. In the first part of this chapter, I will provide a methodological background that will then, in the second part, guide my textual analysis of a series of selected novellas that gravitate around the tale of Frate Cipolla (*Decameron* VI, 10). As we have seen in Chapter One, the risk is to consider this tale only for the unquestionable rhetorical skills that Frate Cipolla, thus the author, show, forgetting that the novella's main topic is the materiality of religion. Indeed, though several studies such as Florinda M. Iannace's *La Religione di Boccaccio*, Cormac Ó Cuilleanáin's *Religion and the Clergy in Boccaccio's Decameron*, Paolo Valesio's *Il sacro*,³ Delcorno's *Scrittura Religiosa: Forme Letterarie dal Trecento al Cinquecento* and Boccaccio *Medievale e "Ordini mendicanti,"* and Ilaria Tufano's *Boccaccio e la Letteratura Religiosa: La Prima e la Seconda Giornata del Decameron* have tried to try shed light on Boccaccio's narration of the religious, there is a need for further studies which investigate how the sacred, especially in theological and hagiographic terms, is essentially at the core of the Italian novelistic tradition, including its greatest expression, the *Decameron*.

² A borrowed term from Filippo Fonio's *Dalla legenda alla novella: continuità di moduli e variazioni di genere. Il caso di Boccaccio*.

³ In *Lessico Critico Decameroniano*.

2.1 TOP-DOWN MOVEMENT: THE *VOLGARIZZAMENTI* OF THE NARRATION OF THE SACRED

The first movement on which I would like to focus regards the phenomenon that we observe between the 13th and 15th centuries in which the narration of the sacred stops being a monopoly of a highly-educated class and begins to be preached to the *vulgo*, mostly using the *lingua volgare*. As Branca perfectly summarizes,

Nel momento più dinamico, anzi esplosivo, della civiltà italiana, nell'autunno del Medioevo, fra Duecento e Quattrocento [si assiste all'epopea dei mercatanti] in nome di Dio e del Guadagno [e alla rivoluzione e trionfo dei Francescani e Domenicani] che fanno della predicazione alle folle e della loro commozione una leva potente anche in senso politico e sociale; che interpretano e promuovono l'emergere della nuova cultura laica e borghese in volgare. (*Esopo Toscano*... 10)

Another element that I will consider in my textual analysis is that this top-down movement also includes how the concept of sanctity changes in the collective imagination. Saints were conceived and presented above all as heroes of the chivalrous type who performed extraordinary actions on earth by virtue of a personal bond with God. He asked them to serve Him with all their strength as *militia spiritualis*. Saints behaved on earth as celestial beings whose life was very different from that of a regular human being. From the last years of the 12th century, this spiritual premises experienced an evolution, especially in Italy, and biographies of lay saints of modest origin (pilgrims, penitents, hermits) began to appear. Already in the 13th century the pastoral dimension of the cult of saints and hagiography in general became preponderant (Vauchez).

To some extent, then, we can speculate that the way in which the model of sanctity changed is directly connected to the massive spreading of hagiographic texts. Suffice it to say that, still today, there are more than a thousand Latin manuscripts of Jacopo da Varazze's *Legenda Aurea* (1260-65). This massive collection of the lives of saints was a huge success until the 16th century, and, already at the beginning of the 14th century, it was translated into most of the vernacular languages of Christianity (Ibid.). This high level of success was reached not only because clerics were eager to make their sermons more pleasant with the aid of concrete examples, but also because laypeople found examples on which to meditate (Ibid.). A great portion of the preachers shared the desire to offer the faithful relatively accessible models of behavior. For this reason, numerous lives of ancient saints were then rewritten, seen with a new perspective.

Another important aspect that will help us later in the textual analysis is that there was an effort to exalt figures close in time and, sometimes, in space (Vauchez). Throughout the history of Christianity, especially after 1230, preachers spread the idea that the true greatness of the saints consists in their daily life and not in miracles. The hagiographers followed this tendency, striving to demonstrate that the extraordinary powers of the servants of God – which no one questioned – originated in the search for an *imitatio Christi*. This new model of sanctity, in stark contrast to the old model which envisioned saints as heroes who performed heroic deeds (as *militia spiritualis*), contemplates the Passion of Christ as a guide, underlining his corporal suffering to the point of emulating specific features of his body.

An emblematic example of this phenomenon is the inclusion of stigmata in hagiographic texts. Although we can already identify this reference in relation to St. Paul, “From henceforth let no man be troublesome to me; for I bear the marks of the Lord Jesus in my body” (Galatians

6:17; which in the *Sacra Vulgata* is “ego enim stigmata Domini Jesu in corpore meo porto”), many theologians believe that the word “stigmata” in this particular case should be interpreted differently. For instance, Pulcinelli states that it refers to the visible marks that St. Paul received during his own flagellation (also mentioned in 2 Corinthians 11:23-27), while Pope Benedict XVI claims that, “Paul is referring to the ancient practice of branding the slave with his owner's mark.”⁴ On the contrary, the first and most influential saint to receive stigmata was St. Francis of Assisi in the celebrated scene narrated in Bonaventure’s *Legenda maior sancti Francisci*.⁵ It is St. Francis of Assisi who can embody better than any other this paradigm shift in the idea of sanctity. Auerbach underlines this aspect when he writes,

At the beginning of the thirteenth century there appears in Italy a man who embodies, in exemplary fashion, the mixture we are discussing of *sublimitas* and *humilitas*, of ecstatically sublime immersion in God and humbly concrete everydayness – with a resulting irresolvable fusion of action and expression, of content and form. He is Saint Francis of Assisi. The core of his being and the impact of his life are centered upon the will to a radical and practical imitation of Christ. In Europe, after the age of the martyrs had ended, this had come to assume a predominantly mystico-contemplative form; he gave it a turn toward the practical, the everyday, the public, and the popular. (ch. 7)⁶

⁴ In “Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI: pastoral visit of his holiness Benedict XVI to Assisi on the eighth centenary of the conversion of Saint Francis”. URL:<http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/it/homilies/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20070617_assisi.html>. Sunday, 17 June 2007.

⁵ *Vita beati Francisci*, Caput XIII - De stigmatibus sacris.

⁶ Chapter 7, “Adam and Eve”. I could not include page numbers because I used the e-book version of Auerbach, Erich, Edward W. Said, and Willard R. Trask. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature - New and Expanded Edition*. E-book. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2013.

The example of St. Francis is emblematic as it shows the emergence of a new conception of saints who no longer function merely as intercessors but as models to follow, having significant repercussions on hagiography (Vauchez).

Another aspect that we should take into account is that this top-down movement which made the narration of the sacred – including the lives of saints – more accessible to the *vulgo* could also take place because prominent theologians composed abbreviated *legendari* (such as Caesarius of Heisterbach's *Dialogus miraculorum* (ca.1219-23), Jean de Mailly's *Abbreviatio in gestis et miraculis sanctorum* (ca.1225-30), and Bartholomew of Trent's *Liber epilogorum in gesta sanctorum* (ca.1244-51)). Besides serving as fundamental sources for Varazze's *Legenda Aurea* (1260-65), the works of these hagiographers were crucial to making the lives of saints – and their *exempla* – more accessible to preachers. Indeed, before them, only the wealthiest abbeys or churches owned a full set of *legendari*, which were large works, often luxuriously illuminated, and intended exclusively for liturgical use (Vauchez).

As we have seen, the *volgarizzamenti* of sacred discourse were on the rise thanks to the increasing popularity of hagiographical texts. This phenomenon goes along with the fundamental role that preachers played in making sacred discourse more accessible to their listeners. One of the most prominent scholars to dedicate a long series of studies to this subject is Carlo Delcorno. In his *Predicazione Volgare e Volgarizzamenti*, he explains that,

Nella retorica dei Domenicani si distinguono diversi livelli di predicazione: il *sermo modernus* destinato ai chierici dell'Università e alle assemblee del clero; la predica volgare, dove gli schemi del *sermo* si ripresentano in forma meno raffinata (senza *prothema*, senza complicate concordanze scritturali), adattati alle possibilità espressive

del volgare; e a un livello più basso l'omelia, senza schemi evidenti, tutta filata sull'esposizione del vangelo e sull'abile impiego degli *exempla*. (683)

The Dominican effort to deliberately make sacred discourse more accessible to the *vulgo* is part and parcel of this top-down movement. Delcorno, citing Thomas Waleys (an English Dominican and lector at Bologna in 1326–27 and author of *De modo componendi sermones*⁷) adds that, though this humble model was irreconcilable with the *sermo modernus*, it continued to be practiced in Italy, mainly by the Franciscans but also by the Dominicans.⁸

Another protagonist who exposed his idea regarding this debate is Domenico Cavalca. Delcorno points out that Cavalca represents the most popular current of the Dominican school in Tuscany and openly nurtures a certain mistrust of preachers who, addressing the laity, imitate the techniques of the Latin sermon (*Predicazione Volgare...*). Despite that, this type of preaching, which popularizes scholastic theology, is particularly cultivated by his confreres,⁹ this Dominican preacher voices his objections against those who, according to him, addressed the “sottilità” of theology “rifiutandosi di predicare gli esempi e li miracoli delli santi, dicendo che sono cose da fanciulli e da femmine, non pensando che a mutare li cuori delli peccatori queste cose sono più utili.”¹⁰ Words like these demonstrate a full awareness that, especially beginning in the 13th century, there existed an open debate on whether to make elevated theological discourse more accessible to the lower classes.

⁷ Chapter II, cited in Charland, TH. M. *Artes Praedicandi* (344).

⁸ *Predicazione Volgare e Volgarizzamenti* (Note 17, page 683).

⁹ Delcorno points out that this phenomenon “è ben documentato dalla storia del pulpito di Santa Maria Novella nella prima metà del Trecento. Con abbondanza non consueta ci sono stati conservati gli schemi dei sermoni pronunciati dai maggiori predicatori della scuola domenicana di Firenze. Si tratta solitamente di appunti latini degli stessi oratori, come nel caso di Remigio de’ Girolami e di Taddeo Dini, oppure di rielaborazioni in forma di trattato, come lo Specchio di vera penitenza, che Iacopo Passavanti ricavò dai suoi quaresimali” (*Predicazione Volgare...* 683).

¹⁰ Bottari, Giovanni. *I Frutti della Lingua*, 1754, chapter XXVIII, cited in Delcorno, *Predicazione Volgare...* 683.

Openly at odds with the abuse of this *volgarizzamento* of sacred discourse, particularly when performed by preachers who exploit the crowds' gullibility, is Dante who in *Paradiso* XXIX writes, "Ora si va con motti e con iscede / a predicare, e pur che ben si rida, / gonfia il cappuccio e più non si richiede" (115-117). As Branca reminds, "il Boccaccio colpiva - e proprio con parole simili - quelle esagerazioni usate per accattivarsi l'uditorio: «le prediche fatte da' frati per rimorder delle lor colpe gli uomini, il più oggi [sono] piene di motti e di ciancie e di scede» (Concl. 23: e cfr. I 1,85; III 4,5-6; VI 10; VII 10,9)" (*Studi sugli «Exempla»*... 190). We can speculate that Frate Cipolla, the protagonist of *Decameron* VI, 10, is molded to be the friar that fits the accusations of Dante and Boccaccio.¹¹

2.2 DIAGONAL MOVEMENT: *CONTAMINATIONES* AMONG SACRED AND PROFANE LITERARY GENRES AND THE ROLE OF THE NOVELLA

As anticipated, the second movement that I would like to discuss focuses more on the literary level. Although strictly connected to the previously-introduced top-down movement, this one is more diagonal and specifically regards the *contaminationes* among sacred and profane literary genres. These *contaminationes*, which, as Fonio rightly points out, could also be considered "confusioni ... a seconda del grado di autocoscienza che si vuole accordare ai due autori" (145), can manifest in various forms. As we will see in greater detail in the ensuing textual analysis, these *contaminationes* include lexical similarities, the mentioning of specific characters, echoes of a particular hagiographical tradition, the use of a common *topos*, and, in general, all those "esagerazioni usate per accattivarsi l'uditorio" (Branca, *Studi sugli*

¹¹ As Hollander will examine more in details in "Boccaccio's Dante." *Italica*, vol. 63, no. 3, 1986, pp. 278–289.

«*Exempla*»... 190). For instance, to provide a concrete example, we can find the captivating *topos* of the shipwreck in the hagiographic narration of St. Francis during his life¹², multiple times in that of St. Mark (in his *translatio*,¹³ but also, as brought to wider knowledge by the magnificent work of Tintoretto entitled “*San Marco salva un Saraceno*” (1562-66) in one of his miracles), in the chronicles of Venice (related to St. Mark), and also in Masuccio Salernitano’s *Novellino* (1476) in tale IV that, as we have seen in chapter one, is based on the exploitation of a relic.

Due to the nature of my study, I will consider these *contaminationes* only for sacred-related matters specifically correlated with relics and religious artifacts. My analysis does not intend to debate the evolution of literary forms *per se*. Although I will mention several features of such genres, my study will not attempt to qualify the categories of hagiography, *exemplum*, chronicles, *sermo*, or novella. If anything, my work will accentuate the similarities and continuity among these forms, which are sometimes so difficult to distinguish that some attempts of classification also include hybrid forms, such as “*exemplum* agiografico” (Delcorno), “*novella-exemplum*” (Wetzel), and “racconto agiografico” (Fonio).

More specifically, I would like to highlight the enormous influence of the hagiographic tradition, which became so pervasive that it is now an indissoluble part of the Italian language and pop-culture. As a matter of fact, still today, when Italians want to ask a lot of information regarding a specific person (most likely from whom they have not heard for a long time), they say “voglio sapere/dimmi vita, morte e miracoli,” which literally translates to “I want to

¹² Bonaventure’s *Vita prima S. Francisci*, Chapter XX.

¹³ Of which I will discuss later in Chapter Three.

know/tell me life, death, and miracles,” and means “I want to know/tell me everything.”¹⁴ It is emblematic that this idiomatic expression includes, in sequence, life, death, and miracles, as this is essentially the content of a hagiographic text. For instance, Bonaventure in his *Vita maior*, after describing in detail the life and the death of St. Francis, adds a section in which he discusses postmortem miracles (which is far from uncommon in practice; XVI, *Postremo de miraculis post transitum eius felicem ostensis aliqua subnectuntur*). Indeed, if we were to look up “miracolo” in an Italian dictionary (e.g., *Treccani*), we read, “*Sapere, raccontare vita, morte e miracoli di qualcuno*, propr.[iamente] di un santo, ma per lo più fig.[urato], conoscere o narrare per filo e per segno tutte le vicende, i casi, le azioni di una qualsiasi persona.”¹⁵ Consequently, we can conjecture that the fact that something that was “propriamente” of a saint, but that is now mostly used allegorically to get to know information about “una qualsiasi persona” (anyone) is an appropriation of the *vulgo* of something that should belong to the sacred sphere. The use of such expression, which evokes the narration of something and/or someone sacred for a profane use is an example of why I claim that the concept of *profanation*, rather than *secularization*, is more appropriate to describe the specificities of the Italian culture, as the sacred has still a tremendous impact on society, even if evolved into a profaned form.

Although any attempt to pin down a specific date or event that determined the *volgarizzamento* of the sacred narration would be useless and detrimental, we can still sift the evidence concerning some knot that could have significantly impacted this process. For instance, it seems fundamental to shed light on how elements from hagiography and chronicles found themselves included in the novella and vice versa. Many scholarly efforts have already been

¹⁴ “*Raccontare* (o *voler sapere*) *vita, morte e miracoli di qualcuno*, a significare *tutto*.” (Marconi, Ludovica. “Il morire e la morte oggi. Breve riflessione linguistica” in *Accademiadellacrusca.it*.

¹⁵ “Miracolo” in *Treccani VocabolarioOnline*, www.treccani.it/vocabolario/miracolo. Accessed 2 May 2020.

made to the point that we can state, “il grande bacino della letteratura sacra è tradizionalmente considerato fra i serbatoi da cui i novellisti attingono materiale,” and that “una filiazione fra generi agiografici e novella è ormai assodata” (Fonio 128). In this direction, many distinguished scholars like Vittore Branca (“L’*exemplum*, il *Decameron* e Iacopo da Varazze” in *Iacopo da Varagine*, with Chiara Degani “*Studi sugli «Exempla» e il «Decameron»*. Premessa. I Riflessi quasi sconosciuti di esempla nel *Decameron*”) and Carlo Delcorno (*Exemplum e Letteratura: tra Medioevo e Rinascimento; Nuovi Studi sull’«Exemplum»; Modelli Agiografici e Modelli Narrativi: tra Cavalca e Boccaccio; Un modello per Laici e Religiosi*) investigate the connections between the *exemplum* and the novella; they emphasize how, especially in the *Decameron*, this connection should be intended as organic to the whole work, and not as a sporadic occurrence in a given tale. Delcorno brilliantly explains that,

Nella cultura medievale, dove la scrittura è intesa come servizio, talvolta come pratica penitenziale, i confini tra agiografia e narrativa sono destinati a rimanere imprecisi e mutevoli. Ogni forma di racconto tende in modo più o meno esplicito a costruire *exempla*, e quindi subisce l’influsso dei modelli agiografici. Nello stesso tempo non vi è racconto agiografico che sfugga alle suggestioni del romanzo antico o, nel Basso Medioevo, ai procedimenti narrativi propri delle nuove letterature volgari.

As we can observe, the profane narrative, including the novella, uses elements that are peculiar to the sacred narration of the lives of saints. Moreover, it is important to consider that it is also true the opposite; that is, that the sacred narration makes use of elements from profane narratives. In this direction, Delcorno adds that,

È stato osservato che il *roman* medievale ripete il tipo della vita di santo, e che l'eroe romanzesco esercita sul lettore un fascino, quasi una tentazione, simili a quello suscitato nel pio lettore dai grandi modelli devozionali. D'altra parte, proprio la moda dei romanzi induce la Chiesa a promuovere una nuova agiografia più disponibile agli elementi avventurosi e meravigliosi. Si ha l'impressione, è stato notato a proposito dei poemi agiografici inglesi, che gli scrittori mirassero appunto alla confusione dei generi, sia che si tratti di un narratore che introduce una sfumatura devozionale nel racconto profano o di un agiografo preoccupato di accontentare il pubblico assecondando il suo gusto romanzesco. È questo un tema che si presta a una grande varietà di indagini e di proposte. (*Modelli Agiografici...* 486-87)

In this fragment, Delcorno elucidates that the Church (the institution in question) is also affected by this new approach of making sacred discourse more appealing by employing literary forms used in profane narrations, and that writers purposely aim to *confuse* sacred and profane genres. In this direction, Branca adds that,

Il popolo, come ricorda già Cesario di Heisterbach, dai sonnacchiamenti e dall'indifferenza si ridestava subito e diveniva attento quando udiva annunciare un *exemplum*, specialmente se era introdotto da un nome sonante ... e prediligeva i predicatori emuli di «giullari e romanzieri e buffoni» come scrive un domenicano contemporaneo del Boccaccio, il Passavanti [in his *Specchio di vera penitenza*]. (*Studi sugli «Exempla»...* 190)

Given that, we can state that preachers used specific – more entertaining – strategies to catch their audience's attention. Hence, in the textual analysis, we will see the extent to which the

“nome sonante” of a powerful figure or a place will be present in many tales of the *Decameron* as well as in chronicles and hagiographic texts.

Since many distinguished publications, especially Branca and Degani’s *Studi sugli «Exempla» e il Decameron* and Delcorno’s *Nuovi Studi sull'«Exemplum» and Exemplum e Letteratura: Tra Medioevo e Rinascimento*, already demonstrate a strong connection between *exemplum* and novella, I will not analyze such relationship *per se*. I will rather provide a specific reading of the Church’s use of the *exempla*. If we consider the oft-mentioned Trebatius/Agamben definition of profanation – “Profane is the term for something that was once sacred or religious and is returned to the use and property of men” (Agamben 73) – we notice that there is a *return* (“returned”). We need to consider that the *exemplum* is a

Genere di derivazione classica ... preso a prestito dall’agiografia ... [che] si sviluppa in un primo tempo come parte integrante della *vita* di santo, per poi progressivamente svincolarsene diventando un genere autonomo e repertoriato in apposite *summae*. Queste *summae exemplorum* conoscono la massima diffusione fra Due e Quattrocento. Si tratta di manuali di *récits ad usum praedicatorum*, dai quali attingere aneddoti da inserire nel discorso religioso ...” (Fonio 146-47)

Given that, we can observe that the *exemplum* was firstly a pagan literary device employed for profane narrations and only later used by Christians to narrate the sacred lives of the saints. In other words, by elevating the *exemplum* to a narrative form chosen to recount the lives of the saints, we assist a bottom-up movement juxtaposed to the top-down that we have seen so far. Consequently, we can conjecture that the hagiographic tradition somehow consecrated (*sacrare*) the *exemplum* because it withdrew this form “from the free use and commerce of men” and made

it “in some way belonged to the gods” (Agamben 73). Then, if we consider that, “sans doute l’*exemplum* constitua-t-il la matrice principale de la « nouvelle »” (Zumthor 392), we see the opposite top-down movement (*profanare*). Consequently, since the novella uses the *exemplum* for a non-sacred narration, we can somehow consider this last movement as a *return*.

After observing some phenomena that we can inscribe as part of the top-down movement, in an attempt to register the most significant passages that allowed these *contaminationes* among different genres, we must examine the influential role of preachers and sermons in the novella (and vice versa). As Fonio points out, the relationships between *sermo modernus* and novella “vanno considerati nel più ampio discorso del realismo cristiano, opposto e complementare al meraviglioso” (148). As Auerbach states, “The everyday and real is ... an essential element of medieval Christian art” and, speaking on how the sacred and profane overlap and how Latin and vernacular were used in some of the sacred-related texts that he examines, he adds that,

the approximation is too close to give the impression of a real separation of styles. On the contrary their effect is to bring the two spheres together. This style-mingling approximation of the two spheres is not limited to Christian dramatic literature; it is found everywhere in Christian literature throughout the Middle Ages (in some countries, especially Spain, in later periods too), as soon as that literature is addressed to a wider circle. This must have been especially apparent in the realm of the popular sermon, of which, however, we possess a fair number of examples only from a very late period. (Ch. 7)

Thus, Auerbach in his colossal study already underlined that, in literature, the boundaries between sacred and profane is thin and becomes even thinner as soon as that literature is addressed to a wider circle (*volgarizzamento*). In this direction, another fundamental aspect that

should be explored in the study of these *contaminationes* is orality. Further dedicated studies are necessary to investigate to what extent the way in which sermons were performed, together with the public loud readings of novellas, contributed to spread these *contaminationes* to a forever-growing mass.

2.3 “L’OPERAZIONE BOCCACCIO”

In *Studi sugli «Exempla» e il «Decameron»*, Branca points out that, “Il Boccaccio ... cambia il piano della storia, porta gli eventi e i personaggi sul piano concreto della vita,” and then adds that (*italics added*), “*A questa operazione* si prestavano bene gli esempi religiosi ... trasportando questi esempi su un livello semplicemente umano” (204). In this fragment of his vast work, Branca somehow describes Boccaccio’s *operazione* as act of profanation by taking religious *exempla* – and thus a sacred-related narration – to a different level, concrete and human. He then concludes that,

l’ironizzazione e la parodia boccacciane nei riguardi di *exempla* religiosi e pii si attua con la scomparsa dell’elemento soprannaturale e la sua sostituzione con tematiche e problemi tipicamente terreni, che trasportano l’esempio in una dimensione concreta e quotidiana e lo rendono utile per fini mondani. (208)

In stating that Boccaccio’s parody deactivates the sacred and substitutes it with the earthly, Branca somehow describes this *operazione* by stressing the same main idea that Agamben will use to articulate his concept of profanation when he writes that, “[profanation] neutralizes what it profanes. Once profaned, that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use” (Agamben 77).

Among the precious contributions that Branca and Degani provide in their study, we can find lists of tales that have a specific “sfondo” on which Boccaccio builds his novellas,

chiaramente anche nel *Decameron* ... Si affiancano cioè narrazioni a sfondo biblico (p.es. I 3, II 8, IX 9, X 10) e a sfondo pio o agiografico (anche ironizzato: p.es. I 2, II 1, II 2, II 9, III 1, III 4, III 10, IV 2, V 8, VI 10, X 8), evasioni o interventi, anche fittizi, nell'al di là (p.es. III 8, IV 2, V 5, V 8, VII 10, VIII 7), intrecci tutti profani alle volte derivati da autori greco-latini ... , argomenti tutti storici ... o mitico-leggendari-folklorici ... impostazioni o derivazioni da racconti orientali ... , o «meraviglie» dai geografi e naturalisti del tempo ..., esperienze dirette e personali. (*Studi sugli «Exempla»*... 188)

By nature of my work, I will pay particular attention to those “a sfondo pio o agiografico.” Specifically, I will analyze in greater detail some of the tales that Branca already registered as relatable to hagiography, such as tale II, 1 (Sant'Arrigo and Martellino) and VI, 10 (Frate Cipolla), but I will also include *Decameron* I, 1 (San Ciappelletto) in this group. In Chapter Three, I will additionally include tale IV, 5 of the *Decameron* (Lisabetta da Messina and Lorenzo), which I argue is rich in hagiographic references. In my analysis of the latter novella, we will see that the hagiographic echoes in the *Decameron* are not, as a premature reading might suggest, simply parodied in a comical tone intended to induce laughter (as is undoubtedly true for other tales).¹⁶

A study that explores in detail such *contaminationes* within hagiography and Boccaccio's masterpiece is Filippo Fonio's *Dalla legenda alla novella: continuità di moduli e variazioni di*

¹⁶ Beginning with what we can read in the *Proemio* of the *Decameron*, I will argue that the hagiographic echoes in this tale are a sort of praise of a decorous Christian burial, which could be jeopardized by the plague and the consequent abandonment of such practice.

genere. Il caso di Boccaccio. In the introduction of his work, the author openly states that his proposition “è quella di pensare al rapporto fra generi della letteratura agiografica e narrativa breve dalla fine del XIII a quella del XIV secolo (con poche incursioni al di fuori di tale periodo) come a un processo di prestiti unilaterali” (127). Although my work is more inclined to highlight the fluidity among genres and forms (in my case, seen more as “prestiti *plurilaterali*”) and the mixing of sacred and profane, Fonio’s meticulous work seems to be somehow complementary to mine. Fonio writes that he first thought to include relics in his study; however, he eventually decides against it as, he writes, relics are mentioned whenever a text deals with the physical and objectual dimensions of holiness. Indeed, in my study, I openly investigate that exact tangible dimension of the sacred, particularly when it presents in the form of relics and religious artifacts.

In attempt to examine the most consequential paths that allowed for these *contaminationes* among sacred and profane genres, we need to consider the fact that,

Forme, storie, motivi, stilemi delle vite di santi passano nella nascente novellistica italiana in maniera ancora riconoscibile proprio grazie allo stadio, maturo se guardiamo alla tradizione dei materiali ai quali i novellisti attingono o alle cosiddette fonti, ma ancora acerbo dal punto di vista di una tradizione interna al genere novella, in cui la prosa narrativa italiana si trova fino al Boccaccio. Dopo il *Decameron*, invece, le cose si faranno più complicate, dal momento che la presenza di un modello già sentito dai contemporanei come un classico passibile di imitazione e creatore di una tradizione fortemente autonoma rende difficile la ricerca di moduli che prescindano dal novelliere boccacciano. (Fonio 127)

This aspect is crucial to understanding that a more diligent study of these *contaminationes* must consider the impossibility of determining whether the works of post-*Decameron* novellisti are

contaminated by sacred forms of narration (such as hagiography) or directly by Boccaccio's oeuvre. There are few doubts that the Italian *tradizione novellistica* – along with the Italian language itself – was and continues to be deeply influenced by Boccaccio. Then, when we read a few lines from Matteo Bandello's *Novelle* (1554-73), we might completely eschew our doubts. For instance, we witness the following direct references to Ser Ciappelletto¹⁷ in tales that involve confessions, false sanctity, and relics: "si spedí in dui motti e fece parte de la confessione di ser Ciappelletto" (Novella XXXIII); "Con questo deliberò la duchessa confessarsi e seco fece una confessione di ser Ciappelletto" (Novella XLIV); "Tomasone faceva da ser Ciappelletto e si mostrava tutto religioso e zelante de l'onor di Dio e de la salute de l'anime." (Novella LIII), and even,

Credo poi che ser Ciappelletto da Prato non fosse peggior di lui già mai. Erano in una cosa simili, che cosí come pareva a ser Ciappelletto di scherzar con messer Domenedio, a burlarsi di lui, il medesimo faceva costui del quale intendo ragionarvi in questa novella. Erano poi in questo differenti molto, per, ché ser Ciappelletto, essendo una sentina di vizii, voleva buono e santo esser tenuto, e questi, sí come vizioso e ribaldo si conosceva, voleva per tale da chi seco conversava esser istimato. (Novella LV)

Taking into account these small examples that make direct mention of (and even dedicate an entire paragraph to) a character from Boccaccio's oeuvre, we can conjecture that the *contaminationes* originate with the *Decameron* and not from a hagiographic text. For these reasons, this section of my study will only briefly reference post-*Decameron* novellas of post-*Decameron* *novellisti* without an accompanying in-depth examination. Finally, we can conclude

¹⁷ A well-known character from *Decameron* I, 1 whom I will discuss later in this chapter.

that Boccaccio's "Forme, storie, motivi, stilemi" – which he partially absorbed from sacred-related genres, such as hagiography and *exempla* – organically entered Italian culture and tradition, both popular and literary. Aside from direct quotations like those present in Bandello's novellas, we can only imagine the extent to which Boccaccio's writings could permeate the Italian culture given that he was openly selected as a model in the *Questione della Lingua*.

2.4 A NEW SAINT IS BORN: THE CASES OF ST. CIAPPELLETTO AND ST. ARRIGO IN *DECAMERON* I, 1 AND II, 1

In this portion of the chapter, I will provide a textual analysis of two specific tales, *Decameron* I, 1 and II, 1; I will later juxtapose them with the tale of Frate Cipolla (*Decameron* VI, 10) and other texts from different genres such as chronicles and hagiography. *Decameron* I, 1 is a popular and well-studied novella that narrates the story of a man named Ser Cepparello who is described as the most despicable person in the world. Just before he perishes, thanks to the rhetorical skills he displays in his first and last confessions, he manages to pass himself off not only as a good person, but as a saint. At the end of the tale, a big crowd treats his body as a relic. Intriguingly, *Decameron* II, 1 begins with a scene that very much resembles the one we encounter in *Decameron* I, 1, which is a large crowd worshipping a corpse as a relic ("Era, non è ancora lungo tempo passato, un tedesco a Trivigi chiamato Arrigo, il quale, ... esser santo dicevano tutti; e concorso tutto il popolo della città alla casa nella quale il suo corpo giacea, quello a guisa d'un corpo santo ..."). Arrigo was believed to be a saint by dint of two main elements: his humble lifestyle and a miracle that entails bells which supposedly ring without human intervention. The plot mainly involves a man named Martellino and his two friends who, curious to discover the reason behind an exceptionally large gathering, skip a long line to see St.

Arrigo's body (i.e., the reason behind the gathering); in order to reach the front of the crowd, the three compatriots conspire to pass Martellino off as a cripple. When the crowd realizes this trick, it flares up and demands to punish Martellino, who – again thanks to his rhetorical skills – manages to save his own life.

The first common element that I would like to underline in the *inventio(n)* of these two saints is that both follow the new model of sanctity that we have seen previously. Ciappelletto of tale I, 1 need not present himself as a hero who does extraordinary deeds for his beneficence or sainthood to be believed. Ciappelletto's confession comes across as “un tentativo di auto-agiografia, che pare stucchevole come molti *exempla*” (Fonio 154), a sort of “autoritratto parenetico” (Valesio 404). We can observe an example when Ciappelletto pretends to accuse himself of gluttony:

oltre alli digiuni delle quaresime che nell'anno si fanno dalle divote persone, ogni settimana almeno tre dí fosse uso di digiunare in pane ed in acqua, con quello diletto e con quello appetito l'acqua bevuta aveva, e specialmente quando avesse alcuna fatica durata o adorando o andando in pellegrinaggio, che fanno i gran bevitori il vino.

(*Decameron* I, 1)

In this passage, we perceive a *stucchevole* series of hyperboles coherent with the rest of his confessions. Nonetheless, as Delcorno highlights, we can see that Ciappelletto “allude certo ad una casistica della tradizione ascetica” (*Nuovi Studi...* 469). Indeed, as the scholar continues, “Escluso, e addirittura ignorato il vino, i maestri spirituali del deserto mettono in guardia contro l'abuso dell'acqua” (Ibid.). Delcorno's point is key to detecting the parody of Boccaccio, who is mocking, and thus profaning, the hagiographical narration of the ascetic tradition.

To contribute to the creation of an aura of sanctity around the figure of Ciappelletto, the tale begins with the long premise of Panfilo – the narrator – which is particularly rich in theological elements that are too long to list. As Fonio points out, “Le parole di Panfilo sembrano preludere a una narrazione agiografica; pare di stare per leggere un racconto dei santi, la cui efficacia come mediatori e latori della grazia divina è esplicitata.” (152)

We can find more evidence that both St. Ciappelletto and St. Arrigo are representations of the new model of sanctity in their descriptions. When the friar presents Cepparello to the crowd as a saint, he emphasizes specific aspects which are worth analyzing; in the tale we read (*italics added*),

il santo frate che confessato l’avea, salito in sul pergamo, di lui cominciò e della sua *vita*, de’ suoi *digiuni*, della sua *virginità*, della sua *simplicità* ed *innocenza* e *santità* maravigliose cose a predicare ... Ed oltre a queste, molte altre cose disse della sua *lealtà* e della sua *purezza* ... (*Decameron* I, 1).

Likewise, even if St. Arrigo’s presentation is visibly shorter, we can still detect the same kind of model (*italics added*), “Era, non è ancora lungo tempo passato, un tedesco a Trivigi chiamato Arrigo, il quale, *povero uomo essendo*, di *portar pesi a prezzo serviva* chi il richiedeva; e con questo, uomo di *santissima vita* e di *buona* era tenuto da tutti” (*Decameron* II, 1). In both these portrayals, we notice that the particularly accentuated elements – “*digiuni*,” “*virginità*,” “*simplicità*” (“*portar pesi a prezzo serviva*”), “*innocenza*,” “*santità*,” “*lealtà*,” “*purezza*,” *poverty* (“*povero uomo essendo*”) - are those commonly associated with an *imitatio Christi*. In both descriptions, also thanks to the mention of “*sua vita*” and “*santissima vita*,” we encounter a clear example of the tendency throughout Christianity, especially after 1230, of preachers to spread the idea that the true greatness of the saints consists in their daily lives and not in miracles. As a

matter of fact, the only miracles mentioned in both tales are *postmortem*, after their bodies have already become relics.

Another symptom that the *invention(e)s* of these two new saints might be Boccaccio's way to parody the new model of sanctity is the fact that both crowds, by sanctifying these two men, are exalting sacred figures close in time and space. In this direction, there is a novella from Sacchetti's *Trecentonovelle* (CLVII)¹⁸, in which the novellista openly criticizes this attitude. The tale narrates of a wealthy man ("Messer Francesco da Casale signore di Cortona") who is very proud of owning the body-relic of San Ugolino and is *overly excited* (just like – as we will see – the two crowds in *Decameron* I, 1 and II, 1) to show it to his guest arriving from Spain (Pietro Alfonso). When the guest sees this body-relic, he is so horrified and scared at its sight that he urgently asks the host for permission to leave and never see that corpse again. At the end of the tale, the narrator comments,

E cosí avviene oggi nel mondo, che li signori e gli altri viventi sono sí vaghi di cose nuove che se elli potessono, muteriano la signoria del cielo, come spesso mutano quella delle terre. Abbiamo li santi canonezzati e cerchiamo di quelli che non sappiamo se sono. Abbiamo il nostro Signore Jesu Cristo, la sua Madre, gli Apostoli e gli altri maggiori del Paradiso, e andremo dietro a san Barduccio. (*Trecentonovelle* CLVII)

The narrator here clearly accuses this ongoing *vaghezza* "di cose nuove," referring to the ease with which people voraciously demand and obtain new saints. Accordingly, we can consider San Ciappelletto and Sant'Arrigo in Boccaccio's tales a little like San Ugolino and San Balduccio in the *Trecentonovelle*, as they are all the result of the overpowering force of the devotees who – *sí*

¹⁸ Messer Francesco da Casale signore di Cortona mena Pietro Alfonso a mostrarli il corpo di santo Ugolino, là dove con nuove parole si raccomanda a lui, e con vie piú nuove si sta, e parte dal detto messer Francesco.

vaghi di cose nuove – provide the necessary support and authority to create a new saint. Indeed, with a closer reading of *Decameron* I, 1, we can also find a reference to this *vaghezza* when the narrator recounts the way in which the crowd of devotees transforms Ser Cepparello into San Ciappelletto:

Ed intanto crebbe la fama della sua santità e divozione a lui, che quasi niuno era che in alcuna avversità fosse, che ad altro santo che a lui si botasse, e chiamaronlo e chiamano san Ciappelletto, ed affermano, molti miracoli Iddio aver mostrati per lui e mostrare tutto giorno a chi divotamente si raccomanda a lui. (*Decameron* I, 1)

As we can read, the devotees confer authority mainly by naming Cepparello “San Ciappelletto” (“chiamaronlo e chiamano san Ciappelletto”) and by asserting that through his body God performs miracles (“ed affermano, molti miracoli Iddio aver mostrati per lui”). Nevertheless, the words that we should actually consider as a potential accusation towards this *vaghezza* of creating more saints are “che quasi niuno era che in alcuna avversità fosse, che ad altro santo che a lui si botasse.” With these words, Boccaccio most likely intends to criticize – though more subtly if compared to Sacchetti’s in his tale (*Trecentonovelle* CLVII) – the way in which the creation and devotion of new saints obfuscates the spiritual commitment towards other (more important/conventional) saints.

2.5 THE HAGIOGRAPHICAL CHRONICLES OF THREE NOVELLAS: *DECAMERON* I, 1; II, 1; AND VI, 10

As anticipated in the first part of this chapter, the *contaminationes* among sacred and non-sacred genres also encompasses chronicles. Without digging too much into the complexity

of these genres, we can agree to a certain extent that our modern perception of “chronicle” is synonymous with a historical narration of facts, while a novella is a fictional narration created by a writer, and a hagiography is a sacred-related narration that involves a certain degree of faith. Nonetheless, as Fonio suggests,

Già lo stratificarsi e l'avvicinarsi di una memoria agiografica a una memoria storica suggerisce un legame non aleatorio fra Storia e Storia sacra da un lato, agiografia dall'altro, tanto più che la percezione moderna di una prospettiva storica si trova spesso appiattita, specie nei secoli precedenti il Boccaccio, nelle categorie tipologiche che tendono ad assimilare la Storia alla Storia sacra. (129)

Given that, it seems appropriate to consider that the dividing line between history and sacred history is often very thin. Nevertheless, as Fonio continues, “Con il *Decameron*, ma già con le *Croniche* del Compagni e di Giovanni Villani, siamo tuttavia a un punto di svolta rispetto a tale assimilazione” (Ibid.).

In this section of the chapter, I intend to juxtapose selected novellas with a few chosen chronicles. In detail, I will consider four sections from Giovanni Villani's *Nuova Cronica*, three of which specifically recount the arrival of relics in Florence; namely, XIV¹⁹ (*Come i Fiorentini ebbero il braccio del beato apostolo santo Filippo*), XIII²⁰ (*Come in Firenze vennero orlique di santo Barnaba*), and IX²¹ (*Di certe reliquie sante che vennero in Firenze*). In addition, I also include CXLIX²² (*Come i Turchi e' Tartari sconfissono i Greci di Gostantinopoli*) because even if it does not explicitly mention relics, there is a reference to “Braccio San Giorgio” which might

¹⁹ Book six.

²⁰ Book ten.

²¹ Book twelve.

