# 6

# *The* Decameron *and Its Early Critics*

The ten young men and women who tell the tales that constitute the *Decameron* do so in order to gain pleasure, which in turn promotes their well-being. We have looked at this reasoning as it appears in the introduction and at the end of the storytelling, but they are not the only places where the *brigata* discusses its motives. At the beginning of the fifth story of the ninth day, Neifile asserts that "we are assembled here for no other purpose than to rejoice and be merry" (p. 701). In an interesting passage located halfway through the hundred tales, Dioneo introduces the last story of the fifth day with a reference to the group's central concern:

> . . . we are more inclined to laugh at scandalous behaviour than virtuous deeds, especially when we ourselves are not directly involved. And since, as on previous occasions, the task I am about to perform has no other object than to dispel your melancholy, enamoured ladies, and provide you with laughter and merriment, I shall tell you the ensuing tale, for it may well afford enjoyment even though its subject matter is not altogether seemly. [P. 470]

He goes on to offer a summary of the responses he thinks his tale should elicit, including laughter at the wife's "amorous intrigues." Laughter and "allegrezza" are the goals of the storytelling, and they replace "malinconia" (p. 680). Dioneo does not directly mention the woes of the plague, which would be psychologically destructive; his allusion to their effects, the ladies'

melancholy, is a sufficient and tactful reminder of the rationale for supplanting pestilence with pleasure.

Dioneo's theory of laughter helps illuminate the relationship between entertainment and morality in the *Decameron.* Although it is a human failing, nevertheless we laugh at "scandalous behaviour" rather than "virtuous deeds," especially when we are detached from it. Even this tale with material less than "onesta" will provide "diletto." In articulating this truth Dioneo establishes a moral frame of reference for evaluating the action of the tale; laughter at the wife's behavior entails some recognition that it is unworthy. Such comic detachment reinforces the distinction, quoted at the end of the previous chapter, that Panfilo draws at the conclusion of the journey between stories and morals, literature and life. Certain kinds of people might misunderstand the *Decameron* fictions, read them pornographically; but the *brigata*'s perspective is wiser, enjoying people's antics without becoming seduced by them. Throughout the work Boccaccio stresses the moral behavior of the company even though it listens to stories of immoral acts, and as we will see shortly he makes a similar point about reader responsibility in reference to the idle ladies for whom he composed the work. The book's playful but pointed subtitle reminds us of the moral value of reading it maturely and critically. The *Decameron* stories may be a Galeotto, a go-between, as Dante's Francesca called the book and author she read; but unlike her, the *brigata,* and by implication any wise reader, will find in its tales therapeutic rather than carnal stimulation.[1]

It will do so in great part by considering not just the content of the stories but also the skill with which they are told. The first narrative of the sixth day makes this principle clear: a knight's inept presentation of a good story elicits a subtle criticism from the well-bred and witty Madonna Oretta. This tale, at the center

[1]For more detailed discussion of this famous allusion see Hollander, *Boccaccio's Two Venuses,* pp. 102–6 and n. 44, which cites some exceptions to the company's usual detachment from the sexual *materia* of the tales; Millicent Joy Marcus, *An Allegory of Form: Literary Self-Consciousness in the* Decameron, Stanford French and Italian Studies 18 (Saratoga, Calif.: Anma Libri, 1979), pp. 20–21, which should be read in the context of her full thesis; Mazzotta, 68–69, and further in "The *Decameron:* The Literal and the Allegorical," *Italian Quarterly,* 72 (1975), 62–63, who stresses Boccaccio's concern with the pornographic potential inherent in fiction.

of the *Decameron* as are Dioneo's literary observations the day before, functions as a microcosm of the entire work, for the knight's performance occurs in the context of a company wandering around the countryside for their "recreation." His artistic disaster causes Oretta physical pain: "She began to perspire freely, and her heart missed several beats, as though she had fallen ill and was about to give up the ghost" (p. 484). As Franco Fido points out, the intense reaction—in addition to its value as humorous exaggeration—points to "the power of words over reality," suggests that the literary achievement of the *Decameron* is itself "an answer to the plague" in that good art can "salvage" what has been lost through fortune or error.[2] It also reveals a sly twist to one of the theories discussed in this book: the principle that literary delight confers physical benefits here gains reinforcement from an amusing vision of a negative instance in which literary displeasure produces sickness.