²² Book eleven.

be in connection with the same reference used by Boccaccio in *Decameron* VI, 10²³ (as he refers to the same geographical area known to be one of the greatest protagonists of the relics trade). For contrast, the tales from the *Decameron* under analysis in this comparison are the three that I mostly discuss in Chapter 1 (I, 1 San Ciappelletto; II, 1 Sant'Arrigo; and VI, 10 Frate Cipolla). Although, to the best of my knowledge, a scholarly effort that exhaustively investigates the connections between Giovanni Villani's *Nuova Cronica* and Boccaccio's *Decameron* is missing from the literature, Vittore Branca states that Boccaccio was familiar with Giovanni Villani's texts, oftentimes even before their "publication" (*Giovanni Boccaccio. Profilo ...*). Furthermore, historical evidence suggests that Giovanni Villani and Boccaccio di Chellino (Giovanni Boccaccio's father) were already acquaintances in 1333.²⁴ Consequently, even if we cannot consider these details to be empirical evidence, we can speculate that Giovanni Boccaccio was likely acquainted with Giovanni Villani's chronicles. Given that, as was the case with the cross-genre parallels, the considerations and analysis that I will present should not be interpreted as an attempt to define or label different genres or to uncover the sources of Boccaccio's tales. If anything, they should be received as an effort to shed light on the thin – often nearly invisible – line between the sacred and non-sacred narration.

In order to guide and facilitate the scrutiny of the elements that I design to highlight in this juxtaposition, I present a few groupings that synthesize the features I discuss in the first part. They include elements mentioned earlier in this chapter (when discussing *volgarizzamenti* and *contaminationes*) and some specificity of the cult of relics that I discuss in other chapters, such as the tactile experience in the cult of relics, the gathering of the crowd, etc. Specifically, I

²³ "Io capitai, passato il Braccio di san Giorgio, in Truffia ed in Buffia, paesi molto abitati e con gran popoli, e di quindi pervenni in Terra di menzogna ..."

²⁴ Agostini Muzzi, Oretta. "Per il Codice diplomatico boccaccesco." In *Il Boccaccio nelle culture e letterature nazionale*, edited by Francesco Mazzoni, Florence, Olschki, 1978, pp. 627–699.

propose to work with eleven thematic groups, which I have labelled with the following abbreviations: “Ben” (whenever there is a reference to the benefactor who previously owned the relic); “Br” (whenever the word “Braccio” – arm – is mentioned in reference to a saint); “Ch” (whenever a relic is brought inside a Church); “Cl” (a reference to gathered clergy); “Lex” (lexical similarities among texts)²⁵; “M” (any reference to a miracle); “Mul” (a reference to the multitude or mass of people gathered); “Hyp” (hyperboles, and in general, “quelle esagerazioni usate per accattivarsi l’uditorio”); “N” (name of person or place, especially if a “nome sonante”²⁶); “East” (All the references to eastern territories²⁷); and “Pro” (procession and, in general, the desire to reach physical proximity to the body/relic). In addition, to facilitate an optimal reading, I added italics to emphasize the resemblances (the chronicles appear in the left column and the novellas on the right).

²⁵ All the lexical similarities that I index are labelled with “Lex” and are underlined to facilitate the reading across different texts.

²⁶ “Il popolo, come ricorda già Cesario di Heisterbach, dai sonnecchiamenti e dall’indifferenza si ridestava subito e diveniva attento quando udiva annunciare un *exemplum*, specialmente se era introdotto da un nome sonante”. (Branca, *Studi sugli «Exempla»*... 190)

²⁷ Finding an umbrella term to include all the territories that I mean to incorporate was rather difficult. I could have used “reference to the Holy Land,” but it would have been incorrect as I intend to include Turkey. At first, I also evaluated the idea to label this group as “Oriental references,” but soon realized that such a name involves a series of complications – for instance, those analyzed by Edward Said in his *Orientalism* - that would have driven the discussion to a level that I could not accommodate in this work. I opted for “East” merely wishing to indicate the geographical positioning of such territories that are – from a conventional Italian perspective – eastern.

Nel tempo che regnava in (East)
Gostantinopoli (N) lo 'mperadore *Manuello*,
 (Hyp) *cristianissimo e obbediente a santa*
Chiesa, si maritò (N) *una sua nipote*
figliuola del fratello, la quale avea nome
Isabella, al re di (East) *Gerusalem e di*
Cipri, e dielle intra gli altri doni e gioelli in
 sua dote l'orlique del beato Filippo
 appostolo. Avenne che uno messere monaco
 di Firenze era cancelliere del (Lex)(N)
patriarca di Ierusalem, e poi fu per sua
 bontà fatto arcivescovo d'Acrida al tempo che
 (East)(N) il soldano *Saladino* prese la città
 di *Ierusalem*; ma poi ripresa (East) la
Terrasanta per gli Cristiani, il detto
 arcivescovo (Lex) tornò oltremare, e fu fatto
 per lo papa (Lex) patriarca di Ierusalem.

...

per la qual cosa la detta reina la donò al
 detto (Lex) patriarca. E ciò sappiendo (N) il
 vescovo di Firenze, ch'avea nome messere
Piero, ne scrisse più lettere al detto
 (Lex)(Ben) patriarca cittadino di Firenze,
 che gli piacesse di mandare la detta santa
 reliquia in Firenze. Avvenne che 'l detto
 (Lex) patriarca amalò a morte, e (N)
 commise a uno messere *Rinieri* di Firenze

Il santo frate che confessato l'avea, udendo
 che egli era trapassato, fu insieme (Lex) col
priore del luogo, e fatto sonare a capitolo,
 (Cl) *alli frati ragunati* in quello mostrò ser
 Ciappelletto essere stato santo uomo, secondo
 che per la sua confessione concepito avea: e
 (M)(Lex) *sperando per lui Domenedio*
dovere molti miracoli dimostrare, persuadette
 loro che con (Lex) grandissima *reverenza e*
divozione quello corpo si dovesse ricevere.
 Alla qual cosa (Lex)(Cl) il priore e gli altri
 frati, creduli, s'accordarono: e la sera, (Pro)
 andati tutti là dove il corpo di ser
 Ciappelletto giaceva, sopra esso fecero una
 (Lex) grande e solenne vigilia, e la mattina,
 (Pro) *tutti vestiti co' camicci e co' pieviali*,
con li libri in mano e con le croci innanzi,
cantando, andarono per questo corpo (Lex) *e*
con grandissima festa e solennità il (Lex)
recarono alla lor chiesa, (Mul)(Lex)
 seguendo quasi tutto il popolo della città,
uomini e donne; (Ch) e nella chiesa postolo,
 ...

si il mise nel capo e nella (Lex) divozion di
 (Mul) *tutti coloro che v'erano*, che, poi che
 fornito fu l'ufficio, (Hyp) *con la maggior*

(Lex) priore del Sepolcro e suo cappellano che 'l detto (Br) braccio mandasse a Firenze; (N)(East) *ma il capitolo de' calonaci di Ierusalem nol voleva lasciare portare. A la fine il sopradetto vescovo di Firenze mandòe* (Lex) oltremare per lo detto (Br) braccio (N) *uno messere Gualterotto calonaco di Firenze, il quale con molta istanzia e studio adoperò tanto col detto* (Lex) priore del Sepolcro, ch'egli ebbe il detto (Br) santo braccio, e recollo in Firenze l'anno di Cristo MCLXXXX, (N)(Cl) *essendo rettore di Firenze il conte Ridolfo da Capraia; al quale per lo vescovo di Firenze con tutto il chericato, e col detto rettore* (Lex)(Mul) *con tutto il popolo, uomini e femmine,* (Pro) *andarono incontro a processione incontro* (Br) *al detto braccio,* (Lex) *e con grande solennità* (Lex) recato fu in Firenze, (Ch) *e messo nell'altare di Santo Giovanni Batista,* (M)(Lex) *il quale fece molti e aperti miracoli* (Mul) *in più cittadini di Firenze, i quali a la sua venuta* (Lex) *ebbono fede e devozione.*

Nuova Cronica, XIII

Nel MCCCXI, dì XIII d'aprile, vennero in Firenze reliquie del beato apostolo santo

calca del mondo (Pro) *da tutti fu andato a basciargli i piedi e le mani, e tutti i panni gli furono indosso stracciati, tenendosi beato chi pure un poco di quegli potesse avere: e convenne che tutto il giorno così fosse tenuto, acciò che da tutti potesse essere veduto e visitato.*

...

(Ch) *in un 'arca di marmo sepolito fu onorevolmente in una cappella, ed a mano a mano il dí seguente* (Pro) *vi cominciarono* (Mul) *le genti* (Pro) *ad andare e ad accender lumi e ad adorarlo, e per conseguente a botarsi e ad appiccarvi le immagini della cera secondo la promession fatta. Ed intanto crebbe la fama della sua* (Lex) *santità e divozione a lui,* (Hyp) *che quasi niuno era che in alcuna avversità fosse, che ad altro santo che a lui si botasse, e chiamaronlo e chiamano san Ciappelletto, ed affermano,* (M)(Lex) molti miracoli *Iddio aver mostrati per lui e mostrare tutto giorno a chi* (Lex) divotamente *si raccomanda a lui.*

Decameron II, 1

... Il che in luogo di (M) *miracolo* avendo, questo Arrigo esser santo (Mul) *dicevano*

Barnaba, (Ben) *le quali mandò da corte di papa il cardinale Pelagrù al Comune di Firenze, perché sapea che' Fiorentini l'aveano in (Lex) grande devozione. E fune fatta in Firenze (Lex) grande reverenza e solennità, e (Ch) furono riposte nell'altare di Santo Giovanni.*

Nuova Cronica, IX

Nel detto anno [MCCCXXXIII], a dì XIII d'aprile, furo mandate in Firenze delle reliquie di santo Iacopo e di santo Alesso, e alquanto del drappo che vestì Cristo, (Ben)(N) *per procaccio d'uno monaco fiorentino di Valombrosa di santa vita, il quale le procacciò in Roma da' suo' signori. E venute in Firenze, (Pro)(Cl) furono ricevute a grande processione di cherici, e furonvi (Lex) i priori e l'altre signorie e (Mul) molta buona gente di Firenze, e (Lex) con grande devozione (Ch) furono messe ne l'altare di Santo Giovanni.*

Nuova Cronica, CXLIX

tutti; e (Mul)(Pro)(Hyp) concorso tutto il popolo della città alla casa nella quale il suo corpo giacea, (Ch)(Pro) quello a guisa d'un corpo santo nella chiesa maggior ne portarono, menando quivi zoppi, attratti e ciechi ed altri di qualunque infermità o difetto impediti, quasi tutti dovessero (Pro)(M) dal toccamento di questo corpo divenir sani. (Mul) In tanto tumulto e discorrimento di popolo,

...

Li quali quivi non essendo stati già mai, veggendo correre (Mul)(Hyp) ogni uomo si maravigliarono,

...

(Pro) Noi vogliamo andare a veder questo santo, ma io per me non veggio come noi vi ci possiam pervenire, per ciò che io ho inteso che la piazza (Cr) è piena di tedeschi e d'altra gente armata, ... ed oltre a questo la chiesa, per quello che si dica, (Mul) è sí piena di gente, (Hyp) che quasi niuna persona più vi può entrare.

...

(Pro) lá pervennero ove il corpo di santo Arrigo era posto, e da certi gentili uomini, che v'erano da torno, (Pro) fu Martellino prestamente preso e sopra il corpo posto,

Negli anni di Cristo MCCCXXX, (East) *i Turchi*, i quali Turchi mandarono per aiuto *a' Tartari de la Turchia*; e venuti con grande esercito assalirono l'oste de' Cristiani e Greci, e misongli innisconfitta, e pochi ne scamparono che non fossono presi o morti; e perderono (Br)(East)(Lex) *tutta la terra di là dal braccio San Giorgio*.

(M) *acciò che per quello il beneficio della sanità acquistasse.*

...

Martellino, essendo (Mul) *tutta la gente* (M) *attenta a veder che di lui avvenisse, stato alquanto, cominciò, come colui che ottimamente fare lo sapeva, a far sembianti di distendere l'un de 'diti, ed appresso la mano, e poi il (Br) braccio, e così tutto a venirsi distendendo. Il che veggendo (Mul)(M) la gente, (Hyp) sí gran romore in lode di santo Arrigo facevano, che i tuoni non si sarieno potuti udire*

Decameron VI, 10

forse non meno per lo nome che per altra (Lex) divozione vedutovi volentieri,

...

secondo il podere e la (Lex) divozion sua,

...

fatta prima con (Lex) gran solennità la confessione

...

di spezial grazia vi mostrerò una santissima e
bella reliquia, la quale io medesimo già (East)
recai dalle sante terre (Lex) d'oltremare:

...

e sentendo (Mul) *la moltitudine grande esser
venuta* di contadini per dovere la penna
vedere

...

io fui mandato dal mio superiore (East) *in
quelle parti dove apparisce il sole,*

...

(N) messomi io in cammino, *di Vinegia
partendomi ed andandomene per lo Borgo
de 'greci e di quindi per lo reame del Garbo
cavalcando e per Baldacca, pervenni in
Parione, donde, non senza sete, dopo
alquanto pervenni in Sardigna. Ma perché vi
vo io tutti i paesi cerchi da me divisando? Io
capitai, passato (Br)(Lex) il Braccio di san
Giorgio, (East) in Truffia ed in Buffia, paesi
molto abitati e con gran popoli, e di quindi
pervenni in (East) *Terra di menzogna,**

...

(N) *e quindi passai in terra d'Abruzzi, ... alle
montagne de 'baschi pervenni, dove tutte
l'acque corrono alla 'ngiú. Ed in brieve tanto
andai addentro, che io pervenni mei infino in*

*India Pastinaca, ... (N) Maso del Saggio, il
quale gran mercatante io trovai lá, che
schiacciava noci e vendeva gusci a ritaglio.*

...

*(N)(Lex) il venerabile padre messer Non-mi-
blasmate-se-voi piace, (Hyp) degnissimo
patriarca di Ierusalem,*

...

*volle che io vedessi tutte le sante reliquie le
quali egli appresso di sé aveva; (Hyp) e furon
tante, che, se io le vi volessi tutte contare, io
non ne verrei a capo in parecchie miglia:*

...

*e l'un de 'zoccoli di san Gherardo da
Villamagna, (Ben)(N) il quale io, non ha
molto, a Firenze donai a Gherardo de 'Bonsi,
il quale in lui ha (Lex) grandissima
divozione: e (Ben) diedemi de 'carboni co '
quali fu il beatissimo martire san Lorenzo
arrostito;*

...

*ma ora che per certi (M) miracoli fatti da esse
e per lettere ricevute dal (Lex) patriarca fatto
n'è certo*

...

li quali poi che alquanto (Mul) *la stolta*
moltitudine ebbe con ammirazione
reverentemente guardati, (Mul) *con*
grandissima calca tutti s'appressarono a frate
Cipolla, e migliori offerte dando che usati
non erano, (Pro) *che con essi gli dovesse*
toccare il pregava ciascuno.

After reading all the resemblances contained in this long series of quotations, one might rightly argue that these similitudes can be explained by the fact that both writers are describing the same cult that encompasses the same rituality. If this is undeniable, and we need to account for it in our reading, it is also true that some of the similarities that we can observe are remarkable and worth further analysis. For this reason, I will now propose a series of sub-chapters in which I will examine more deeply the groupings I supply.

2.5.1 Get in *touch* with the relic: same rituality, same narration, different genres

As we have seen, the three tales under analysis (*Decameron* I, 1; II, 1; and VI, 10) share many elements with Giovanni Villani's *Nuova Cronica*, but also amongst themselves. For instance, the tale of San Ciappelletto (I, 1) shares a remarkable series of analogies with *Nuova Cronica* XIV. Specifically, there are numerous lexical equivalences shared by the two methods of narrating the *inventio* and *translatio* of relics. For an easier comparison, I will number all similarities worth further analysis:

Avvenne che 'l detto (1) patriarca amalòe a morte, e commise a uno messere Rinieri di Firenze (2) priore del Sepolcro e suo cappellano che 'l detto braccio mandasse a Firenze;

...

A la fine il sopradetto (1) vescovo di Firenze ... col detto (2) priore del Sepolcro,

...

al quale per (1) lo vescovo di Firenze con tutto il chericato, e col detto rettore (3) con tutto il popolo, uomini e femmine, (4) andarono incontro a processione incontro (Br) al detto braccio, (5) e con grande solennità (6) recato fu in Firenze, (7) e messo nell'altare di Santo Giovanni Batista, (8) il quale fece molti e aperti miracoli in più cittadini di Firenze, i quali a la sua venuta (9) ebbono fede e devozione.

Alla qual cosa (2) il priore (1) e gli altri frati, creduli, s'accordarono: e la sera, andati tutti lá dove il corpo di ser Ciappelletto giaceva, sopra esso fecero una (5) grande e solenne vigilia, e la mattina, tutti vestiti co 'cámisci e co 'pieviali, con li libri in mano e con le croci innanzi, cantando, andarono per questo corpo (5) e con grandissima festa e solennità il (6) recarono alla lor chiesa, (3) seguendo quasi tutto il popolo della città, uomini e donne; (4) e nella chiesa postolo,

...

si il mise nel capo e nella divozion di tutti coloro che v'erano, che, poi che fornito fu l'ufficio, con la maggior calca del mondo (4) da tutti fu andato a basciargli i piedi e le mani, e tutti i panni gli furono indosso stracciati, tenendosi beato chi pure un poco di quegli potesse avere: e convenne che tutto il giorno cosí fosse tenuto, acciò che da tutti potesse essere veduto e visitato.

...

(7) in un'arca di marmo sepolto fu onorevolmente in una cappella, ed a mano a mano il dí seguente (4) vi cominciarono le

genti ad andare e ad accender lumi e ad adorarlo, e per conseguente a botarsi e ad appicarvi le imagini della cera secondo la promession fatta. Ed intanto crebbe la fama della sua (9) santità e divozione a lui, che quasi niuno era che in alcuna avversità fosse, che ad altro santo che a lui si botasse, e chiamaronlo e chiamano san Ciappelletto, ed affermano, (8) molti miracoli Iddio aver mostrati per lui e mostrare tutto giorno a chi (9) divotamente si raccomanda a lui.

Besides the different lengths and number of details in the two narrations – which we still must register for a fair comparison across genres – we already notice in these short passages at least nine similarities that I will list to stress the level of *contaminationes*, and later I will venture to include a more cult-related analysis, such as the need of the crowd to touch the saint's body.

In points 1 and 2, we can observe the gathering of various clergy members (“vescovo,” “cappellano,” “tutto il chericato” and “frate,” “altri frati”), also with a specific mention of a “prior”²⁸ (point 2). Points 3-9, in both texts, narrate how (3) all the people gathered, (4) follow the relic in a procession (5) with solemnity, and (6) transport the relic (*translatio*; 7) to a church; and then the relic will (8) be the protagonist of many miracles, (9) for which the crowd will show its devotion. This symmetrical narration is a precious window from which we can observe specific features of the cult of relics narrated in the 13th century. In addition, it undeniably demonstrates that the structures of these two different genres, and specifically Giovanni Villani

²⁸ Prior (my translation).

and Boccaccio's narratives, have numerous points in common; and that is a testament to the occurrence of a *contaminatione*. If including the same exact steps while describing the same rituality cannot be a reliable sign of contamination between the two genres (because they are narrating the same cult), the abundant lexical similarities might be. Indeed, besides the aforementioned "priore," we can read a great number of identical words or lemmas used to narrate the same exact elements, in order (italics added), "con *tutto il popolo, uomini e femmine*" and "seguendo quasi *tutto il popolo* della città, *uomini e donne*"; "con *grande solennità*" and "*grande e solenne* vigilia, ... e con *grandissima festa e solennità*"; the relic "*recato* fu in Firenze" and "*recarono* alla lor chiesa"; "il quale fece *molti* e aperti *miracoli*" and "*molti miracoli* Iddio"; and "ebbono fede e *devozione*" and "*divotamente* si raccomanda a lui." If, to an extent, it is certainly true that some lexical similarities could be explained by the fact that both Giovanni Villani (1280-1348) and Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-75) are two men from Tuscany who lived at approximately the same time, and who talk about the same subject; it is also patent that the similarities are too many to be ignored.

In both Giovanni Villani's chronicles and Boccaccio's novellas, we have seen several hyperboles which, together with the use of flashy names, are part of what Branca defines as "quelle esagerazioni usate per accattivarsi l'uditorio" (*Studi sugli «Exempla»* ... 190). For instance, Frate Cipolla (in *Decameron* VI, 10) uses them when he tells the crowd about the number of relics that "il venerabile padre messer Non-mi-blasmate-se-voi piace" showed him ("volle che io vedessi tutte le sante reliquie le quali egli appresso di sé aveva; e furon tante, che, se io le vi volessi tutte contare, io non ne verrei a capo in parecchie miglia"). This flashy character is also the protagonist of another similarity between Giovanni Villani and Boccaccio's texts. Indeed, when in *Nuova Cronica* XIV we read about "lo 'mperadore Manuello,

cristianissimo e obbediente a santa Chiesa,” we somehow understand the type of character that Boccaccio attempts to caricature. Indeed, if we consider that in *Decameron* VI, 10, this character is presented as “il venerabile padre messer Non-mi-blasmate-se-voi piace, degnissimo patriarca di Ierusalem,” we notice that the two writers use the same exact pattern: the title of the man (“lo ‘mperadore” and “il venerabile padre messer”) the man’s name (“Manuello” and “messer Non-mi-blasmate-se-voi piace”), an adjective in the absolute superlative form (“cristianissimo” and “degnissimo”), and something that express their belonging to the church (“obbediente a santa Chiesa” and “patriarca di Ierusalem”²⁹).

We can observe other examples of these hyperboles when Boccaccio describes the multitude of devotees; for instance, in *Decameron* II, 1, we read, “la chiesa, per quello che si dica, è sí piena di gente, che quasi niuna persona più vi può entrare” and “la gente, sí gran romore in lode di santo Arrigo facevano, che i tuoni non si sarieno potuti udire.” In this direction, the hyperboles that I would like to analyze more deeply (also for the ways in which it concerns the cult of relics *per se*) are related to the constant exaggerations that Boccaccio uses to describe the mob. More specifically, we will observe the persistent use of the word “calca” and the overexcitement of the crowd in the attempt to reach physical proximity with the relic. Boccaccio uses the word “calca” in all the three tales under analysis: in *Decameron* I, 1 with a hyperbole to express the voracity of the mob to touch the saint’s body-relic and possibly obtain a little piece of his clothing (“nella divozion di tutti coloro che v’erano, ... con la maggior calca del mondo da tutti fu andato a basciargli i piedi e le mani, e tutti i panni gli furono indosso stracciati”); and in *Decameron* VI, 10, we observe the same paradigm that contemplates the crowd in the attempt to

²⁹ In the same chapter of *Nuova Cronica*, XIV, we read “patriarca di Ierusalem” twice, and “patriarca” three times (five in total if we also consider “patriarca di Ierusalem”).

get closer to the relic, in this case the (supposed) coal of St. Lawrence (“la stolta moltitudine ebbe con ammirazione reverentemente guardati, con grandissima calca tutti s’appressarono a frate Cipolla”). Interestingly, also in *Decameron* II, 1 we read the word *calca* twice, but this deserves a dedicated examination that I will provide in the following subchapter.

2.5.1.2 Get in *touch* with the relic: *Calca* and *Calci*

So far, we have seen the abundant similarities between chronicles (in particular those of Giovanni Villani) and Boccaccio’s novellas. Instead, in this part of the chapter, I would like to propose a juxtaposition between tales I, 1 and II, 1 from the *Decameron* to see how, I argue, Boccaccio is able to simultaneously parody the cult of relics and his own novella. In each of the three tales mainly analyzed in this chapter (*Decameron* I, 1; II, 1; and VI, 10), we have seen how he chooses to describe the crowds with hyperboles that emphasize their overexcitement to touch the relics. We have seen that both *Decameron* I, 1 and VI, 10 include the word “*calca*” to express such an image. Interestingly, Boccaccio also uses this specific word in *Decameron* II, 1, but in a more intriguing way that is worth an in-depth analysis. Accordingly, in this particular subchapter, I will argue that Boccaccio purposely uses this specific word to make an internal reference across two tales (I, 1 and II, 1), precisely in relation to the way in which the two crowds treat the bodies of the two protagonists, San Ciappelletto and Martellino. In order to support this idea, I will provide a series of textual references contained in both tales.

For starters, the name that the *Trevigiani*³⁰ give Martellino – “beffatore di Dio e de’ santi” – very much resonates with the “Bestemmiatore di Dio e de’ santi era grandissimo” that

³⁰ People from Treviso, the city in which *Decameron* II, 1 is set

Panfilo (the narrator of the tale) gives to Ser Cepparello. In other words, we can state that both Martellino and Cepparello played with the sacred in a blasphemous way, and eventually Cepparello will manage to become a saint while Martellino will be able to save his own life, both using their rhetorical skills.

The first point that suggests an internal juxtaposition based on the use of the word *calca* is how this term is used to describe the overexcited and/or aggressive attitude of the crowd in the attempt to reach the body of both the protagonists of the tales (San Ciappelletto and Martellino). Boccaccio's mastery allows him to create a narration in which, in one tale, the crowd is overexcited to reach the body of San Ciappelletto (which they consider a relic), while in the other, the mob shows the same over-animated attitude, first to reach Sant'Arrigo's body as a relic and later to reach Martellino's body. The way in which Boccaccio explains such an episode is a narrative masterpiece, as it envisions the parody in his own parody.

I will now propose some considerations about the use of the term *calca* in the three tales of the *Decameron* under analysis, and then draw a closer parallel between the ways the crowds treat the bodies of San Ciappelletto and Martellino. First and foremost, in both *Decameron* I, 1 and VI, 10, the word *calca* is precisely used to refer to the crowd that wants to reach proximity to the relic. Specifically, in *Decameron* I, 1 Boccaccio describes the hectic crowd that wants to kiss the saint's hands and feet and obtain a piece of his clothing as (*ex indumentis*) relic.³¹ Likewise, in *Decameron* VI, 10, the word *calca* is used to depict the frenetic *stolta moltitudine* that wishes

³¹ “tutti coloro che v'erano, che, poi che fornito fu l'uficio, (Hyp) con la maggior calca del mondo (Pro) da tutti fu andato a basciargli i piedi e le mani, e tutti i panni gli furono indosso stracciati, tenendosi beato chi pure un poco di queglii potesse avere: e convenne che tutto il giorno così fosse tenuto, acciò che da tutti potesse essere veduto e visitato” (*Decameron* I, 1).

to gain proximity to the relic³² and beseeches the friar to touch them with the relic (“che con essi gli dovesse toccare il pregava ciascuno”); an achievement which they will eventually accomplish when the friar later marks a cross on their own *clothing*.³³ Remarkably, Boccaccio uses the same word in *Decameron* II, 1 twice, also to indicate the hectic crowd who wants to reach the body of Martellino, this time to beat him. This particular use of the word *calca* is part of a series of remarkable similitudes that I will now list in order of appearance in the tales. In this juxtaposition, I will consider the attempt of the crowd to reach Martellino’s body as a parody of the crowd that wants to reach San Ciappelletto (and to some extent also the same Sant’Arrigo), which is, in turn, a parody of how non-fictional crowds venerate their old and *newly-made* saints.

First, the way in which a third person (“un fiorentino”)³⁴ speaks to the crowd about Martellino radically juxtaposes the way in which a third person (“il santo frate che confessato l’avea”) talks about Cepparello to the crowd. In the two tales, we read (*italics added*),

³² “aperse la cassetta e mostrò i carboni, li quali poi che alquanto la stolta moltitudine ebbe con ammirazione reverentemente guardati, con grandissima calca tutti s’appressarono a frate Cipolla” (*Decameron* VI, 10).

³³ “Per la qual cosa frate Cipolla, recatisi questi carboni in mano, sopra li lor camiscion bianchi e sopra i farsetti e sopra li veli delle donne cominciò a fare le maggior croci che vi capevano” (*Decameron* VI, 10).

³⁴ “Era per ventura un fiorentino vicino a questo luogo, il quale molto bene conosceva Martellino” (*Decameron* I, 1).

Decameron I, 1

il santo frate che confessato l'avea, salito in sul pergamo, di lui cominciò ... gli avea potuto metter nel capo che Iddio gli ele dovesse perdonare, da questo volgendosi a riprendere il popolo che ascoltava, dicendo: — E voi, maladetti da Dio, per ogni fuscello di paglia che vi si volge tra' piedi bestemmiate Iddio e la Madre e tutta la corte di paradiso! — Ed oltre a queste, molte altre cose disse della sua lealtà e della sua purità, ed in brieve con le sue parole, alle quali era dalla gente della contrada data intera fede, si il mise nel capo e nella divozion di tutti coloro che v'erano

Decameron II, 1

Era per ventura un fiorentino vicino a questo luogo, il quale molto bene conosceva Martellino, ... il quale, veggendolo ridirizzato e riconosciuto, subitamente cominciò a ridere ed a dire: — Domine, fallo tristo! Chi non avrebbe creduto, veggendol venire, che egli fosse stato attratto da doverlo? — Queste parole udirono alcuni trivigiani, li quali incontanente il domandarono: — Come, non era costui attratto? — A' quali il fiorentin rispose: — Non piaccia a Dio! ... — Come costoro ebbero udito questo, non bisognò più avanti; essi si fecero per forza innanzi, e cominciarono a gridare: — Sia preso questo traditore e beffatore di Dio e de' santi, il quale, non essendo attratto, per ischernire il nostro santo e noi, qui a guisa d'attratto è venuto!

In these portions of the two tales, we can clearly see the antithetical presentation of the two protagonists and the accompanying reaction of the crowd. On the one hand, the friar in I, 1 says that Ciappelletto was pure, loyal, etc. and the crowd believes him. Consequently, this discourse will establish the *divozione* of the crowd towards this new saint. On the other hand, the Florentine man is talking about Martellino while laughing and, even if with a comical tone, mentions God several times (“Domine, fallo tristo!”, “Non piaccia a Dio!”, and “beffatore di Dio

e de' santi") as it occurs in I, 1. Subsequently, just as the words of the friar initiate the devotion of San Ciappelletto, the words of this Florentine man trigger the rage of the crowd towards Martellino. In addition, we should also note that in this particular portion of these two tales, the role of the crowd switches from the accused ("E voi, maladetti da Dio... bestemmiate Iddio e la Madre e tutta la corte di paradiso!" in I, 1) to the accuser ("Sia preso questo traditore e beffatore di Dio e de' santi" in II, 1). Boccaccio's juxtaposition between these two scenes is particularly vivid as he uses the same paradigm: the subject accused ("voi maledetti" and "questo traditore"), the act against God ("bestemmiate Iddio" and "beffatore di Dio"), and the mention of other saints in addition to God ("e la Madre e tutta la corte di paradiso!" and "e de' santi").

The second element that I would like to suggest includes the use of the word "calca" and, more broadly, a series of analogies and contrasts that describe the attitude of the crowds to reach and touch the body of San Ciappelletto and Martellino. The number of equivalences is so high that, for a more practical reading, I will label the main ones with the letters *a* to *f*,

Decameron I, 1

che, poi che fornito fu l'uficio, (a) con la maggior calca del mondo (b) da tutti fu andato a basciargli i piedi e le mani, (c) e tutti i panni gli furono indosso stracciati, tenendosi beato chi pure un poco di quegli potesse avere: ... (d) e convenne che tutto il giorno così fosse tenuto, acciò che da tutti potesse essere veduto e visitato. (e) Poi, la

Decameron II, 1

E così dicendo, (b) il pigliarono e giù del luogo dove era il tirarono, e presolo per li capelli e (c) stracciatigli tutti i panni indosso, (b) gl'incominciarono a dare delle pugna e de' calci; (d) né pareva a colui essere uomo che a questo far non correa. Martellin gridava: — Mercé per Dio! — (a) e quanto

vegnente notte, in un'arca di marmo sepolto
fu onorevolmente in una cappella, ed a mano
a mano il dí seguente (f) vi cominciarono le
genti ad andare e ad accender lumi e ad
adorarlo, e per conseguente a botarsi e ad
appiccarvi le immagini della cera secondo la
promession fatta. Ed intanto crebbe la fama
della sua santità e divozione a lui, che quasi
niuno era che in alcuna avversità fosse, che
ad altro santo che a lui si botasse, e
chiamaronlo e chiamano san Ciappelletto, ed
affermano, molti miracoli Iddio aver mostrati
per lui e mostrare tutto giorno a chi
divotamente si raccomanda a lui.

poteva s'aiutava, ma ciò era niente: la calca
gli moltiplicava ognora addosso maggiore.
(e) La qual cosa veggendo Stecchi e
Marchese, cominciarono tra sé a dire che la
cosa stava male, e di se medesimi dubitando
non ardivano ad aiutarlo, anzi con gli altri
insieme gridando ch'el fosse morto, avendo
nondimeno pensiero tuttavia come trarre il
potessero delle mani del popolo.

... n'andò a colui che in luogo del podestà
v'era, e disse: — Mercé per Dio! Egli è qua
un malvagio uomo ...

— Subitamente, udito questo, ben dodici
de 'sergenti corsero lá dove il misero
Martellino era senza pettine carminato, (a)
ed alle maggiori fatiche del mondo rotta la
calca, (e) loro tutto pesto e tutto rotto il
trassero delle mani e menaronnelo a palagio;
(f) dove molti seguitolo che da lui si
tenevano scherniti.

The first point (a) that I would like to discuss is the use of the word *calca*, selected to emphasize the frenzy of the crowds in their desire to gain proximity to the bodies. Of course, the reasons why the crowds wish to touch the bodies of San Ciappelletto and Martellino are juxtaposed. Especially in Chapter One, we see the absolute desire of devotees to touch and kiss the relic in order to absorb the *virtus* contained in a sacred body. If this is what San Ciappelletto's crowd

wants to obtain, it seems clear that the *Trevigiani* have a drastically different objective. I would argue that Boccaccio is punctually parodying the two different goals while simultaneously writing a parody about the cult of relics. By focusing on points *b*, *c*, and *d*, we will be able to observe that (*b*) both crowds want to touch the bodies. While one crowd kisses San Ciappelletto's hands and feet, the other one grabs Martellino's body and hair. We notice a powerful juxtaposition between "basciargli" and "pigliarono...giù...il tirarono, e il presolo," and especially with "dare delle pugna e de' calci." With these verbs, Boccaccio is able to render the overexcitement, which is common to both crowds, but he additionally distinguishes the triggers of the two antithetical behaviors (devotion and rage). If, allegorically, the fact that the Trevigiani grab Martellino's body and hair is already an indicator that the two tales might be in conversation, I will argue that point *c* is a witty ploy that Boccaccio uses to simultaneously parody his own tale and the cult of relics. The correspondence between the crowd that rips up San Ciappelletto's clothing is too strongly connected to the crowd that rips up Martellino's clothing to be ignored, especially because Boccaccio uses almost the same exact expression for both cases ("e tutti i panni gli furono indosso stracciati" and "e stracciatigli tutti i panni indosso"). This combination is also reinforced by the fact that both tales remark on the increasing number of people in the crowd who want to reach each respective body (as we can see in point *d*). Taking this into account, we have the grounds to speculate on the fact that, in this juxtaposition, Martellino's clothing in *Decameron* II, 1 functions as a parodied version of the *ex indumentis* relics, which are already parodied with San Ciappelletto's clothing in *Decameron* I, 1. In this direction, the roughing up reserved for Martellino, emphasized by the *pugna* and *calci*, also function – in the same manner – as a double parody of the way in which the crowds vigorously attempt to gain proximity to relics.

Another significant analogy between these two narrations is that both specify, as we can observe in point *e*, that the bodies of these two men are transported to the corresponding places: San Ciappelletto's body will be buried in an *arca di marmo*, while *Martellino*'s body will be brought to the *podesta* where he will be judged. I would now like to propose a specific reading in which, I argue, the way these two bodies are transported is again a double parody. On the one hand, we attest to San Ciappelletto's body being *onorevolmente* carried in a specific way that Boccaccio describes (point *f*) as a *grande e solenne vigilia*,³⁵ commonly performed during a saint's *inventio* and *translatio* (and then emulated yearly in a procession, a ritual that, in Italy, is as alive today as it was in the 14th century). Moreover, the tale clearly remarks that a multitude of people will follow San Ciappelletto's body ("con la maggior calca del mondo da tutti fu andato a basciargli i piedi e le mani" and "il dí seguente vi cominciarono le genti ad andare"). Likewise, on the other hand, the body of Martellino is brought to the *palagio* with brutal force ("loro tutto pesto e tutto rotto il trassero delle mani e menaronnelo a palagio") to the point that even his own two friends who were there, Stecchi and Marchese,³⁶ insult him. Also in this case, Boccaccio specifies that Martellino's body is followed by other people ("ben dodici de' sergenti corsero lá dove il misero Martellino" and "dove molti seguitolo che da lui si tenevano scherniti"). Given that, as it was for the case of Martellino's hair and clothing which Boccaccio employs to double-parody relics and his own tale, here we observe how the angry people who follow Martellino's

³⁵"andati tutti lá dove il corpo di ser Ciappelletto giaceva, sopra esso fecero una grande e solenne vigilia, e la mattina, tutti vestiti co' cámsici e co' pieviali, con li libri in mano e con le croci innanzi, cantando, andaron per questo corpo" and "ed a mano a mano il dí seguente vi cominciarono le genti ad andare e ad accender lumi e ad adorarlo, e per conseguente a botarsi e ad appicarvi le immagini della cera secondo la promession fatta" (*Decameron* I, 1).

³⁶ We must register another similarity between these two protagonists (Cepparello and Martellino) as Martellino is accompanied by two friends, Stecchi and Marchese, while, likewise, Cepparello before his confession is hosted by two brothers ("due fratelli fiorentini"). Interestingly, to some extent, we can see that both pairs are initially accomplices, and at a certain point of both tales they become almost passive.

body are the double parody of a procession (“grande e solenne vigilia”) that accompany saints’ *inventiones* and *translationes*.

2.5.2 References to the East and “*il braccio di san Giorgio*”

The fact itself that we find references to Eastern territories³⁷ in chronicles and novellas that deal with relics is no surprise, as the area between Constantinople and Jerusalem is undoubtedly one of the protagonists, if not the main protagonist, in the narration of the relics trade. As we have seen, Villani mentions “tutta la terra di là dal braccio San Giorgio” to refer to the land that the *Turchi* conquered over the *Cristiani e Greci*. Likewise, we have also read that Boccaccio in *Decameron* VI, 10 mentions such land (“passato il braccio di San Giorgio”). I would like to highlight that Boccaccio mentions such land in a specific context in which he lists a series of clearly parodied geographical names,

Signori e donne ... io fui mandato dal mio superiore in quelle parti dove apparisce il sole
... Porcellana ... Vinegia ... Borgo de 'Greci ... Garbo ... Baldacca ... Parione ...

Sardigna. Ma perché vi vo io tutti i paesi cerchi da me divisando? Io capitai, passato il braccio di San Giorgio, in Truffia e in Buffia, paesi molto abitati e con gran popoli; e di quindi pervenni in terra di Menzogna, dove molti de 'nostri frati e d'altre religioni trovai assai, li quali tutti il disagio andavan per l'amor di Dio schifando, poco dell'altrui fatiche curandosi, dove la loro utilità vedessero seguitare, nulla altra moneta spendendo che senza conio per quei paesi ...

³⁷ From the perspective of Italy.

Branca in his footnotes explains that the listing of all these geographical references is part of a “grande discorso tutto appuntato e modulato su un linguaggio prestigioso e funambolesco, caricaturale e grottesco, anfibologico e antifrastico; e in questa pazza girandola semantica e oratoria le cose più semplici suonano meravigliose e straordinarie.”³⁸ Branca also adds that this series of geographical references mostly refers to Florence crossed from east to west. If, on the one hand, this hypothesis is convincing and well-supported by precise correspondences, I am on the other hand surprised that, in a tale which narrates the cult of (spurious) relics, a mention to “il Braccio di San Giorgio” (literally, “St. George’s arm”) is analyzed merely as one of the other geographical references. Other scholars also dismiss this reference by simply referring to a “before leaping the sea,” like in the case of Hollander (*Boccaccio’s Dante*... 45). As Branca suggests, “San Giorgio” most likely refers to a “contrada presso la Dogana e anche località Oltrarno” or to “il Bosforo, come si indicava con braccio di San Giorgio” (note 8, page 768). Nonetheless, when we read this passage, I believe that we should not overlook the mention of a saint’s arm because it could be a relic-related parody.