On one day, however, the *brigata*'s controlled merriment fades, and this "aberration" is worth attention for what it implies about the journey as a whole.[3] The ruler of the fourth day is Filostrato, who, as his name signifies, is desperately in love with one of the seven ladies and fearful that his passion will never be requited. Hence he chooses a topic "which applies most closely to myself, namely, *those whose love ended unhappily*" (p. 320). Fiammetta begins the storytelling by noting how "cruel" this subject is, "especially when you consider that, having come here to fortify our spirits (rallegrarci), we are obliged to recount people's woes, the telling of which cannot fail to arouse compassion in speaker and listener alike. Perhaps he has done it in order to temper in some degree the gaiety (temperare alquanto la leticia) of the previous days" (p. 332; Branca, p. 461). Stories that trigger feelings of pity will drive the blood and *spiritus* inward rather than outward; such a response might be warranted only, Fiammetta reasons, as a means of moderating extreme cheerfulness. She is thinking of the *accidentia animae* in the same way that Maino de' Maineri

[2]"Boccaccio's *Ars narrandi* in the Sixth Day of the *Decameron*," in *Italian Literature: Roots and Branches*, ed. Giose Rimanelli and Kenneth John Atchity (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), pp. 239–40; see his n. 15 for other criticism of this "metanovella."

[3]The word is Marcus's, who treats the fourth day on pp. 54–56, 121–22.

does when he recommends that excessive *gaudium* be regulated by occasional sadness (see p. 49). Filostrato's motives are in fact for personal amelioration rather than communal temperance: hearing tales related to his own "sorry state" will make him feel better, as he announces at the beginning of the day's second story. But its teller, Pampinea, knowing her "feelings" to be closer to the spirit of the company than his, chooses to "amuse (recrear)" her friends by telling a tale that fits the day's topic yet nevertheless will "make them laugh," that will "restore your spirits a little by persuading you to laugh and be merry" (pp. 342–43; Branca, pp. 478–79). Still, this narrative is only temporary relief; the mood remains somber until Dioneo exercises the option to make his story differ in theme from the day's assignment. The ladies laugh at it, alleviating the sadness induced by the others. Filostrato even apologizes for having forced everyone to treat "so disagreeable a theme" and turns the leadership over to Fiammetta to "restore the spirits" of the company after the harsh day of his rule (p. 401). On the following day he tells a humorous story to make up for his unpopular choice of theme (V, 4), and he delights the *brigata* so much that they no longer blame him for his decree. Most of the fourth day's stories are clearly counter to the prevailing spirit of the *Decameron.* They allow Boccaccio the writer to increase the scope of his work, but they can be integrated into the rationale of the storytelling only by creating a character whose emotions oppose the sentiments of the group as a whole. In focusing so intently upon the fourth day's theme as deviant, in having Fiammetta suggest that its only value to the company might be the hygienic one of insuring that their *letitia* remain *temperata,* and in reintegrating Filostrato into the merriment on the fifth day, Boccaccio reinforces our sense of the *Decameron* as a journey—save for this one detour—into delight.

But the storytellers are not Boccaccio's readers, and he frames their journey with three passages that point to his ostensible audience, idle ladies. Of these, the defense at the beginning of the fourth day is perhaps the best known and the richest source for critics who find in the work a naturalism or a "nuova etica" that heralds a Renaissance rather than medieval

sensibility.[4] I am more concerned with the preface and the conclusion and with the ways in which Boccaccio's statements about how his stories serve the ladies enlarge the therapeutic and recreational meanings of the plague to pleasure pattern. In the preface, he directs his tales to women in love, who unlike men do not have a variety of ways of alleviating the "melancholy or ponderous thoughts (malinconia o gravezza di pensieri)" with which they are beset. As Branca notes, the distinction between men having many activities and women nothing to do but brood on love goes back to the beginning of Ovid's *Heroides,* XIX; but Ovid does not take Boccaccio's next step, which is to offer his work as an answer to the distress, the "noia," that results from such restricted opportunity. The hundred tales will be for the ladies what hunting, hawking, gambling, and other interests are for men in love: "succour and diversion" that will help ease their "noia" and, as the conclusion reaffirms, their "malinconia" (pp. 46–47; Branca, pp. 6–7, 1243). The parallels to the frame story are obvious and are reinforced by various verbal links: the *brigata* leaves all the "noie" present in the plague-stricken city (p. 33), detaches itself from the "malinconie" and "pensieri" that afflict people so exposed (pp. 1234, 39), and partakes of gracious entertainment for its own support, "sostentamento" (p. 1234), the same "sostentamento" that Boccaccio says he will provide for the ladies in need of it (p. 5). The medical parallel between the journey and proper regimen thus has at its base a more broadly conceived psychology of fiction which is applicable at any time. The frame story becomes a dramatized representation of the inner psychological movement from "noia" to "allegrezza" that Boccaccio intends his work to effect in his audience. Perhaps that is why there is no mention of the plague or the desolation of Florence when the *brigata* returns home; the narrative journey conforms to the envisaged mental journey of the young ladies, which will leave melancholy behind. Chronicle defers to comedy.