The hypothesis that the words from Frate Cipolla’s speech are both a parody and a strong accusation levied against the exploitation of relics is supported by at least two elements. First, Boccaccio’s use of geographical names is not only flashy but also openly accusatory, as names such as “Truffia,” “Buffia,” and “terra di Menzogna” suggest (to which I would also add “braccio di san Giorgio” as reference to both a place and a relic). Second, Frate Cipolla states that in these places, many clergy members (“molti de’ nostri frati e d’altre religioni trovai assai”) act in a shameful way (“li quali tutti il disagio ...”). Plus, to accentuate the accusation, Boccaccio also quotes Dante’s well-known expression, “pagando di moneta senza conio” (Par XXIX, 126;

³⁸ Note 8, page 768.

“nulla altra moneta spendendo che senza conio per quei paesi”). Specifically, it seems that this passage could be a direct parody/condemnation addressed to the specific way in which many types of narration (from hagiography to sermons to chronicles) told the origin story of a given relic. As we read in both the *Nuova Cronica* and the *Decameron*, in addition to the constant references to Constantinople and Jerusalem,³⁹ there is a series of flashy names⁴⁰ that often includes a “patriarca di Ierusalem,” which is mentioned five times in *Nuova Cronica*, XIV and twice in *Decameron* VI, 10.⁴¹

Another element which could suggest that the reference to St. George’s arm is a double reference (geographical and relic-related) might be the preposition “di” that Boccaccio, contrarily to Giovanni Villani, includes. In the two figures below, we can see that in what is considered a Boccaccio autographic manuscript – the ms. Hamilton 90 – we can read “passato il braccio di san giorgio” (figure 4), while in the second manuscript (figure 5), which dates between 1341-47 (Cherubini and Pratesi), the copier wrote “tutta la terra di la dal braccio sa(n) giorgio,” thus without the preposition “di.”

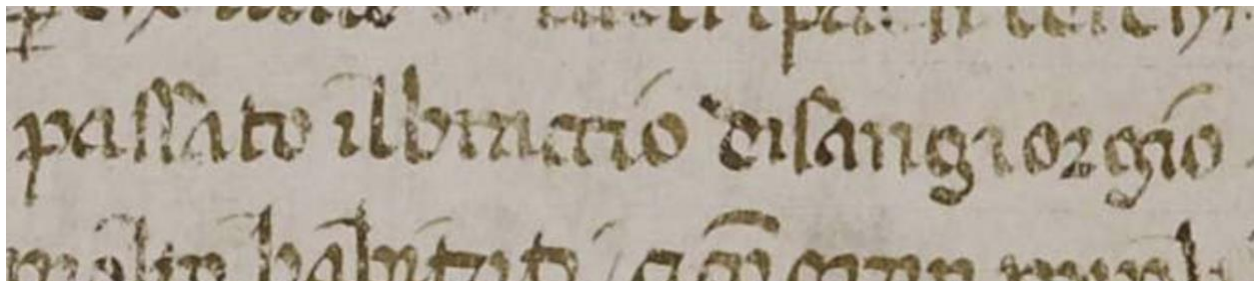


Figure 4: Boccaccio, Giovanni: *Decameron*: Ms. Ham. 90, 1370, [160] 77v. Berlin Staatsbibliothek.

³⁹ Indicated with “(East)”.

⁴⁰ Indicated with “(N)”.

⁴¹ Indicated with “(Lex)” and underlined.

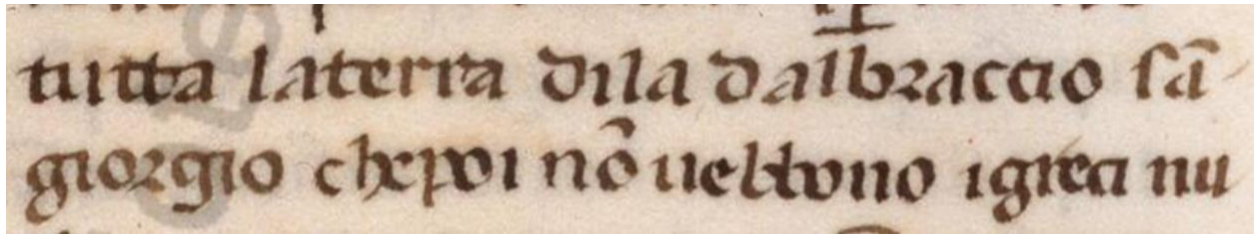


Figure 5: Manuscript - Chig.L.VIII.296, 1341-48, 309r. Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.

Of course, an analysis of only two instances that mention the “braccio (di) san Giorgio” is not enough to establish whether the omission or the inclusion of the preposition “di” retains an allegorical value, or if it is simply, for instance, due to a copyist’s choice, or because both forms (with and without the preposition) were used. For these reasons, only a much wider paleographical cross-comparison among different 14th century manuscripts could provide trustworthy data which could help us conjecture that Boccaccio’s “braccio di san Giorgio” is an oblique reference to the saint’s relic.

In addition to the geographical reference behind “il braccio di san Giorgio,” we might also wonder if the relic of St. George’s arm was somehow relevant and discussed in the late Middle Ages and thus speculate on the possibility that it could be a source of inspiration for Boccaccio. There are several episodes (and several arms) that resonated greatly between the 12th and the 14th centuries. For instance, an arm of St. George seems to be a donation that Robert II, Count of Flanders brought to Ferrara in 1110 as a gift to Matilda of Canossa (Guarini). *La Gran Contessa* then gave the arm to the new cathedral in Ferrara which was dedicated to the saint in 1115,⁴² and in 1388 we have evidence that a silver artistic reliquary was commissioned by Bishop Marcapesi (Guarini). There is evidence that in the 13th century, an arm of St. George was

⁴² The engraving in the cathedral is considered by many scholars as the first poetic Italian inscription (“Il mille cento trenta cinque nato / fo questo templo a san Giorgio donato / da Glielmo ciptadin per so amore / et ne fo l’opra Nicolao scoltore”; Bertoni; Pistarino).

guarded by the “Abbate di san Giorgio di Fiore in Calabria” (Carnaro 479). Carnaro recounts that, “Per togliere però agl’insulti, ed alla profanazione di quegli empì [alcuni Barbari Corsari⁴³] un Braccio del glorioso San Giorgio, che ivi custodivasi, il divoto Nobile lo rapì, e con esso trasferissi a Venezia” (479). As I will expand upon in Chapter Three, the need to hide relics – and to mention this concealment in chronicles and hagiographic texts – is very common. Another accompanying element that Carnaro incorporates is the troubled journey of St. Mark’s *translatio* with a joyful ending.⁴⁴ Once in Venice, the sacred arm was acclaimed in a public ceremony and preserved in the Church of San Giorgio Maggiore. Carnaro adds other details about the arm, such as that it still maintains the hand with the fingers,⁴⁵ two inscriptions (one dated 1255 and the other 1296), and a solemn ceremony (in 1305) with the son of King Denis of Portugal. Speciale also mentions that in 1325, the reliquary of the arm in Venice received a luxurious and refined upgrade. Other historical documents report evidence of an arm of St. George’s which seems to be sent directly from Constantinople to Venice by the doge himself during the so-called siege and sacking of Constantinople, which occurred in the first years of the 13th century (Rohrbacher). What could be the same relic (of the supposed arm of St. George) was brought from the Holy Land to Brindisi⁴⁶ at the end of the 12th century (Guzzo et al.).

Despite all that, any statement that speculates on Boccaccio referring to one of these relics would clearly be too hazardous. Nevertheless, if we discount the desire to find a precise

⁴³ A *topos* very popular in both chronicles and hagiographical texts

⁴⁴ “... preservato miracolosamente da Dio nel suo viaggio in tal maniera, che gli assassini, ne’ quali sfortunatamente incontrò, levato avendogli il soldo illese gli lasciarono la libertà, e la vita, nè punto si avvidero del più prezioso Tesoro, che seco portava” (479).

⁴⁵ This very common kind of clarification about the level of preservation and corruption of the flesh might have inspired Boccaccio when he writes, “Egli primieramente mi mostrò il dito dello Spirito santo così intero e saldo come fu mai.”

⁴⁶ A city in Apulia in the Southeastern part of Italy which was a travel hub for those journeying from the Italian peninsula to the Holy Land. The relic of St. George is now preserved at the Museo Diocesano “Giovanni Tarantini” in Brindisi.

reference at all costs, we can register that the narration of St. George's arm was significantly discussed in several texts from hagiography to chronicles, thus being the subject of what we could call substantial media coverage. Therefore, even if we will probably never know whether Boccaccio had these relics in mind when he was writing the tale of Frate Cipolla, it is worth mentioning that citing the arm of a saint in a tale about relics should require more sensitivity towards a study that involves the sacred matter. Moreover, though we cannot state whether Boccaccio used the preposition "di" to accentuate the reference to the arm of St. George, it is still worth highlighting Boccaccio's narrative mastery in mentioning the name of an actual relic to indicate a geographical place that was crucial to the history of the relics trade in a tale that talks about relics. In other words, by using "il braccio di san Giorgio," Boccaccio might have found a perfect way to simultaneously evoke relics and indicate that geographical area which was a protagonist in the narration of the relics trade.

2.6 THE RELICS OF FRATE CIPOLLA: THE RISKS OF CONSIDERING HIS RELICS AS MERELY RHETORICAL TWISTS

In general, to properly understand a parody, it is fundamental to have enough elements to comprehend the parodied element. Therefore, to appropriately comprehend Boccaccio's parody in *Decameron* VI, 10, we need to learn more about relics. Accordingly, I hope that a study like mine – which contemplates a constant dialogue between novellas and the cult of relics, adding features from other fields of study, such as theology, sociology, and religion – will contribute to a slightly richer understanding of these literary works. Simultaneously, it is also vital to document the valuable information that these oeuvres have to offer in order to better understand such cult.

By overlooking a much deeper historical and theological connection to relics, a cult that – as we will see – Boccaccio seems to know very well, we run into a likely incoherent textual analysis. This is because many studies on this tale almost exclusively focus on analyzing Frate Cipolla's rhetorical skills within the tale, forgetting that the topic under analysis is actually the sacred matter. By neglecting to include such an angle, even eminent *Boccaccisti* arrive at inaccurate conclusions. For instance, Hollander writes that,

The struggle faced by Cipolla is to turn the *carboni*, left him in place of the parrot's feather by his inimical friends, into spiritualized relics for the multitude. If a parrot's feather is, by comparison, fairly easy to pass off to the gullible as angelic, to make *carboni* seem sacral objects involves greater sleight of mind. (50)

From a perspective that is aware of all the mechanisms of this cult, as Boccaccio displays on many occasions, such an assumption is simply wrong. As a matter of fact, Frate Cipolla can more easily and effectively turn random coal into a relic as, in the narration of this cult, such an item has a solid history that includes its correlation to St. Lawrence's martyrdom. Indeed, as Philippe Lauer shows in his *Le trésor du Sancta Sanctorum*, the coal of St. Lawrence is actually a legitimate relic. The scholar mentions a 12th century description of the *Ecclesia Sancti Laurentii in palatio* (which is located inside the complex of the Lateran Basilica) by Johannes Diaconus who writes, "In tertio vero sunt carbones aspersi de sanguine sancti Laurencii, et arvina corporis ejus" (29). This coal/relic will be also mentioned later, in the 16th century, by the erudite Augustinian Onuphrius Panvinus (1529 - 1568), and by Cesare Rasponi in the 17th century in his *De Basilica Et Patriarchio Lateranensi*. Furthermore, it seems appropriate to highlight that coal is also used in other Christian practices, such as in many local festivals, mostly in honor to the patron saints. An emblematic example is the festivity in honor of St. Anthony which takes place

in Castel di Sangro.⁴⁷ De Nino explicates that, during the celebrations, “si fa il fuoco avanti la chiesa; il prete lo benedice e tutti se ne pigliano una reliquia, carbone o tizzone, che recano nei focolari domestici” (183⁴⁸). These digressions serve to better understand that, first, Frate Cipolla’s attempt to fool the crowd had a solid religious background because coal, especially that which burned St. Lawrence, claims a long tradition in the cult of relics. Second, the example from Abruzzo is extrapolated from a series of practices in honor of St. Anthony. Given that, we could also advance the hypothesis that the coal is also a reference to St. Anthony’s fire, which is notoriously the major symbol of both the saint and his religious order with which Frate Cipolla is affiliated.⁴⁹

Moreover, we must consider that in Frate Cipolla’s list of relics, which includes rays of a star, phials of sound and the perspiration of an intangible angel, etc., the coal of St. Lawrence is paradoxically one of the few relics that do not have sensorial inconsistencies. Hence, we can agree that, to some extent, the only relics which have (theo)logical grounding in the tale are: the coal of St. Lawrence, “l’un de’ zoccoli di San Gherardo da Villamagna,” and “uno de’ denti della Santa Croce” (and I will also add the reference to the “Braccio di San Giorgio”). So far, we have seen that the coal of St. Lawrence is an actual relic. Likewise, as Branca points out in his footnotes,⁵⁰ “San Gherardo di Villamagna (1174-1267)” was a legitimate saint (“fu dei più antichi francescani, forse accolto direttamente da san Francesco nell’Ordine”) who was depicted

⁴⁷ In the region of Abruzzo in Central Italy.

⁴⁸ Note 1.

⁴⁹ A saint and an order that is highly commented on and recalled throughout *Decameron* VI, 10.

⁵⁰ Nota 3 page 772.

with his clogs (“era rappresentato, per es. in Santa Croce, con gli zoccoli”). Given that, we can state that the clogs of a venerated saint can be considered as a legitimate relic.⁵¹

Finally, the relic – among those mentioned in Frate Cipolla’s list – that is more widely recognized and venerated is “uno de’ denti della Santa Croce.” We have no doubts that this type of relic was extremely popular. As a matter of fact, not only does it have its own type of reliquary (called *Staurotèca*, or *staurotheke*), but also Calvin dedicated a section to it in his *A Treatise on Relics* to it, writing,

Now let us consider how many relics of the true cross there are in the world. An account of those merely with which I am acquainted would fill a whole volume, for there is not a church, from a cathedral to the most miserable abbey or parish church, that does not contain a piece. Large splinters of it are preserved in various places, as for instance in the Holy Chapel at Paris, whilst at Rome they show a crucifix of considerable size made entirely, they say, from this wood. In short, if we were to collect all these pieces of the true cross exhibited in various parts, they would form a whole ship's cargo. (173)

Aside from the exactness of this parodical calculation,⁵² these highly emblematic words immediately render that this type of relic was familiar to everyone, especially in France and Italy. Without delving further into the analysis of these *ex lignum Crucis D.N.J.C.* relics,⁵³ when we read “uno de’ denti della Santa Croce” we perceive that Frate Cipolla might have made a double reference to relics. Indeed, in the name of this relic, we have the combination of two very popular and legitimate types of relics – a fragment of the Holy Cross and a tooth – which

⁵¹ Since this image was depicted in a fresco in Santa Croce, Usher suggests that this could be part of Frate Cipolla’s “mnemonic ‘pilgrimage’” around Florence (334).

⁵² Rohault de Fleury in his *Mémoire sur les instruments de la Passion* (1870) proposes a meticulous calculation that would discredit Calvin’s statement.

⁵³ For a more complete study on this subject, please see Chiara Mercuri’s work *La Vera Croce*.

apparently, once combined, lose their (theo)logical sense. Usher tries to explain that all the relics are somehow connected and the sequence in which the friar mentions them it is as important as these relics *per se* (329). In this direction, talking about “uno de’ denti della Santa Croce,” Usher states that, “Clearly this links back to the jawbone, the last of the previous series, but it also links back via the idea of the cross to the seraphic vision of St Francis, of the crucified man who announces the saint’s stigmata” (A *Récit*... 334). This hypothesis on the “dente” being in dialogue with the “mascella” is both fascinating and convincing. Nonetheless, I believe that the critical debate, aside from Usher’s attempt, has never produced a closer analysis of Frate Cipolla’s relics through an extensive theological, religious, and hagiographical perspective. Even Usher, seems to be legitimately focused on highlighting Boccaccio’s exceptional rhetorical skills in the construction of Frate Cipolla’s speech, trying to underline the well-arranged sequence of relics. On the one hand, this is undeniable, and all should recognize and comment on Boccaccio’s mastery in creating such a character and such a rich *Récit du discours*.

On the other hand, this constant, almost exclusive, focus deprives our reading of this tale from grasping some peculiarity regarding the cult of relics and Boccaccio’s knowledge of such religious practice. For instance, by exclusively highlighting that the “dente,” the “mascella,” and the fragment of the Holy Cross are a series of *internal* references within the tale, we move away from realizing what these relics represent for Boccaccio and his society on a non-fictional level. The tooth as a relic was mentioned in a myriad of inventories throughout the Middle Ages and, as for the case of the Holy Cross fragments, we should also consider that Boccaccio might have selected these specific relics to stress, mock, and condemn its abundancy as a clear symptom of fabrication and speculation on these sacred items. In addition, in this analysis we should, to an extent, somehow also consider that the word “dente” could also denote, by extension, the various

objects that recall the shape of the teeth or have some analogy with them. In particular, its diminutive form “dentello” was introduced in the 14th century and can be referred to as a “Piccola sporgenza, o irregolarità del margine o del profilo di un oggetto, di forma simile a un dente” (TLIO). Accordingly, a piece of wood or a splinter might recall this secondary meaning, making “uno de’ denti della Santa Croce” a legitimate relic also on a non-fictional level. Accordingly, to make “uno de’ denti della Santa Croce” seem like a sacral object, just like in the case of the coal of St. Lawrence, Boccaccio did not require a “greater sleight of mind.” On the contrary, he could easily base his narrative on a very solid tradition of the cult of relics in which, as we have seen, both the coal of St Lawrence and the “dente” of the Holy Cross are undiscussed protagonists.

2.6.1 The Relics of Frate Cipolla: A Contaminated List

Frate Cipolla’s list of relics deserves a much greater scholarly effort that contemplates a constant dialogue with the actual mechanisms of the cult of relics. Usher, in his *Frate Cipolla's ars praedicandi or a "récit du discours,"* was one of the few scholars who tried to decipher some of the references that Boccaccio includes in this tale. For instance, as I briefly mentioned, he highlights the importance “to observe not only *what* he lists but also the relational *sequence* in which he lists them” (329). Despite being a fascinating and well-supported hypothesis made by an eminent scholar, the limit of this proposition is that its premises are always self-referenced within the same tale, and almost completely ignore *what* these relics mean for a 14th century audience. In other words, it is also worth analyzing them as an actual list of relics.

In this direction, I will attempt to provide a parallel between the list of relics mentioned by Frate Cipolla in *Decameron* VI, 10 and a list of relics that we find in other sources, highlighting the *contaminationes* among these genres. As we have seen in the first part of this chapter, besides hagiography, *exempla*, and *sermones*, this contamination among genres also involved chronicles. The purpose of this juxtaposition is duple. On the one hand, one goal is to provide a concrete example that shows the liquidity among genres when narrating the cult of relics. On the other hand, this analysis will help us better appreciate the fact that Boccaccio's parody of relics is imbued with theological and historical knowledge about the cult of relics, and not just an entertaining list of items organized in a self-referential order.

The text that I will juxtapose against Boccaccio's tale is an extract from the chronicles of two French historians,⁵⁴ namely Rigord (c.1150 - 1207) and William the Breton (c.1165 - c.1225). I will use an Italian translation⁵⁵ so that the morpho-syntactical similarities between these chronicles and Boccaccio's text will be more easily visible, and I will include the original text in Latin in my footnotes.⁵⁶ Despite the numerous similarities that we will see, this

⁵⁴ Who are best known for their biography of King Philip II Augustus of France (*Gesta Philippi Augusti*)

⁵⁵ Translation by Gasparo Gozzi (in *Storia Ecclesiastica di Monsignore Claudio Fleury continuata dal P. Fabre tradotta dal francese da Gasparo Gozzi*, Volume 37).

⁵⁶ 145. - Anno Domini MCCV, Philippus rex Francorum in pignus caritatis et dilectionis ecclesie Beati Dionysii Areopagite contulit pretiosissimas reliquias, quas Balduinus imperator Constantinopolitanus de sancta capella imperatorum, quam *Os Leonis* vocant, cum timore et reverentia premissis jejuniis et orationibus acceperat, scilicet de sancta cruce, in qua salvator mundi pependit, ad quantitatem unius pedis in longum, in grossum quantum aliquis claudere manu potest, juncto pollicis indice; de capillis domini nostri Jesu Christi pueri; de spinea corona Domini spinam unam; costam unam sancti Philippi apostoli cum uno dente ipsius; de panno lineo albo in quo involutus fuit Salvator in presepio; de purpureo indumento ipsius. Crux, in vase aureo cum gemmis pretiosis ornato posita est, ad quantitatem ejus facto; alie reliquie predictae posite habentur in alio vase aureo. Omnes reliquias predictas christianissimus rex Francorum I Henrico abbati Beati Dionysii propria manu Parisius tradidit, VII idus junii. (*Œuvres de Rigord et de Guillaume le Breton, historiens de Philippe-Auguste: Philippide de Guillaume le Breton*. Librairie Renouard, H. Loones, successeur, 1885).

juxtaposition is not intended to be an attempt to find a hypothetical source for Frate Cipolla's relics. In the two texts we read,⁵⁷

Rigord and Guillaume's Chronicles

(i) Balduino conte di Fiandra divenuto imperadore, mandò a Filippo Augusto re di Francia (ii) molte reliquie tratte dalla santa cappella del gran palagio di Costantinopoli, chiamato allora *Boucoleon*; cioè (iii) un pezzo della vera croce lungo un piede, (iv) de' capelli di Gesù Cristo fanciullo, una spina della sua corona, (v) del pannolino in cui fu avvolto nel presepio, (v) della sua veste di porpora, e (vi) una costa e (vii) un dente dell'apostolo san Filippo. (viii) Il re diede quelle reliquie di sua propria mano (i) ad Enrico abate di san Remigio a Parigi nel settimo giorno di giugno 1205.

Decameron VI, 10

E quivi trovai (i) il venerabile padre messer Nonmiblasmete Sevoipiace, ... volle che io vedessi (ii) tutte le sante reliquie le quali egli appresso di sé aveva ... Egli primieramente mi mostrò il dito dello Spirito Santo così intero e saldo come fu mai, e (iv) il ciuffetto del serafino che apparve a san Francesco, e una dell'unghie de 'Gherubini, e (vi) una delle coste del Verbum-caro-fatti-alle-finestre, e (v) 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 diavole, e la mascella della Morte di san Lazzaro e altre ... e donommi (vii) uno de 'denti della (iii) santa Croce, e in una ampolletta alquanto del suono delle campane del tempio di Salomone e la penna dell'agnol Gabriello, della quale già detto v'ho, e l'un de 'zoccoli di san Gherardo da Villamagna, (i) il quale io, non ha molto, a Firenze donai a Gherardo de 'Bonsi, il quale in lui ha grandissima divozione: (i) e diedemi de '

⁵⁷ Since the original text already had its own italics, I ordered the parts that I wish to highlight with Roman numerals to facilitate the reading and avoid confusion.

carboni co 'quali fu il beatissimo martire san
Lorenzo arrostito;

...

mi pare esser certo che volontà sia stata di Dio
e (viii) che Egli stesso la cassetta de 'carboni
ponesse nelle mie mani ...

In this parallel, without particular effort, we can notice that Frate Cipolla presents his list of relics in a manner that resembles that of the *cronisti* Rigord and Guillaume in their chronicles. The elements that I would like to highlight concern both the way in which the list is presented and the relics, themselves. Points *i* and *ii* (which I will discuss in greater detail later in this chapter) concern the fundamental element of providing an authorial figure who owns a great number of relics⁵⁸ and that – “*in pignus caritatis et dilectionis*” – he gives them as a gift. In the chronicles, we read that Baldwin I (1172 – c. 1205), the first emperor of the Latin Empire of Constantinople, gives some relics to Philip II Augustus (1165-1223), and that the same Philip gives them to an abbot of St. Remigius in Paris. In Boccaccio's novella, we also encounter this element in a parodied form. Indeed, Frate Cipolla first receives the relics from a certain “venerabile padre messer Nonmiblasmete Sevoipiace,” and then he gives one of them (“l'un de' zoccoli di san Gherardo da Villamagna”) to Gherardo de' Bonsi, who then gives the supposed coal of St. Lawrence to the friar.

⁵⁸ Often referred to with hyperbole.

I would like to briefly focus on the aforementioned “venerabile padre messer Nonmiblasmete Sevoipiace,” as this name seems particularly flashy and certainly deserves a deeper analysis. Branca in his footnotes⁵⁹ writes that it is literally, “*non mi biasimate per favore*,” and then citing Zingarelli he adds that, “Pare riduzione del fr. *Nemeblasmez Sevosplait* (in forma antica), perché *blasmete* è francese e fa pensare alla rima; e *se voi piace* è francese: detto in questa lingua meno avrebbe dato sospetto agli uditori.” In addition, Branca points out that, “Il nome è formato su quelli dei personaggi allegorici per es. nel *Roman de la Rose*, nel *Fiore*, nel *Tesoretto* ecc.” It is intriguing to register that the authoritative figure who supposedly gives Frate Cipolla the relics has a strong French connotation, as undoubtedly Philip Augustus – king of France – and his ally Baldwin I certainly do. Furthermore, these two figures are two undisputed protagonists of the Crusades, which, as mentioned multiple times, can be considered the highest and most controversial peak of the relics trade.

Taking this aspect into consideration, one can speculate about the possibility that Boccaccio uses a French-like name not merely because it rhymes or because it makes the audience less suspicious, but also as a subtle reference. After all, it would not certainly be the first time in which an Italian author condemned French figures and their relationship with relics. For instance, though his chronicles are notoriously about the history of Florence, Giovanni Villani in chapter XCII⁶⁰ dedicates a parenthetical notation (of which we can consider foreign affairs⁶¹) to ferociously attack the French king and people. In this chapter, Villani narrates of times when, in France, Templars were burned alive in public (“LVI de’ detti Tempieri fece legare ciascuno a uno palo, e cominciare a mettere loro il fuoco da’ piè e a le gambe a poco a

⁵⁹ Note 1, page 771.

⁶⁰ Book nine.

⁶¹ “Lasceremo de’ fatti di Francia, e torneremo a’ nostri fatti d’Italia.” (XCII)

poco ...”). We can vividly perceive that Villani takes the side of the Templars, firstly because he defines this killing as martyrdom (“in su questo martorio confortati”), and secondly because he openly writes that they were innocent and Christians (“e con pianti e grida scusandosi com’erano innocenti e fedeli Cristiani, chiamando Cristo e santa Maria e gli altri santi, col detto martorio tutti ardendo e consumando finirono loro vita”). More importantly, to denote a certain (pre)judice towards the French people, we can observe that in the same chapter, Villani writes that the requests to capture and kill all the templars was not for religious reasons, but for profit (“ma più si dice che fu per trarre di loro molta moneta”). At the end of the chapter, Villani will again openly accuse the king of France and the French people of several shameful actions (“E lo re di Francia e’ suoi figliuoli ebbono poi molte vergogne e aversitadi, e per questo peccato, e per quello della presura di papa Bonifazio, come innanzi si farà menzione”). We should take into consideration that Boccaccio himself chooses France and French people as the place and society that turns an impostor (“ser Cepperello da Prato”) into a saint (“san Ciappelletto”) in a blink of an eye in the very first tale of the *Decameron*. Indeed, in the same tale, we can see that just like Giovanni Villani, Boccaccio explicitly mentions both the king of France and Pope Boniface (“...fratello del re di Francia, da papa Bonifazio addomandato ed al venir promosso ...” (*Decameron* I, 1)). Furthermore, we should also consider that the hostility towards French authorities might have increased in the 14th century on account of the controversial Avignon Papacy. As we know, Petrarch includes an explicit invective against Avignon in his *Canzoniere*, first in sonnet 114 - *De l’empia Babilonia, ond’è fuggita* – and then in the so-called “sonetti anti-avignonesi” (136, 137, and 138). Even Rubbi in his *Dissertazione sopra il corpo di San Marco*,⁶²

⁶² Of which I will discuss further in Chapter Three.

chapter “VI. Motivi per nascondere il corpo di S. Marco,”⁶³ reinforces the idea of this anti-French prejudice, specifically in relics-related episodes:

Sapeasi benissimo da' Savi uomini del Governo quanto ardore ed industria adoprassero i Francesi per procurarsi comunque corpi santi, ed insigni reliquie, e fra gli altri nel 653 tolsero a Monte Gassino i corpi di San Benedetto e Santa Scolastica, (i) che trasportarono nel loro Monastero di Fleury. (43)

Also,

Appena trasportato il Corpo di S. Marco in Venezia fu esso nascosto nelle pareti della Chiesa, e nel pilastro di San Leonardo per metterlo a coperto degli arbitri de' Membri del Governo, delle frequenti insurrezioni popolari, e massimamente della rapina francese. (Ibid., 129)

Rubbi's text should serve as only one of the many examples that we can find in which we discern prejudice against French people and their supposed greed for relics. Indeed, by using the adverb “massimamente,”⁶⁴ Rubbi emphasizes how the fear for *furta sacra* is especially perceived with regard to a French menace. Given all these reasons, we should be more than legitimated to think that the French allusion that we perceive when we read about “il venerabile padre messer Nonmiblasmete Sevoipiace” – the flashy name of an impostor – might be a subtle accusation against French authorities.

Focusing on point *viii* of the juxtaposition, we can see the way Boccaccio parodies a very common expression that *cronisti* and hagiographers use to remark on the relic's *authenticity*,

⁶³ “Reasons for hiding St. Mark's body” (my translation).

⁶⁴ “Above all/especially” (my translation).

which is the *hand*-delivery⁶⁵ between a given subject and an *authoritative* figure. In these chronicles, we can read that “Il re diede quelle reliquie di sua propria mano ad Enrico abate di san Remigio a Parigi nel settimo giorno di giugno 1205.” Interestingly, we can observe that Boccaccio, by writing “mi pare esser certo che volontà sia stata di Dio e che Egli stesso la cassetta de’ carboni ponesse nelle mie mani,” is parodying the very same idea of *authority* and *authenticity* of relics and their supposed *hand*-delivery. Frate Cipolla claims that the most *authoritative* figure – God, Himself – was the one who physically passed the reliquary to the friar. In addition to the issue of God’s (in)tangibility (which I discussed in greater detail in Chapter One), “mi pare esser certo” is beautifully used to push the parody of the supposed authoritative figures who *hand*-deliver the relics even further.

Finally, in this last part I will recap the fundamental similarities among the juxtaposed texts, specifically regarding the typology of different relics. As I mentioned multiple times in my work, Boccaccio plays with the (in)tangibility of some celestial figure such as God, the angels, etc. to the point that he pushes his parody even further when he mentions the supposed clothing of the Catholic Faith. Although these considerations are pivotal to understanding this tale, the purpose of this juxtaposition now is to offer the opportunity to scrutinize Frate Cipolla’s relics from a different angle, that is as a list of relics, and the specific kinds of relics it contains. As we have seen, many of the types of relics that the friar mentions are listed in a legitimate list of relics, like the one presented by Rigord and Guillaume in their chronicles. More specifically, in point *iii*, we can observe that both lists catalog a remarkably popular type of relic – *ex lignum Crucis D.N.J.C* (“un pezzo della vera croce lungo un piede” and “uno de’ denti della santa

⁶⁵ Of which I also discussed in Chapter One on the subject of Frate Cipolla’s reliquary.

Croce”) – which I have already discussed. Another relic type that both lists mention (in point iv) is *ex piliis* (“de' capelli di Gesù Cristo fanciullo” and “il ciuffetto del serafino che apparve a san Francesco”), that is a widespread relic, commonly a lock of hair or some beard and/or moustache of a given saint. Furthermore, both lists (point v) present relics *ex indumentis* (“del pannolino in cui fu [Cristo] avvolto nel presepio, della sua [di Cristo] veste di porpora” and “de' vestimenti della Santa Fé catolica”). Moreover, (in point vi) when in the chronicles we read “una costa e un dente dell'apostolo san Filippo,” we can perceive that Boccaccio, by mentioning “una delle coste del Verbum-caro-fatti-alle-finestre” is boldly mocking this exact *ex ossibus* type of relic. At first glance, in Frate Cipolla's list there is no relic that is an actual tooth, as we can find in the chronicles (point vii) when we read “un dente dell'apostolo san Filippo.” Nonetheless, though this remains an unverified conjecture, it is plausible to believe that when we read “uno de' denti della santa Croce,” Boccaccio might have used the word “denti” also as an oblique reference to this particular type of relic (in addition to the already-mentioned *ex lignum Crucis D.N.J.C.*).

As we have seen, the list of relics that Boccaccio provides in *Decameron* VI, 10 is not just a rhetorical effort, but it is indeed imbued with a fine knowledge of the cult of relics as it includes a wide range of legitimate types of relics. Furthermore, though the aim of my study was not to pinpoint an exact source for Frate Cipolla's relics, we have seen the extent to which Boccaccio's parodied narration of the cult of relics is significantly *contaminated* with elements that we have found in another type of narration of the same cult.

In conclusion, this series of juxtapositions helps us appreciate more Boccaccio's mastery in parodying the narration of the sacred with a language that is not just entertaining and hilarious, but also imbued with theological and historical knowledge of the cult of relics. Accordingly, it is important not to continue considering Frate Cipolla's speech merely as a rhetorical masterpiece,

as this would somehow lessen our perception of Boccaccio's profound knowledge and theological understanding of the cult of relics. As we have seen, the list of relics that he provides are obviously flashy and entertaining, but they are also considerably aware of the mechanism of such cult. Plus, it seems important to highlight that, as we have seen, Frate Cipolla's list of relics and the words that Boccaccio uses to narrate this tale are contaminated⁶⁶ with elements of different literary genres and forms, especially hagiography and chronicles.

In addition, we have seen that the portrayals of St. Ciappelletto (in *Decameron* I, 1) and St. Arrigo (in *Decameron* II, 1) reflect the new idea of sanctity that more closely follows the model of an *imitatio Christi* rather than depicting saints a *militia spiritualis*. Moreover, these two supposed saints seem to serve the text to illustrate that *vaghezza* with which devotees insatiably demand and obtain new saints who are closer and more accessible in time and space.

Finally, thanks to a specific reading of these novellas – which always consider the sacred aspects as pivotal – we have been able to perceive that Boccaccio, with his *operazione*, was able to parody (thus profane) many aspects of the cult of relics, including the overexcitement of the mob (the *calca*), the procession, the desire of devotees to physically reach the relic, and possibly obtain a piece of it (often a piece of clothing). In addition, as we see with the antithetical treatment that the bodies of Ser Cepparello and Martellino receive from the crowd, Boccaccio seems to have created a twist of tales in which the *Decameron* performs both as a parody text (as it mocks the cult of relics) and parodied text (as it mocks its own parody).

⁶⁶ And surely has contaminated and continues to contaminate other texts.

CHAPTER 3: THE BURIAL OF LORENZO IN *DECAMERON* IV, 5

Since the very beginning of his masterpiece, Boccaccio demonstrates his preoccupation with the degradation of the sacredness of funerals due to the dreadful circumstances of the plague¹ and, to contrast this phenomenon, he includes a series of meticulous burials such as that of Ciappelletto (I, 1), St. Arrigo (II, 1), Guiscardo (IV, 1), Andreuola (IV, 6)², etc. Among these, one of the most moving is certainly that of Lorenzo in tale IV, 5. This story is about two lovers, Lorenzo and Lisabetta, who cannot openly consummate their love because the woman's three brothers cannot accept their sister's (unapproved) affair with a modest man, and the brothers secretly murder Lorenzo when they learn of the relationship. The main focus of my analysis of

¹ Era usanza (sì come ancora oggi veggiamo usare) che le donne parenti e vicine nella casa del morto si ragunavano e quivi con quelle che più gli appartenevano piagnevano; e d'altra parte dinanzi alla casa del morto co' suoi prossimi si ragunavano i suoi vicini e altri cittadini assai, e secondo la qualità del morto vi veniva il chericato; ed egli sopra gli omeri sé suoi pari, con funeral pompa di cera e di canti, alla chiesa da lui prima eletta anzi la morte n'era portato. Le quali cose, poi che a montar cominciò la ferocità della pestilenza tutto o in maggior parte quasi cessarono e altre nuove in lor luogo ne sopravvennero. ... Ed erano radi coloro, i corpi de' quali fosser più che da un diece o dodici de' suoi vicini alla chiesa acompagnati; li quali non gli orrevoli e cari cittadini sopra gli omeri portavano, ma una maniera di beccamorti sopravvenuti di minuta gente, che chiamar si facevan becchini, la quale questi servigi prezzolata faceva, sottentravano alla bara; e quella con frettolosi passi, non a quella chiesa che esso aveva anzi la morte disposto ma alla più vicina le più volte il portavano, dietro a quattro o a sei cherici con poco lume e tal fiata senza alcuno; li quali con l'aiuto de' detti becchini, senza faticarsi in troppo lungo ufficio o solenne, in qualunque sepoltura disoccupata trovavano più tosto il mettevano.

It had been, as to-day it still is, the custom for the women that were neighbours and of kin to the deceased to gather in his house with the women that were most closely connected with him, to wail with them in common, while on the other hand his male kinsfolk and neighbours, with not a few of the other citizens, and a due proportion of the clergy according to his quality, assembled without, in front of the house, to receive the corpse; and so the dead man was borne on the shoulders of his peers, with funeral pomp of taper and dirge, to the church selected by him before his death. Which rites, as the pestilence waxed in fury, were either in whole or in great part disused, and gave way to others of a novel order. ... Few also there were whose bodies were attended to the church by more than ten or twelve of their neighbours, and those not the honourable and respected citizens; but a sort of corpse-carriers drawn from the baser ranks, who called themselves becchini and performed such offices for hire, would shoulder the bier, and with hurried steps carry it, not to the church of the dead man's choice, but to that which was nearest at hand, with four or six priests in front and a candle or two, or, perhaps, none; nor did the priests distress themselves with too long and solemn an office, but with the aid of the becchini hastily consigned the corpse to the first tomb which they found untenanted.

² This tale is particularly relevant because it offers a good amount of material for further studies on burial practices in the *Decameron* (and during the Plague in general); furthermore, it follows that of Lisabetta and Lorenzo.

this well-studied tale will be the particular preservation of Lorenzo's body that, I will argue, includes key characteristics which make use of ritual and narrative elements from the cult of saints.

As stated in Chapter Two, my study is not intended for an academic debate on literary genres *per se*, but rather as an attempt to examine how the Italian *novellisti* (and then *registi*) so freely incorporate the sacred body in their oeuvres in a profaned, yet not secularized, form. Accordingly, in this chapter I will work with a few emblematic examples in which specificities of hagiographic texts and the cult and preservation of relics are included in a secular tale.

It is certainly not a mystery that Boccaccio and many other authors, as we have seen, employ celestial figures, such as saints and angels, and their relics to construct tales that are designed around a *beffa* which is visibly – and purposely – hilarious. Nevertheless, we should not jump to the conclusion that an act of profanation can only occur in such a paradigm. As we know, the story of Lorenzo and Lisabetta is part of Day IV of the *Decameron*, a group of tales celebrated for their marked melancholic drive which is visibly juxtaposed against the mood of other tales, like that of Frate Cipolla (VI, 10).

As Delcorno points out, there is a distinction between *irony* (which is the “sovrapposizione di contesti semantici (il senso letterale e il senso allusivo)”³) and *parody* (which is the “sovrapposizione di contesti letterari (il testo parodiante e il testo parodiato)”⁴; “Ironia/Parodia” in *Lessico critico decameroniano* 163). Starting from this distinction, Barbera reminds us that, “Comprendere l'intento parodico di una novella del *Decameron* può essere

³ “Overlapping of semantic contexts (the literal sense and the allusive sense)” (my translation)

⁴ “Overlapping of literary contexts (the parodying text and the parodied text)” (my translation)

molto complesso, anche più complesso che individuarne il tono ironico”⁵ (103). Keeping these premises in mind, we will observe the numerous elements that Boccaccio parodies from the hagiographical tradition of various saints. Since the “*testo parodiante*” – which is a secular tale – molds the “*testo parodiato*” – which is the sacred narration of saints – we can conjecture that the *testo parodiante* is somehow a profaned version of the sacred text (and/or sacred practice). As we will see, the tradition of certain saints – such as St. Mark and St. Elizabeth – will appear more vivid compared to others. Nevertheless, the aim of my study is not to find a specific text to be claimed as Boccaccio’s supposed parodied source. My goal is mainly to highlight, once again, how this novellista builds a narration that apparently does not concern the sacred body by using elements which belong to the sacred sphere, playing with the boundaries between sacred and profane even in a non-*giocosa* novella.