How, exactly, does fiction cause this psychological transformation? Its operation is defined in the *Decameron* as analogous

[4]Aldo D. Scaglione, *Nature and Love in the Late Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), pp. 101–10; Raffaello Ramat, "L'introduzione alla quarta giornata," in *Scritti su Giovanni Boccaccio,* pref. Sergio Gensini (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1964), pp. 93–107.

to other recreations that restore mental balance. The crucial statements are in the preface, first in regard to the benefits which men in love gain from various distractions:

> Each of these pursuits has the power of engaging men's minds, either wholly or in part, and diverting them from their gloomy meditations, at least for a certain period: after which, some form of consolation will ensue, or the affliction will grow less intense. [P. 47]
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> . . . de' quali modi ciascuno ha forza di trarre, o in tutto o in parte, l'animo a sé e dal noioso pensiero rimuoverlo almeno per alcuno spazio di tempo, appresso il quale, o in un modo o in uno altro, o consolazion sopravviene o diventa la noia minore. [P. 6]

And then in regard to the similar effects of the *Decameron* stories:

> In reading them, the aforesaid ladies will be able to derive, not only pleasure from the entertaining matters therein set forth, but also some useful advice. For they will learn to recognize what should be avoided and likewise what should be pursued, and these things can only lead, in my opinion, to the removal of their affliction. [P. 47]
>
> . . . delle quali le già dette donne, che quelle leggeranno, parimente diletto delle sollazzevoli cose in quelle mostrate e utile consiglio potranno pigliare, in quanto potranno cognoscere quello che sia da fuggire e che sia similmente da seguitare: le quali cose senza passamento di noia non credo che possano intervenire. [P. 7]

These passages are hedged with qualifying phrases, but there is some firm theorizing behind them. In turning to hunting or other distractions, a man draws his mind (trarre) to another subject, lessening the hold of the melancholy thought. Such action necessarily involves corresponding mental and physical changes, since, as discussed in Chapter 2, the body reacts favorably to emotions of joy and hope but poorly to sadness and fear. Hence some kind of consolation must follow; one's "noia" will be diminished through the restoration of proper bodily

functioning and the consequent improvement of mental state. This is the logic that explains why physicians, as Dino del Garbo points out, "say that the best cure of [love] is to distract the man from thinking about his beloved so that he will forget it." Once the preoccupation that causes melancholy is lessened, the *virtus animalis* is no longer distracted ("distrahitur") and is able to resume its role in keeping the body well disposed.[5] Rather than thinking of recreations as superficial evasions, ineffective responses to a serious emotional problem, Boccaccio and Dino conceive of their power of distraction—etymologically a drawing away, a pulling apart—as a vigorous and effective force. To draw someone's mind from a consuming passion, which itself draws off natural energy, is to liberate him.

Reading fiction seems to involve a similar pattern of responses. Absorption in a story produces that Horatian duality of pleasure and profit; in becoming involved and gaining these ends, one's mind is necessarily drawn into the fiction and thus away from "noia." The gaining of pleasure and profit, Boccaccio says in the last clause, cannot happen without the passing away of distress. Does this mean, as McWilliam's translation has it, that reading causes distraction from distress, or, as Wesley Trimpi has read the passage, that the removal of "noia" is "a necessary psychological condition" for the full appreciation of the "useful advice" the *Decameron* offers?[6] Probably both. The parallel between men's and women's responses certainly means that removal of distress follows upon engagement with something delightful. And in the process of that engagement, as one is being delighted and advised, one's condition is returning to that optimum state that is the result of *gaudium temperatum;* the reader's mind is correspondingly sharpened, thus more ready to appreciate fully the pleasures and profits that fiction contains. Literature not only distracts one from "noia" but in doing so engenders a sensibility that is in turn able to gain greater pleasure and profit from it. In this medieval sense fiction creates (by recreating) its own audience.