This chapter will be divided into eight sections that analyze in depth those features of the tale that, I argue, remarkably evoke characteristics or episodes that belong to the cult of saints in the following order: Lisabetta and Lorenzo as Santa (E)Lisabetta and San Lorenzo (3.1); the practice of wrapping a body part and preserving it in a container (3.2); tears, pouring liquids into reliquaries, purification through water, fertility, and germination (3.3); the fragmentation of the body and the head (3.4); the features of St. Mark’s *inventio* and *translatio* in Lorenzo’s postmortem treatment (3.5); the odor (of sanctity; 3.6); the *visio in somniis* (3.7); and the concealing of the body (3.8).

⁵ “Understanding the parodic intent of a *Decameron* novella can be very complex, even more complex than identifying its ironic tone” (my translation).

3.1 LISABETTA AND LORENZO AS SANTA (E)LISABETTA AND SAN LORENZO

As I discussed in Chapter Two, there are many works that study the hagiographical elements of the *Decameron*. Most of these studies are focused on creating an archive with the most significant hagiographical episodes that are parodied in Boccaccio's oeuvre. Nonetheless, there is one study in particular that has the merit to openly juxtapose one character against a specific saint's hagiographical tradition (in a one-to-one analysis), and that is Rossana Feru Barbera's *La Fonte delle Lacrime di Elisabetta da Messina: Decameron 4:5*. Barbera writes that,

Con questo studio vorrei presentare una nuova fonte per la novella di Elisabetta da Messina e dimostrare che anche questa novella va inserita all'interno di un più vasto progetto parodico di riscrittura, di manipolazione e di stravolgimento di figure e argomenti religiosi, indipendentemente dal fatto che questa riscrittura muova al riso o al suo contrario, al pianto. (104)

An aspect which Barbera intends to research is the source of this tale. In the *Decameron*, we read that Filomena, who is the narrator of this story, ends the novella by saying, "Ma poi a certo tempo divenuta questa cosa manifesta a molti, fu alcuno che compuose quella canzone la quale ancora oggi si canta, cioè: / Quale esso fu lo malo cristiano, / che mi furò la grasta, ecc."⁶

(*Decameron* IV, 5). In the following tale, the narrator says, "Quella novella, che Filomena aveva detta, fu alle donne carissima, per ciò che assai volte avevano quella canzone udita cantare né mai avevan potuto, per domandarne, sapere qual si fosse la cagione per che fosse stata fatta" (*Decameron* IV, 6). According to Barbera, "Si tratta di un depistaggio intenzionale voluto

⁶ "Such was the end of her disastrous love; but not a few in course of time coming to know the truth of the affair, there was one that made the song that is still sung: to wit: A thief he was, I swear, A sorry Christian he, that took my basil of Salerno fair, etc."

dall'autore”⁷ (104), while for Forni, "Boccaccio's game of gloss entails a displacement: the focus is not on the sources of the story but on the story as source" (22). As Barbera reminds, “le fonti della storia di Elisabetta sono sempre state difficili da rintracciare e risultano ancora oggi non del tutto chiare”⁸ (104).

Barbera tries to answer this question about the source of the tale by looking closely at Lisabetta's tears. The scholar points out that, given Elisabetta's tears are “prive del loro più naturale e ovvio valore semantico”⁹ and that Boccaccio mentions them thirteen times in the tale, there must be a reason, such as a source. Although Barbera does an excellent job in finding a source for these tears, I highly disagree with considering Lisabetta's tears deprived of their semantic value, which is the sorrow for a beloved who just died. I still believe that any consideration or study on these tears should look for a complementary semantic value and not an alternative one, as I will try to do later in this chapter.

Barbera bases her work on a constant parallel between Boccaccio's tale and chapter 168 of the Jacopo da Varagine's *Legenda Aurea*. Barbera grounds her argument in a series of well-documented factors, and I will now present the ones that I find more compelling and relevant to my study. The first point that she mentions are, as we said, Lisabetta's tears. Both the hagiographical narration of St. Elizabeth and *Decameron* IV, 5 are full of occurrences. What is more intriguing is that Barbera found linguistic and thematic similarities between Boccaccio's

⁷ “Glad indeed were the ladies to have heard Filomena's story, for that, often though they had heard the song sung, they had never yet, for all their enquiries, been able to learn the occasion upon which it was made.”

⁸ “This is an intentional misdirection wanted by the author” (my translation).

⁹ “Deprived of their most natural and obvious semantic value” (my translation).

tale and the *Golden Legend*, especially the vernacular version.¹⁰ Below are a few examples that I find particularly convincing:

St. Elizabeth in *Leggenda Aurea*

Lisabetta in *Decameron* IV, 5

“Ne la quale contemplazione ebbe speciale
grazia di spandere lacrime, di vedere spesso
celestiali visioni”

“vendo costei molto pianto Lorenzo ... e
essendosi alla fine piagnendo addormentata,
Lorenzo l'apparve nel sonno”

“non mutando giammai il volto per piagnere”

“non cessando il pianto e le lagrime”

“*la notte si levava ispesse volte ad orazione ...
spesse volte gittava innanzi a lui abbondanza
di lagrime ... si che sempre con dolore
piagnea e del dolore s'allegrava.*” (Barbera’s
italics)

“*e assai volte la notte pietosamente il
chiamava e pregava che ne venisse; e alcuna
volta con molte lagrime ... si doleva senza
punto rallegrarsi.*” (Barbera’s italics)

With these few examples,¹¹ we can already perceive the extent to which these two narrations are in dialogue. Furthermore, with the last examples (“la notte...” / “e assai volte la notte...”) we could even conjecture that these stories are specular, as Boccaccio is depicting Lisabetta while praying and crying, just like the saint; but, contrarily to the saint, she will not find peace.

Boccaccio vividly mentions this aspect by juxtaposing that “del dolor s’allegrava” from *Leggenda Aurea* against his parodied version “si doleva senza punto rallegrarsi.” Once again, my use of the

¹⁰ I quote from the version that Barbera uses for her parallel, which is Beato Jacopo da Varagine. *Leggenda Aurea. Volgarizzamento toscano del trecento*. Vol.3. Firenze: Libreria Editrice Fiorentina, 1926.

¹¹ A small selection of the many Barbera proposes in her study.

word “parody” is to be intended as suggested by Delcorno, and my main goal is to investigate this new *testo parodiante* as a profaned version of the *testo parodiato*. Thus, my use of the term “parody” does not necessarily include any comical nuance. For instance, when Barbera points out that Lisabetta’s tears “pur essendo lacrime di dolore, diventano invece materia del progetto parodico del Boccaccio”¹² (114), she is implying a comical tone that I do not contemplate. In this direction, she makes her point clear when she writes that,

È qui, nello slittamento di tono dal drammatico al grottesco che Boccaccio col verbo “innaffiare” e con lo spostare l’attenzione di chi legge dal pianto alle doti superlative della pianta realizza il paradosso di un piangere che può quasi far ridere - non la protagonista di gioia, si intende, bensì il lettore — e raggiunge il climax della parodia deliberatamente voluta per questa novella. (114)

Although I agree that the image of Lisabetta watering the basil plays a fundamental role in Boccaccio’s parody (as I will explain in the section 3.3.1 *Pouring liquids into reliquaries*), my interpretation of Boccaccio’s new *testo parodiante* is drastically different from Barbera’s as I argue that Boccaccio’s parody is circumscribed in a touching atmosphere.

Another very compelling correlation between Lisabetta and St. Elizabeth that Barbera includes in her study concerns the decapitation and washing of a head. In detail, the two texts read as follows,

¹² “Although they are tears of pain, they instead become the subject of Boccaccio’s parodic project” (my translation)

“Un infermo di sozza paruta, *orribile per puzza del capo*, le si chinò *in sul proprio grembo*, *gli tagliò i capegli*, e lavò *quell'orribile capo* a la perfine, ridendo le sue ancelle” (Barbera’s italics)

“messala in grembo alla fante ... in uno asciugatoio inviluppata ... Con questa testa nella sua camera rinchiusesi, sopra di essa lungamente e amaramente pianse, tanto che tutta con le sue lagrime la lavò”

Barbera detects at least three major points shared by the two narrations that I will now summarize. First, though it is a more radical gesture in the *Decameron*, in both narrative passages the object of attention is a head on which a cut has been made. Plus, this act is followed by the good hygiene rules of washing. Later in this chapter, I would add that rather than mere “good hygiene,” the act of washing Lorenzo’s head with tears recalls a practice of the cult of relics and the sacrament of baptism as the quintessential act of purification. Second, both heads are in such condition as to negatively awaken the sense of sight and smell in the reader. The sick beggar in the *Leggenda Aurea* is filthy and has “un capo orribile”; plus, it is also “orribile per puzza.” Barbera explains that Lorenzo had previously appeared to his lover in a dream in bad shape. Plus, his head “è vista dapprima ‘non ancora sì consumata;’ poi è definita ‘corrotta,’ infine, ormai in fase di decomposizione, è riconoscibile solo per via della ‘capellatura crespa’”¹³

¹³ “It is first seen as ‘not yet so consumed’, then it is defined as ‘corrupted’, and finally, already in the process of decomposition, it is recognizable only because of the ‘crisp hair’” (my translation)

(111). The third point Barbera highlights is that during this cut, both Lisabetta and St. Elizabeth were not alone, but with their servants.

Another very captivating trail that would link these two women is the vision of Lisabetta as a possible sexualized version of St. Elizabeth. Barbera writes that,

È lecito pensare infatti che "il calore" che viene comunicato al giovane¹⁴ da Santa Elisabetta sia stato letto da Boccaccio sulla base di una suggestione metaforica, e sia stato rielaborato fantasticamente dunque non in termini di misticismo, quale certamente era l'intenzione di Jacopo da Varagine nel lodare i meriti della santa, ma di erotismo, secondo i canoni di un registro di comunicazione erotica diffuso nel Medioevo; (116-7)

I briefly mention this passage here as it offers a considerable point of connection between St. Elizabeth and Lisabetta. Nonetheless, I will analyze this aspect more deeply in Chapter Four, which includes a section that is entirely dedicated to the sexualization of the sacred body.

If Barbera analyzes the correspondences between St. Elizabeth and Lisabetta, of which I have only mentioned the most relevant to my study, in the case of Lorenzo and St. Lawrence the scholar provides only one major point, which is that both men were beheaded. Although the martyrdom of St. Lawrence (the same recalled by Boccaccio in the tale of Frate Cipolla (*Decameron* VI, 10)), is not achieved by decapitation, it is important to mention, as Barbera rightly does, that,

Anche la testa di San Lorenzo fu tagliata dal resto del corpo. Questo avvenne in seguito alle opere di restauro della basilica cimiteriale costantiniana di San Lorenzo al Verano fatte eseguire da papa Pelagio II (579-90), dopo il rinvenimento dei resti del santo ivi

¹⁴ Previously mentioned in Barbera (115) in a hagiographical episode of St. Elizabeth in the *Golden Legend*.

sepolto. Era stato stabilito dalla Chiesa durante il V e il VII secolo che per proteggere molte basiliche cimiteriali dall'essere depredate dalle feroci incursioni barbariche allora frequenti, si facessero trasferire le salme dei santi che li erano sepolti nelle chiese di Roma. A volte in occasione delle nuove sepolture varie parti del corpo dei santi venivano separate in modo da far venerare le loro reliquie in diversi luoghi di culto della città.

(118-9)

Barbera only briefly mentions that the head-relic of St. Lawrence was “Fatta trasportare dalla basilica di San Lorenzo al Verano a quella di San Lorenzo in Palatio,” and “fu portata, in epoca di alto Medioevo, al Laterano,” and then “infine trasferita alla sua ultima e attuale sede definitiva dove si trova tuttora, in Vaticano”¹⁵ (118). However, the scholar does not mention that these are multiple *translationes* experienced by St. Lawrence, just like Lorenzo’s head-relic in the tale. I will propose a thorough analysis of Lorenzo’s multiple *translationes* in sections 3.5 *Features of St. Mark’s inventio and translatio in Lorenzo’s postmortem treatment*, and 3.8 *The concealing of the body*. Although I will mainly draw a parallel between Lorenzo and St. Mark, as I mention in various occasions, I do not argue that Boccaccio in this tale uniquely refers to a specific saint, but rather to several hagiographical narrations, including that of St. Lawrence and St. Mark. As Branca and Degani brilliantly explain in *Studi Sugli «Exempla» e il «Decameron»*,¹⁶

Se si tien conto dell’eclettismo e della curiosità culturale che spingevano il Boccaccio ad assorbire e a contaminare varie tradizioni letterarie, difficilmente si può parlare, per i casi che abbiamo citato, di fonti. Parliamo, invece, di spunti, di suggerimenti e di suggestioni

¹⁵ “It was transported from the basilica of *San Lorenzo al Verano* to that of *San Lorenzo in Palatio*,” and, “it was taken, in the early Middle Ages, to the Lateran,” and then “finally transferred to its last and current permanent location where it is still located in the Vatican” (my translation)

¹⁶ Mostly talking about the exempla, but also about hagiographic sources.

che il nostro scrittore certamente sentì e trovò in una *figura sententiae* divenuta al suo tempo ormai un genere letterario, genere che su una mentalità e una fantasia narrativa esemplificatoria, quale quella dell'autore del Decameron, dovette esercitare un particolare fascino.¹⁷ (190)

In conclusion, we can state that Barbera's analysis shows a significant number of congruities between the hagiographical tradition of St. Elisabeth and the way in which Boccaccio portrays his Lisabetta da Messina. Although we would probably never know if Boccaccio purposely molded the character of Lisabetta as a profaned version of St. Elisabeth, it is undeniable that the likenesses between this tale and a hagiographic text are remarkable.

If for the case of (Santa E-)Lisabetta I find it hard to believe that all those congruities are merely coincidental, I maintain a more cautious approach for the case of Lorenzo. This is also due to the fact that the story of Lorenzo echoes the hagiographical narrations of many other saints and the blessed. Therefore, my analysis will not try to disprove the juxtaposition of St. Lawrence/Lorenzo, but rather will provide a picture in which this connection is part of a series of hagiographical episodes that demonstrates the extent to which Boccaccio plays with the boundaries between hagiography and novella.

¹⁷ If we take into account the eclecticism and cultural curiosity that prompted Boccaccio to absorb and contaminate various literary traditions, for the cases we have mentioned, it is difficult to speak of sources. Instead, we are talking about hints, clues and suggestions that our writer certainly felt and found in a *figura sententiae* which, at his time became a literary genre, a genre that on an exemplifying mentality and narrative fantasy, such as that of the author of the *Decameron*, he must have exercised a particular fascination. (My translation)

3.2 THE PRACTICE OF WRAPPING A BODY PART AND PRESERVING IT IN A CONTAINER

The first and most obvious similarity that links the treatment of Lorenzo's corpse and that of a relic is the fact that Lisabetta places a part of her beloved's body in a container. We can agree that this element evokes the image of a relic because this "testo"¹⁸ functions as an actual reliquary, as it is a container which preserves a piece of (holy) body. In the tale, we read,

Quivi con questa testa nella sua camera rinchiusasi, sopra essa lungamente e amaramente pianse, tanto che tutta con le sue lagrime la lavò, mille baci dandole in ogni parte.

Poi prese un grande e un bel testo, di questi nei quali si pianta la persa o il basilico, e dentro la vi mise fasciata in un bel drappo ... per usanza avea preso di sedersi sempre a questo testo vicina¹⁹

This fragment of the tale shows that Lisabetta guards and venerates this pot as if it were a reliquary. Even though it is true that standing and crying next to a dead body is a practice that we also perform for non-saint bodies, there are peculiarities of the treatment of Lorenzo's head that renders it sacred-like.

One of the ways to determine if Lorenzo's sepulture echoes that of a relic is to deconstruct the core elements of such cult and see if they are present in Boccaccio's tale. In order to list the major elements of this religious practice, we could observe, for instance, the way in which doctors of the Church report this rituality in their texts. One of the most famous

¹⁸ "pot"

¹⁹ "There she shut herself up in her room with the head, and kissed it a thousand times in every part, and wept long and bitterly over it, till she had bathed it in her tears. She then wrapped it in a piece of fine cloth, and set it in a large and beautiful pot of the sort in which marjoram or basil is planted, ... And 'twas her wont ever to sit beside this pot."

discussions on relics is surely the ferocious invective that Jerome, who constantly condemned the worship of relics, addresses *Contra Vigilantium*. We can consider Vigilantius' portrayal of the cult as the most basic, as he solely describes the act without adding any spiritual value to it. He states that, "We are observing the introduction, under the guise of religion, of something not very different from a pagan ritual. These people can be seen kissing and adoring little piles of some kind of dust in tiny bottles, wrapped up in precious cloth" (cited in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, 3a, 25, 6). After reading Vigilantius' description of the cult, we can now try to detect whether some of those features are also included in the preservation of Lorenzo's body in *Decameron* IV, 5. I would like to underline four specific elements that we can observe in Lisabetta's behavior. First, Boccaccio openly describes the "kissing and adoring" by writing "sopra essa lungamente e amaramente pianse, ... mille baci dandole in ogni parte." The second element is "some kind of dust" that in Vigilantius' portrayal is the actual relic²⁰ which, I argue, in the economy of Boccaccio's tale is represented by Lorenzo's head. Third, the dust that Vigilantius mentions is collected "in tiny bottles" that we can surely refer to as the reliquaries; and, as aforementioned, in this tale the *testo* functions as a reliquary.

The fourth element that I would like to highlight in Vigilantius' description, which deserves a longer digression, is the wrapping ("wrapped up in precious cloth"). This specific feature is present in this novella in two specific moments: first, when Lisabetta encounters Lorenzo's corpse for the first time, beheads him, and wraps his head in a cloth ("gli spiccò dallo 'mbusto la testa, e quella in uno asciugatoio involupata"²¹); and second, when she is about to place the head in the *testo* ("Poi prese un grande e un bel testo, di questi nei quali si pianta la

²⁰ Relics in the form of dust were and are very common; they can be the dust of a bone (*ex pulvere*), the ash in case the saint was burned (*ex cineribus*), or simply the ground of the Holy Land or the Calvary (*ex terra Calvarii*, etc.); in many cases these relics can even be the dust that touched a sacred body or another relic (*ex contactu*).

²¹ "[Lisabetta] severed the head from the trunk, and wrapped it in a napkin."

persa o il basilico, e dentro la vi mise fasciata in un bel drappo”²²). To narrate the treatment of Lorenzo’s body, Boccaccio highlights a sense of rituality that we perceive as radically in contrast with the lack of burials that the same author condemns in the *Introduction* of Day I. In addition, Lorenzo not only receives a burial that is above average during the plague, but he also seems to receive those scrupulous attentions that we normally observe in the treatment of a holy body.

It seems appropriate to underline that Boccaccio, in another tale which explicitly talks about relics (that of Frate Cipolla (VI, 10)), emphasizes how the relic was wrapped just as Lorenzo’s head was. In the tale of Lisabetta, he writes, “e dentro la vi mise fasciata in un bel drappo,” while in Frate Cipolla’s tale the narrator describes the scene by saying, “fu la bisaccia nella quale era la penna; la quale aperta, trovarono in un gran viluppo di zendado fasciata una piccola cassetina.”²³ It seems emblematic that Boccaccio uses the same word “fasciata” to describe the storage of an actual relic (even though clearly spurious) and that of Lorenzo’s head.

As we have seen in Chapter One, most likely in an attempt to make his relic look more authentic and to provide “gran solennità,”²⁴ Frate Cipolla wraps his relic²⁵ with a cloth, or more precisely “zendado,” which is a very fine drape or veil mostly made of silk. This element is mentioned twice in the tale: first, when the two young men replace the feather with the coal; and second, when the friar is about to present the relic to the crowd. Boccaccio is not the only novellista who mentions this element. Indeed, as we have seen in Chapter One, in the *Novellino* (IV) we also observe the wrapping of a relic with the same material (“rimossi i viluppi del

²² “She then wrapped it in a piece of fine cloth, and set it in a large and beautiful pot of the sort in which marjoram or basil is planted.”

²³ “And lit at once upon the wallet, in which was the feather. the wallet opened, they found, wrapt up in many folds of taffeta, a little casket.”

²⁴ “Great solemnity.”

²⁵ Then it will be later replaced.

zendado, e presa la reliquia”²⁶). Even more emblematic is the fact that, in tale IV of the *Novellino*, Masuccio Salernitano describes all the phases of the *invention* of a new relic. When Frate Girolamo obtains the arm of the knight and wishes to disguise it as St. Luke’s, we read that in order to not arouse suspicion (“per non dare indugio al fatto”), the friar deliberately wraps the relic in *zendado* before adding some scent and putting it all into a casket (“and posta messer lo frate la santa reliquia in più viluppi fasciata con zendado e soavi odori dentro una cassetta”²⁷). As we can see from these two examples, wrapping a relic is such a distinctive feature of this cult to the point that, in both tales, both friars use this characteristic to counterfeit their spurious relics.

Besides the evidences that we can read in these novelle, we can recognize this aspect in other sources. For instance, in the hagiographical narration of St. Mark’s first *inventio* in Alexandria, we can find a description of his body being wrapped. In testament to the relevance of this gesture, two astonishing mosaics in St. Mark’s Basilica portray the moment in which the Venetians “scoprono la tomba di san Marco e prelevano il corpo” and “lo avvolgono in un lenzuolo”²⁸ (Tramontin 67). Remarkably, even today, the *Istruzione della Congregazione delle Cause dei Santi su “Le reliquie nella Chiesa: Autenticità e Conservazione”* – a bulletin²⁹ in which the Vatican authorities designate the canonical procedure to verify the authenticity of relics and mortal remains and to ensure their conservation – mentions something about the fabric that is in contact with the relic. In article 15, we read that “Le reliquie o i resti mortali siano

²⁶ “he removed the wrappings of fine taffeta, and, having taken up the relic”; all translations of Masuccio Salernitano’s *Novellino* are from Masuccio, Salernitano, Ernest Richard Hughes, and William George WATERS. *The Novellino of Masuccio. Now First Translated Into English by WG Waters. Illustrated by ER Hughes*. FP. Lawrence & Bullen, 1895.

²⁷ “Sir Friar forthwith swathed the holy relic in divers wrappings fashioned out of fine taffeta, and placed it, together with certain sweetly-smelling gums, in a casket.”

²⁸ “They discover the tomb of St. Mark and take the body” and “wrap it in a sheet” (my translation)

²⁹ “Le reliquie nella Chiesa: Autenticità e Conservazione.” *Istruzione della Congregazione delle Cause dei Santi*, 16 Dec. 2017, press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2017/12/16/0905/01939.html. Accessed 23 May 2020.

deposti sopra un tavolo, coperto da un drappo decoroso,”³⁰ while in article 19 § 2, we read, “Se le reliquie o i resti mortali vengono avvolti in nuovi indumenti, questi, per quanto possibile, siano della stessa foggia di quelli precedenti.”³¹ The mention of a “drappo decoroso,” together with an explanation of the material properties of the clothing that should complement the relic in a fully-fledged legal document,³² demonstrates that marked attention to textiles is still as present now as it was in the cult described by Boccaccio and the other novellisti. More pertinent to my study, we see that the noticeable presence of the wrapping of the relic in the cult, both in tales and in official documents of Church authorities, supports the notion that Lisabetta’s wrapping of Lorenzo’s head is a parodied (thus profaned) version of the wrapping of a relic.

3.3 TEARS, POURING LIQUIDS INTO RELIQUARIES, PURIFICATION THROUGH WATER, FERTILITY, AND GERMINATION

One of the most iconic scenes that can represent *Decameron* IV, 5 is certainly Lisabetta crying. As we have seen, Barbera provides a reading of this repeated gesture that connects Lisabetta with the hagiographic narration of the homonymous saint, St. Elizabeth. Besides this very compelling and well-structured juxtaposition, there are other possible interpretations of Lisabetta’s tears that are worth analyzing.

First, I believe that we should not overlook the fact that these tears are those of a woman who just discovered that her brothers murdered her beloved. For this reason, I do not find

³⁰ “The relics or the mortal remains are placed on a table, covered with a decent cloth” (my translation).

³¹ “If the relics or mortal remains are wrapped in new clothing, these, as far as possible, are of the same fashion as the previous ones” (my translation)

³² Compiled by the prefect Cardinal Angelo Amato

convincing any attempt to that tries to discredit the emotional and empathetic aspect that such a tale effects in both the writer and the reader. For instance, Barbera states that,

Nonostante la tematica altamente drammatica, sembra che le lacrime di Elisabetta tuttavia abbiano la peculiarità di non commuovere o convincere nessuno, né gli altri personaggi — fratelli, lo stesso amante nel sogno — né tantomeno l'autore. Boccaccio anzi sembra aver posto fra sé e la protagonista una distanza e un'astrazione di sentimenti tale da privare il testo di una componente essenziale al dramma, l'elemento della compassione, come è stato rilevato in sede critica in questi ultimi anni (cfr. Forni 21³³)³⁴. (104-5)

Stating that Boccaccio deprives his own text of compassion seems a too hazardous conclusion which is also fairly impossible to empirically demonstrate. On the contrary, I would argue that saying the author deprives his text of compassion in relation to a woman who just lost her lover (and killed by her brothers, at that) would be too much of a paradox if we consider that the same Boccaccio begins his masterpiece with an emblematic and powerful “Umana cosa è aver compassione degli afflitti”³⁵ (Proemio).

A scholar who studied tears in the *Decameron* in depth is Nobili Sebastiana in her *Il senso delle lacrime. una teoria del pianto nel Decameron*. Nobili invites to interpret “il pianto

³³ Citing Forni, Pier Massimo. *Adventures in Speech: Rhetoric and Narration in Boccaccio's Decameron*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1996.

³⁴ “Despite the highly dramatic theme, it seems that, nevertheless, Elizabeth's tears have the peculiarity of not moving or convincing anyone, nor the other characters - brothers, the same lover in the dream – nor the author. On the contrary, Boccaccio seems to have placed between himself and the protagonist a distance and an abstraction of feelings such as to deprive the text of an essential component to the drama, the element of compassion, as has been pointed out in the critics in recent years” (my translation)

³⁵ Versione inglese

come dono offerta di natura religiosa”³⁶ (175), and that “L’idea delle lacrime come dono è centrale nel pensiero cristiano del Medioevo”³⁷ (174). The scholar concludes that,

Se dunque il *Decameron* registra con insistenza l’uso delle lacrime come dono, prima ancora che nella letteratura romanza il modello va cercato nella tradizione cristiana e in quella agiografica in particolare, la stessa che sta alla base della leggenda di Ciappelletto e delle sue (false) lacrime di penitenza. (Nobili 174)

This elucidation provides a solid theoretical ground that allows us to connect tears with Christianity, and, most importantly for this chapter, hagiography.

3.3.1 Pouring liquids into reliquaries

Although I have already discussed the crucial role of liquids in Chapter One (1.1 *Secretions, liquids, and non-body parts relics*), providing examples of relics in liquid form, in this section, I will instead analyze a peculiarity of the cult of relics that I believe is at the core of *Decameron* IV, 5, which is fluid that comes into contact with a relic. Talking about a “reliquary casket,” Norville points out that,

A bronze lock, hinges, and straps once held the gabled lid securely closed, leaving the small opening in the center of the roof-ridge as the only point of access for devotees. Through this opening, libations of highly aromatic oils would have been poured onto the relic contents, in offering to the martyrs. The ritual pouring out of oils, wine, water, liquor, blood, milk, and other fluids served an important role in many antique religious

³⁶ “weeping as an offered gift with a religious significance” (my translation)

³⁷ “The idea of tears as a gift is central to the Christian thought of the Middle Ages” (my translation)

practices and still persists in contemporary iterations. (in Hahn 24)

Brazinski and Fryxell also mention that “archaeologists have uncovered evidence of liquids in direct contact with the relic” (9), and that there are reliquaries with an inner box that contain the relics and an outer box that has “a central hole on top, allowing pilgrims to pour offerings of oil or water onto the inner box” (9). The scholars add that the contact relic-liquid would define the relic’s smell, and that reliquaries with their scent, “frequently became objects of veneration in their own right” (6).

Given all these notions on how fundamental and deep the connection between relics and fluids is, we can conjecture how this could assist our reading of Lisabetta’s tears which drop into the *testo* with Lorenzo’s head-relic. I argue that the image of Lisabetta crying on Lorenzo’s head is a rhetorical and theological masterpiece that Boccaccio creates to simultaneously depict the suffering of a woman, the watering of the basil, and the rituality of pouring fluids into reliquaries.

Boccaccio describes Lorenzo’s *translatio* in the pot with the passage,

Poi [Lisabetta] prese un grande e un bel testo, di questi ne’ quali si pianta la persa o il basilico, e dentro la vi mise fasciata [la testa di Lorenzo] in un bel drappo; e poi messavi su la terra, su vi piantò parecchi piedi di bellissimo basilico salernetano, e quegli da niuna altra acqua che o rosata o di fior d’aranci o delle sue lagrime non innaffiava giammai.³⁸

³⁸ She then wrapped it [Lorenzo’s head] in a piece of fine cloth, and set it in a large and beautiful pot of the sort in which marjoram or basil is planted, and covered it with earth, and therein planted some roots of the goodliest basil of Salerno, and drenched them only with her tears, or water perfumed with roses or orange-blossoms.

This beautiful passage is exceptionally dense with echoes of the cult of relics. If we consider the *testo* as a reliquary, we can speculate that Lisabetta pours into it not only her tears, but also water scented with roses and orange blossoms. It is undeniable that, besides the notoriously agreeable scent of basil, Lisabetta pours fragrant liquids into the *testo*-reliquary, and that these aromatic liquids – together with Lisabetta’s own tears – will come into contact with Lorenzo’s head-relic. In other words, when we read that reliquaries “not only housed relics but also allowed aromatic liquids to interact directly with the venerated objects, thus imbuing them with a distinctive smell” (Brazinski and Fryxell 3), we cannot ignore the fact that such a statement remarkably evokes the relationship between Lisabetta and the pot of basil/reliquary.

Finally, we could conclude that by fashioning an image in which a woman pours her tears and scented water into a pot with a head-relic, Boccaccio creates a profaned version of the sacred practice of pouring liquids into reliquaries.

3.3.2 Purifying water

Amongst the numerous references to religious elements that emphasize the sacredness of the treatment of Lorenzo’s burial in *Decameron* IV, 5, we can also include what seems to be purification through water. As we know, water in Christianity has always played an essential role in the religion as it serves the very first sacrament – baptism – that initiates the believer’s path towards salvation. Furthermore, the theological relevance of water can be attested in various scriptural episodes, such as the washing of the feet (John 13: 1-15). By keeping such rituality in mind, we can understand Lisabetta’s gesture through this perspective. Indeed, Boccaccio writes that Lisabetta, “sopra essa [la testa] lungamente e amaramente pianse, tanto che tutta con le sue

lagrime la lavò.”³⁹ Lisabetta’s tears stand out not only as an element that betrays her suffering (“con molte lagrime della sua lunga dimora si doleva”⁴⁰), but also as a purificatory constituent that prepares Lorenzo’s head to function as a purified relic.

3.3.3 *Vegetalia*, fertility, and germination in the cult of relics

It seems relevant to underline that the choice to associate the planting and growing of an exemplar of *vegetalia*⁴¹ – in this case the basil – with a sacred body has a strong theological connection. There are many examples in which theology⁴² is explained through nature, with exceptional emphasis on the metaphor of sowing and germinating, from the Bible to Bonaventure and his powerful image of the *Lignum Vitae*. For instance, we can observe that Augustine of Hippo in his *Confessiones* employs nature as an allegoric scheme to explicate his ideas. Alluding to Gen. 1:29, he writes, “Ecce dedisti nobis in escam omne faenum sativum seminans semen, quod est super omnem terram, et omne lignum, quod habet in se fructum seminis sativi” (XIII, 25, 38). In this case, Augustine’s statement essentially entwines two layers: theological (because in the constant dialogue with God) and natural (because his words are commenting the environment, specifically, the cultivation process in its steps, sowing and bearing fruit). Augustine not only uses this allegory as an elusive textual device but also, after a

³⁹ “wept long and bitterly over it, till she had bathed it in her tears.”

⁴⁰ “and bewailed his long tarrying with many a tear, and ever yearning for his return, languished in total dejection.”

⁴¹ I am using the term “*vegetalia*” broadly to refer to what the Aristotelian tradition would include in such a group; in particular to what Albertus Magnus (c. 1200 – 1280) includes in his “*De vegetabilibus et plantis*.”

⁴² This is not only referred to in Christian theology. Indeed, there are also other religious and anthropological resemblances between the imaginary of a head-relic and fertility. For instance, the cult of the god Osiris has plenty of similarities with Lorenzo’s postmortem treatment. Nonetheless, due to the nature of my work, I will limit my scrutiny to a very short mentioning of the main aspects that I believe are worthy of further study. First, the head of Osiris is one of the most, if not the most, important relics of Ancient Egypt. The tradition describes that this pivotal figure is not only the god of death, but also that of fertility and vegetation. Furthermore, he is vividly associated with the Nile River and the water that makes cultivation possible.

few lines, makes the apparatus of his metaphor explicit: “Dicebamus enim eis terrae fructibus significari et in allegoria figurari opera misericordiae, quae huius vitae necessitatibus exhibentur ex terra fructifera” (XIII, 25, 38).

Likewise, this connection is also present in the cult of St. Mark. Aquileia’s patriarch Paolino, a wise poet (Tramontin) who in the 8th century dedicates his poetry to St. Mark, singing, “Marcus beatus doctor evangelicus / sic a beato Petro issus adiit / Aquileiensem dudum famosissimam urbem sacrati verbi pullulantia / disseminavit ...” (in Tramontin 48). In these verses, we can observe a clear, and not uncommon, association between a holy figure (the evangelist, in this case) and the process of sowing. In addition, to further enrich this bond between the sacred and the *vegetalia* world, we can mention that in one of the miracles presented in Jacopo da Varazze’s *Legenda Aurea* (1260), in the section dedicated to St. Mark (LIX), we can identify a certain connection between the evangelist and the idea of fertility. In the well-known book of saints, we read,

Tutta la Puglia era colpita da una grande carestia e la pioggia non benediceva più quella terra. ... Gli abitanti invocarono allora il suo [di San Marco] aiuto e promisero che avrebbero festeggiato solennemente la sua festa: Marco allora li liberò dalla siccità e portò loro la fertilità, donando loro un’aria salubre e pioggia abbondante.⁴³

As we can observe here, even if less explicit than some of the other similarities contemplated, the narration of the evangelist encompasses the idea of fertility. Keeping this in mind, we may now enrich the reading of the tale of Lisabetta and Lorenzo. Boccaccio writes that, “Il basilico, sì per

⁴³ “All Apulia was hit by a great famine and the rain no longer blessed that land. ... The inhabitants then invoked his [San Marco's] help and promised that they would solemnly celebrate his feast: Marco then freed them from drought and brought them fertility, giving them healthy air and abundant rain” (my translation)

lo lungo e continuo studio, sì per la grassezza della terra procedente dalla testa corrotta che dentro v'era, divenne bellissimo e odorifero molto.” In this extract we can perceive that Lorenzo's “testa corrotta” functions as a fertilizer. Therefore, it seems that on the one hand, St. Mark is fertilizing the “terra” of Apulia, while on the other hand Lorenzo is fertilizing the “terra” in the pot of basil.

I would like to focus now on a specific aspect of several hagiographic narrations that, I argue, encompasses the tale of Lisabetta and Lorenzo, which is the germination of vegetal elements on top of holy bodies. As a matter of fact, the image of *vegetalia* literally growing from a (holy) corpse is not Boccaccio's invention. Indeed, there are several examples of *inventio* and *translatio* of holy figures that include this exact aspect. Intriguingly, we can observe many representative examples in Tuscany during the 14th century, a place and time undoubtedly significant for Boccaccio, who, we can speculate, was likely to be informed of such cases. The first example that I would like to propose is Blessed Francis Patrizi of Siena (1266-1328). In the *Leggenda* (1374), we can read that the beginning and the end of his life have the presence of a lily in common. When Francis' mother was about to give birth to her child, “sognò di partorire un giglio, col quale poi onorava un'Immagine della Madonna”⁴⁴ (Canali 202). Then, when he dies,

volendo la divina Provvidenza, che siccome la sua Vita era un vivo esemplare delle cristiane virtù, così fosse la morte una piena fonte di Miracoli, de 'quali però il più stupendo, che portò seco tutta la meraviglia de'Posterì, fu quando appena sepolto, si vide dal terreno, che copriva il sacro Corpo, uscire un bellissimo Giglio, nelle cui foglie

⁴⁴ “She dreamed of giving birth to a lily, with which she then honored an image of the Virgin” (my translation)

vedevasi impressa l'Ave Maria; e tanto più crebbe lo stupor, quanto fu osservato, che il

Giglio in quel sito germogliava, dove sotto il terreno era la bocca del Beato.⁴⁵ (Canali 81)

We can assume that this story must have been significantly popular in 14th century Tuscany because a lily germinated from Francis' body became a royal gift:

Il suo Santo Corpo fu messo nella Chiesa de'Servi in Siena in un'Arca di legno, e posta sopra l'Altar maggiore; dove uscì dalla sua bocca un giglio bellissimo subito che morì, il che udendo il Re di Francia mandati messi alla Repubblica di Siena, ed a quelli Reverendi Padri, con grate preghiere, l'ebbe in dono.⁴⁶ (Canali 222)

As we can see, in the *Leggenda*, the idea that the lily germinates right from the body of Blessed Francis is pervasive, from his birth to his *translatio*.

An evident similar case is that of Blessed Anthony Patrizi (1280-1311) from Monticiano.⁴⁷ The narration of his life and miracles talks about white lilies bloomed on his tomb, even in the coldest season, and the friars, taken by wonder at the miracle, disinterred his body and found it still intact with a lily coming out of his mouth. The devotion towards this Blessed must have risen right after his death, as the establishment of the "Company of the Blessed

⁴⁵ "wanting divine Providence, as death was a full source of Miracles, his Life was a living example of Christian virtues, of which, however, the most stupendous, which brought with it all the wonder of the posters, was when he was just buried, from the ground, which covered his sacred Body: a beautiful lily emerged, and Ave Maria was imprinted in its leaves. The more it was observed, the more the astonishment grew, that the Lily in that site sprouted, where under the ground was the mouth of the Blessed" (my translation)

⁴⁶ "His Holy Body was placed in the Church De'Servi in Siena in a wooden Ark and placed above the High Altar. Immediately after his death, a beautiful lily came out of his mouth. The King of France heard about it and sent heralds to the Republic of Siena, and to those Reverend Fathers; then, with grateful prayers, he received it as a gift." (my translation)

⁴⁷ In the province of Siena, Tuscany.

Sacrament of Blessed Anthony" in 1313 attests ("Traslazioni" in *Venerabile Compagnia del Santissimo Sacramento e del Beato Antonio Patrizi*).

Another analogous case is that of Blessed Ugolino Zefferini from Cortona.⁴⁸ In the *Relazione della solenne traslazione del corpo del beato Ugolino Zefferini cortonese*, we read that Ugolino's body is presented to the hectic crowd for adoration. The casket in which he is preserved is well-described in all its ornaments and details, including a little flying angel "che teneva in mano, e mostrava un giglio di argento, simbolo di quel giglio prodigioso"⁴⁹ (*Relazione della Solenne... XI*). Right after this sentence, we can find another explicit example of the image of a flower that germinates from a holy body: "dopo trenta anni dalla Sepultura del Beato [il giglio] spuntò al difuori dell'intatto suo corpo, dalla parte del cuore, ove aveva posto le sue radici"⁵⁰ (XI). As we can observe, the portrayal is clear, and explicitly includes a fundamental element of germination, the roots, which are described as attached to Blessed Ugolino's heart. This peculiarity of the lily which germinates from a holy body is neither observable only in Tuscany nor a male exclusivity. As a matter of fact, in the *Breve ristretto della vita e miracoli della beata Elena Enselmini, nob. padovana*, we can read that Blessed Helen Enselmini (1207–1231/1242) of Arcella⁵¹,

fosse da principio seppellita in terra, & è fama che avanti d'esser posta nella cassa, òpur sotterrata le uscisse un candidissimo Giglio di bocca. La traditione viene accreditata dalle immagini della medesima; nelle quali è dipinta con un Giglio in mano, come si scorge

⁴⁸ In the province of Arezzo, Tuscany.

⁴⁹ "which he held in his hand, and showed a silver lily, symbol of that prodigious lily" (my translation)

⁵⁰ "thirty years after the burial of the Blessed, [the lily] sprouted outside his intact body, from the part of the heart, where it had placed his roots" (my translation).

⁵¹ A district of Padua, Veneto.

nella Chiesa da lei intitolata all'Altare di San Basilio, & in altri luoghi del Monasterio.

Anzi di più scrive alcuno che questo Giglio fù portato nella Città di Verona.⁵² (58)

Again in this extract we encounter an example of a lily which germinates on top of a holy body, thus testifying that this idea of *vegetalia* growing from a sacred corpse was reasonably common.⁵³

Given all these examples, we need to assert whether this similarity between the basil growing atop Lorenzo's head and the lilies germinating on top of holy bodies is a sign of the assumed sanctity of Lorenzo. Accordingly, I would like to propose a reading in which Lorenzo is not the sacred element *per se*, but rather that his sepulture and the postmortem phase of his narration are sanctified. On the one hand, as we observe, the narration of the postmortem treatment of Lorenzo's body vividly resembles that of a saint or a blessed, since it also allows for an extraordinary germination on top of his body. When we read that the basil flourishes exceptionally well ("Il bassilico, ... divenne bellissimo e odorifero molto"⁵⁴), to the point that even Lisabetta's neighbors notice this extraordinariness ("più volte da' suoi vicini fu veduta. Li quali, maravigliandosi i fratelli della sua guasta bellezza"⁵⁵), we perceive that this basil and the pot in which it is planted are uncommon and somehow celestial.

⁵² "was initially buried in the ground, & it is known that before being placed in the casket, or even buried, a very white lily came out of her mouth. The tradition is accredited by her images in which she is painted with a Lily in her hand, as you can see in the Church she named after the Altar of San Basilio, & in other places in the Monastery. Indeed, more than someone writes that this lily was brought to the city of Verona" (my translation)

Another very powerful example of the growing of *vegetalia* from a relic is the well-known flowering rod of St. Joseph. Besides being part of the saint's iconography,⁵³ the media popularity of this relic is so high that we can find traces in the *Golden Legend*, in many popular legends, and in a beautiful mosaic, the "Marriage of the Virgin" by Cesare Nebbia (Circa 1350-90) inside the Orvieto Cathedral.

⁵⁴ "the basil burgeoned out in exceeding great beauty and fragrance"

⁵⁵ "the neighbours from time to time took note of it, and when her brothers marvelled to see her beauty ruined"

On the other hand, it is fundamental to remark that in the narrations of the four aforementioned holy figures (Blessed Francis, Anthony, Ugolino, and Helen), together with the miracle of the lily, each text underlines the fact that the respective bodies were found “incorrotto,”⁵⁶ while the tale in the *Decameron* the body of Lorenzo it is only at first. Boccaccio does not omit this detail; instead, he explicitly mentions that Lorenzo’s body, after a sacred sepulture, will be subjected to the corruption of the human flesh. From a theological perspective, the corruption of the human body is a heavily-discussed topic that we find not only in the Bible but also in literary works, including Dante’s *Commedia*. In the *Sacra Vulgata* we can read,

sic et resurrectio mortuorum. Seminatur in corruptione, surget in incorruptione. (I Corinthians 15: 42)

In momento, in ictu oculi, in novissima tuba: canet enim tuba, et mortui resurgent incorrupti: et nos immutabimur. (I Corinthians 15:52)

Oportet enim corruptibile hoc induere incorruptionem: et mortale hoc induere immortalitatem. (I Corinthians 15: 53)

Most importantly for this study, this element of the incorruptibility of a sacred body is present in many narrations of *inventio*.⁵⁷ Likewise, in the *Decameron*, when Lisabetta finds her beloved’s body after a dream, Boccaccio includes this very element, writing that, “ella trovò il corpo del suo misero amante in niuna cosa ancora guasto né corrotto: per che manifestamente conobbe essere stata vera la sua visione.”⁵⁸ Nonetheless, after Lorenzo’s beheading, when Lisabetta puts

⁵⁶ “uncorrupted” (my translation)

⁵⁷ For a detailed study on this subject, please see Fallica, Giuseppe. *Il Miracolo dei Corpi Incorrotti in 2000 anni di Storia della Chiesa*, Edizioni Segno, 2008.

⁵⁸ “she found the body of her hapless lover, whereon as yet there was no trace of corruption or decay; and thus she saw without any manner of doubt that her vision was true.”

his head in the pot and plants the basil – the moment that we can describe as Lorenzo’s first *translatio* – we read that, “Il basilico, sì per lo lungo e continuo studio, sì per la grassezza della terra procedente dalla testa corrotta che dentro v’era, divenne bellissimo e odorifero molto.”⁵⁹ As we can observe in these two subsequent moments, the head of Lorenzo from “incorrotta” becomes “corrotta.” In this case, it is true that Lorenzo’s head-relic is an element of fertility since it allows for an exceptionally prosperous growing of the basil, but it seems that it is the corruption of his flesh and bones that helps with the growth of the plant rather than his sacredness. If it seems clear now that Boccaccio gives Lorenzo’s burial a solemn nuance, providing many aspects that we can only find in hagiographical narrations, I argue that Boccaccio’s explicit use of the word “(in)corrotto” is essential to restrict the sacredness of Lorenzo’s death into a sort of hybrid sepulture that has both human and celestial elements.

Finally, as we observed in the practice of pouring liquids into reliquaries, we could conclude that by fashioning an image in which *vegetalia* succulently grows atop a corpse, Boccaccio is creating a profaned version of this specific hagiographical tradition.

3.4 THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE BODY AND THE HEAD

It seems appropriate now to further analyze the reasons why Lisabetta can only cry on Lorenzo’s head⁶⁰ and not his entire body. In the tale, Boccaccio makes this quite clear by writing,

⁵⁹ “Fostered with such constant, unremitting care, and nourished by the richness given to the soil by the decaying head that lay therein, the basil burgeoned out in exceeding great beauty and fragrance.”

⁶⁰ In addition, heads in the relic world can be observed not only as first-class relics, but also as the shape of a specific kind of reliquary. Speakman points out that, though the shape of these reliquaries might be an indication of their content, they sometimes enshrined a number of different relics. For instance, the Reliquary Head of St. Eustace

...se avesse potuto volentieri tutto il corpo n'avrebbe portato per dargli più convenevole sepoltura; ma, veggendo che ciò esser non poteva, con un coltello il meglio che potè gli spiccò dallo 'mbusto la testa, e quella in uno asciugatoio involuppata e la terra sopra l'altro corpo gittata ...⁶¹

Before considering all the issues that arise from the fragmentation of corpses into smaller parts, it is fundamental to briefly summarize the history of such practice. Originally, the portioning of martyrs' bodies was a huge controversy between Western and Eastern Christians. Bentley explains that, "Eastern Christians [were] willing to cut up and distribute their relics... [for them] the trade in relics was gathering peace. All this would have horrified fellow-Christians in the west" (91). A leading exemplar is a letter that Pope Gregory I (540-604) sent to the Empress Costantina when she requested the head of St. Paul while building a basilica dedicated to the saint,

Romanis consuetudo non est quando Sanctorum Reliquias dant, ut quidquam tangere praesumant de Corpore. Quidam Monachi Graeci huc ante biennium venientes (anno 592), nocturno silentio, juxta Ecclesiam S.Pauli corpora mortuorum, in campo jacentium

contains numerous relics, including those of Eucharius, first bishop of Trier; Nicolas, bishop of Myra; Benedict, abbot of Monte Cassino; and that of the Holy Virgin. In Hahn's *Strange Beauty*, the author dedicates a full chapter to "Body-Part Reliquaries: Head." In this chapter, Hahn discusses the peculiarities of this type of reliquary, mentioning that many of these head-shape reliquaries, or actual skulls of saints, were royal offerings (such as the reliquary of Saint Martin of Tours who was donated by Charles IV, King of France). The scholar also adds that these head-related relics and reliquaries were not new during the 13th and 14th centuries, and that there are a certain "number of examples in which skulls or other relics are extracted from a tomb to be encased in a dramatic head reliquary" (Hahn 119).

⁶¹ "And so, saddest of women, knowing that she might not bewail him there, she would gladly, if she could, have carried away the body and given it more honourable sepulture elsewhere; but as she might not so do, she took a knife, and, as best she could, severed the head from the trunk, and wrapped it in a napkin and laid it in the lap of her maid; and having covered the rest of the corpse with earth."

effodiebant, servants sibi. Qui . . . confessi sunt quod illa ossa ad Graeciam essent
tamquam Sanctorum reliquias portaturi. (Epist. Lib. IV. Ep. L.)

In this letter, we can see that the pope clearly censures the fragmentation of bodies, considering such practice far from his custom. Hence, it is now fundamental to understand why even if the leader of Christianity, who is also *Vicarius Christi*, in the 6th century disapproved of the exchange of relics and the fragmentation of bodies so explicitly, Western Christianity in the 14th century ended up more than welcoming such practice. As a matter of fact, we have a great number of testimonies that confirm the movement of relics to be common practice in the Middle Ages. Bentley points out that during the invasions of non-Christian populations, many clergy members, afraid of having their relics plundered, started to escape with them. The scholar adds that all this facilitated the breakdown of those “old taboos” concerned with the immorality of splitting or displacing saints’ bodies (Bentley 93).

Aside from the historical evidence, the fact that Boccaccio mentions relics and their movements from the Holy Land to the Italian peninsula (mostly in the tale of Frate Cipolla (VI, 10)) is also an indicator that this practice was not rare but rather commonplace. Accordingly, if for us, today, the act of decapitating a corpse to give the head a better sepulture seems at least bizarre, if not macabre, this practice – at least when involving the bodies of saints – was well accepted in the High Middle Ages. As a matter of fact, in the bulletin of the *Istruzione della Congregazione delle Cause dei Santi su “Le reliquie nella Chiesa: Autenticità e Conservazione,”* the Vatican representatives dedicate a full chapter (II) to the “prelievo di frammenti e confezione di reliquie.”⁶² Article 24 of this document openly states that, “Non è

⁶² “removal of fragments and packaging of relics” (my translation)

consentito lo smembramento del corpo, salvo che il Vescovo non abbia ottenuto il consenso della Congregazione delle Cause dei Santi per la confezione di reliquie insigni.”⁶³ According to this document, one of the cases in which it is still possible to fragment the body of a saint is,

Qualora sia imminente la canonizzazione di un Beato o la beatificazione di un Venerabile Servo di Dio, o per altri motivi giustificati nell’istanza di cui all’art. 3 § 1 della presente Istruzione, nel contesto di una legittima ricognizione canonica, si può procedere, su indicazioni del perito anatomico, al prelievo di alcune piccole parti o di frammenti, già separati dal corpo. (Article 21 § 1)⁶⁴

Given these instructions, it seems that, today, the Vatican allow the separation of a part of a saint’s body from the whole only in very exceptional instances. In addition, these parts must be very small pieces or fragments that are already separated from the body. On the contrary, in chapter 305 of the *Legenda Maior* (1393), we read that in 1383 Pope Urban VI granted Raymond of Capua permission to detach St. Catherine’s entire head from her body, which was in Rome, and to bring the head in question to the Basilica of St. Dominic in Siena. Consequently, we have a pope in the 6th century, Pope Gregory I, censuring the fragmentation of bodies; one in the 14th century, Pope Urban VI, who grants permission for the same practice (beheading the body of a saint); and finally a papacy in the 21st century, that of Pope Francis, which returns to the origin point and forbids the fragmentation as practiced in the first centuries of Western Christianity.

⁶³ “The dismemberment of the body is not allowed, unless the Bishop has obtained the consent of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints for the confection of distinguished relics” (my translation).

⁶⁴ “If the canonization of a Blessed or the beatification of a Venerable Servant of God is imminent, or for other justified reasons in the instance referred to in art. 3 § 1 of this Instruction, in the context of a legitimate canonical recognition, it is possible to proceed, on the indications of the anatomical expert, to the removal of some small parts or fragments, already separated from the body.” (my translation)

Accordingly, given the context in which Boccaccio wrote the *Decameron* (the 14th century and apex of the relics trade, to the point that even the pope allowed the fragmentation of saints' bodies), the beheading of Lorenzo could reasonably evoke that of a saint. As a matter of fact, heads as relics were not uncommon and have a long, authoritative tradition both in written texts and various artworks from the Bible to Baroque oeuvres.⁶⁵ Apart from the two examples of St. Paul and St. Catherine, we have a long list of relics in the form of head, such as the presumable multiple heads of St. John the Evangelist⁶⁶ and the head of St. Donatus of Arezzo,⁶⁷ not to mention the aforesaid head of the homonymous saint of Lorenzo, St. Lawrence.

Another well-known case of head-relic that might have stimulated Boccaccio's writing of the tale of Lorenzo's head might be found in St. Mark's hagiographical tradition.⁶⁸ Agostino Carli Rubbi, who writes a *Dissertazione sopra il corpo di San Marco, evangelista riposto nella*

⁶⁵ The depiction of beheading is very common, and we can find examples, such as that of St. John and Judith beheading Holofernes (Judith 13:7–8), which are so emblematic that artists of the caliber of Caravaggio and Gentileschi magnificently paint those scenes (Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (c.1598–1599); Caravaggio's *The Beheading of St John the Baptist* (1608); Caravaggio's *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist* (London; c.1607–1610); Caravaggio's *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist* (Madrid; c.1609); Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith slaying Holofernes* (1614–18)). The story of Judith and Holofernes is particularly interesting because in both paintings (Gentileschi's and Caravaggio's), the scene depicts three people: a male figure who is decapitated, a female figure that decapitates a male figure, and another female figure, the servant, who assists in the beheading. This image somehow recalls that of Lorenzo, Lisabetta, and her servant, "Poi la mattina levata, non avendo ardire di dire alcuna cosa a' fratelli, propose di volere andare al mostrato luogo e di vedere se ciò fosse vero che nel sonno l'era paruto. E avuta la licenza d'andare alquanto fuor della terra a diporto, in compagnia d'una che altra volta con loro era stata e tutti i suoi fatti sapeva, quanto più tosto poté là se n'andò ... ella trovò il corpo ... con un coltello il meglio che poté gli spiccò dallo 'mbusto la testa ..." The main difference between these two images is that Lisabetta does not kill the man and beheads Lorenzo when he is already dead in order to give him a better sepulture and have a relic of her beloved.

⁶⁶ See the study of Oliviero Iozzi, *Le insigni reliquie del Battista in Roma e in Viterbo*, Roma, 1904.

⁶⁷ Preserved in the Duomo of Arezzo

⁶⁸ During my study of the evangelist, I was able to find a great amount of information in a remarkable work by Agostino Carli Rubbi (1811), titled *Dissertazione sopra il corpo di San Marco, evangelista riposto nella R. Patriarcale Basilica di S. Marco in Venezia*. This dissertation, together with Silvio Tramontin's *Culto dei Santi a Venezia* (1965), significantly helped me in the study of some peculiarities of St. Mark that I will now discuss. Rubbi informs that in some churches of France and Belgium, there are more than two arms and the head of St. Mark (129). He warns that the 3rd volume of Bollandisti says that,

Natalis (inquit) S. Marci Evangelistae, cujus corpus Venetiis, Brachium vero cum ossibus aliquot in Paroeciali Ecclesia de Limerio Parisiensis Dioecesis inde allatum religioso cultu asservatur. Cranium suessionem a Constantinopoli primum advectum, in summo Templo congrua honorificentia repositum est.

R. Patriarcale Basilica di S. Marco in Venezia (1811), states that St. Mark's skull was brought from Constantinople to Soissons after 828 (41).⁶⁹ Rubbi adds that *inappropriate devotion*⁷⁰ was probably the reason why the head was separated from the rest of the body and well-preserved in Alexandria.⁷¹ Tramontin (192), an expert on the cult of saints in Venice, adds a long series of details about the head of the evangelist. He claims that there were two churches dedicated to St. Mark in Alexandria: one built by St. Cyril of Alexandria called "Kamsya," which was near the coast and held the relics of St. Mark, and another one without relics which was built upon the ruins of an old church destroyed by the Arabs, who later burned the church of St. Mark "al Canopo" (193). An important detail is that they found not the entire body of St. Mark, but solely his head, which was returned to the Christians and placed in the church of Maollaca (Tramontin 193) by the patriarch⁷² Benjamin I of Alexandria (623-662). Tramontin also claims that, according to a local version from Alexandria, the head of St. Mark remained in Alexandria until the years 1235-1243 with the patriarch Cyril Laklak. The scholar also adds that there is another interpretation which states that the head of St. Mark was never in the church "al Canopo," but rather in that of Moallaca, personally placed by the patriarch Benjamin I (193).

Both Rubbi and Tramontin complement their studies of St. Mark with even more interconnected details about his head. Nonetheless, for the purpose of my study and aside from the small details, it is central to appreciate that St. Mark's head was a protagonist in the chronicles of his relics in the same way that Lorenzo's head was in the economy of tale IV, 5. First, just like Lorenzo's head, St. Mark's head was detached from his body; and, second, again

⁶⁹ ("il Cranio trasportato da Costantinopoli a Soissons, e non saprei come, né quando prima dell' 828")

⁷⁰ Which I discuss in Chapter One.

⁷¹ "fosse al Sacro Corpo da divozione indiscreta mozzata la testa al cadavere, ch'era sepolto, e ben custodito in Alessandria" (41)

⁷² 38th Pope of Alexandria (of the Coptic Church) and Patriarch of the See of St. Mark

like Lorenzo, he did not die because he was decapitated. As a matter of common knowledge, St. Mark's martyrdom⁷³ did not involve his head, and this specific part of his body, just like in Lorenzo's story, became important only after his death. Likewise, the heads of St. Mark, Lorenzo, and also that of the aforementioned St. Lawrence acquire importance only in their postmortem phase, thus as relics, and none of them died by decapitation.

In conclusion, all of the hagiographical narrations of the aforementioned head-relics, especially that of St. Lawrence and St. Mark, might have inspired Boccaccio in the creation of his tale's plot, at least in allowing one of his characters to perform such a radical act like beheading a human body. We can agree that this gesture has a profoundly different impact on the reader if we analyze it within or outside the context of the cult of relics. In this direction, I find Barbera's suggestion of the "cut" in both Lorenzo and St. Lorenzo's narrations very compelling and worthy of further study. Given that, I am still more inclined to consider all these episodes as "spunti," "suggerimenti," and "suggerioni," and not as static "fonti" (Branca and Degani, *Studi Sugli «Exempla»...* 177).

3.5 FEATURES OF ST. MARK'S *INVENTIO* AND *TRANSLATIO* IN LORENZO'S POSTMORTEM TREATMENT

As previously anticipated, I believe that there are significant similarities between the treatment of St. Mark and Lorenzo's bodies that are worth analyzing more in depth. St. Mark's hagiographic tradition includes a discussed diatribe about the ownership of his body among

⁷³ The *Legenda Aurea* narrates his martyrdom as follows, "Al mattino gli legarono di nuovo una corda al collo e correndo lo trascinarono di qui e di là" ("In the morning they tied a rope around his neck again and, running, they dragged him from here and there" (my translation)). Tramontin (54) adds more details about St. Mark's martyrdom but none of them are related to his head.

Aquileia, Venice, and Grado and, more importantly for my study, an *inventio* and multiple *translationes*. Leaving aside the political aspects of St. Mark's relics that I will consider in other chapters of my dissertation, I will now investigate specific features of St. Mark's relics that evoke Lorenzo's postmortem phase in tale IV, 5. First, it is key to notice that both receive a triple sepulture. On the one hand, various sources⁷⁴ narrate that St. Mark was taken by a tumultuous crowd on a Sunday and with a cord around his neck; they took him to the seaside where they manhandled and imprisoned him. He then died the day after on April 25, 68 CE. On the other hand, Boccaccio illustrates Lorenzo's death by writing,

E in tal disposizion dimorando, così cianciando e ridendo con Lorenzo come usati erano avvenne che, sembianti faccendo d'andare fuori della città a diletto tutti e tre, seco menarono Lorenzo; e pervenuti in un luogo molto solitario e rimoto, veggendosi il destro, Lorenzo, che di ciò niuna guardia prendeva, uccisono e sotterrarono in guisa che niuna persona se ne accurse.⁷⁵

As we can read, Lorenzo, just like the evangelist, is taken to a remote place with the intent to be killed but, contrarily to St. Mark's story, he is invited by Lisabetta's three brothers who were supposedly taking him to a certain place in a scene that Boccaccio depicts as usual ("come usati erano").

If this might be a common image, which somehow also reads like the celebrated assassination of Julius Caesar, it is in St. Mark's first *translatio* that I argue we can find the most

⁷⁴ This date, as those of the first and second *inventio*, respectively 828 and 1094, is extensively disputed in Tramontin (54, 194), Rubbi (128), and Pesce (*Cronica di Venexia detta di Enrico Dandolo*, note 156 page 32).

⁷⁵ Adhering to which purpose, they jested and laughed with Lorenzo as they had been wont; and after a while pretending that they were all three going forth of the city on pleasure, they took Lorenzo with them; and being come to a remote and very lonely spot, seeing that 'twas apt for their design, they took Lorenzo, who was completely off his guard, and slew him, and buried him on such wise that none was aware of it.

remarkable resemblance between the treatment of the two body-relics under analysis. This is due to two main reasons, namely the containers which store their bodies and the pleasant odor.

In a nutshell, the chronicle of the appropriation of St. Mark's body by the Venetians narrates that in 828, ten ships are shoved against the sailors' wills ("navigantes velut inviti") to the shore of Alexandria (Tramontin 54). Enrico Dandolo, in his *Cronica di Venexia* (1362), writes that on board these ships were "dui nobelli et grandi mercadanti, l'uno nomado Tribuno di Torcelo et l'altro Rustico Tronconico di Mathamauco"⁷⁶ (32). These two men were great merchants but also great believers, and every day they would visit the church in which the body of St. Mark was buried. They become friends with the ministers of the temple, especially with the monk Staurazio and priest Theodore. Due to the caliph Mamum's practice of dispossessing Christian churches to build mosques, and the consequent fear of the Christians to see their sites of cult deprived, robbed, and profaned, especially for what concerns their precious relics, the two Venetian merchants propose to smuggle St. Mark's body. At first, the ministers are very reluctant towards this request but, preempting the imminent danger, they decide to grant it (Tramontin). It is now in the attempt of transporting the body from Alexandria to Venice that we can observe the most emblematic resemblances between the *translatio* of St. Mark and that of Lorenzo. Tramontin reports the well-known episode by writing that,

Il corpo dell'evangelista viene imbarcato sotto gli occhi degli arabi con uno stratagemma:
la cesta che lo contiene viene riempita di foglie di cavoli e di altri ortaggi e di carne

⁷⁶ "two nobles and great merchants, one called Tribune of Torcelo and the other Rustico Tronconico of Mathamauco" (my translation)

porcina alla cui vista essi si mettono a gridare "Kinzir - Kinzir" (maiale, maiale) e si allontanano sputando⁷⁷. (55)

Martino da Canal in his *Les Estoires de Venise* (1275), while narrating St. Mark's first *inventio* and first *translatio*, also mentions that the body of St. Mark is placed inside a container,

Si s'en alerent a l'arche au plus hastivement que il porent et osterent li cors de monsignor saint Marc de l'arche ou il estoit et le mirent en une sporte et le covrirent de chos et de char de porc, ... Et li dui prodome pristrent li cors de monseignor saint Marc et le conduitrent en lor nef en cele sporte meisme, enci con je vos ai conté sa en ariere.⁷⁸ (X)

What I would like to stress here is that the role of this container is not marginal, but rather pivotal to the economy of the first *translatio* of the evangelist. Even though the *Golden Legend* does not mention this passage, Martino Da Canal accentuates that this stratagem is the keystone that makes St. Mark's first *translatio* possible. Tramontin, whose study on St. Mark is exhaustive and greatly documented, comprehensively reports this passage as fundamental in his narration.

After reading some of the episodes from the hagiographic tradition of St. Mark, I will now turn to a textual analysis of Boccaccio's tale and speculate on possible correspondences between the stories of Lorenzo and the evangelist. As we know, in this celebrated novella, the *testo* in which Lisabetta places Lorenzo's head unquestionably plays a pivotal role, and the plot of the whole tale essentially rests on this very element. Boccaccio writes, "Poi prese un grande e

⁷⁷ The body of the evangelist is loaded under the eyes of the Arabs with a stratagem: the basket that contains it is filled with cabbage leaves and other vegetables and with pork meat at which sight, they start shouting "Khinzir - Khinzir" (pig , pig) and walk away spitting.

⁷⁸ Allora si recarono all'arca quanto più rapidamente poterono e tolsero dall'arca, in cui stavano, le spoglie di messer san Marco e le misero in una cesta e le copersero di cavoli e di carne di porco, ... E i due valentuomini presero le spoglie di messer san Marco e le portarono nella nave, in quella stessa cesta di cui vi ho raccontato qui sopra. (translation by Alberto Limentani)

un bel testo, di questi nei quali si pianta la persa o il basilico, e dentro la vi mise fasciata in un bel drappo, e poi messovi su la terra, su vi piantò parecchi piedi di bellissimo basilico salernetano.”⁷⁹ Now, if we wished to deconstruct the entire image of the “*testo di basilico*” and list all its components, we would say that these are: a container (the actual “testo”), a piece of corpse (Lorenzo’s head), a wrap (the “drappo”), an organic layer to cover the body (“terra”), and finally something from the *vegetalia* sphere (“basilico salernetano”). What I would like to highlight is that the narration of St. Mark’s first *translatio*, except for the layer of “terra,” contemplates every single one of these elements. For instance, in the portion of the text from the aforementioned Da Canal chronicles (“il porent et osterent li cors de monsignor saint Marc de l’arche ou il estoit et le mirent en une sporte et le covrirent de chos et de char de porc”), we can claim that the container is visibly the “*sporte*,”⁸⁰ and the piece of corpse is the body of St. Mark (“*li cors de monsignor saint Marc*”). Even the wrapping is a shared element between St. Mark and Lorenzo’s sepultures. As I mentioned in the previous section, the scene of the evangelist’s first *translatio* is portrayed in two of the marvelous mosaics of the Basilica of St. Mark in Venice. In the mosaics of the right-hand door, we can observe that the Venetians find the tomb of St. Mark, then pick up the body and “lo avvolgono in un lenzuolo” (Tramontin 66). As Tramontin summarizes, “la cesta che lo contiene [il corpo di San Marco] viene riempita di foglie di cavoli e di altri ortaggi e di carne porcina”⁸¹ (55). Thus, just like the case of Lisabetta’s lover, the body of St. Mark is covered by an organic element, more specifically something from the *vegetalia* sphere, which in this case are cauliflower leaves and other vegetables.

⁷⁹ “She then wrapped it in a piece of fine cloth, and set it in a large and beautiful pot of the sort in which marjoram or basil is planted, and covered it with earth, and therein planted some roots of the goodliest basil of Salerno”

⁸⁰ Both Tramontin and Limentani translate “*sporte*” with “*cesta*,” which in English would be “basket” (WordReference).

⁸¹ “the basket that contains it [the body of San Marco] is filled with cabbage leaves and other vegetables and with pork meat”

Furthermore, during Lorenzo's first *inventio*, when Lisabetta after her dream searches for the place that Lorenzo indicates as the place in which her brothers buried him, we can also find another vegetal element aside from the basil (of which I will discuss in greater detail later in section 3.6 *The Odor (of Sanctity)*). Indeed, before digging, Boccaccio mentions that Lisabetta removes some leaves ("e tolte via foglie secche che nel luogo erano, dove men dura le parve la terra quivi cavò"⁸²). As we can see, the novella also mentions a layer of leaves on top of the corpse, just like how the cauliflower leaves and other vegetables cover the evangelist's relic in the narration of his first *translatio*. Given that, it would be intriguing to speculate on the meaning of these leaves as, in Boccaccio's tale, they apparently do not play a fundamental role in a plot that could easily be unaltered without this element. What we could conjecture is that without providing a reference to a possible *testo parodiato*, the mentioning of these leaves could only be considered as what Roland Barthes would call the *reality-effect*.⁸³

In addition, there are two other details that might connect the treatment of Lorenzo's body to that of a relic. The first one is a supposed double layer of "terra" on Lorenzo's corpse. Indeed, in the passage in which Lisabetta beheads Lorenzo, we read, "e tolte via foglie secche che nel luogo erano, dove men dura le parve la terra quivi cavò ... gli spiccò dallo 'mbusto la testa, e quella in uno asciugatoio involuppata e la terra sopra l'altro corpo gittata").⁸⁴ After reading this passage, we can observe that Lisabetta covers Lorenzo's body with a double stratum

⁸² "she hied her thither with all speed; and having removed the dry leaves that were strewn about the place, she began to dig where the earth seemed least hard."

⁸³ "The small details of person, place, and action that while contributing little or nothing to the narrative, give the story its atmosphere, making it feel real." ("Reality-effect" in *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, Oxford Reference)

⁸⁴ "she hied her thither with all speed; and having removed the dry leaves that were strewn about the place, she began to dig where the earth seemed least hard ... [she] severed the head from the trunk, and wrapped it in a napkin and laid it in the lap of her maid; and having covered the rest of the corpse with earth ..."

of terrain, one inside the pot, and the other on top of his decapitated body. It should not go unnoticed that from the moment in which Lisabetta separates the head from the rest of his body, Lorenzo's corpse will be located in different spaces simultaneously. A part of his body will be inside the wall of Lisabetta's house (at least at first), while the other will remain buried under the ground. As we have seen multiple times throughout the analysis of this religious practice, the circumstance in which we have the same body (re)located in many places is a typical characteristic of the cult of relics. The second point that I will only briefly mention is that in Boccaccio's tale, there is a continuous and ferocious conflict to obtain the body of Lorenzo. As we will see in more detail in Chapter Four, the history of relics is full of clashes that are triggered by the acquisition of a (piece of) sacred body.

In conclusion, we can state that there are vivid resemblances between St. Mark's hagiographical tradition and the way in which Boccaccio narrates Lorenzo's burial(s). First of all, the *cesta* in which the body of St. Mark is placed has a pivotal role in the narration of the evangelist's first *translatio* just as the *testo* has in Lorenzo's. Also, both bodies receive a triple sepulture and, remarkably, share the same container-relic-wrap-*vegetalia* assemblage.

3.6 THE ODOR (OF SANCTITY)

One of the features of the cult of relics that we cannot overlook is the pivotal role of the sense of smell. In their meticulous work *The Smell of Relics: Authenticating Saintly Bones and the Role of Scent in the Sensory Experience of Medieval Christian Veneration*, Brazinski and Fryxell conclude that the olfactory dimension of relics was so pivotal in the cult that it "was used in the medieval world as a means to challenge or confirm a relic's authenticity" (1). An example

of this aspect can be found in a novella that I analyze earlier in this chapter and in Chapter One, tale IV of the *Novellino*. As we have seen before, Frate Girolamo, not to arouse suspicion that his relic was spurious, together with the relic wrapped in the *zendado*, he inserts some fragrance inside the casket (“per non dare indugio al fatto ... posta messer lo frate la santa reliquia in più viluppi fasciata con zendado e soavi odori dentro una cassetta”). These *soavi odori* will reappear in the tale when the friar shows the relic to the crowd, “E veduto finalmente tutto il populo stare ammirato, aperta la cassetta, da la quale uscuto mirabile odore, rimossi li viluppi del zendado, e presa la reliquia ...” As we can see, Masuccio Salernitano is well aware that both the wrapping and the odors of the relic are distinguishable signs of a relic’s power and authenticity, to the point that his character uses these features to render a seemingly trustworthy relic.

The smell, in particular a good odor, is a feature that many relics share. As Rothkrug points out,

Most Christian saints achieved sainthood only after they died. ... But in late Antiquity and in the early Middle Ages people sought the first signs of the deceased's sanctity in the cemetery. Exhuming [a saint's] body about a year after burial, people discovered in every case that a sweet fragrance rose from the saint's tomb ... and the redolence that remained indicated the absence of putrefaction. (95)

This connection between bodies of saints and a pleasing scent is so well known that we refer to it as the *odor of sanctity*⁸⁵ (Rothkrug 95). Relics emanate fragrances so pleasing to the point that

⁸⁵ As evidence that the sacred narration has been profaned, thus made available to the free use of men, we can mention that the expression “*essere in odore di santità*” in the Italian language can be used in a secular sense, Frequente l’espressione *morire o essere in o. di santità*, in concetto di santo (per la credenza, diffusa dalla letteratura agiografica, che i corpi dei santi esalino dopo la morte un particolare profumo di fiori); per antifrasi, *essere in o. di eresia*, esser considerato, per affermazioni teoriche, prese di posizione e sim., ai limiti dell’eresia (nel sign. proprio o in quello estens. di questo termine); e per estens. di questo uso antifrastico, sono spesso coniate, nel linguaggio giornalistico, espressioni quali *in o. di mafia*, *in o. di truffa*,

Gregory of Tours, talking about a saint, writes, “Il suo volto beato era così colmo di gloria dopo la morte che sembrava una rosa. Esso infatti appariva rosso vermiglio e il resto del corpo rifulgeva candido come un giglio, tanto da ritenerlo ormai pronto per la gloria della resurrezione futura”⁸⁶ (VP, 7, 3, 328); and also, “Tutti noi presenti sentimmo le narici riempirsi del profumo di gigli e rose”⁸⁷ (*Liber in Gloria Martyrum*).

One of the richest hagiographic narrations in terms of olfactory significance is certainly that of St. Mark, which is so exceptionally rich of such specificity that Brazinski and Fryxell dedicate a full section to it in “Scented Relics: The Thefts of St Mark and St Nicholas” (6). Both *Les Histoires de Venise* and the *Legenda Aurea* widely mention a perfume throughout the narration of St. Mark’s relics. For instance, there was an intense fragrance during St. Mark’s first *inventio*. In the *Golden Legend*, when the two Venetians exhume St. Mark’s body, we can read, “Ma non appena sollevarono il corpo dalla tomba, tutta Alessandria fu invasa da un profumo tanto intenso che tutti si chiesero da dove provenisse tanta soavità.”⁸⁸ Likewise, Da Canal writes,

Que vos diroie je? Droitement a celui point que il ouvrirent l’arche, si expandi un’oudor
parmi la vile si grant e si pleisant, que, ce totes les espices dou monde fussent en
Alisandre, fust il acés sofisant chose. Et lors distrent paiens:

e sim., riferite a persone (per lo più note) di cui si sospetta che siano coinvolte in tali attività. (“Odore.” *Treccani Vocabolario Online*, /www.treccani.it/vocabolario/odore. Accessed 2 Mar. 2020)

The expression *dying or being in odor of sanctity*, in the concept of saint (due to the belief, widespread in hagiographic literature, that the bodies of saints exhale a particular scent of flowers after death); for antiphrasis, *to be of heresy*, can be considered, for theoretical statements, stances and similar, on the verge of heresy (in the proper meaning or in the extended one of this term); and for extension of this antiphrastic use expressions such as *in odor of mafia*, *in odor of scam*, and similar, are often coined in journalistic language, referring to people (mostly known) who are suspected of being involved in such activities.

⁸⁶ “His blissful face was so full of glory after his death that it looked like a rose. In fact, it appeared vermilion red and the rest of his body shone as white as a lily, so much so that he was ready for the glory of the future resurrection.” (my translation)

⁸⁷ “All of us who were present felt our nostrils fill with the scent of lilies and roses.” (my translation)

⁸⁸ “But as soon as they lifted the body from the grave, the whole of Alexandria was invaded by a perfume so intense that everyone wondered where so much sweetness came from.” (my translation)

- Or se meut Marquet! - ,

Que il esoient acostumé chascun an de sentir cele oudor.⁸⁹

(Part 1, XI)

As we can see, both texts describe the same moment analogously, but Da Canal adds a sense of rituality (“*acostumé chascun an*”). Furthermore, his text describes the pagans from Alexandria as very aware of this perfume, practically as if it were a distinctive sign and feature of St. Mark (“*- Or se meut Marquet! -*”). The more detailed version of Tramontin includes the presence of this perfume in other occurrences, expanding this sensorial aspect of St. Mark’s relics beyond his first *translatio*. He states that in general, “al passaggio delle sacre spoglie si sparge attorno un insistente profumo”⁹⁰ (55), and that, during his *inventio* (of which I will profusely discuss later) there is a marvelous perfume that is propagated in the basilica. After this brief analysis, we can state that in the narrations of St. Mark and Lorenzo’s postmortem phases, and generally in the cult of relics, the element of the pleasant smell is certainly a distinguishing element.

In this direction, if we were to be more accurate with the deconstruction of the image of the “*testo di basilico*” that I proposed above, we would have to include a fundamental element, a pleasant smell, as the basil is unquestionably renowned for this characteristic. Boccaccio describes the basil plant as “odorifero molto,”⁹¹ while Branca in his commentary on the text of the *Decameron*⁹² writes that the basil plant was selected for its “forte odore aromatico atto a

⁸⁹ “Che dirvi? Proprio nel momento in cui apersero l’arca, si sparse per la città un odore così intenso e gradevole, che, se tutte le spezie del mondo fossero state ad Alessandria, non avrebbero dato l’eguale. Allora i pagani dissero: - È il nostro Marco che si muove! -, perché erano abituati a sentire quell’odore ogni anno.”

⁹⁰ “as the sacred remains passed, an insistent perfume spread around”

⁹¹ “Very odorous” (my translation)

⁹² See note 10 “*basilico salernetano*.”

coprire o almeno attenuare ogni altro, più che per i valori simbolici o magici.”⁹³ We can speculate on the reasons why Boccaccio selects this very good-smelling plant. In order to try to answer this question, I will also include some archeological evidence from the cult of relics as well as some hagiographical episodes so that we might obtain a richer picture. For instance, as we have seen, scented liquids are fundamental in the worship of relics. In this direction, Spencer claims that,

The liquid continued to be collected by pilgrims until the Reformation. Chemical analysis conducted on one flask found at York revealed that it still contained ‘a pleasant-smelling liquid, which from preliminary investigations, seems likely to be a compound of aromatic, and presumably medicinal, herbs and spices, mixed in water.’ (cited in Brazinski and Fryxell 9)

This archeological discovery allows us to suspect that Boccaccio might have chosen the basil as one of the “herbs and spices” needed for some relic-related practice. In addition, as we have seen in several sections of this chapter, Lisabetta waters Lorenzo’s head-relic with her tears and with rose and orange blossom water. Given that, it would not be too hazardous to think that Lisabetta’s tears, together with the rose and orange blossom water and the basil itself, would create a sort of compound of aromatic herbs and spices, mixed in water, just like those which were used in the rituality of relic worship.

As Branca suggests, the good smell of basil functions as a contrasting odor to the corrupted flesh of Lorenzo. Consequently, if we also take into consideration some hagiographic sources, we discover that leaves were also used to hide sacred bodies. As a matter of fact, in the

⁹³ “strong aromatic odor designed to cover or at least mitigate every other one, more than for symbolic or magical values” (my translation)

stories of St. Mark's *translatio*, the Venetian merchants cover the relics of the evangelist with "*foglie di cavoli e di altri ortaggi*"⁹⁴ and "*carne porcina*."⁹⁵ Thus, on the one hand, we can see that the body-relic of St. Mark was covered by a layer of leaves (cauliflower and other vegetable leaves), just as Lorenzo's body-relic was with basil leaves (plus, as we have seen before, the decapitated part of Lorenzo's body is also covered with leaves). On the other hand, Brazinski and Fryxell offer a very compelling interpretation,

It is nevertheless tempting to consider that Venetian merchants might have placed pork products in the coffin of Saint Mark the Evangelist to mask the smell of the stolen relics. Could this have been meant as a double entendre; masking the relic's scent whilst creating a religious dilemma for the Islamic customs officers? Even if reports of a specific fragrance are exaggerated ... smell nonetheless operated as a means of authenticating or characterizing prominent saintly relics. (12)

Brazinski and Fryxell's proposition is very compelling as it would give the pork products and the cauliflower and other vegetable leaves a role in concealing the good smell of relics. In this paradigm, we have an unpleasant smell (the pork and the cauliflower and other vegetable leaves) that masks a magnificent odor (that of St. Mark's relics). Given that, it would be very intriguing to investigate in future studies if Boccaccio is making a parody of such an episode as he depicts the pot of basil in the exact opposite paradigm. Indeed, in his tale, it is a very pleasant scent (the smell of basil) that covers the unpleasant odor (of Lorenzo's corrupted flesh).

⁹⁴ "cauliflower and other vegetables' leaves".