To explore in any detail what kinds of profit the *Decameron* offers is to venture into areas far beyond the scope of this

[5]Bird, *Mediaeval Studies,* 2 (1940), 168; 3 (1941), 126–27.
[6]"The Quality of Fiction," 99, 117.

book. The reference to learning what to flee and what to pursue sounds very like the theory of literature as praise or blame, one that often appears in medieval statements about the purpose of poetry.[7] It is not hard to find values put forth in the tales for emulation or condemnation, and there has been influential critical discussion, notably by Ferdinando Neri and Vittore Branca, of the *Decameron*'s largest thematic concerns, leading to the final day's topic of the high secular virtue of magnanimity.[8] But surely many of the tales have few if any overt didactic intentions, and some, as Marcus and Mazzotta have argued, playfully subvert traditional readings of stories as morally exemplary. I share to a certain extent their tendency to find Boccaccio's "seriousness" to lie less in the specific content of his fictions (whether that content be interpreted either as "Christian" or "naturalistic") than in his exploration of a host of questions concerning the nature of literature and its reception by an audience. Significantly, when he returns in the conclusion to the idea of literary profit dealt with so briefly in the preface, he refers it back to the reader. Any verbal discourse, he says, may be rightly or wrongly used. One can find "evil counsel" in the *Decameron* stories if one tries. "And if anyone should study them for the usefulness and profit they may bring him, he will not be disappointed. Nor will they ever be thought of or described as anything but useful and seemly (utili e oneste), if they are read at the proper time by the people for whom they were written" (p. 831; Branca, p. 1241). But the proper time is one of idleness, the presumed audience melancholy ladies in need of diversion. In such a context the usefulness might well entail therapeutic as well as or rather than didactic benefits—*utilitas est delectatio.* In the prologue and the conclusion the complex question of pleasure and profit in literature is subordinated, as it is in other works we have seen, to the recreational claim. The reader must take responsibility for the proper or improper moral use of the *Decameron;* what Boccaccio asserts most forcefully is a context for its experience and the power of his work in that context to move minds from "noia" to "allegrezza."

[7]For example, Hermannus Alemannus, p. 7. See also Hollander, p. 224 n. 24, and Trimpi, 100. For the tradition as a whole, see O. B. Hardison, Jr., *The Enduring Monument* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962).

[8]Branca, *Boccaccio,* pp. 206–11.

That context, says Singleton, is Boccaccio's "effort to justify and protect a new art, an art which simply in order to be, to exist, required the moment free of all other cares, the willingness to stop *going anywhere* (either toward God or toward philosophical truth)," and he notes elsewhere that of course the author "is far more concerned with us, his readers, than with those ladies."[9] Both frames, the journey of the *brigata* from plague to pleasure and the envisaged journey of the idle ladies from melancholy to delight, exist to shape the reader's expectations. But although the art may be new, the justifications for it are not. Boccaccio does not ask us to enjoy the tales for their own sake; rather he incorporates them in frames that give them therapeutic value. The reader's journey may not be toward supreme truth, but he will be moving nevertheless, to the *quies* that is the result of literary *delectatio.*

Boccaccio adds another dimension to his frame that further illuminates the *Decameron*'s status as a work of recreation. The author who can give support to ladies in love was once himself in love, and he has the "power of making provision for their pleasures" (p. 47) only now that he has been freed from that condition. As he looks back to his own experience, he remembers that while suffering from the "noia" induced by a passionate love stemming from his own "ill-restrained" appetite, relief came to him "from the agreeable conversation (piacevoli ragionamenti) and the admirable expressions of sympathy (laudevoli consolazioni) offered by friends, without which I am firmly convinced that I should have perished" (p. 45; Branca, p. 4). Nevertheless, in spite of their advice, his passion remained strong until finally it pleased God, who "decreed by immutable law that all earthly things should come to an end," that it "should in the course of time diminish of its own accord" (p. 45). Those friends who gave him pleasing and helpful conversation probably do not need the support ("sostentamento") of the *Decameron,* he says, but it is in gratitude for their help that he decides to aid in turn the "charming ladies" beset with love, idle, and thus prey to melancholy.