⁹⁵ "pork" (my translation).

3.7. THE *VISIO IN SOMNIIS*

One of the elements that many scholars have already recognized as connected to the cult of relics is Lisabetta's dream. Dreams have a long tradition in the cult, especially for *inventio* and *translatio*. Bentley explains that, at first, dispersing saints' bodies in Western Christianity was a taboo that gradually became as popular there as it was in the East. The scholar specifies that there was an "evident desire of Western Christians to emulate the East in transferring relics or parts of relics," and that this practice "began to be supported by alleged dreams in which the saint in question endorsed the removal of his corpse" (Bentley 93). In this paradigm, a (supposed) dream can be the exceptional element that could justify the exhumation of a corpse and grant authority over the saint's body. After all, there is a basic logic to this dynamic: if a saint in a dream was the one to explicitly ask to be exhumed, the act of contravening, and not observing this precise instruction, would be sacrilegious.

Canetti in his *"Le divinazioni de' nostri sogni" (Conv. II, viii, 13) - Hagiography and Incubation in Dante's Age* discusses how Constantine's dream changes the paradigm and gives authority to dreams by saying that, "Il sogno di Costantino al Ponte Milvio è divenuto l'emblema dell'inaugurazione di una nuova età della storia precisamente perché il messaggio è stato rivelato all'imperatore cristiano in forma onirica e visionaria"⁹⁶ (220). This dream is essential to the history of Christianity because it is the very narrative device that allows Emperor Constantine to become a Christian. Canetti remarks that,

⁹⁶ "Constantine's dream at the Milvian Bridge has become the emblem of the inauguration of a new age of history precisely because the message was revealed to the Christian emperor in a dreamlike and visionary form." (my translation)

la funzione autenticante del dispositivo onirico veniva attivata anche nei casi frequenti di sogni premonitori che orchestravano materiali topici (di ascendenza biblica, letteraria, folklorica e iconografica) in forma di profezia *post eventum*. Anche se non tutti i sogni, e non tutti i sognatori, potevano sempre e comunque attingere a un tale statuto di autorità, nel Medioevo la *visio in somniis* costituiva un dispositivo retorico e narrativo in grado di conferire autenticità e perciò autorità probatoria a un episodio o ad una situazione, talvolta a prescindere dalla qualità dei testimoni e dalla verifica empirica delle testimonianze stesse.⁹⁷ (221)

Dreams, then, gained authority in early Christianity, and the *visio in somniis* after Constantine became a powerful device that would have allowed a grand gesture, including the exhumation and appropriation of holy bodies. Indeed, another event that certainly had a big impact (Luciano) and led to the exponential and uncontrolled growth of the cult of relics is when Pope Damasus I claims he had a revelatory dream in which St. Eutychus⁹⁸ (c.305-383) showed him where his body was located (Daniele in *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*). Another similar episode that took place in approximately the same period is the *inventio* of Sts. Gervasius and Protasius, who were found thanks to a revelation/presentiment⁹⁹ of St. Ambrose (Rimoldi in *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*).

⁹⁷ the authenticating function of the dream device was also activated in the frequent cases of premonitory dreams that orchestrated topical materials (of biblical, literary, folkloric and iconographic origin) in the form of *post eventum* prophecy. Even if not all dreams, and not all dreamers, could always and in any case draw on such a status of authority, in the Middle Ages the *visio in somniis* constituted a rhetorical and narrative device capable of conferring authenticity and therefore evidential authority to an episode or to a situation, sometimes regardless of the quality of the witnesses and the empirical verification of the testimonies themselves. (My translation)

⁹⁸ Also known as Eutychius, Eutycius, and Eutychianus in Latin.

⁹⁹ S. Agostino, present in Milan in those years, and Paolino of Milan, secretary and biographer of St. Ambrose say that the saint had a revelation (the two writings are respectively from 397-401 and 422); St. Ambrose, on the other hand, writing the chronicle of those events to her sister Marcellina, speaks only of a presentiment (Rimoldi in *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*).

As aforementioned, Lisabetta's dream in the tale has been widely¹⁰⁰ recognized as correlated to the typical dream of hagiographic narrations. In this direction, Fonio states that, "L'unico sogno profetico di matrice scopertamente agiografica nel *Decameron* è quello di Lisabetta da Messina (IV, 5). La derivazione agiografica di tale sogno, che porta, fra l'altro, all'*inventio* del corpo di Lorenzo, è stata più volte notata." Fonio, speaking on Pierre Blanc and his *Vision d'amour et lumières du rêve: Decameron, IV, 5; IV, 6; IX, 7*, points out that, "Lo studioso riconosce appunto nell'apparizione di Lorenzo a Lisabetta una laicizzazione del *topos* agiografico del santo che si manifesta in sogno ai fedeli per comunicare loro dove si trova il suo corpo e permetterne così l'*inventio*." (174). Besides agreeing with both scholars, I find particularly noteworthy Fonio's expression "una laicizzazione del *topos* agiografico," because it perfectly explicates the act of profanation at the core of my study. For the same reasons, I find equally significant his concept of "Rifunzionalizzazione del linguaggio sacro" (175).

Now, to better understand the connection among the revelatory dream, the cult of relics, and the act of Lisabetta cutting off Lorenzo's head, we need to consult the actual text of the *Decameron*. Boccaccio writes,

Avvenne una notte che, avendo costei molto pianto Lorenzo che non tornava, ed essendosi alla fine piagnendo addormentata, Lorenzo l'apparve nel sonno, pallido e tutto rabbuffato e con panni tutti stracciati e fracidi indosso, e parvele che egli dicesse:

– O Lisabetta, tu non mi fai altro che chiamare e della mia lunga dimora t'attristi, e me con le tue lagrime fieramente accusi; e per ciò sappi che io non posso più ritornarci, per

¹⁰⁰ By Branca in his commentary, Barberi Squarotti in *L'Orazione di Alatiel*, Fonio in *Dalla Legenda alla Novella*

ciò che l'ultimo dì che tu mi vedesti i tuoi fratelli m'uccisano. E disegnatole il luogo dove sotterrato l'aveano, le disse che più nol chiamasse né l'aspettasse, e disparve.¹⁰¹

In this extract we can speculate that Boccaccio is using that very rhetoric and narrative device, the *visio in somniis*, described by Canetti. Honestly, before knowing that the dreaming of exhuming saints' bodies was such a powerful discourse throughout the Middle Ages, I conjectured that Boccaccio merely needed a narrative device that would allow Lisabetta to find Lorenzo's body. On the contrary, now, I believe that Boccaccio uses the expediency of the dream to further evoke the rituality and sacredness of Lisabetta's gesture by using a rhetorical and narrative device that, as we have seen, provides authority and sanctity. As aforementioned, Branca in his commentary¹⁰² emphasizes this aspect by writing that, "Lorenzo rivela a Lisabetta il luogo dove è sepolto, con gesto analogo a quello tradizionale dei martiri che indicano ai devoti dove giace il loro corpo o qualche loro reliquia."¹⁰³ Nevertheless, this element already observed by Branca gains new value if positioned within the constellation of references to the creation and cult of relics.

As I mentioned before, hagiographic narrations are full of dreams, and that of St. Mark is not an exception. The bond between dream and St. Mark is so strong that it is even captured in artistic works, such as the well-celebrated painting by Tintoretto titled "Il Sogno di San Marco" (1585). Even though this painting is much younger than the *Decameron*, it shows that visually,

¹⁰¹ But so it was that one night, when, after long weeping that her Lorenzo came not back, she had at last fallen asleep, Lorenzo appeared to her in a dream, wan and in utter disarray, his clothes torn to shreds and sodden; and thus, as she thought, he spoke: "Lisabetta, thou dost nought but call me, and vex thyself for my long tarrying, and bitterly upbraid me with thy tears; wherefore be it known to thee that return to thee I may not, because the last day that thou didst see me thy brothers slew me." After which, he described the place where they had buried him, told her to call and expect him no more, and vanished.

¹⁰² Note 9, page 529

¹⁰³ "Lorenzo reveals to Lisabetta the place where he is buried, with a gesture similar to the traditional one of the martyrs who indicate to the devotees where their body or some of their relics lies." (My translation)

the idea of St. Mark and that of a dream is not difficult to associate. The fame of the patron of Venice in all his artistic representations and verbal narrations is unquestionable. Indeed, another artistic example that connects this saint with the dream is a sculpture (*Sogno di S. Marco*) by Benedetto Antelami (whose school had numerous disciples as of the 12th century) (Toesca). The episode depicted in these two different artistic oeuvres is not mentioned in the *Golden Legend* but is represented among the mosaics of the Basilica of St. Mark. All these oeuvres translate into images a legend which has become particularly famous since the 13th century and served to consolidate the cult of the evangelist in Venice. The legend says that, when Mark was trying to go by sea from Aquileia to Rome, he was driven towards the islands of the Venetian lagoon due to a strong storm. During the night, an angel appeared to him in a dream and tells him, “Pax tibi, Marce, Evangelista meus, hic requiescat corpus tuum” (“Sogno di San Marco” in *Gallerie Accademia Venezia*). Even in this example, the device of the dream is giving authority to Venice, legitimizing its possession, and thus the power, of St. Mark’s body (in this case over Aquileia). In addition, Tramontin remarks that overall, in the cycle of the dreams, the occurrences are two: the one in the Venetian lagoon, and another one in Africa when the angel goes to visit the evangelist before his martyrdom (68). Furthermore, the *Legenda Aurea* recounts that,

Un tale di Mantova venne falsamente accusato da alcuni invidiosi e fu gettato in carcere. Erano ormai trascorsi quaranta giorni quando, stremato, si macerò per tre giorni nel digiuno e invocò l'aiuto di san Marco. Marco gli apparve e gli ordinò di uscirsene tranquillo dal carcere. Ma quello, stremato, continuò a dormire e non obbedì agli ordini

del santo: credeva infatti che fosse solo un ingannevole sogno. Marco gli apparve poi una seconda e una terza volta, ordinandogli sempre la stessa cosa.¹⁰⁴

As we can see, the legends around St. Mark are rich in dreams, not only like the ones he had but also several in which he appears.

In the narration of one of his appearances, there is a detail that I would like to highlight, which is the description of how the saint is dressed in the dream. In the *Legenda Aurea* we read,

Un giovane era tormentato da un cancro che gli straziava il petto, come se dei vermi rodessero le sue carni; prese quindi a implorare devotamente l'aiuto di san Marco. Ed ecco che gli apparve in sogno un uomo vestito da pellegrino, che camminava a passo svelto. Il giovane gli chiese chi fosse e dove stesse andando così di fretta; quello rispose che era Marco e che andava di corsa in aiuto di una nave in pericolo che aveva invocato il suo aiuto.¹⁰⁵

In this extract we can read that in the appearance of the evangelist, the detail of the clothing is explicit (“un uomo vestito da Pellegrino”). This detail is certainly not exclusive to St. Mark, but rather a common addition to many hagiographic texts. As a matter of fact, in the story of St.

Peter Martyr (*Legenda Aurea*, LXI), we read that someone “Addormentatosi, vide in sogno un frate che portava la tonaca dell'ordine dei Predicatori, corpulento d'aspetto e bruno”¹⁰⁶; and, “Ed

¹⁰⁴ A man from Mantua was falsely accused by some envious people and was thrown into prison. Forty days had now passed when, exhausted, he fasted for three days and invoked the help of St. Mark. The saint appeared to him and ordered him to get out of prison calmly. But he, exhausted, continued to sleep and did not obey the orders of the saint: in fact, he believed that it was only a deceptive dream. St. Mark then appeared to him a second and third time, always ordering the same thing of him. (My translation)

¹⁰⁵ A young man was tormented by a cancer that tore at his chest, as if worms gnawed at his flesh; he then began to pray devoutly for the help of St. Mark. And behold, a man dressed as a pilgrim appeared to him in a dream, walking at a brisk pace. The young man asked him who he was and where he was going so fast; he replied that it was Marco and that he was running to the aid of a ship in danger that had invoked his help. (My translation)

¹⁰⁶ “Falling asleep, in a dream, he saw a friar wearing the cassock of the order of the Preachers, corpulent in appearance and dark.” (my translation)

ecco che gli apparve in sogno un uomo dall'aspetto venerabile, vestito con l'abito dei Frati Predicatori, che lo coprì con la propria cappa e lo fece entrare in chiesa.”¹⁰⁷ Another case, among many, of dream-related *inventio* by is that of St. Stephen. The story of his relics became legendary and, on December 3, 415, a priest named Lucian dreamed the appearance of a venerable old man in liturgical clothes with a long, white beard and a golden wand in hand with which he touched Lucian, calling him three times by name. He revealed that he and his companions were sad because they were buried without honor. He also added that they wanted to be placed in a more dignified space where believers could worship their relics (Borrelli in *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*).

After all these examples, we have a clearer picture in which dreams were a common device both in the narration of miracles and for authorizing the exhumation of a sacred body. In addition, we can state that in both types of episodes, the depiction of how holy figures look, and especially how they are dressed, is certainly a shared element of many hagiographic texts. Thanks to this closer analysis, we are now entitled to scrutinize Lisabetta’s dream through this perspective. If we observe Boccaccio’s words more closely, we see that when he writes, “Lorenzo l’apparve nel sonno, pallido e tutto rabbuffato e con panni tutti stracciati e fracidi indosso,” the author lends Lorenzo’s sepulture a feature that is usually a mark of hagiographic texts.

Finally, thanks to a closer observation of this apparently small detail – the description of how the person looks and is dressed in the dream – we can conclude that in this tale we have witnessed, borrowing Fonio’s terminology, “una laicizzazione del *topos* agiografico.” Thanks to

¹⁰⁷ “And behold, a venerable-looking man appeared to him in a dream, dressed in the habit of the Friars Preachers, who covered him with his own cloak and made him enter the church.” (my translation)

the device of the *visio in somniis*, which constitutes a rhetorical tool that conveys “authenticity” and “authority” (Canetti 221), Boccaccio manages to even better associate the treatment of Lorenzo’s body to that of a saint. Indeed, by giving Lorenzo his first¹⁰⁸ *inventio* (thus bestowing a non-religious figure with the postmortem feature of a saint, even rhetorically with the narrative emulation of the hagiographic genre), Boccaccio accentuates once again the sacredness of burial.

3.8 THE CONCEALING OF THE BODY

Considering all the elements that we have examined, we could advance the hypothesis that the *relics* of Lorenzo, just like those of St. Mark, had two *translationes*. The first *translatio* of St. Mark happens when his body is brought from Alexandria to Venice, while that of Lorenzo occurs when Lisabetta takes his head from the place where he was first buried to the crock in her room.¹⁰⁹ I propose that we consider Lorenzo’s second *translatio* to be the displacement of Lorenzo’s head when Lisabetta’s three brothers take her pot, which Boccaccio narrates as:

I giovani si maravigliavan forte di questo addimandare e per ciò vollero vedere che dentro vi fosse; e versata la terra, videro il drappo e in quello la testa non ancor si consumata che essi alla capellatura crespa non conoscessero lei esser quella di Lorenzo.

Di che essi si maravigliaron forte e temettero non questa cosa si risapesse; e sotterrata

¹⁰⁸ With the “first *inventio*” I refer to when Lisabetta discovers Lorenzo’s body thanks to the dream; while I relate the “second *inventio*” with the moment when the three brothers destroy the crock to peer inside and happen to see Lorenzo’s head.

¹⁰⁹ “...con un coltello il meglio che potè gli spiccò dallo ’mbusto la testa, e quella in uno asciugatoio inviluppata ... messala in grembo alla fante, ... si partì e tornossene a casa sua. Quivi con questa testa nella sua camera rinchiuserasi.”

“she took a knife, and, as best she could, severed the head from the trunk, and wrapped it in a napkin and laid it in the lap of her maid ... and went home. There she shut herself up in her room with the head”

quella, senza altro dire, cautamente di Messina uscitisi e ordinato come di quindi si ritraessono, se n'andarono a Napoli.¹¹⁰

In this scene, the three brothers discover that Lisabetta's precious pot contains the head of Lorenzo and, afraid that others would learn on their murder, they *re-bury* the young man (supposedly in a different place, not to be discovered).

I will now draw a parallel between St. Mark and Lorenzo's second *translatio*¹¹¹ to show that the resemblances regarding their postmortem treatment are not limited to the number of *translationes*, but that they also share some specific features. For instance, one of the characteristics that I would like to propose as crucial in both the plot of *Decameron* IV, 5 and a great number of hagiographic narrations, with particular attention to St. Mark's, is the concealing of the body. Even if it sounds like a paradox, because relics are characteristically exposed for their believers' veneration – and certainly also to showcase power, often heightened by magnificent reliquaries – in the history of this cult it is not rare to find evidence of relics that are purposely hidden. For instance, Dandolo explains two plausible reasons why the body of St. Mark was hidden:

La casion perché in quel luogo fu posto primamente poteno esser due. La prima, im per quello che dubitava che per alcun muodo el no li podesse esser tolto per alcun tempo funo contenti de ocultarlo, possa imaginando el muodo per lo qual furtevelmente il to<I>sseno de Alexandria – como se contiene nela translation di quello, facta in

¹¹⁰ “Passing strange they found it, and fearing lest it should be bruited abroad, they buried the head, and, with as little said as might be, took order for their privy departure from Messina, and hied them thence to Naples.”

¹¹¹ I am referring to the “second *translatio*” of St. Mark's relics to indicate the displacement of his body from the column in which he was hidden to the main altar of the new church. As Baronio reports, “*Corpus solemniter collocatum fuit sub Altari primario (anno 1094 25 Junii)*,” this is not just a marginal detail but rather a great and solemn event in the cult of St. Mark.

VIII^cXXIII -; l'altra che pò esser che in tempo di meser Piero Orsiolo dicto, che cominçar la glesia fexe, dubitando che per alcun muodo el non se podese disperder per fuoco ... (53)¹¹²

As we can see, Dandolo reports that the Venetians concealed the body of their patron because they were afraid of both *furta sacra* and fire. Rubbi profusely talks about the practice of concealing relics and dedicates an entire chapter (VI) to “*Motivi per nascondere il corpo di S. Marco.*”¹¹³ In this section of his dissertation, he writes that it is common practice to hide the saints’ bodies inside the church walls, and that only a few people were informed of the actual place in which they were hidden (43). The scholar reports how the Council of Mainz (Canon LI.) in 813 specifies that “*Deinceps vero corpora Sanctorum de loco ad locum nullus praesumat transferre nisi Consilio Principis, vel Episcoponim, et Siinctae Synodi licentia*” (Rubbi 43).

This practice of hiding bodies was a common and ancient practice that was certainly not limited to the case of St. Mark. For instance, there are plenty of inscriptions and documents that show how during the invasion of the Huns in 615, in Friuli, the bodies guarded in the church of St. John in Timavo were hidden and then found in 1115 (Rubbi 44). Rubbi adds that beside the fear of *furta sacra* (“*massimamente della rapina francese*”¹¹⁴ (130)), one of the biggest concerns was to avoid fragmentation of the body. This fear was due to the continuous requests of many churches, which were accustomed to demanding parts of sacred bodies, causing the constant

¹¹² There could be two reasons why it was first placed there. The first, because of the doubt that it could have been removed at any time, and thus they were happy to conceal it; imagining the way in which they strongly removed it from Alexandria – as it is told in his *translatio*, facta in VIII^cXXIII; the other may be that during the time of the aforementioned Messer Piero Orsiolo, who started the church, he doubted that in some way he could be dispersed by fire ... (my translation).

¹¹³ “reasons to hide St. Mark’s body” (my translation).

¹¹⁴ “especially by French robbers” (my translation).

displacement of relics from one church to another.¹¹⁵ An emblematic example is the necessity of the Roman papacy to make the “*casse*”¹¹⁶ in which St. Peter and St. Paul were preserved almost impossible to open (Rubbi 48).

Given this context, we can comprehend why hiding sacred bodies was a reasonable necessity. The specific case of concealing St. Mark’s body is profusely documented in many sources. In the *Legenda Aurea*, we read,

In un certo momento il corpo di san Marco era stato deposto sotto una colonna fatta di blocchi di marmo, ma pochi ne erano stati messi a conoscenza, perché fosse custodito con più sicurezza; accadde che, venuti a morire coloro che ne erano stati testimoni, nessuno sapeva dove fosse riposto il santo tesoro e non si riusciva a trovarne alcuna traccia.¹¹⁷

Da Canal also reports,

Quant monsignor saint Marc fu aportés de Alisandre en Venise, il fu mis en l’iglise, non pas a la seüe de tos, mes en un leu mult priveement. Et lors avint que ciaus que savoient li leus ou il estoit mis, morurent sans ce que il le feïssent a savoir as autres: si en furent Veneciens mult dolans et prièrent ... (Part 2, LX)¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Especially towards French churches. Baronio in 820 (N. XXXIII), states that, “Sciebant enim (Veneti) Francos penes quos erat in occidente summa vis, atque potentia, Sanctorum corporum avidissime venari ea : jamque ex Italia complura ipsorum in Galliis transtulissent.” (cited in Rubbi 44)

¹¹⁶ casket, coffin (WordReference).

¹¹⁷ At a certain moment the body of St. Mark had been placed under a column made of blocks of marble, but few people had been made aware of it, so that it could be kept more safely; it happened that, when those who had witnessed died, no one knew where the holy treasure was stored and no trace of it could be found. (my translation)

¹¹⁸ Quando messer san Marco fu portato da Alessandria a Venezia, fu, non a conoscenza di tutti, ma molti di nascosto, messo nella chiesa, in un certo luogo. E allora avvenne che quelli che conoscevano il luogo in cui era stato messo, morirono senza farlo conoscere agli altri: e i Veneziani ne furono molto addolorati e pregarono ... (Part 2, LX) (Limentani)

This episode is celebrated in the Lagoon, and Tramontin points out that, aside from the biggest festivity in honor of Venice's patron (April 25), there are two more: one remembering St. Mark's first *translatio* (January 31), and the other one honoring his *inventio* (June 25). The former festivity is traceable already in the 11th century, since it is included in the *Kalendarium Venetum*; while the latter, which I will now analyze, is more recent (Tramontin). This festivity is known in the local liturgy as "*in apparitione sancti Marci Evangelistae*" or "*revelatio mirabilis*" (Tramontin 59). After three days of prayer and a procession, the body of St. Mark, which was previously secretly placed inside St. Leonard's column in the old church,¹¹⁹ is found (Rubbi 63). Tramontin remarks that there is an anonymous manuscript from the 12th century that underlines how the column was one of the few parts which remained from the old church (57).

The reasons why I claim that this specific aspect of the cult of relics – the concealing of the body – is a characteristic that connects, once again, St. Mark and Lorenzo's postmortem treatment is because in Boccaccio's novella, Lisabetta, like the Venetians, hides the relics of her beloved and keeps them away from her brothers. As we know, Lisabetta's brothers, after seeing their sister morbidly attached to the pot, have their suspicions aroused and secretly take the precious plant away from her ("Il che udendo i fratelli e accorgendosene, avendonela alcuna volta ripresa e non giovando, nascosamente da lei fecer portar via questo testo").¹²⁰ The young men did not realize that they committed a sort of *furta sacra* because, at first, they were not even aware that Lorenzo's head was inside the pot. More importantly for my study, and for what I am trying to show now, is that once Lisabetta realizes that the crock is missing, she enters into a sort of agony in which she can only cry and ask for her precious *testo di basilico* ("Il quale, non

¹¹⁹ "Corpus autem Evangelistae arcula aerea obseratum intra columnam recondunt marmoreis lapidibus compactam, summa adhibita diligenda ne quis locum cognoscat ..." (Corner cited in Rubbi 48)

¹²⁰ "Whereupon the brothers, marking her behaviour, chid her therefore once or twice, and as she heeded them not, caused the pot to be taken privily from her."

ritrovandolo ella, con grandissima istanzia molte volte richiese; e non essendole renduto, non cessando il pianto e le lagrime, infermò, né altro che il testo suo nella infermità domandava”¹²¹).

In the hagiographic narrations that concern St. Mark’s missing relics, we can observe that the Venetians, once they figure out that the relics of the evangelist were lost, enter into a state which resembles that of Lisabetta when she cannot find her *testo*. The *Legenda Aurea* narrates this moment as follows:

Per questo nelle chiese si pianse molto, la gente comune fu presa da una grande desolazione e tutti si disperavano. La popolazione devota temeva che il corpo di un così grande patrono fosse stato sottratto furtivamente e per questo fu indetto un solenne digiuno e stabilita una processione solennissima ...¹²²

Da Canal’s narration is very similar because it involves the “*digiuno*” and the “*processione*”

(“E allora avvenne che quelli che conoscevano il luogo in cui era stato messo, morirono senza farlo conoscere agli altri: e i Veneziani ne furono molto addolorati ... E allora messere il patrarca li fece tenere tutti per tre giorni a pane e acqua, e poi fecero la processione”¹²³) (Part 2, LX).

Likewise, Dandolo reports on this significant episode, stating that already during the construction of the Basilica of St. Mark, they were looking for the body since it was the very reason why they were building the church in the first place (“per la qual cosa cercando per tucto non si trovava el corpo” (53)). Then he adds that the doge,

¹²¹ “Which, so soon as she missed it, she demanded with the utmost instance and insistence, and, as they gave it not back to her, ceased not to wail and weep, insomuch that she fell sick”

¹²² “For this reason there was much weeping in the churches, the common people were taken by a great desolation and everyone was desperate. The devout population feared that the body of such a great patron had been stolen stealthily and for this reason a solemn fast was held and a very solemn procession established.” (my translation)

¹²³ “And then it happened that those who knew the place where he was placed died without making it known to the others: and the Venetians were very saddened ... And then the patriarch made them all keep for three days on bread and water, and then they made a procession.” (my translation)

brevemente dimandadi tucti li amixi là dove 'l fusse ignorava, *unde* che lo dicto Duxe *cum* tucto el povolo funno in grande tristicia, quasi parendoli esser privadi del suo paron et proptector ... digiunado la più parte d'i citadini per tre giorni *cum* grande divocion et pregere como fu ordenado, facendo letanie et grande precession a ciò che l'evangelista se dignasse de apalentarse¹²⁴ dove era lo suo corpo. (53)¹²⁵

As we can observe, that time in which the body of St. Mark could not be found is very representative in both the Venetian chronicles (Dandolo and Da Canal) and the *Golden Legend*.

Therefore, in conclusion, we can attest that the idea of incessant crying and praying as a result of a lost sacred body is a characteristic that is very present in hagiography, particularly in that of St. Mark. Likewise, I will argue that the incessant crying of Lisabetta in tale IV, 5 echoes such an image as it still encompasses the basic idea of crying for a lost sacred body. Contrarily to the tale of Lisabetta and Lorenzo, the story of St. Mark's relics is a triumph and ends with an *inventio*¹²⁶ and a second *translatio*. Boccaccio, who at first also gives Lorenzo's body two *inventiones*, ends his tale in tragedy as the theme of Day IV enforces. Nevertheless, the tragedy in this novella is not only expressed through the actual death of Lorenzo and Lisabetta.

Boccaccio achieves the quintessential tragic involvement because his tale will never grant us the experience of a new *inventio* that would allow Lisabetta to, at least, see and cry upon the body of her beloved.

¹²⁴ "Mostrarsi, rendersi palese" (Pesce, note 237)

¹²⁵ "briefly after realizing that all the friends did not know, the aforesaid Duxe, with all the people, was in great sadness, almost as if they were deprived of their patron and protector ... most of the citizens were fasting for three days with great devotion and prayed as it was ordered, making litany and a great precession so that the evangelist reveals where his body was." (my translation)

¹²⁶ The *inventio* of St. Mark is widely discussed in the *Legenda Aurea* (St. Mark), Da Canal (Part 2, LX), and Dandolo (53).

3.9 SOME CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, even though we cannot resolutely state that Boccaccio based his story upon the hagiographic tradition of St. Mark or any other holy figure, we cannot ignore the numerous similarities that we observe between the postmortem treatment of Lorenzo's body and the cult of relics. In the reading of tale IV, 5 in the *Decameron*, it would be improper to omit that the novella includes all the elements that we can observe in the narration of St. Mark's first *translatio*; we cannot overlook that the basil growing atop Lorenzo's head echoes the idea of *vegetalia* germinating from a sacred body like in the aforementioned cases of the lily. Finally, we can claim that, since the story of Lorenzo includes the discovery of his corpse thanks to a dream and the placement of part of it in a container that is then displaced from the first burial, it is a narration which echoes the *inventio* and *translatio* of heavenly bodies, including but not limited to St. Mark's.

As mentioned earlier, Branca in his footnotes specifies that Lisabetta's dream echoes many narrations of *inventio*. Nonetheless, without an accurate analysis that consistently associates the novella with the cult of relics, the element of the dream appears to be an isolated detail and not part of an organic apparatus in which the postmortem treatment of Lorenzo echoes that of a sacred figure. As we have seen, thanks to a closer observation of apparently minute details, like that of the description of how a person who appears in a dream looks and is dressed, we can assume that Boccaccio is presenting (to borrow Fonio's expressions) "una laicizzazione del *topos* agiografico" and a "Rifunzionalizzazione del linguaggio sacro" (175).

In addition to *re-functionalizing* the sacred language, I argue that Boccaccio also re-functionalizes, and thus profanes, sacred practices belonging to the cult of relics. Only after analyzing this tale with a specific theoretical and interdisciplinary approach that is attentive to

discerning sacred practices in a secular novella, we are able to detect some elements that enrich our reading of this already well-known tale. For instance, I believe that Lisabetta, in watering the pot of basil with her tears and other aromatic liquids, is a powerful image that Boccaccio re-functionalizes from the practice of the cult of relics. I argue that Boccaccio portrays the picture of Lisabetta watering Lorenzo's reliquary in an attempt to re-functionalize the fact that "olfactory liquids that imbued or permeated material objects in the context of worship functioned as a means of focusing attention on relic veneration and were an essential part of the cult and/or pilgrimage experience" (Brazinski and Fryxell 1).

Furthermore, we can now appreciate even more that the beheading of Lorenzo is not just an atrocious act made in a state of emergency, but also one of the many aspects that dignifies the young man's sepulture since it is a gesture that evokes the fragmentation of body-relics. Accordingly, Lisabetta's decapitation of Lorenzo does not violate the sacredness of his corpse, but rather elevates Lorenzo's burial to a sacred-like status. Day IV of the *Decameron* is unquestionably (also) the day of sepultures, and several tales like IV, 5 or that of Tancredi, Guiscardo, and Ghismunda (IV, 1) and Andreuola (IV, 6) demonstrate Boccaccio's deep involvement in the preservation of corpses and funerary practices. These tales create a contrasting mirror with the abandonment of such practice caused by the plague, which is responsible for the loss of society's values, including the burial, as narrated in the *Introduction* of Day I. Thanks to the analysis of the tale in parallel with the cult of relics, we can even better appreciate Boccaccio's rhetorical mastery. Indeed, the exhumation and fragmentation of Lorenzo's body not only emphasize the holiness of funerals but, indeed, thanks to the image of the well-growing basil, the text *literally* (and *literary*) gives Lorenzo's dead body new life.

Now, after witnessing a long series of similarities between the cult of relics, particularly those of St. Mark and Lorenzo's postmortem treatment, we might wonder whether in tale IV, 5 of the *Decameron* the young man is somehow depicted as a holy figure. I do not believe that this is the case. Even if we can metaphorically consider Lorenzo as a sort of martyr of love killed by the hands of the avid mercantile society, we cannot consider Lorenzo to be an actual martyr. If it is true that, on the one hand, Boccaccio gives Lorenzo's burial a solemn nuance (enriching his postmortem treatment with features that we can only find in hagiographic texts), it is also true that, on the other hand, Lorenzo's head becomes "corrotta" because it is subject to the law of human mortality. In addition, we can contemplate that the presence of a double layer of "terra" also serves to restrict the holiness of Lorenzo's body, which is not as sacred as his own sepulture. In other words, Lorenzo's corpse will inescapably decompose and remain human, but thanks to the extraordinary growth of the basil and a sort of hybrid *holy-human* sepulture, Boccaccio manages to spectacularly highlight the circularity of life and the sanctity of burials.

CHAPTER 4: THE PERSISTENCE OF THE SACRED: HOW ITALIANS KEEP ALIVE THE IDEA OF THE DIVINE WHILE PROFANING IT

“Se Dio vuole”

Being from a little town in Apulia in the south of Italy, I have heard and used the expression “se Dio vuole” an uncountable number of times. This expression is so common that people have been using it for an immense variety of topics all throughout the Italian territory; they even made a film with the title *Se Dio Vuole*.¹ The use of this expression applies to a remarkable range of registers and contexts that stretch from the most trivial, such as my mother speaking in dialect to her neighbor about what they are going to cook for lunch,² to more serious moments, like discussing when a relative will be dismissed from the hospital.³ On the one hand, as both my mother and her neighbor are openly active believers, and the culturescape of my little town is still traditionally Catholic, we can agree that such expressions might be a result and/or symptom of these circumstances. On the other hand, it seems more academically relevant to investigate on the reasons why a highly educated and well-known Italian scholar like Prof. Alessandro Barbero,⁴ who is openly a non-believer,⁵ commences his talk as a main guest at the *Festival della Mente* 2019 by saying, “Questa, se Dio vuole è l'ultima [delle tre rivolte popolari

¹ *Se Dio Vuole*. Falcone, Edoardo. 01 Distribution (Italy). 2015. Film.

² For instance, “sci Diu ole fazzu pasta e pasuli,” literally, “if God wants I (will) make pasta and beans.”

³ For instance, “sci Diu ole esse crai,” literally, “if God wants [that person] will exit [the hospital] tomorrow.”

⁴ Professor of Medieval History in the Department of Humanities at the University of Piemonte Orientale Amedeo Avogadro, and famous to a much wider audience thanks to his numerous collaborations with the Italian national television RAI.

⁵ The UAAR (Union of Rationalist Atheists and Agnostics) includes his name in the list “Famosi non credenti” (Famous people who are not believers) URL: <https://www.uaar.it/ateismo/famosi-non-credenti/>.

medievali che presenterò]⁶” (00:27-00:29).⁷ It is intriguing that the same expression used by two Catholics from the south of Italy in a very informal context, and in dialect at that, is used by an atheist professor⁸ in a festival in the north of Italy⁹ in quite a formal occasion which certainly involves a much higher register. This example seems to suggest that an expression which basically recalls divine will and providence is free to use by anyone, even a non-believer, for non-sacred discourse. This is exactly at the core of what my study describes as an act of profanation.

In this direction, since the relationship between the sacred and profane in Italy is so peculiar that the traditional debate on secularism and secularization fails to properly investigate it,¹⁰ in my study I would like to suggest the use of a new paradigm that would better depict the Italian scene, that is Giorgio Agamben’s concept of *profanation*. As I mentioned in the introduction of my work, for the Italian philosopher, “if ‘to consecrate’ (*sacrare*) was the term that indicated the removal of things from the sphere of human law, ‘to profane’ meant,

⁶ Literally, “This, if God wants, is the last one [of the Medieval popular uprisings that I will present]”.

⁷ Barbero, Alessandro. “Festival della Mente 2019 - Alessandro Barbero (3/3) - Le rivolte popolari nel Medioevo. La rivolta dei contadini inglesi (1381)”. *Youtube*, uploaded by Festival della Mente Sarzana, Sept 16, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjJtrdoSMwk>.

⁸ Who is from Turin, in the northwest of Italy.

⁹ The *Festival della Mente* takes place in Sarzana, in the province of La Spezia, in Liguria, a region in the northwest of Italy.

¹⁰ The debate on secularization significantly changed in the last decades. Although the decline of religion in Western society was perceived as “an undisputable ‘social fact’ during most of the twentieth century, more recent research calls both the evidence and the theoretical frameworks used in the secularization literature into question” (Vanderstraeten 69). Besides Philipp Mainländer, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and, more notoriously, Friedrich Nietzsche’s most emblematic statement that “God is dead,” the works which certainly had a remarkable impact on the debate on secularization were Auguste Comte’s *Système de Politique positive: ou traité de sociologie instituant la religion de l’Humanité* (1851-1854); Émile Durkheim’s *De la division du travail social: étude sur l’organisation des sociétés supérieures* (1893) and *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912); Max Weber’s *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* (1920); Talcott Parsons’ *Religion in a modern pluralistic society* (1966); Berger’s *The Sacred Canopy: Elements Of A Sociological Theory Of Religion* (1967); and, most recently, Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (2007). Furthermore, although my work is aware that Giorgio Agamben’s theory is in constant dialogue with both Walter Benjamin’s *Capitalism as Religion* and Mircea Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, entering into the debate would push the boundaries of my studies’ parameters, being too-often focused on the “capitalist religion” (Agamben 81), a theme that departs from my own use of the term “profanation.”

conversely, to return them the use of men” (73). More precisely, as the reading key of my analysis, I used a concept that Agamben borrows from Trebatius: for “the great Roman jurist ... profane is the term for something that was once sacred or religious and is returned to the use and property of men” (Ibid.). The main reason why I propose this model, rather than using the theories of secularization or disenchantment, is because we can find countless instances in which Italians return, or make available to their use, something that was once sacred or religious. In other words, in Italian culture there is an exceptional inclination to profane, and with my study I intend to show that this is a phenomenon that persists from Medieval novellas to today’s films and bar talk. Accordingly, in this chapter, rather than enquiring whether Italy is a secularized country or not, I will rather try to analyze the persistent and pervasive presence of sacred discourse (especially on the sacred body in the form of relics and religious artifacts) through the analysis of selected Italian literary and filmic texts that range from Boccaccio’s *Decameron* to Alice Rohrwacher’s *Corpo Celeste* (2011).

The chapter will be divided into four sections. In the first one, I will analyze the persistence of the sacred in a profaned form, and I will suggest why profanation, rather than secularization, is an effective starting point in examining the peculiarities of Italian culture. In the second and third parts, I will explore how the acts of profanation we observe in medieval novellas persist until today. In the second part we will see how this is conveyed in a comical tone, while in the third part we will witness that it can also be done without the will to make the reader/viewer laugh. The fourth and last part will be dedicated entirely to the sexualization of the sacred body.

4.1 THE PERSISTENCE OF THE SACRED IN A PROFANED FORM IN ITALIAN CULTURE

Confounding the confident forecasts of the prophets of modernism (Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, among others), the importance of the sacred has not diminished with the passage through the respective phases of industrial and consumer capitalism. On the contrary, from today's vantage point it is now evident that the overarching narrative of modernity—the myth of the progressive and emancipatory secularization of the West—is fundamentally myopic in regard to the persistence of the sacred. (Snyder, Falasca Zamponi, and Wittman 1)

Although my work is not meant to participate in the debate on secularization, secularity, and secularism on the global scale *per se*, this chapter will offer readings of texts through which we can see how the sacred vividly persists, albeit in a profaned form, in Italian culture. With respect to the Italian case, statements like Charles Taylor's "Everyone can agree that one of the big differences between us and our ancestors of 500 years ago is that they lived in an 'enchanted 'world and we do not'" (38) seem to be too hazardous or at least should require further consideration. Although the secularization theory's assumptions were a key element in the traditional approaches of sociology, it seems appropriate to point out that today, many scholars discredit or even totally reject these theories (Berger). As a matter of fact, the debate on secularization includes conclusions that are radically different. On the one hand, authoritative thinkers such as Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud all believed that religion would gradually fade into the background and fall out of significance with the advent of industrial society (Norris, Pippa, and Inglehart). On the other hand, especially in the last four decades, other prominent scholars like Harvey Cox and Peter

Berger are not only are rejecting those assumptions, but in fact speaking about a revival of religion. Berger – who was, at first, one of the main supporters of the idea that we live in a secularized society – argues that secularization never occurred, and that it was a “category mistake[s]” made by, and because of, a heavily-secularized international intellectual class (313).