Robert Hollander, who has recently given these details the

[9]Singleton, "On *Meaning*," 119, and "The Uses of the *Decameron*," *MLN*, 79 (1964), 76.

attention they deserve, points out that Boccaccio's narrative pose here has a number of affinities "with those found in the *Fiammetta* and the *Corbaccio,* that is, with those narrators who warn against the dangers of carnal love."[10] Certainly the evaluation of passionate love is hardly adulatory; it is a source of "noia" and as such associated with the *noie* of the ladies and of the plague. But it is stretching things to say, as Hollander does, that "the narrator's express intent is to turn us away from love" (p. 108). His express intent is to provide some kind of relief for the women. His own past history suggests that the condition of passionate love is one not easily remedied, something one must live through until time takes its course. In such a situation, presented as a given for the ostensible audience of the *Decameron,* the best thing short of a lengthy "course of time" is the kind of friendly conversation that helped Boccaccio himself endure the throes of passion. That verbal sustenance, both pleasing ("piacevoli ragionamenti") and full of advice ("consiglio"), now takes shape in the narrator's hands as tales that offer both pleasure and profit ("diletto . . . et utile consiglio"). But for him *confabulatio* offered "relief from (rifrigerio)" the pangs of love, a desire that found "no proper respite (niuno convenevol termine)" (p. 45; Branca, p. 4). It ameliorated his condition, but it did not fundamentally change it. The analogy suggests that the *Decameron* too will be a comfort, a support, a refuge; it will not be a cure. It is written not to reprove people who find themselves in love but to sustain them. It will offer the limited *quies* of recreation rather than either the immediate "termine" of love satisfied or the permanent "termine" of Christian contemplation.

Yet Boccaccio implies—and I would stress that it is only an implication—that perhaps the *Decameron* may be able to do more. For if he was consoled but not cured by his friends, that is probably more a comment on his own ill-regulated appetite than on their intentions. It took the long passage of time for him to reach a state where the pains of love have diminished and in their place lies a certain kind of pleasure ("piacere") (p. 4). Insofar as the hundred tales correspond to diversions from love, they are recreational relief, and that is no mean goal. Insofar as they may lead to a complete abolishing of "noia,"

[10]*Boccaccio's Two Venuses,* p. 97; for details see 97–102, 141–42.

they would seem to function not only as the conversation of friends did for Boccaccio but as time itself did, so that the ladies' forthcoming pleasures ("piaceri"—the final word of the preface) seem to have some kind of affinity with the "piacere" of the man now freed from the chains of an excessive passion. The book's usefulness, then, would include its ability to give its audience (or at least those members of its audience whose "appetito" is not beyond regulation) the sort of insight which leads to a permanent liberation from mental distress. In this sense we can see the consolation offered by the *Decameron* as Boethian in the way that Marcus, in *An Allegory of Form,* has argued (pp. 112–25), though I think that the "therapeutic effects of fiction-making" (p. 114) which she recognizes are not exclusively or even primarily Boethian in implication but chiefly psychological in the secular tradition of recreational and hygienic thinking. The traditions are not mutually exclusive: implicit in the relief from "noia" is a mental balance that will permit rational assessment of one's experience. The *Decameron* gives us the means to that balance; it does not lecture us on what the assessment must be.

It should be clear that I have not tried to discuss the *Decameron* itself but instead the terms in which Boccaccio presents the hundred tales to his readers. Those terms suggest in places what Hollander calls "the attitudes of a Christian moralist" (p. 106) and in places, particularly at the beginning of the fourth day, what Scaglione calls "the attitude of conscious defense of the 'rights of nature' " (p. 104). But principally they suggest the power of fiction to alleviate psychological distress. The author of the work has already moved from "noia" to "piacere" (not through fiction, admittedly, but had he been more receptive he might have through talking with friends, one of the features of the *brigata*'s mental regimen); the work itself consists of stories that are part of a therapeutic design to move ten young men and women from "noia" to "piacere"; and the announced intention of the book is to effect a similar movement from "noia" to "piacere" in its audience of idle ladies. Boccaccio's framing devices focus less on the content of his stories than on their intended effects; together the pleasures and profits of the *Decameron* lead to *recreatio* in the fullest medieval sense, attainment of physical, psychological, and perhaps ultimately spiritual well-being.

Contemporary or near-contemporary criticism of a work does not guarantee accurate perception of it. But it may well be revealing, and not only of its author's own prejudices, especially when it comes from intelligent and sympathetic sources. The initial response to the *Decameron* recognizes it primarily as a great work of entertainment and in some cases justifies its pleasures on recreational and hygienic grounds. The evidence I will consider (certainly not a full inventory of all the early comments) involves three passages, each extensive enough to warrant being thought of as literary criticism: the anonymous prefatory material in an early fragmentary manuscript of the *Decameron;* Petrarch's remarks on the work in a letter written to Boccaccio in 1373; and Laurent de Premierfait's preface to his French translation completed in 1414. Of these, Laurent's text is the most detailed and explicit; I will begin with the earlier and shorter ones.

The anonymous preface in a *Decameron* manuscript written while Boccaccio was still alive is partial testimony to the excitement the work engendered in Florentine mercantile society during the 1360s and 1370s. There is much other evidence of this excitement, including Boccaccio's well-known letter to Mainardo Cavalcanti, all of which Branca has thoroughly documented and discussed, but none of it comes as close to full-scale literary commentary as do the paragraphs of this unknown admirer.[11] Although most of his comments relate not to Boccaccio but to women and the clergy, he does offer some consideration of the *Decameron* as a work of art. He sees it in the tradition of Boccaccio's other "beautiful and delightful books, in prose and in verse, in honor of those gracious ladies whose high-souled noblemindedness takes pleasure in occupying itself with pleasant and virtuous matters."[12] He summarizes its frame story of a "jovial company" that leaves Florence "during the time of pestilence" and spends its time disporting itself ("diportando") in delightful places (66). He does not discuss the values

[11]"Per il testo del Decameron—La prima diffusione del Decameron," *Studi di filologia italiana,* 8 (1950), 29–143, esp. 61–68, 134–42. The text of the anonymous preface is on 64–66, a description of the MS on 83–84. Branca summarizes this material in *Boccaccio,* pp. 197–200.

[12]*Boccaccio,* p. 198.

of such recreation at this point, but they appear at the beginning of his preface, where he praises writers and composers who bring pleasure and comfort to women. Such enterprise is praiseworthy because it enables the world to keep itself "in allegrezza," and such happiness is useful because it preserves youth ("lietamente vivendo fa lunga giovanezza mantenere"). The physical benefits of *gaudium* are apparent, and it follows that the "sommo piacere e diletto" which women find in reading Boccaccio serve to help sustain their spirits (64, 66). When the anonymous admirer asks, "Who can engage in more praiseworthy work than to keep a lovely lady cheerful during her youth?" he apparently considers the question rhetorical.[13] To what extent he has simply appropriated some of Boccaccio's own reasoning in the *Decameron,* to what relied on a more widespread secular poetics, is perhaps impossible to determine. It is clear at least that while he finds Boccaccio in general both pleasurable and profitable, his principal interest lies in the effects of literary delight on the women he finds so charming, and he defines those effects as physical and psychological benefits.

Petrarch is close to the author of this preface in time but not in literary milieu. Branca has pointed out the general neglect of the *Decameron* in early humanist circles, consistent with the late medieval perception of the book "not as a work adhering to literary tradition but as a book for agreeable, pleasant reading, as a work created not for the savoring of the refined men of letters but for the joy of the less-cultured readers."[14] Petrarch's view of the *Decameron,* as it emerges from the introductory remarks to his translation of the Griselda story in *Seniles* XVII, 3, contains a good deal of that humanist superiority to entertainment in the vulgar tongue, yet it also reveals an awareness of the circumstances and justifications of such literary endeavor.

He acknowledges the variety of stories to be found in his friend's collection, but he indicates clearly what predominates: "Along with much that was light and amusing (iocosa et levia), I

[13]"E chi può fare più lodevole operazione che mantenere una vaga donna lieta nella sua giovanezza?" (64). He may be drawing on Boccaccio's own question in the preface, where, defending his offer of comfort to those who need it, he asks, "And who will deny that such encouragement, however small, should much rather be offered to the charming ladies than to men?" (p. 46).

[14]*Boccaccio,* pp. 200–2; see also "La prima diffusione," 54–61, 134–35.

discovered some serious and edifying things (pia et gravia) as well, but I can pass no definite judgment upon them, since I have not examined the work thoroughly."[15] Apparently only those stories "pia et gravia" warrant careful reading and judgment, and they appear much less often than humorous and "light" material. In fact, Petrarch rather pointedly comments that the tale of Griselda, which so pleased him that he decided to translate it, making explicit at the end its moral significance, "differs entirely from most that precede it." The *Decameron,* then, is primarily a collection of amusing stories, and with this understanding Petrarch discusses his response to the work as a whole:

> My hasty perusal afforded me much pleasure. If the humor is a little too free at times, this may be excused in view of the age at which you wrote, the style and language which you employ, and the frivolity of the subjects, and of the persons who are likely to read such tales. It is important to know for whom we are writing, and a difference in the characters of one's listeners justifies a difference in style. [P. 233]