The way he began one of his lectures¹¹ seems very emblematic:

Let me first take a matter where I very much changed my mind, and in fact it's the major area where, as a sociologist, I changed my mind; and that is the question of the relationship of religion to modernity. When I started out my work in sociology of religion, almost everyone in the field believed in what generally was called secularization theory, which when you take apart some of the pretentious verbiage of sociologists, really is a very simple thesis. It's a thesis that modernity leads to a decline of religion: the more modernity, the less religion; and almost everyone thought that at the time. This was when ... I started writing things and doing things beyond being a student, and it was not completely crazy. There were some reasons for saying this, ... I changed my mind not because of any religious or philosophical changes on my own, but simply because I concluded that the evidence simply did not support this thesis. And I was not the only one, almost everyone in the field came to the same conclusion: many of them about the same time ... (00:00-01:57)

We can agree that seeing a scholar who so drastically changes his mind is not very common and, if it does happen, it is worth wondering why. Another sociologist, Malcolm Hamilton, colorfully describes this “odd situation” among sociologists in favor of or against this theory “as if rather

¹¹ Berger, Peter. “Prof Peter Berger on Resurgence of Religion and Decline of Secularization Theory.” *Youtube*, uploaded by Ibrahim Ragab, Jan 18, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHlDyR102G8>.

economic historians were in deep dispute as to whether the industrial revolution ever actually occurred” (186). Indeed, many eminent thinkers like Émile Durkheim¹² and Rudolf Otto in the first half of the 20th century, “although none of them agree upon the causes or effects of this phenomenon,”¹³ have emphasized the persistence of the sacred in modernity” (Snyder, Zamponi, and Wittman 1).

Rather than directly entering the debate on whether Italian culture ever faced a substantial process of “disenchantment” (Weber), “re-enchantment” (Beck) or “desecularization” (Berger), my work is more inclined to register how, if, and to what extent the sacred (with a closer eye to the sacred body) is still as pervasive today as it was in the 14th century. My goal is to record the use of the sacred in non-religious discourse in the texts that I will examine. I will argue that the sacred still plays a crucial role in Italian culture even if it mostly persists in a profaned form that retains the idea of the divine, but (often) releases itself from the constraints of an institutionalized religion to which it is no longer necessarily subjected. If we agree that secularization refers to the historical process in which religion loses social and cultural significance (Beckford), I will attempt to demonstrate that this assumption at least partially contradicts the distinctive perception and representation of the sacred/profane dichotomy in Italian culture, placing particular emphasis on the sacred body. Given that in Italy, when something goes wrong, it does not go “down the toilet” or “out the window,” but “a farsi benedire”¹³; and since many Italians remember when wines are ready based on the calendar of saints (“*A San Martino ogni mosto diventa vino*”¹⁴), and refer to “a poor man” with “a povero Cristo,”¹⁵ I believe that the critical

¹² *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1912.

¹³ (Approximately) literally translatable with “go get blessed” (my translation).

¹⁴ Literally “On St. Martin’s Day every wort becomes wine” (my translation).

¹⁵ Literally “A poor Christ” (my translation).

debate should undertake a more focused study with a proper socio-historical and linguistic analysis on the peculiarities of Italian culture in relation to the use of the sacred in everyday life for non-sacred matters.

It seems appropriate now to establish the fundamental difference(s) between the use of the idea of profanation – which I borrow from Agamben – and other apparently similar concepts such as blasphemy and sacrilege. In other words, we need to determine how to discern an act of profanation from a blasphemous or sacrilegious one. For the TLIO (*Tesoro della Lingua Italiana delle Origini*), “*profano*”¹⁶ means “estraneo alla sfera del sacro e della religione e appartenente a quella secolare e mondana (rif. a una persona, un'azione, un'opera).”¹⁷ Consequently, *profanare*, as a verb, is the deed that makes something extraneous to the sacred and religious sphere. Outside of the oft-mentioned Trebatius/Agamben statement, we can find a definition of “*profano*” written by Boccaccio himself in his *Comento sopra la Commedia di Dante Alighieri*¹⁸ (italics added):

Profano propriamente si chiama quello luogo il quale alcuna volta fu sacro, poi è ridotto all'uso comune d'ogni uomo; siccome alcun luogo, nel quale già è stata alcuna chiesa o tempio, la quale mentre vi fu fu sacro luogo, poi per alcuno acconcio comune, trasmutata la chiesa in altra parte, è il luogo rimaso comune, e chiamasi profano; così si può dire degli spiriti dannati, essere stati alcuna volta sacri, mentre seguirono la via della verità, perciocchè mentre questo fecero, era con loro la grazia dello Spirito Santo, ma poichè

¹⁶ “1 Estraneo alla sfera del sacro e della religione e appartenente a quella secolare e mondana (rif. a una persona, un'azione, un'opera). 1.1 Sost. Chi è escluso dalla grazia di Dio, peccatore. 1.2 Sost. Chi non è iniziato ai misteri sacri di una religione. 2 Privato del carattere sacro avuto in precedenza, sconsacrato (un luogo, un edificio di culto).”

¹⁷ “Extraneous to the sphere of the sacred and religion and belonging to the secular and worldly one (ref. to a person, an action, a work)” (my translation).

¹⁸ Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Il comento sopra la Commedia di Dante Alighieri di Giovanni Boccaccio. Tomo II, nuovamente corretto sopra un testo a penna*. Firenze, Magheri, 1831.

abbandonata la via della verità seguirono la malvagità e le nequizie, per le quali dannati sono, *partita da loro la grazia dello Spinto Santo, sono rimasi profani.* (90-91)

Although Boccaccio is mainly referring to a place first and to a sinful behavior later, we can observe that his description of “profane” is based on the main idea that something was a certain way at first (“alcuna volta”, “fu”, “essere stati”), and that it later changes into something else (“trasmutata”, “abbandonata”) and remains in this way (“rimaso comune”, “sono rimasi profani”). Given this definition of *profano*, we can conclude that for Boccaccio, too, something “profaned” refers to a thing that was once sacred (“luogo il quale alcuna volta fu sacro”) and has returned to and for the use of all (“all’uso comune d’ogni uomo”).

On the other hand, again in the TLIO, we find that “*blasfemo*” (both as a noun and an adjective) means “che bestemmia” and “bestemmiatore.” The fact that there is not an actual equivalent in English that properly translates the term *bestemmia* (and all its derivations), and that the closest concept dictionaries mention is “blasphemy” (“to blaspheme”) or “(to) curse,”¹⁹ deserves a short digression. Translating *bestemmia* with “curse” is not completely incorrect, but rather incomplete. As a matter of fact, in Italian, to indicate a curse or to curse, there are other expressions like “dire parolacce” or “imprecare.” The concept of “bestemmia” diverges from cursing, cussing, or swearing because it requires an involvement with the sacred. More specifically, in any *bestemmia*, the subject that is cursed must be a sacred figure or element (e.g. God, saints, or anything related to them).²⁰ We can observe that *bestemmie* are mentioned in two

¹⁹ I looked up the word “bestemmia” in the Cambridge and Collins online dictionaries and consulted WordReference.com and Google Translate, and they all supplied the same entry: “blasphemy” or “curse.”

²⁰ This phenomenon is so distinctive of Italian culture that, while I was watching a soccer game in April 2021 (Torino-Juventus match, series A, Italian soccer league) on the ESPN broadcast, the British commentator Dave Farrar said, “Buffon (Juventus’ goalkeeper) was disqualified for blasphemy, those things that can only happen in Italy.”

of the most celebrated non-Italian literary works, James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Ezra Pound's *Cantos*. In *Ulysses* we encounter a *bestemmia* in a conversation among Italians²¹ that the author chooses not to translate into English:

Adjacent to the men's public urinal they perceived an icecream car round which a group of presumably Italians in heated altercation were getting rid of voluble expressions in their vivacious language in a particularly animated way, there being some little differences between the parties.

—*Puttana madonna, che ci dia i quattrini! Ho ragione? Culo rotto!*

—*Intendiamoci. Mezzo sovrano piu ...*

—*Dice lui, pero!*

—*Mezzo.*

—*Farabutto! Mortacci sui!*

(Part III)

Joyce mentions another *bestemmia* that he translates as “hangman god” (Part II), also used by Ezra Pound in his *Canto XXVII*, first in Italian and then with a reference/attempted translation in English (“bloudy ‘angman!”), which I will analyze later in this chapter.

Furthermore, as we know, Dante – in *Canto XIV*, while describing the third round of the seventh circle – includes the Blasphemers, which are those who commit violence against God. Boccaccio himself, while listing Ser Ciappelletto's numerous sins, writes that “Bestemmiatore di

²¹ I will mention another example later in this chapter.

Dio e de 'santi era grandissimo, e per ogni piccola cosa, sí come colui che piú che alcuno altro era iracondo” (*Decameron* I, 1).



Figure 6: Plate presumably dating back to the first half of the 20th century in which we read, “The civilized person does not blaspheme (bestemmia). Crime punishable under Article 724 of the Criminal Code” (my translation).

Although offensive and lacking propriety (as figure 6 suggests), this custom is so widespread in Italy that, “leggi contro la blasfemia hanno sempre fatto parte della storia dell’ordinamento italiano e, contrariamente ad altri paesi, la bestemmia è tuttora oggetto di forme repressive a tutela del buon costume e del sentimento religioso”²² (Merluzzi 1). Indeed, there is an article in the Italian *Codice Penale*²³ – art. 724 “Bestemmia e manifestazioni oltraggiose verso i defunti”²⁴ – which states that,

²² “Laws against blasphemy have always been part of the history of the Italian legal system and, contrary to other countries, blasphemy is still the object of repressive forms to protect morality and religious sentiment” (my translation).

²³ Criminal/penal code

²⁴ “Bestemmia and outrageous manifestations towards the dead” (my translation).

Chiunque pubblicamente bestemmia, con invettive o parole oltraggiose, contro la divinità o i simboli o le persone venerati nella religione dello Stato²⁵ è punito con la sanzione amministrativa pecuniaria da lire centomila a seicentomila. La stessa sanzione si applica a chi compie qualsiasi pubblica manifestazione oltraggiosa verso i defunti.²⁶ (Gazzetta Ufficiale)

Although this article prompted many issues regarding the legitimate use of the wording “religione dello Stato” for a country (Italy) that does not officially encode a state religion,²⁷ it is emblematic that this topic is still quite alive in Italy.

Speaking of very-alive topics related to the pervasive presence of the sacred body in Italy, a supposedly secular country, I would like to briefly mention a highly animated debate on the obligation to expose the crucifix in Italian classrooms and public workplaces that took place in Italy, especially between 2009 and 2011. On March 18, 2011, The European Court of Human Rights agreed with the government's appeal on the display of the crucifix in public schools. The sentence of the *Grand Chambre*, with fifteen votes in favor and two against, overturned that of November 3, 2009 (which had condemned Italy for the violation of religious freedom), accepting the appeal of Sole Lautsi, an Italian citizen of Finnish origin. The judges established that there

²⁵ Since the wording “i Simboli o le Persone venerati nella religione dello Stato” (“Symbols or Persons worshiped in the State religion” was declared unconstitutional – as Italy does not officially have a state religion – this article received the following update: “AGGIORNAMENTO (146) La Corte Costituzionale, con sentenza 18 ottobre 1995, n. 440 (in G.U. 1^a s.s. 25/10/1995, n. 44), ha dichiarato l'illegittimità costituzionale dell'art. 724, primo comma, del codice penale, limitatamente alle parole: ‘o i Simboli o le Persone venerati nella religione dello Stato’” (Gazzetta Ufficiale).

²⁶ “Anyone who publicly blasphemes (*bestemmia*) with invectives or outrageous words against the divinity or symbols or people venerated in the State Religion is punished with a pecuniary administrative sanction from one hundred thousand to six hundred thousand lire. The same sanction applies to those who make any public outrageous manifestation towards the dead.” (my translation)

²⁷ This article received further updates. For further information, please refer to Gianfreda, Anna. “Religious Offences in Italy: Recent Laws Concerning Blasphemy and Sport.” *Ecclesiastical Law Journal*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2011, pp. 182–197., doi:10.1017/S0956618X11000056.

are no elements that prove the supposed influence on the pupils had by the display of the crucifix in classrooms.²⁸

It seems appropriate to stress how this debate, in which Italians discussed sacred figures, was remarkably heated, but this is far from being an isolated episode. Indeed, as we have seen in the previous chapters, we can observe a comparable behavior that still encompasses the defense of sacred figures in the Italian peninsula, in *Decameron* II, 1, when the *Trevisani* get very angry at Martellino; in *Novellino* IV when Fra Mariano dares to doubt the veracity of the relic; or when in Giovanni Verga's *Vita dei campi* (1880), there is a conflict generated by what we can call inappropriate devotion, which leads to a *Guerra di santi*. Melchiorre Gioia (1767-1829), an Italian philosopher who is most known for his work on political economy, in his *Del merito e delle ricompense trattato storico e filosofico* (Book I, Capo Quinto, Conclusionione) methodically analyses what he believed were the “motivi impellenti” and the “Alterazioni cui soggiacciono in mezzo allo stato reale delle cose e delle affezioni umane” (262). According to Gioia, one of these “motivi impellenti” (besides *Interesse*, *Sensibilità*, and *Stima Pubblica*) is “Religione.”²⁹ Aside from some derogatory and misogynistic thoughts, such as “La religione degenera facilmente in superstizione nelle donne” (point 7; 262), Gioia remarks how religious zeal can easily mutate into fanaticism (“Si cambia agevolmente in fanatismo, allorchè è forte” (point 9)), or mix with intolerance and generate violence (“S’amalgama presto coll’intolleranza e può alterare le più amabili qualità dell’animo” (point 10)). As we have seen, in the Italian literary production the

²⁸ (RQuotidiano, “Crocifisso, l’Europa ribalta la sentenza: “Nessuna influenza negativa”, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, March 18, 2011.)

²⁹ Of which he discusses profusely in Book I, sections “Speranze e timori religiosi,” “Religione ne ’secoli d’ignoranza,” and “Inconvenienti de ’palliativi religiosi.”

inappropriate veneration that leads to violence is a topic³⁰ with a long tradition that goes from (at least) the 14th century until today.

After this long digression, returning to the difference between profanation and blasphemy, we still need to determine in a more practical way what an act of profanation is and the qualities that make it categorically different from a sacrilegious act or blasphemy. The current and widespread use of *profanare* in the Italian language today is “Compiere atti sacrileghi e violare oggetti o luoghi sacri: profanare un altare” and that it is a synonym of “*blasfemo*,” a synonym of “*sacrilego*” that means, “Che offende la divinità” (“profanare” in Sabatini-Coletti). Nonetheless, in the model that I would like to propose, borrowing the concept of Agamben/Trebatius, *profanare* is not exactly a synonym of blasphemy and sacrilege (which can still be considered synonyms). To explain this difference more effectively, I would like to propose a concrete example using the figure of St. Peter. Since sacrilege and blasphemy are acts that supposedly “offende la divinità,” we can conjecture that the act of destroying the altar of one of St. Peter’s churches can be considered a sacrilegious or blasphemous act. In my view, this is not an act of profanation because it lacks a fundamental element, that is the return to use, the new availability to the human, the switching from a sacred to a non-sacred sphere. Now, still using the figure of St. Peter as focal example, I would like to mention a popular sonnet written by Aldo Spallicci in the Romagnolo³¹ dialect, titled *E ’Rumagnùl*.³² Spallicci’s original sonnet tells of the

³⁰ For a more detailed analysis on this topic, refer to Ulrich, A. *God of one’s Own: Religion’s Capacity for Peace and Potential for Violence*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2010. Print.

³¹ From Romagna, a territory in Northern Italy in the region Emilia-Romagna.

³² I am including here in the footnotes the original version and the Italian translation as they appear on the website *Romagnazone.it* (<https://www.romagnazone.it/scopri-rimini-romagna/dialetto-e-tradizioni/scritti-romagnoli/poesie/e-rumagnul-di-aldo-spallicci.html>):

E ’Signor, fat e ’mond,e’va un po in zir /E cun San Pir e ’passa do parol; / e intant ch’j è int una presa,u i fa San Pir: / “La Rumagna t’lè fata e e ’rumagnùl? / Ui vo dla zenta sora a sti cantùr, / t’a n’vrè zà fè la mama senza e ’fiul”? / “Me a t’e ’farò, mo l’ha dal bròt manir / e a j ho fed ch’u n’gni azova gnianca al scòl”. / E ’daset ad chelz par tèra cun un pè / E e ’faset saltè fura ilè d’impèt / E ’vigliacaz de ’rumagnul spudè. / In mang ad camisa , svidurè int e ’ pèt, / un caplin rudè com un fatòr; / “ A so qua mè, ciò, boia ded ’S.....!”

mythical birth of the *Romagnolo*.³³ In a nutshell, the text narrates that God and St. Peter walk to observe the Creation and God tells the saint that something is missing. St. Peter answers that the reason is obvious: He made Romagna but did not make the Romagnolo to work the land. God replies that He could do it, but that he was unsure at first because the Romagnolo is a bad guy who cannot be educated, even with school. Then God tells St. Peter that since he insisted, He will do it. Thus, God kicks the ground, lifts a clod of earth that takes human form, and the Romagnolo appears. As the first act of his existence on earth, the Romagnolo *bestemmia*.³⁴ Very intriguingly, Ezra Pound will cite this very sonnet, including the actual *bestemmia*, and even some words in the Romagnolo dialect in his Canto XXVI³⁵ (1-10):

And God the Father Eternal (Boja d'un Dio!)³⁶

Having made all things he cd.

think of, felt yet

That something was lacking, and thought

Still more, and reflected that

The Romagnolo was lacking, and

Il Signore, fatto il mondo, va un po in giro / e con San Pietro scambia due parole, / e mentre sono in un podere ,gli fa San Pietro: / “La Romagna l’hai fatta, e il romagnolo? / Ci vuol gente sopra questi campi, / non vorrai mica fare la mamma senza il figlio?” / ”Io te lo farò, ma ha brutte maniere, / e credo che non gli giova nemmeno la scuola”. / Dette un calcio per terra con un piede / e fece uscir fuori lì dirimpetto / il vigliaccaccio del romagnolo sputato. / In maniche di camicia, sbottonato sul petto, / un cappellaccio a ruota come un fattore; / “Sono qua io, allora, boia del S....!”

³³ Person from Romagna, Emilia-Romagna, Italy.

³⁴ The word “*bestemmia*” in Italian can function as noun or as the third person singular of the verb *bestemmiare*, as is the case now.

³⁵ I used the text used in *The Cantos Project* (<http://ezrapoundcantos.org/index.php/canto-17-27-overview/113-a-draft-of-xxx-cantos/cantos-xxviii-xxx/xxviii/366-xxviii-poem>).

³⁶ Joyce mentions the same *bestemmia*, which he translates with “hangman god” (*Ulysses*, Part II)

Stamped with his foot in the mud and

Up comes the Romagnolo:

“Gard, yeh bloody ’angman! It’s me”.

Aso iqua me. All Esimo Dottor Aldo Walluschnig

There are two reasons why I mention this story. First, because, as we have seen, non-Italians, even as illustrious as Ezra Pound, are captured by the concept of *bestemmia* itself, as it is one of “those things that can only happen in Italy.” Second, and more relevantly to exemplify the concept of profanation, is the use of St. Peter in this story. I maintain that this is an act of profanation because the saint is removed from the sphere of the sacred and made available to use. Indeed, although this story recounts God’s Creation, the biblical episode is portrayed in a new – profaned – form that belongs to the human sphere. In other words, in the *Cultura Romagnola*, through the literary efforts of one of its most representative popular expressions, the author Spallicci manipulates the sacred scripture for a non-sacred purpose. This profaned narration is now free from the constraints of the institutionalized religious doctrine of the Church – in this case the biblical exegesis of the Creation, God, and St. Peter – but at the same time, it still preserves the ideas of the Creation, God, and St. Peter, which now belong to the human sphere.

It is important to underline that this phenomenon is not sporadic, but rather a constant of Italian culture. To provide a more visually powerful example of how Italians profane the sacred, we might consider the fashion designers Dolce & Gabbana’s series “*Sacro Cuore*” (Figures 8, 9, and 10).



Figure 7: Statue of The Sacred Heart of Christ preserved at the Bisceglie Cathedral (Bisceglie, Apulia, Italy) (cattedralebisceglie.it)



Figure 8: Dolce & Gabbana Earrings "Sacro Cuore rojo de cobre amarillo oro Cristal Sagrado Corazón Pendientes CLIPON" (eBay.es)



Figure 9: Dolce & Gabbana's shoe from the Sacred Heart collection "Décolleté in Retina con Cuore Sacro" (ikrix.com)



Figure 10: Dolce & Gabbana's Red Jacquard Cage Heel Sacred Heart Mary Jane Shoes (monalisalikes.com)

As we can see, the famous Italian fashion brand Dolce & Gabbana deliberately built an entire collection (that includes clothing and accessories) around the Sacred Heart of Christ (figure 7). This is probably one of the most direct examples of how the sacred is profaned as it is made

available to the use of humans, in this case becoming a commodity made by and sold to lay people.

Since one of the main elements under analysis in my research is relics, it seems appropriate to underline that one pair of shoes from the Sacred Heart collection (figure 10) is meticulously designed to emulate, and thus profane, a reliquary. In this direction, I would like to mention another instance in which we assist in an act of profanation that is somehow connected to a relic. Before introducing this specific example, it is necessary to determine if this type of profanation is a peculiarity of Italy or can be found elsewhere. Of course, the only way to answer this question would be to analyze samples from all the other countries; unfortunately, that would require a different kind of comparative work that I cannot include in my study. Nonetheless, I would still like to provide a small example that might show some peculiarities that I believe are very unlikely to be found in other countries. For instance, in figures 11 and 12 we can see that both artists, one from Italy (figure 11) and one from the United States (figure 12), made what we can assume to be some of their favorite characters into saints. Both works emulate the main characteristics of the saints they are profaning. *San Francesco Totti* is holding birds because the popular hagiographical narration of St. Francis of Assisi mentions that the saint could speak with birds, and other animals, while the Star Wars/Mandalorian version of the Virgin with infant Jesus meticulously reproduces the iconic positions, the halos, and the clothing of the two characters.



Figure 11: Graffiti titled “San Francesco Totti” by street artist TVBOY in Via Savelli, Rome, Italy (Romanews.eu)



Figure 12: Star Wars/Mandalorian characters emulating the canonical image of the Virgin with the Baby by artist Alexander Vance (elective.collegeboard.org)

Given these two works, one could reasonably conclude that this specific act of profanation is not a prerogative of Italian culture, as it can be also found in other countries/cultures. If that is empirically true, I would like to provide an example of how Italian culture gives birth to acts of profanation that demonstrate Italians' radical mass knowledge of the cult of relics and of the saints in general. In 2019, Fox and Sky Italy created a TV commercial to promote the new season of the show “Romolo + Giuly.” The point I would like to stress is that the protagonist of the commercial is still the soccer player Totti, but contrarily to the artwork I have just analyzed, this time it is not simply “San Francesco Totti” (basically the title “San(to)” before his name), but “San Pupone da Porta Metromia.” By supplying the origin of this fictional saint, they add a specificity that we can find in a saint's name which, in most cases, is followed by a toponym (e.g. San Francesco D'Assisi, Santa Caterina da Siena, Santa Rita da Cascia, etc.). In the commercial (figure 13), the main actor of the tv show, Alessandro D'Ambrosi, acts as a believer

who asks for divine intervention. San Pupone da Metronia miraculously appears (emulating the way in which saints typically appear in hagiographic narrations) and explains to the believer how he can solve his problem.



Figure 13: Francesco Totti as San Pupone da Metronia for Fox/Sky Italy's commercial of the show Romolo + Giuly. (AdnKronos.com).

If this is already a clear act of profanation of sanctity, there is another element that I would like to underline now, which is the wooden spoon that the saint is holding (figure 13). This detail is also included in another Sky Italy commercial (figure 14) that is part of the “Miracles happen only on Sky Sport” (a name that is already very emblematic in this sense) campaign which includes many soccer players from the Italian Series A soccer league depicted as saints (in the same manner as Totti in figure 13). What deserves more attention is the fact that each saint, including San Pupone da Metronia, is methodically designed with careful research on what can

emulate, and thus profane, what is notoriously known to be a given saint's symbol, relic, clothing, pose, or scenario that distinguishes each saint from the others.



Figure 14: Francesco Totti depicted as a saint with his distinctive “cucchiaio (spoon) for the Sky Sport Italy campaign “Miracles happen only on Sky Sport.” (Sky Sport)

For instance, one can recognize that a *santino*³⁷ depicts St. Anthony and not another saint because of the presence of a bell, or fire, or a pig, or – more relevantly to understand Totti's emulation – a man holding a rod (*il bastone di Sant 'Antonio*). I believe that the authors of both campaigns, using Totti as a testimonial, are specifically emulating sacred objects that each saint's hagiographical tradition states as distinctive of that saint. For a non-Italian audience, this

³⁷ Holy card/picture, a religious artifact that is present in the car and in the wallet of many Italians

fictional saint (Totti) with a spoon might not mean so much, but for an Italian audience (that follows soccer), that spoon is immediately connected to Totti's famous *cucchiaio* (spoon), which is a risky but spectacular way to kick a soccer ball, something like a lob. Totti as a soccer player is famous for this skill as he performed it in many occasions. For this reason, most Italians will instinctively associate the spoon he holds as a saint with his skill as a soccer player. This automatic association is only possible because distinctive objects of saints are a notion that is well-established in the Italian audience; and we can assume that Sky Sport Italy's authors were well-aware and took advantage of this very idea.

In a final example among an uncountable number of cases, I would like to briefly discuss the *Cassatella di sant'Agata* or *Cassatina siciliana*, which the Catanesi³⁸ call (in their dialect) *minnuzzi di sant'Àjita*.³⁹



Figure 15: Minnuzzi di sant'Àjita (lasiciliainrete.it)



Figure 16: St. Agatha's Martyrdom, Códex Bodmer 127, ca. 1170/1200 (catania.italiani.it)

³⁸ People from Catania, Sicily

³⁹“ St. Agatha's breasts”

As we can see in figure 15, this pastry⁴⁰ resembles women's breasts to the point that – always for those things that can only happen in Italy⁴¹ – on an Australian website there is an article titled “Why everyone in Italy is eating nipple cakes” (Marchetti).⁴² Besides the correlation between sexuality and sacredness, a topic that I will discuss later in this chapter, we need to mention that this pastry intentionally bears resemblance to a woman's breast. More specifically, it should recall St. Agatha's breasts. In the hagiographic tradition of this saint, her breasts play a pivotal role as they are the symbols of her martyrdom (figure 16). As we have seen in the previous chapters, devotees have a strong desire to get in physical contact with a saint's relic in order to acquire some of its *virtus*. In addition, as I briefly mention in Chapter One, Hahn shows that besides touching with one's hand, there are stories in which pilgrims “even bite relics in order to come into the most intimate possible contact with the object of devotion” (14). Consequently, we cannot exclude that, to a certain level, the Catanesi desire to celebrate their beloved saint with a pastry is also sparked by their longing to come into the most intimate possible contact with the object of devotion.

⁴⁰“ The minni (or minnuzzi) of Saint Agatha are mouth-watering half-sphere sponge cupcakes resembling the breasts of a young woman. Filled with oozing fresh ricotta goat cheese mixed with cinnamon, lemon juice, sweet Marsala liqueur and dark chocolate crumbs, they're covered in a thick, crunchy icing and topped with a red candied cherry resembling a nipple.” (Marchetti)

⁴¹ See note 20.

⁴² Marchetti, Silvia. “Why everyone in Italy is eating nipple cakes.” *News.co.au*, 23 Jan. 2019, www.news.com.au/lifestyle/food/eat/why-everyone-in-italy-is-eating-nipple-cakes/news-story/6d1331866c691487395c19b92bc5cfec. Accessed 3 May 2020.

4.2 THE PERSISTENCE OF THE SACRED: A COMICAL ACT OF PROFANATION

“Scherza coi fanti / e lascia stare i santi!”

These are not just the words that the scandalized *sacrestano* pronounces in Puccini's *Tosca* (Act 1 Scene III), but words that form one of the most popular proverbs in Italian culture. Italians use it as much today as in the past,⁴³ and it differs from the proverbial “*noli miscere sacra profanis*” that we can find in the tradition of Ancient Rome, such as in Horace (*Ep. I, 16, 54*), because it is based on *saints* (“*santi*”) and not simply on *holy* or *sacred* (that in Italian would be “*sacro*” or “*santo*”). Noticeably, the existence and necessity of creating such a proverb in which one is invited not to joke about saints is somehow a symptom that this is a custom to be regulated, as we have seen in the example of *bestemmiare* and the Italian penal code. Then, if we consider that Boccaccio's first *novella* in his masterpiece is titled “*Ser Cepperello con una falsa confessione inganna uno santo frate, e muorsi; ed essendo stato un pessimo uomo in vita, è morto reputato per santo e chiamato san Ciappelletto,*” we can already appreciate that this proverb has been abundantly disregarded in the Middle Ages. In addition, if we take into consideration that, for instance, an Italian newspaper in 2019 fashions a political satire using sanctity⁴⁴ (figure 17) we will soon notice that this custom is still pervasive in Italian culture.

⁴³ This proverb was included in Pescetti, Orlando. *Proverbi Italiani, E Latini: Per uso de'fanciulli, che imparan grammatica, raccolti*. Spineda. 1629.

⁴⁴ In this headline, we can see the politician Matteo Renzi who is the leader of the political party “Italia Viva”, which is mocked through the flag that the saint is holding, that says “Forza Italia Viva”, mixing the name of his political party with that of Silvio Berlusconi's – Forza Italia – as they shared the same idea on the subject. The headline says “San Matteo patrono degli evasori” (“St. Matthew, patron saint of the (tax) evaders”). Even in this case, we can see how meticulously the satirist included the distinctive object of the saint, in this case the flag and the money that the saint is holding.



Figure 17: Front page of the Italian newspaper ilFattoQuotidiano, Dec 13, 2019. (ilfattoquotidiano.it)

Now that we have a better idea of the extent to which the sacred, in a profaned form, permeates Italian culture, we still need to consider how it is possible that something sacred becomes the protagonist of a hilarious narration. In Chapter Two, we see the pivotal role of the *predicatori* and the novella, in particular the *Decameron*. As we witness in that instance, the people show more interest in those “predicatori emuli di giullari e romanzieri e buffoni” (Branca, *Studi sugli...* 190), which indicates one way the comical entered into sacred discourse. In her “Hagiographic parodies, popular devotion, and the satire against the friars in the *Decameron*,” Tufano proposes as central the parody of sacred literature, the derision of popular devotion, and the mocking

modalities employed to describe members of the clergy (123). The number of examples in which the sacred is the object of a hilarious parody in the Italian novella tradition is too high to be mentioned. Indeed, as Fonio points out,

Quando poi la cultura popolare entra in gioco nelle dinamiche di produzione e trasmissione degli aneddoti, l'*exemplum* diventa una novella appena tinta di motivi religiosi, con l'apertura di spazi al comico e al grottesco e lo sviluppo di una componente presente ab origine nell'agiografia non storica (137)

Fonio proposes a convincing number of cases⁴⁵ (“scelti per illustrare il comico di parola e di situazione in agiografia” (180)) that show hagiographical texts were already full of comical episodes. Nonetheless, he points out that,

La matrice comica ... Non si tratta infatti di un genere in origine agiografico (o comunque radicalmente influenzato da un riutilizzo agiografico) e quindi passato nella novella, ma di una forma preesistente all'agiografia, e che conosce con la novella una diffusione molto più ampia di quella che ha in agiografia. (Fonio 180)

According to Fonio, then, the comical with “motivi religiosi” preexisted hagiography and found more fertile ground in novellas, which would become a great container of it.

Given that, we still need to find an antecedent process that allowed the comical to enter sacred discourse. Although this process is likely impossible to be empirically proven, we might find some intriguing notion that Agamben exposes to analyze the relationship between the sacred and *play*,

⁴⁵ Such as “i moti di san Lorenzo” (Legenda aurea, CXVII) “san Tiburzio” (178), nella vita di san Sebastiano (Legenda aurea, XXIII) (178), and “santi Ciro e Giovanni” (180).

The passage from the sacred to the profane can, in fact, also come about by means of an entirely inappropriate use (or, rather, reuse) of the sacred: namely, play. It is well known that the spheres of play and the sacred are closely connected. Most of the games with which we are familiar derive from ancient sacred ceremonies, from divinatory practices and rituals that once belonged, broadly speaking, to the religious sphere. The *girotondo* was originally a marriage rite; playing with a ball reproduces the struggle of the gods for possession of the sun; games of chance derive from oracular practices; the spinning top and the chessboard were instruments of divination. (*Profanations* 75)

In this passage, Agamben indicates that the passage from the sacred to the profane can involve an inappropriate (re)use of the sacred. Although he mentions a more physical form of play that derives from ancient sacred ceremonies, we can conjecture that the inappropriate (re)use of the sacred can also be a verbal or written *gioco*. If it is the case, we could be allowed to use Agamben's concept of profanation to label all the numerous instances in which the Italian popular, literary, and filmic production *plays* with the sacred; and in doing so, it still keeps the idea of the divine centrally-located in the culturescape of Italy despite the visible decline of the Church's power as institution. After all, the same Agamben writes that, "play frees and distracts humanity from the sphere of the sacred, without simply abolishing it" (*Profanations* 76). Along these lines, we can explore how in Dino Risi's *Operazione San Gennaro* (*Treasure of San Gennaro*; 1966), Nino Manfredi and Totò play with the sacred. In this film, a group of thieves tries to steal the famous treasure of St. Januarius that even today, according to its museum's official website,⁴⁶ is considered "the most precious in the world." Armanduccio Girasole, known

⁴⁶ *Museo del Tesoro di San Gennaro*, <https://museosangennaro.it/en>. Accessed 2 June 2020.

as Dudù, interpreted by Nino Manfredi, has a hilarious (one-sided) conversation with the statue of San Gennaro and asks him for permission to steal his treasure. Conversing with the statue of a saint is a very common practice in both film and in real life. As a matter of fact, with the same series of shot-reverse shots (see figure 18 and 19), we will later see another dialogue between the main character of Fellini's *Amarcord*, Titta, and the statue of St. Louis (see figure 24 and 25).



Figure 18: Statue of San Gennaro in the film *Operazione San Gennaro* (Interfilm)



Figure 19: Dudù (Nino Manfredi) who talks to the statue of San Gennaro in the film *Operazione San Gennaro* (Interfilm)

Furta sacra is not only the main plot of *Operazione San Gennaro*; indeed, Carlo Mazzacurati's *La Lingua del Santo* (2000) is a comedy about the holy thief of the tongue-relic of San Antonio da Padova. Interestingly, the film was based on a non-fictional *furta sacra* of the chin of St. Anthony of Padua that happened on October 10, 1991.⁴⁷ This is not an isolated case, as there was an entire police operation called *operazione Reliquia*, “che ha portato al sequestro e recupero di numerosi beni ecclesiastici, soprattutto reliquie e reliquiari, rubati da diverse chiese lombarde” (Marchesoni). The head of the operation, Captain Andrea Ilari, reported that, “in Lombardia nel

⁴⁷ “Felice Maniero racconta il furto della reliquia.” *Il Mattino di Padova*, Sept 27, 2011, <https://mattinopadova.gelocal.it/padova/cronaca/2011/09/27/news/felice-maniero-racconta-il-furto-della-reliquia-1.1170849>

2012 i furti nelle chiese sono stati 54 e 56 nel 2011 e rispettivamente 180 e 230 gli oggetti trafugati"" (Ibid.).

Another Mazzacurati film that deals with sacred narration is *La Passione* (*The Passion*; 2010). As the title already suggests, this film is about the Passion of Christ. Despite that, Mazzacurati's work is a comedy that stages the sacred narration of Jesus in a drastically different way when compared to other representations of the Passion, such as Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). The plot of Mazzacurati's film revolves around the figure of the main character, Gianni Dubois, interpreted by Silvio Orlando, who is a film director with an artistic crisis. The damaged pipes of his house ruin the wall of the adjacent building, which is, unfortunately for the unlucky Gianni, a church adorned with a 16th century fresco. The local municipal administration offers him a way to avoid reporting this fact to the *Soprintendenza dei Beni culturali* (Superintendency of Cultural Heritage); he will need to direct the traditional sacred representation of the Passion of Jesus with their local actors. The actor to play Jesus is a character named Abbruscanti (interpreted by Corrado Guzzanti), a local amateur meteorologist who is terrible at acting and particularly touchy. Consequently, this film is probably one of the most illustrative filmic texts that helps us understand how an act of profanation makes the representation (in this case) of the most dolorous pages of Christianity free to use, in a comical tone at that. This film helps maintain the presence of the divine – very alive in Italian culture – while it simultaneously removes it from the sphere of the sacred.

4.3 THE PERSISTENCE OF THE SACRED: A SERIOUS ACT OF PROFANATION

If in most cases both *novellisti* and *registi* profane the sacred elements to entertain their audiences with something that is (among many qualities) humorous, in Chapter Three we observe that some of the acts of profanation do not have a comical tone or effect. Indeed, though some scholars read Lisabetta's tears in *Decameron* IV, 5 as something that can almost make the reader's laugh,⁴⁸ it is important to keep in mind that this tale is a tragedy (as both the main characters will eventually die) that is included in Day Four of the *Decameron*; a day in which the king, Filostrato, openly orders the Brigata to base their *novellare* on love stories with *malus exitus*. As we have seen in Chapter Three, Boccaccio profanes many elements of the cult of relics, such as the *visio in somniis*, reliquaries, odor (of sanctity), etc.

In this direction, it seems appropriate to underline that there are cases in which the sacred is not profaned in the sense that we have seen so far, but is rather included in a non-sacred related narration. One example in which a director inserts many sacred elements without necessarily profaning them is *Le Quattro Volte* (*The Four Times*; 2010). This film, written and directed by Michelangelo Frammartino, beautifully engages with life in four forms and stories: life lived as human (an old shepherd), as animal (a goat), as vegetation (a tree), and as mineral (coal). In this oeuvre we can find many sacred practices such as processions and, in one of the four parts – the one that focuses on the tree - how devotees mold their culturescape for the festivity of their patron saint (St. Alexander). Nonetheless, the part that I would like to highlight is a practice that the old shepherd (interpreted by Giuseppe Fuda) performs in the first part of the film, the one about the human. The man is visibly sick, as he coughs very often, and as a cure –

⁴⁸ "... il paradosso di un piangere che può quasi far ridere - non la protagonista di gioia, si intende, bensì il lettore" (Barbera 114).

or what he believes to be a cure – he drinks a daily solution of water and *holy* dust (figure 20) that he obtains from the local church.



Figure 20: The old shepherd (Giuseppe Fuda) drinks the solution of water and holy dust in *Le Quattro Volte* (Cinecittà Luce)

As we have seen in Chapter One, in the cult of relics we have examples, such as the *Latte della Vergine*, in which the sacred matter is presented as dust. As De Mattheis elucidates,

Non c'è da meravigliarsi, quindi, che dal VI secolo cominciassero a circolare reliquie conosciute come 'latte della vergine' che non sono altro che pezzetti di roccia polverizzata e compressa in piccoli panetti. Si tratta di un tipo di roccia calcarea (carbonato di calcio) la cui polvere, se diluita in acqua, diventa bianca come il latte e prende la stessa consistenza. Il commercio di queste polverine per secoli è stato molto

fiorentine, soprattutto a partire del XIII secolo ... La polvere veniva sciolta in acqua e bevuta oppure poteva essere mescolata con gli alimenti.⁴⁹ (“Il latte...”)