> Delectatus sum ipso in transitu; et si quid lascivie liberioris occurreret, excusabat etas tunc tua dum id scriberes, stilus, ydioma, ipsa quoque rerum levitas et eorum qui lecturi talia videbantur. Refert enim largiter quibus scribas, morumque varietate stili varietas excusatur. [P. 290]

Petrarch specifies four characteristics: (1) the *Decameron* is a work of Boccaccio's youth, a fact he assumes at the beginning of the letter; (2) its subject matter is light ("rerum levitas"); (3) its audience is also light ("levitas . . . eorum qui lecturi talia videbantur"); (4) its style corresponds to the *mores* of its audience, as is fitting. Petrarch adduces these four considerations to excuse whatever excesses in *lascivia* occur throughout the work, but they are obviously conditions which pertain to the *Decameron* as a whole, not just to its questionable passages. To what kind of literary situation do they refer?

There is a striking parallel to this set of characteristics in

[15]Trans. in Thompson, p. 233. Text in J. Burke Severs, *The Literary Relationships of Chaucer's Clerkes Tale* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942), p. 290.

Geoffrey of Vinsauf's discussion of comic material in the *Poetria nova.* After giving an example of a comic story, he explains the qualities and circumstances of such literature:

> A comic discourse is marked with the character of lightness in the following ways: levity of spirit is the source of comedy; comedy is an immature form, attractive to green years. Moreover, the subject of comedy is light; to such a subject the sportive period of youth readily devotes itself. See to it that the third element is light. Let all aspects, then, be light: the whole is in perfect harmony if the spirit is light, and the subject light, and the expression light.
>
> Hac ratione levis signatur sermo jocosus:
> Ex animi levitate jocus procedit. Et est res
> Immatura jocus et amica virentibus annis;
> Et leve quid jocus est, cui se jocundior aetas
> Applicat ex facili. Res tertia sit levis. Ergo
> Omnia sint levia. Sibi consonat undique totum
> Si levis est animus, et res levis, et leve verbum.[16]

This passage, a theoretical background to Petrarch's remarks, enumerates the precise characteristics he attributes to the *Decameron:* youthful authorship, lightness of subject matter, lightness of style, and lightness of spirit on the part of author and audience. The appropriateness of style to subject and audience is familiar enough as a topic in all the medieval arts of discourse; however, Geoffrey is not discussing here one of the conventional triad of styles, which he deals with elsewhere, but the special attributes of a kind of speech which is light rather than serious, *sermo jocosus,* a particular mode of expression which he associates with youthful frivolity.

We are in a position to see some of the resonance of Petrarch's and Geoffrey's references to lightness of mind. *Levitas* is often associated with interest in jokes and other trifling discourse, sometimes quite negatively, as in Bishop Ralph of Walpole's monastic statutes that condemn using words that are "light" to others, sometimes more neutrally, as in Antoninus of Florence's discussion of lying, which says that there is no mortal

[16] *Poetria Nova of Geoffrey of Vinsauf,* trans. Margaret F. Nims (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1967), p. 85. Latin in Faral, *Les arts poétiques,* pp. 255–56.

sin "in a joking lie" because the purpose is "some light delight (aliqua levis delectatio)" rather than deceit.[17] On the more positive side, insofar as lightness of mind may be thought of as the opposite of Lydgate's undesirable "hevynesse," it may well carry some implication of hygienic value. The imputation of lightness to both work and audience suggests the kind of circumstances described at the beginning of the fabliau *Du chevalier qui fit les cons parler,* which claims to bring "confortement" to the "oiseus," that is, to satisfy the recreational needs of people looking for something agreeable to pass the time.[18] The perception of the *Decameron* as a work of "levitas" is thus true to its express intentions of inducing cheerfulness in an idle audience through delightful fictions, and Petrarch's initial "Delectatus sum" signals his own pleasure in the work even in spite of its excesses of *lascivia.* Of course, as Anne Middleton has pointed out, the story of Griselda pleased him even more, offering a kind of delight more suitable to his literary tastes, one meriting translation into Latin so that people unfamiliar with Italian "might be pleased with so charming a story."[19]

Petrarch is, then, certainly not unfair to the *Decameron;* yet he is not at all inclined to aggrandize its status, and what he does not say is as interesting as what he does. He does not seize on remarks that might lead to a more respectful view of the work's moral or artistic seriousness, such as Boccaccio's reference to profit in the *Decameron* preface or his observation in the fourth day defense that in writing the *novelle* "I am not straying as far from Mount Parnassus or from the Muses as many people might be led to believe" (McWilliam, p. 330). Petrarch's arch observation early in his letter that the book was written "and published, I presume, during your early years (iuvenis)" (Thompson, p. 232; Severs, p. 290) may be chronologically legitimate, since Boccaccio probably wrote the *Decameron* in his mid- to late thirties and *juventus* extends at least to forty in some medieval

[17]Evans, p. 13; *Summa theologica,* Pars II, tit. X, c. 1, col. 1054.