If in *Le Quattro Volte* the dust is collected from a church in which there are many religious artifacts, such as statues of various sacred figures, in the Italian literary and filmic tradition there are also examples in which this practice reaches a form of cannibalism. Indeed, as we have seen in Chapter One, tale IV of Masuccio Salernitano’s *Novellino* includes a scene that depicts Frate Geronimo showing the crowd that the relic is real (and not spurious as his accomplice Fra Mariano pretends to believe) by making Fra Mariano drink a solution of holy water and a small piece of the relic’s nail (“raso un poco de l’ungchia de la miracolosa mano, e postala in un bicchiere d’acqua benedetta, e aperta la bocca di fra Mariano, quel pretiosissimo liquore in gola gli gittoe ...”⁵⁰). Thanks to these two examples – which hail from two different artistic forms, novella and film, one from 1476 and the other from 2010 – we can state that this desire of devotees to obtain physical contact with the relic to the point of eating it is a practice with a long tradition that still persists today. In addition, as these two works involve the sacred in two radically different ways – with (*Novellino* IV) or without (*Le Quattro Volte*) a markedly comical tone – we can hypothesize that the Italian novella and filmic production includes secular works that deal with the same sacred practice with or without a comical nuance. Many other great *novellisti* and *registi* convey the peculiar way in which in Italian culture the sacred and the profane coexist without necessarily narrating it in a comical tone. For instance, Grazia Deledda

⁴⁹ “It is no wonder, therefore, that from the sixth century relics known as ‘the virgin’s milk’ began to circulate, which are nothing more than pieces of crushed rock compressed into small blocks. It is a type of limestone rock (calcium carbonate) whose powder, when diluted in water, becomes white as milk and takes on the same consistency. The trade of these powders has been very flourishing for centuries, especially since the 13th century ... The powder was dissolved in water and drunk or it could be mixed with food.” (my translation)

⁵⁰ “taken out a little knife, pared off a small shred of the nail from the miraculous hand, which thing he put in a beaker of holy water, and then, having opened wide the mouth of Fra Mariano, he poured down his throat the precious liquor.”

in her *Leggende Sarde* (1899), particularly in the stories of *San Michele Arcangelo*, *Nostra Signora del Buon Consiglio*, and *La leggenda di Gonare* and *San Pietro di Sorres* (published in *Natura ed Arte*, 1894), offers a secular narration that is heavily imbued with popular (in this case Sardinian) stories about saints. Deledda's prose, especially in *San Michele Arcangelo*, also includes references to the practice of kissing the sacred body/object and the description of the clothing that a given saint is wearing in a *visio in somniis*. Likewise, Luigi Pirandello in his *Novelle per un anno* (1922) makes frequent reference to the sacred. In *L'avemaria di Bobbio* he conveys doubts about relics, while in *Il Tabernacolo* he offers a picture of how Italians mark their culture- and landscape with privately-made *aediculae* and tabernacle shrines built without (institutionalized) permission (neither from the city council nor from ecclesiastical authorities).⁵¹

Moreover, Italo Calvino in his *Fiabe italiane* (1956) presents stories, such as *Il devoto di San Giuseppe* (Verona), in which a devotee shows devotion only to St. Joseph, and when he dies, St. Peter does not let him enter Paradise. So, the devotee asks St. Joseph to intervene, and he does. He tells St. Peter that if he will not let this man in Heaven, he (St. Joseph) together with his wife and son (the Virgin Mary and Jesus) will go somewhere else. St. Peter is then forced to let this devotee enter Paradise. If this story is narrated with a marked comic tone that seems that of a *barzelletta*,⁵² other *fiabe* in Calvino's collection of popular stories deal with the sacred in a more serious way. For instance, in *Il bambino che diede da mangiare al Crocifisso* (Catania), we find a relationship between a child and the crucifix, a theme some directors include in their films.

Since I believe that on some occasions this phenomenon also involves the sexualization of the

⁵¹ A topic that I will analyze in the near future, for which I have already collected photo-video data.

⁵² *Le Barzellette* are not simply jokes, as many dictionaries tend to – too quickly – state. They are jokes but they must be in form of stories – which can be more or less long - that have the purpose of make the listener laugh. Remarkably for my study, there is a huge number of *barzellette* that not only deals with the sacred, but also have as main characters saints and other sacred figures.

sacred body, I will leave the analysis of this element to the next section of the chapter, which is specifically focused on the sexualization of the sacred.

4.4 THE SEXUALIZATION OF THE SACRED BODY

Anyone who reads the tale of Ferondo and his *Purgatorio* (in *Decameron* III, 8), or the way in which Rustico explains the *Inferno* to Alibech (in *Decameron* III, 10), or what Frate Puccio does with Puccio di Ranieri's wife while the gullible man tries to deserve *Paradiso* (in *Decameron* III, 4) finds a testimony of the persistent way in which Boccaccio mixes the sacred and eros in his work. As Eisner shows in *Eroticizing Theology in Day Three and the Poetics of the "Decameron,"* these tales are far from the only instances in which the *Decameron* intermixes the sacred and the sexual. Likewise, Fonio points out that, "Comico nel *Decameron* significa spesso osceno, specie se filtrato dal sacro. Penso al «santo cresci in man» (II, 7) o al «san Cresci in Valcava» (II, 7, 109), o ancora alla «resurrezion della carne» (III, 10, 13)" (177). If Boccaccio's mixture of sacred and eros is wrapped in a comical tale, in this last section of this chapter we will see that the range of profanations in the Italian literary and filmic tradition is broad and includes stories with a more intimate connection between the human and the sacred body that is not necessarily comical.

The Italian literary tradition includes instances that, by using the sacred, are even more directly sexual than the peculiar way in which Rustico explains how to put the devil in *Inferno* in *Decameron* III, 10. Of course, given the topic, it is hard to find an author that is more explicit about sex than Pietro Aretino. In his *Ragionamento della Nanna e della Antonia* (1534), he writes, "Dopo questo, la prudente badessa gli grappò la reliquia: e porgendole la bocca, la

baschiava soavemente; poi imbertonata di essa, la masticava e la mordeva” (Giornata Prima).⁵³

Although not in the form of a novella, but in a discourse on mixing the sacred and the sexual in the Italian tradition, we could not overlook an example in which the male sex member is called “reliquia” and also includes biting and eating, which are actions that, as we have seen, are part of the actual cult of relics. We could also include another instance in which the male sex member is juxtaposed to a relic. In Dino Buzzati *I Miracoli di Val Morel* (1971) there is a story, 28. *I diavoli incarnati*, whose narrative involves an exorcist who sexually abuses a woman with an “asticciola metallica ch’egli pretendeva fosse stata ricavata da un chiodo della Santa Croce” (70). In this narration, the relic (which is now specified as “un chiodo della Santa Croce”) is the physical object that will be used for the rape. In some Italian novellas, for instance *Trecentonovelle* (CCVII)⁵⁴ and Masuccio Salernitano’s *Novellino* (III),⁵⁵ we can also find hilarious *ex-indumentis* relics that are nothing more than the underwear left by a friar after committing adultery. In both cases, the cheating wife and the friar tell the cheated husband that the underwear they found is that of a saint (St. Francis ’in *Trecentonovelle* and St. Griffon’s in the *Novellino*).

We can find another example that still mixes the sacred with the sexual, though in a less-explicit manner, in Masuccio Salernitano’s *Novellino*, novella II, in which we read,

... con lei in braccio sopra del preparato letto se gittoe. Quello che tutta la notte se facessero, ciascuno el può facilmente considerare; so ben io, che, secondo per la giovene

⁵³ I used the edition Aretino, Pietro. *Ragionamento della Nanna e della Antonia*. Edited by Giorgio Bàrberi Squarotti. Rizzoli, Milano, 1988.

⁵⁴ A Buccio Malpanno d’Amelia è fatto credere, coricandosi un frate minore con una sua donna e lasciandovi le brache, che quelle son quelle di santo Francesco, ed egli se ’l crede.

⁵⁵ Fra Nicolò da Narni, innamorato de Agata, ottiene il suo disiderio; vene il marito, e la moglie dice il frate averla con certe reliquie liberata; trova le brache del frate a capo del letto; il marito si turba; la moglie dice esser state di san Griffone; el marito sel crede e lo frate con solenne processione ne le conduce a casa.

fu a l'ultimo palesato, non solamente al numero del quinto evangelista pervennero, ma agli sette doni del Spirito Santo.

As we can see, the sacred here is used to fashion an ironic situation with regard to two young people who spend the night in bed. Instead of using a direct metaphor of sex members as Aretino (and also Rustico with Alibech) does in his work, Masuccio Salernitano leaves the reader to imagine the sexual activity of the two, and to do so, he borrows, and thus profanes, the Gospels/evangelists and the gifts of the Holy Ghost.

After mentioning some examples from the great variety of literary works that mix the sacred with eros, I will now propose a series of examples and comparisons of Italian directors who turn the celestial sacred body into a visible and touchable recipient of sexuality. My analysis will concentrate on Alice Rohrwacher's *Corpo Celeste* (2011), Roberto Rossellini's *Roma Città Aperta* (1945), and Federico Fellini's *Amarcord* (1973) in the context of the model provided by Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* III, 10.

At first glance, the story of Alibech (*Decameron* III, 10) and that of Marta (*Corpo Celeste*) seem completely different. Nonetheless, if we go deeper into analysis, we can observe that both, even if in radically different ways, have their first sexual-related experience with a male body through the *sacred*. The resemblance between these two characters and stories are several. Both Marta and Alibech come from a different place, and they have just recently moved elsewhere (Alibech from the "città di Capsa in Barberia" and Marta from Switzerland). They are almost equal in age, Alibech "d'età forse di quattordici anni" and Marta is 13 years old. Most importantly, their curiosity leads them to explore new places on their own during a period of their lives in which they also explore their religious faith. In Boccaccio's tale we observe Alibech "La quale, non essendo cristiana e udendo a molti cristiani che nella città erano molto

commendare la cristiana fede e il servire a Dio, un dì ne domandò alcuno in che maniera e con meno impedimento a Dio si potesse servire.” Here we can perceive Alibech’s thirst of knowledge about God and her proclivity to ask questions related to faith. Marta has a similar approach. Besides appearing not very enthusiastic about it, Marta is attending catechism, that is to say a place in which “molti cristiani...commend[ano] la cristiana fede e il servire a Dio.” Just like Alibech, Marta wishes to understand her faith in first person. She is not satisfied to hear and trust words; she feels the need to go and explore firsthand. This is why Marta, driven by the same “fanciullesco appetito” of Alibech, asks the meaning of the phrase “Elì, Elì, lamà sabactàni?” while her classmates simply follow the suggestion of Santa (the *catechista*) and say it without knowing the meaning. What looks even more similar is how Alibech’s spiritual journey echoes Marta’s *confirmation*, and how it also involves the transformation of the body during puberty. To explain the meaning of the sacrament of the confirmation, the holier-than-thou Santa asks a student (Marco) to read something (“con una letturina capirete meglio” (00:12:45)):

[Marco] “Stai crescendo ed è per te un’esperienza stupefacente. Quante novità di giorno in giorno: la tua voce cambia, il tuo corpo si trasforma”.

[Santa] [loudly, inviting students to repeat] “Si trasforma...”

[Everyone] [loudly, monotone] “Si trasforma ...”

[Marco] “Ti senti inutile, annoiato, depresso, non sai qual è il tuo posto nel mondo. Noi lo sappiamo. La Chiesa è la risposta che cerchi”.

[Santa] [loudly, inviting students to repeat] “La Chiesa...”

[Everyone] [loudly, monotone] “La Chiesa...”

[Marco] “Sentire lo spirito è come indossare dei meravigliosi occhiali da sole che ti permettono di vedere le cose in un'altra maniera. È tramite lui che devi guardare il mondo.

[Santa] [loudly, emulating an explorer] “Guardare il mondo...”

[Everyone] [loudly, monotone] “Guardare il mondo...”

In this *letturina*, it is clear that all the transformations of the body during puberty are taken into account. The body is evolving and adolescents are disoriented. It is suggestive that the *letturina* presents a supposed *spiritual* solution, the Church, for a *corporeal* transformation. Nonetheless, the concept that I would like to stress in the *letturina* is that if “non sai qual è il tuo posto nel mondo ... Noi lo sappiamo.” It is indicative is that the answer the Church suggests is the Church itself. If we keep this in mind, we might find similarities in Alibech's path for her first sexual experience. The young girl is starving and tired of her exploration in the desert and finds shelter in the little house of a “santo uomo.” When he asks her what she was doing alone in the desert, she replies that, “spirata da Dio andava cercando d'essere al suo servizio, e ancora chi le 'nsegnasse come servire gli si conveniva.” She needs help just like the adolescents in *Corpo Celeste*. If the Church in the *letturina* indicates the Church itself as the answer, this *santo uomo* tells Alibech that the answer to what she seeks is another “santo uomo” (“Figliuola mia, non guari lontan di qui è un santo uomo, il quale di ciò che tu vai cercando è molto migliore maestro che io non sono; a lui te n'andrai”). It is here that, with a *holy* man who actually tricks her,

Alibech will have her first sexual experience. It is here that Rustico “le ’nsegnò come star si dovesse a dovere incarcerare quel maladetto da Dio.” In the tale of Alibech, we can observe that Boccaccio uses a religious-related element (“rimetter il diavolo in inferno”) to build a tale based on sexual desires that will also make all the narrators laugh (“Mille fiata o più aveva la novella di Dioneo a rider mosse l’oneste donne, tali e sì fatte loro parevan le sue parole” (III, Conclusion)). If the combination of the sacred elements, sexual desire, and comical tone is clear in the tale of Alibech – and as I will show later in the cases of *Amarcord* and *Roma Città Aperta* – in *Corpo Celeste* the comical tone is practically nonexistent.

In this part of the chapter, I will speculate that Marta explores her sexuality with the *body* of Christ. In this film there is a human-sized crucifix that plays an important role in the plot and, I argue, in Marta’s sexual exploration. It is important to remark that this *corpo celeste* has a fully-human body that will become the topic of discussion of the curious adolescents who promptly sexualize it from the very first instance of its mention in the film (00:21:49):

[Boy] ma nudo...nudo completo?

[Santa] Sì

[Girl] E quanto è grande? Grandezza naturale?

[Santa] Sì, sì...

[Boy] “ma anche lì sotto?” [the class laughs]

[Santa] Bambini, non ci siamo capiti, il corpo di Gesù è un corpo diverso dal nostro, è un corpo spirituale, celestiale, santo [...]
Si tratta di un crocifisso figurativo, vuol dire che si vede la figura di Gesù...tutta!

Despite what Santa is trying to explain, the adolescents' observations are all oriented towards the *manliness* of the body of Christ. Suggestively, the scene which precedes this corporal description of Jesus' body is pivotal in that Marta disrobes and observes her body in transformation. The transition between these two shots matches the two naked bodies that will eventually come into contact later in the film. The words of the boy, "ma nudo...nudo completo?" immediately follow the scene in which Marta was completely naked.

It seems clear that Marta is in the process of discovering her sexuality throughout the film. This aspect is particularly visible in the scenes of her first menstrual cycle, her first experiences with bras, and the consequential fights with her older sister. I will now place even greater stress on the correspondences between the newly-sexualized body of Marta and the sexualized body of Christ. In order to explain the mechanism of this act of profanation, we need to take into account that the sexualization of the body of Christ is a deeply-rooted phenomenon. Camille explains that, "The image of the Resurrected Christ in the *Zouche Hours* is an eroticized, gender-bending and penetrable body" (77). Furthermore, he adds that, "The devotional urge was not merely visionary but involved all the senses, especially touch" (77). Accordingly, we can speculate that Marta slowly *touching* the body of Christ is not an act free from sexual instinct.

Moreover, it is imperative to underline that the sexualization of the body of a holy figure is not an isolated case, but integrated in a long Italian filmic tradition. Indeed, many *registi scherzano coi santi*, like Roberto Rossellini and especially Federico Fellini. For instance, in *Roma Città Aperta*, the statue of San Rocco is humanized and sexualized (00:20:22).



Figure 21: Don Pietro (Aldo Fabrizi) who realizes that the statue of San Rocco is in front of a naked female body in *Roma Città Aperta* (Minerva Film).

Here Rossellini plays with the three characters' gaze (figure 21). Don Pietro first rotates the female naked statue so that her body will not be in the field of view of San Rocco, but then, once he rotates it, he sees that in the gaze trajectory there is still the backside of the naked statue. Eventually, Don Pietro will rotate both statues so that the saint will not be exposed to the view of

the naked body. This gesture shows that Don Pietro attributes potential sexual desire to the statue of San Rocco. It is symptomatic that the only, or one of the very few, scenes in which Rossellini tries to make the spectator laugh in *Roma Città Aperta* is organized around the statues of a saint and a female naked body.

Amarcord is surely a *Galeotto* film, and we might say that Fellini's endorsement of sexual elements in this film can be compared to Boccaccio's. In many scenes there is a blending between the representation of a saint or another holy figure and sexual desire. Then, if we add that all these scenes are comical, we again arrive at the same pattern we find in Boccaccio and Rossellini: sacred body, sex, and comical tone. If in the case of Rossellini we assist in a sort of sexual tension between the two statues, in the case of Fellini we see the involvement of a human's desire toward the statue. In *Amarcord*, these *corpi celesti* are also the *objects* of desire. One specific scene that perfectly exemplifies this aspect is when the boys go to see the *Monumento della Vittoria*. Once in front of the statue, Titta in voice-over says (00:35:08), "Questo è il monumento della Vittoria e lo andavamo a vedere tutti i giorni e io me lo sognavo anche la notte" (figure 22).



Figure 22: “Monumento alla Vittoria” in *Amarcord* (Dear International).

After this shot, there is one immediately after that shows the boys mimicking sexual intercourse with their hands and bodies (figure 23). Fellini, in this scene, as in many others, uses a technique in which, repeatedly, a shot that shows the male gaze is followed by a reverse shot with a close-up of female body parts as objects of desire.



Figure 23: Titta and his friends mimicking sexual intercourse (to supposedly have with the statue of an angel in *Amarcord* (Dear International).

In this example, we can see that Fellini flashily emphasizes the human features of what appears to be an angel. This angel has a *tangible* and *visible body*, and it is deprived of its heavenly nature because it functions as an object of desire for the boys. Conceivably, Titta and his friends are sexually attracted to the statue because “It also seems probable that the historic linkage of statues with fertility, sex, and the erotic is making a contemporary appearance” (Thomas 40).

Sexualizing the body of an angel is a practice that Boccaccio also particularly favors, as we can observe in the tale of Frate Alberto who “dà a vedere ad una donna che l’Agnolo Gabriello è di lei innamorato, in forma del quale più volte si giace con lei” (*Decameron* IV, 2). In this tale, Frate Alberto ardently desires Madonna Lisetta, but she refuses him because she is married. Right away, he realizes that she is very conceited and that he could play with that in order to trick her (“Frate Alberto conobbe incontanente che costei sentia dello scemo e,

parendogli terreno da 'ferri suoi, di lei subitamente e oltre modo s'innamorò"). At this point, Frate Alberto contrives a perfect way of tricking the woman into having sex with him. In order to achieve his perverse plan, the friar tells the woman that the angel Gabriel is in love with her and that he wants to meet her. She is very happy and believes the friar's words. To accomplish his plan, the friar mentions that angels, being heavenly creatures, do not have tangible human bodies:

Ora vi manda egli dicendo per me, che a voi vuol venire una notte e dimorarsi una pezza con voi; e per ciò che egli è agnolo e venendo in forma d'agnolo voi nol potreste toccare, dice che per diletto di voi vuol venire in forma d'uomo, e per ciò dice che voi gli mandiate a dire quando volete che egli venga, e in forma di cui ed egli ci verrà; di che voi, più che altra donna che viva, tener vi potete beata.

The very gullible woman ("Donna Zucca al vento, la quale era anzi che no un poco dolce di sale"; "donna Pocofila"; "Madonna Baderla") accepts and points out that the archangel could present himself in any form that he wants ("e oltre a questo, che a lui stesse di venire in qual forma volesse, purché ella non avesse paura"). The diabolical plan of the friar will succeed when he effectively asks the woman to designate his own *body* as the *recipient* of the angel's *immaterial body* ("Ma voi mi potete fare una gran grazia, e a voi non costerà niente; e la grazia è questa, che voi vogliate che egli venga con questo mio corpo."). Thus, Frate Alberto takes advantage of the dynamic of celestial figures not having a tangible body.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ I analyze this tale in greater depth in a paper titled *Relics in Boccaccio's Decameron: The Displaying of the Archangel Gabriel in VI.10 and IV.2* which I presented at the American Boccaccio Association's 4th Triennial Conference in October 2019.

The scene which more than any other contains the combination of the three elements – sacred body, eros, and comical tone – is that of the confessions of the boys in *Amarcord*. These confessions are entirely based on their sexual desires. Sex and confessions are a longstanding combination that has been studied for years,⁵⁷ and the Italian literary and filmic traditions are particularly rich with examples. This wide range include examples in which, thanks to a confession, a man tries to trick a woman with a confession (*Decameron* IV, 2), a woman tricks a (male) friar to get in contact with another man (*Decameron* III, 3), and a woman who tricks her husband who disguises as a priest (*Decameron* VII, 5).

In *Amarcord*, the confession scene is undoubtedly comical and shows a series of flashbacks in which the boys think back to their lustful moments when the priest asks them the question, “Commetti atti impuri? Ti tocchi?” (00:36:46). In the first flashback, Titta and the boys lustfully stare at the backsides of some women. The scene is comical because Titta’s voice-over ironically says, “Che cosa credi che veniamo a vedere il giorno di Sant’Antonio, quando te benedici gli animali? Le chiappe delle pecore?” After this comment, which once again associates the figure of a saint (St. Anthony) with sexual desire, Fellini uses the same technique of shot-reverse shot he utilizes in the scene of the angel. The boys’ eyes and the backsides of the women sitting on their bicycles are accentuated. The long scene of Titta’s confession continues with the priest saying a very emblematic phrase, “Lo sai che San Luigi piange quando ti tocchi?”⁵⁸ (00:36:51) This scene is relevant to the demonstration of how saints are associated with sexual desire. If the naked angel of the *Monumento alla Vittoria* were only the *object* of desire, here San Luigi is considered as a man in all his carnal and human deficiencies because he is also presented

⁵⁷ Foucault analysis this mix sex and confessions in his *The History of Sexuality* (Volume I: The Will to Knowledge, and Part III: *Scientia Sexualis*).

⁵⁸ “Do you know that St. Louis cries when you touch yourself/masturbate?” (My translation).

as the *subject* who desires. Indeed, after the priest's warning, Titta, looking directly into San Luigi's eyes (figure 24), says, "Sì, sì, piangi pure, tanto io non te lo dico se mi tocco se no fai la spia al babbo," and then adds "Oh, perché te non ti tocchi?"



Figure 24: Titta who looks the statue of San Luigi in the eye and talks to him about sexual desires (shot). Amarcord (Dear International).



Figure 25: The statue of San Luigi pictured as if the statue was talking to Titta about sexual desires (reverse-shot). *Amarcord* (Dear International).

Thanks again to the shot-reverse shot technique (figures 24 and 25)—this time softer and less flashy probably thanks to the absence of a female body—we can better experience the direct dialogue Titta has with San Luigi. Fellini in the scene of Titta’s confession uses the saint in various ways that range from holy to carnal, but always in a comical tone. First, the saint is presented as a moralizing holy tool against Titta’s carnal desires (“Lo sai che San Luigi piange quando ti tocchi?”). Then, the boy renders San Luigi human by accusing the saint of reporting his behavior to his dad. In this case, the saint still holds a moralizing task against the sin but, at the same time, is accused of a human habit himself, that of being a spy. Finally, the boy completes the *humanization* and *sexualization* of the saint by saying, “Oh, perché te non ti tocchi?” By doing so, Titta destroys all the boundaries between human and divine, terrestrial and celestial, tangible and intangible, corporeal and mental, and (especially) sexual and non-sexual.

With his question, Titta brings San Luigi down to the human level in which sexual desire and masturbation are, in his view, essentials of everyday life. As we have seen, in *Amarcord* the saint goes from being a moralizing tool for the priest who refers to him in the third person (“*piange*”) to a sort of *partner in crime* with bodily vices to whom Titta directly and informally speaks using the second person singular (“*piangi...te...fai...ti...tocchi*”)⁵⁹ as he would do with an intimate friend.

Thanks to the analysis of the sexualized statues of saints in *Roma Città Aperta* and *Amarcord*, we can continue our speculation on the corporal relationship between Marta and the body of Christ. One might argue that Marta is just a little girl who genuinely and innocently establishes contact with the crucifix. After all, there are other examples in which a child and the crucifix come into physical contact. One filmic example of this *topos* is *Marcelino Pan y Vino*. This film, based on José María Sánchez Silva’s novel, was very popular in Italy and the imagery of Marcelino feeding Christ is now iconic. In addition, nearly the same story – depicting a young boy feeding the crucifix – is collected by Italo Calvino in his *Fiabe Italiane* (186 “Il bambino che diede da mangiare al Crocifisso (Catania)”). Despite these two precedents, I argue that the case of Marta is essentially different. The scene that I select for close analysis is the scene in which, I claim, Marta has her first sexual encounter with a male body, which in this case is that of Christ.

On the one hand, the physical contact between Jesus and Marcelino in the main two scenes of *Marcelino Pan y Vino*⁶⁰ lasts just a few seconds, and the little boy seems to be particularly concerned about Christ’s human needs, such as light and fresh air (as he opens the

⁵⁹ Lamentably, the English subtitles on *Kanopystreaming.com* translates “*Piangi, piangi* pure...” with “Let him weep...”, thus losing the aspect that Titta addresses his words directly to San Luigi.

⁶⁰ When the boy gives the bread to Christ, and when Jesus embraces him to make him die (in order to go to Paradise and see his mom and Jesus’s mom).

windows), hunger (as he offers the crucifix some bread; figure 26), and thirst (as the little boy gives Jesus a beverage). Plus, the shots of the physical contact emphasize the movement of Christ's hand towards Marcelino and the bread (figure 27).



Figure 26: Marcelino gives a piece of bread to Jesus on the crucifix in *Marcelino Pan y Vino* (Chamartín).



Figure 27: Jesus on the crucifix tries to reach the bread that Marcelino is offering him in *Marcelino Pan y Vino* (Chamartín)

On the other hand, we need to state that the equivalent sequence in *Corpo Celeste* goes from 01:18:30 to 1:20:17. I believe that this passage is crucial to understanding why Rohrwacher titled her film *Corpo Celeste* and how much this narration – which involves the sacred – encompasses Marta’s sexual curiosity. Marta is not Marcelino because she is in a phase in her life in which she discovers her sexuality. This scene, thanks to the straight-on angle of framing (figure 28) and the extreme close-up of Marta’s hand on Christ’s body (figures 29, 30, and 31), gives the viewer a sense of erotic intimacy. This sensation is also emphasized by the darkness of the scene. The church is empty and dark (to the point that I had to increase the brightness on figures 28, 29, 30 and 31 by 50%, for it would otherwise be difficult to evaluate), and only a beam of light makes it through the window. This scene is even more intimate because of the direct sound and the absence of extra-diegetic sounds. Moreover, the modulated rise in volume

emphasizes even more the rubbing of Marta's hand on the dusty crucifix (figures 29, 30, and 31), and consequently offers the spectator not only a visual but also an acoustically warm experience. This intimate moment will abruptly end with the high pitch of Don Mario's voice ("Marta, dobbiamo andare, sù!") and Marta putting her jacket back on (perhaps alluding to the dressing/undressing present in sex scenes).



Figure 28: Marta sitting on the body of Christ (straight-on angle of framing) in *Corpo Celeste* (Istituto Luce Cinecittà).



Figure 29: Marta touching the face of Christ in *Corpo Celeste* (Istituto Luce Cinecittà).



Figure 30: Marta touching the hand of Christ in *Corpo Celeste* (Istituto Luce Cinecittà).



Figure 31: Marta touching the feet of Christ in *Corpo Celeste* (Istituto Luce Cinecittà).

This scene, together with the one in which Marta disrobes and looks at herself in the mirror and then takes a bath, simply shows the natural behavior of adolescents who are discovering their bodies. These two scenes represent Rohrwacher's attempt to destabilize and shock the *male gaze*, or indicates that she simply could not care any less to please it. According to Mulvey, the male

gaze puts “its fantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly” (19). Furthermore, Barker states that the cinematic experience is a “full-bodied engagement with the materiality of the world,” and through cinema’s *tactility*, the viewer opens up to an “*intimate* experience” and a “*close* connection” rather than a distant experience of observation (2). If we take Mulvey and Barker’s statements into account, we can observe that in these two scenes the male viewer feels uncomfortable and destabilized because the female body displayed in a sexual context is that of a peripubescent girl. Contrarily to the bodies of La Gradisca, the tobacconist, and the statue of the *Monumento alla Vittoria* that our tactile eye can touch in Fellini’s *Amarcord*, Marta’s body is not styled according to the male gaze’s pleasure. Furthermore, the scene in which Marta touches the *earthly* body of Christ closely places a male body in the spotlight, subverting a long-standing male-centered dynamic that traditionally highlights the female body. Thus, the male gaze opens up to an *intimate* experience and a *close* connection with sexual context that displays two types of bodies that are not merely there for its pleasure. In addition, the act of profanation itself of sexualizing the body of Christ also plausibly helps this destabilization.

In conclusion, we have seen that the presence of saints’ bodies is *solid* from the Middle Ages until today. That is, they are solid in both connotations of the word: *solid* as extensive, because saints are everywhere, and have deeply modeled and still model the Italian culturescape, making them people’s “intimate friends” (Brown, *The Cult of the Saints* 50); and *solid* as concrete, because, as we have seen, statues of saints make them tangible to human *vision* and *touch*. Furthermore, proximity to these *humanized* bodies potentially creates sexual desire. As in the case of *Corpo Celeste*, the body of Christ is not only a heavenly body; it is indeed also a human body with all its manly characteristics. Christ’s corporality incites Marta’s sexual curiosity in a period of her life in which she discovers her sexuality.

It is true, the allure of the sacred body is a constant that we can appreciate on a large scale of texts written by many pivotal Italian *novellisti* and *registi*. Rohrwacher's film is based on the binomial *corpo/celeste*. The Italian director not only presents this apparent oxymoron through the religious and dogmatic relationship between the two terms, but also shows the sexual implications that arise when a heavenly figure also has a tangible body. From the Middle Ages until today, we can observe texts that include the combination of three factors: the sacred (body), sexual desire, and a comical tone. However, in many other cases, only two of these elements are present: for example, *Corpo Celeste* lacks the comical tone, while, at least at first glance, the tale of Frate Cipolla lacks reference to sexual desire.

On the one hand, in *Amarcord*, no matter if made of flesh and bones or marble, Fellini uses the female body “as sexual objects ...[and] leitmotif of erotic spectacle” and he does it in a flashy manner, totally in agreement with his style, using a flashy shot-reverse shot that repeatedly shows the male gaze and its object of desire. In his film, women “are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (Mulvey 19). On the other hand, in *Corpo Celeste*, the body that is being gently touched and looked upon (and probably desired) is that of a male heavenly body. Christ's maleness is emphasized with a close-up of his most masculine features, which are his beard (figure 29) and his full body structure from hands (figure 30) to feet (figure 31). Furthermore, the dust on his body, on which Marta repeatedly blows, plus the effort of Don Mario and Marta to carry the heavy crucifix into the car, are other signs that make this *corpo celeste* undoubtedly tangible. Symptomatically, as is the case of the Monumento alla Vittoria in *Amarcord*, this *heavenly-body-statue* is the trigger of sexuality. Fellini displays sexual desire throughout his film and it is certainly one of the pivotal keys of *Amarcord*. As we have

seen, the scene that includes the most sexual references is that of the flashbacks during the boys' confession. It seems symptomatic that the matching of sexual desire and heavenly bodies, exposed in a comical tone, involves the statue of San Luigi, the statue of an angel (Monumento alla Vittoria), a religious festivity linked to another saint (the blessing of animals during "il giorno di Sant'Antonio"), and that all these short stories within the story are glued together with another sacred element, the sacrament of the confession. Fascinatingly, Rohrwacher's *Corpo Celeste* also has as the primary plot and skeleton of her film another sacrament, the Confirmation.

I would like to conclude with a shot (figure 32) from *Corpo Celeste* (00:25:21) that effectively exemplifies the mixing of a sexualized human and sacred body. Although sexualized and visually intermixed with the sacred (the crucifix), this scene is not presented with a comical tone. This fact provides an example in which we can see that in the Italian literary and filmic production, the sacred body is also profaned in a non-comical way.⁶¹

⁶¹ Probably—though it would deserve a much more focused analysis—because this *regista* is a woman.

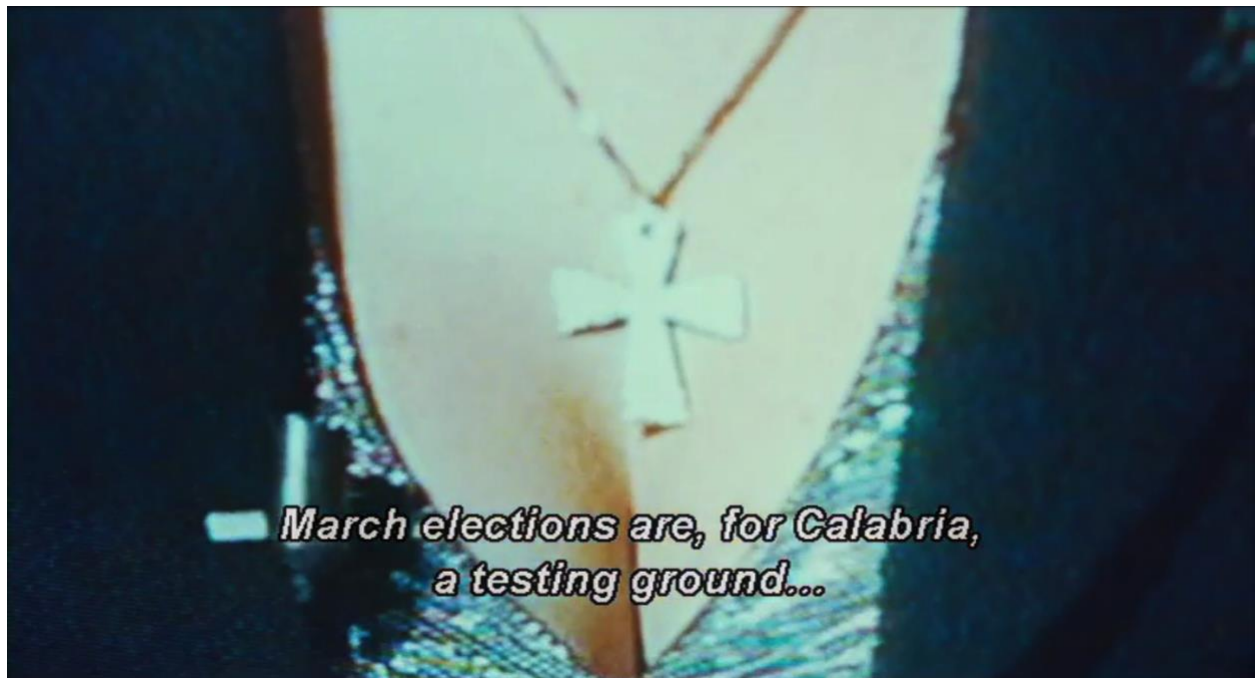


Figure 32: The sexualized neckline of a news reporter with a large crucifix near her breasts in *Corpo Celeste* (Istituto Luce Cinecittà).

CONCLUSIONS

I hope that my scholarly effort contributed to a more interdisciplinary—thus complete—understanding of the concept of relics and religious artifacts. Indeed, as it is certainly true that the study of these religious elements is extensive in fields like theology, anthropology, and archeology, the materiality of the sacred is still a relatively unexplored subject in the literary and filmic critical debate. Accordingly, I hope that my reading contributed to help both studies. Thanks to the specific reading that is always in dialogue with the history of relics and all the mechanisms of such cult, we were able to perceive that Boccaccio, with his *operazione*, was able to parody/profane many aspects of the cult of relics, from the overexcitement of the mob (the *calca*) to the peculiar characteristics of relics' *inventio* and *translatio*; as we seen in the cases of San Ciappelletto (*Decameron* I, 1), and Lorenzo's sepulture (*Decameron* IV, 5). In addition, thanks to this specific reading, we were able to observe that Boccaccio has created a twist of tales in which the *Decameron* performs both as a parody text (as it mocks the cult of relics) and parodied text (as it mocks its own parody) as we have seen in the tale of Martellino (*Decameron* II, 1). This specific reading of how the *Decameron* made us appreciate even more the mastery of Boccaccio, also in relation to the sacred matter. As we have seen, the tale of Lisabetta and Lorenzo is abundant of hagiographical elements that evoke various aspect of the cult of relics. Thanks to this reading, we are now able to appreciate Lisabetta's *visio in somniis*, not only as a sporadic element that recalls a long-standing tradition of saints' *inventio*, but as a dense network of references that make Lorenzo's burial a magnificent parody/profanation of the cult of relics.

In addition, my study offered the opportunity to grasp new elements to add to our canonical reading of medieval and renaissance novellas. For instance, too many and too clear

were their *contaminationes* with hagiography and chronicles to be ignored. Moreover, this attentive reading was also necessary to reconsider some of the assumptions that have been conjectured with a traditional reading of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, especially regarding Frate Cipolla's tale (VI, 10). As a matter of fact, the lack of a proper analysis of Frate Cipolla's relics through an extensive theological, religious, and hagiographical perspective, has prevented us from grasping Boccaccio's knowledge of the sacred matter. For instance, since we too-often considered the friar's relics just as a series of *internal* references within the tale, our understanding of the novella was deprived of what "dente", "mascella", and the fragment of the Holy Cross meant for Boccaccio and his medieval culture on a non-fictional level. As we have seen, a too detached reading of this tale can lead even one of the most prominent Boccaccio's scholars to affirm that making the coal seem a sacral object involves greater sleight of mind if compared to a feather, forgetting that the coal of St. Laurance is indeed a legitimate relic with a long-standing tradition. This might be both, a warning that makes us realized that we might have made many of these mistakes, and a proof that re-reading Boccaccio's masterpiece (or other texts) with a more interdisciplinary approach is certainly fruitful.

It is undeniable that my study has some clear limitations that I hope I will solve in the near future. For instance, my aspiration to include texts from so many different periods and forms, and to use theoretical tools from so many disciplines lead to a series of issues. For instance, the verbal expressions, the fashion designs, the advertisement that I have mentioned in my work are essential for my study as they empirically show that the sacred discourse is still very persistent today. Nonetheless, it is obvious that these different sources require a specific analysis with tools that I have not integrated in my dissertation.

In addition, for an appropriate study of the cult of relics and religious artifacts, further considerations must be made on some aspects that I only briefly mentioned. Among the most crucial, I would like to investigate more deeply on the full spectrum of ideas that Agamben explores in his *Profanazioni*. Another pivotal point that is fundamental for a study on relics and that needs to be expanded is surely what relics and reliquaries mean in relation to the history of religions. In this direction, it would be fundamental to explore what relics and reliquaries meant for the shift of paradigm from one in which the religious activity is based on the sacrality of a sacred space to a later one in which the fulcrum of the religious activity is a person. In a nutshell, it should be studied more deeply the position of relics and religious artifact in the shift from sacred space to sacred person.

The main argument on which my thesis was built on—and that I hope I even partially resolved or shed a light on—is to determine if the concept of *profanation* is a better tool to observe the peculiarities of Italian culture more effectively, if compared to the idea of secularization that even some of its advocates are now disregarding (Berger). Indeed, though, to a certain degree, the process of secularization is inexorable, I argue that secularization should be understood not as declining religion *per se*, but rather as the declining scope of religious authorities. With my study I tried to show that Agamben's idea of profanation might be a better tool to analyze Italian culture more productively, a society that appropriates the narration of sacred, making it free to use. My study was driven by research questions that have been neglected for too long, but that should be of high interest. For instance, to the best of my knowledge, there are not many scholarly efforts that are determined to shed a light on why can Italian *novellisti* in the Middle Ages first, and then *registi* in the 20th and 21st century later, were and still are so free to talk about the sacred in such a peculiar and blasphemous way. Exploring

the *volgarizzamenti* and *contaminationes* somehow helped our understanding of how the novella appropriates the sacred narration. Perhaps, we can now try to see a little clearer why Franco Sacchetti in the 14th century, and Masuccio Salernitano in the 15th century¹, could so freely talk about St. Francis'² and St. Griffon's³ underwear, or how Fellini and Rohrwacher can stage a boy who asks St. Louis if he masturbates, or a teenage girl who experiments her sexuality on a human-size crucifix. We now have more theoretical ground to trace an arch that connects those novellisti's freedom to profane the sacred discourse with today's registi and the Italian pop-culture in general. In addition, our analysis of various types of text by Deledda, Pirandello, Rohrwacher, and Frammartino—just to name a few—allows us to determine that the persistency of the sacred in a profaned form in Italian culture, is not only conveyed in a comic tone, as it is often assumed. Finally, as there are no doubts that the religious institution has lost control over the centuries, it is also true that—although in a profaned form—the socio-cultural relevance of the divine in Italy is still very alive; *non c'è santo che tenga!*

¹ And for that matter, in stories in which a man is trying to get sexual benefit through those assumed relics.

² *Trecentonovelle* (CCVII) ("A Buccio Malpanno d'Amelia è fatto credere, coricandosi un frate minore con una sua donna e lasciandovi le brache, che quelle son quelle di santo Francesco, ed egli se 'l crede").

³ *Il Novellino* (III) ("Fra Nicolò da Narni, innamorato de Agata, ottiene il suo disiderio; vene il marito, e la moglie dice il frate averla con certe reliquie liberata; trova le brache del frate a capo del letto; il marito si turba; la moglie dice esser state di san Griffone").

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