[18]Cited above, Chap. 4. See also the prefatory remarks in the German fabliau *Irregang und Girregar,* which addresses itself to a youthful audience looking for pleasing entertainment as a time filler; text and translation in *The Literary Context of Chaucer's Fabliaux,* ed. Larry D. Benson and Theodore M. Andersson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), pp. 124–27.

[19]Thompson, p. 233. Middleton, "The Clerk and His Tale: Some Literary Contexts," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer,* 2 (1980), 125–36.

classifications of the ages of man. But it hardly seems responsive to Boccaccio's narrative pose, which, as we have seen, is that of a man whose ardors have been diminished by the passage of time, who allies himself in the fourth day defense with other men who "in their old age" continued to pay tribute to women (McWilliam, p. 329). Petrarch suggests that the author was essentially like his envisaged audience, not a maturer and wiser counselor. And, of course, he does not deal with the question of the validity of natural desire raised at the start of the fourth day; nor does he rehearse any of the more extended recreational arguments, preferring instead to imply them only with the more ambivalent reference to "levitas."

Petrarch does not judge the *Decameron* to be substantially different from what Florentine mercantile society found it to be; he differs rather in the value he places on a work whose primary aims are recreational. The one group may have been "light" enough to relish an elegant diversion like the *Decameron,* but Petrarch's attitude toward recreation, though tolerant, is less sanguine. He sometimes admits its usefulness, as in the letter cited at the beginning of Chapter 4 and in this one to Francesco Nelli: "I have nothing of importance to tell you today. But as overworked fields profit by lying fallow, and as busy minds need an occasional respite, I will ask you to forget your serious concerns for a bit and listen to a silly story."[20] But in other contexts he is conscious of the possible dangers to the mind in relaxation, and he can invoke the same agricultural image (which goes back to Seneca's *De tranquillitate animi*) to somewhat different effect: "The holiday which I ordain is for the body, not for the mind; I do not allow the intellect to lie fallow (veto in otio ingenium quiescere) except that it may revive and become more fertile by a period of rest. For a rest benefits the brain just as it benefits the soul."[21] *Quies* is justified only to the extent that it leads to greater productivity. Throughout the *De vita solitaria,* and in other works as well, Petrarch stresses the close relationship between rest and work. Even recreative woods and fields enable one not

[20]*Epistolae variae* 44, trans. Morris Bishop, *Letters from Petrarch* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), p. 217.

[21]*The Life of Solitude,* trans. Jacob Zeitlin (n.p.: University of Illinois Press, 1924), p. 291. Text in Francesco Petrarca, *Prose,* ed. G. Martellotti et al. (Milan: R. Ricciardi, 1955), p. 556.

only to recuperate from the weariness of mental labor but also "to sow the seeds of new projects in the field of his genius, and in the very interval of rest and recuperation prepare matter for the labor to come." The result is a state of "an active rest and a restful work (actuosa requies et quietus labor)."[22] Petrarch's sense of "temporal urgency"[23] leads him here virtually to negate relaxation as a factor in one's mental life; he is thinking about leisure and contemplation, not recreation and play. One hundred stories, even though some of them be "pia et gravia," would be too extensive an offering of entertainment to be completely acceptable to a man whose ideal is that "not a moment of time will pass with any waste or loss to the student."[24] However ready to be charitable to his friend's work and to take what serious matter he could find there, Petrarch is, ultimately, far more like "students, who endeavour to use their time profitably rather than while it away" (McWilliam, p. 832), than like young ladies with time on their hands. And the *Decameron* addresses itself only to the latter.

Petrarch could look on the *Decameron* as the youthful work of a friend and admirer. Two generations later another humanist, Laurent de Premierfait, came to it as an admirer of Boccaccio's learning and wisdom. He was a scholar and translator, one of that group of early French humanists who absorbed Italian influence at the papal court in Avignon. He had already translated Cicero's *De senectute* and *De amicitia* and had twice, in 1400 and again in 1409, put Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium* into French, the second version proving highly popular throughout the century. Some of the manuscripts of it include a Latin poem in praise of Boccaccio, which, along with its French translation that may also be by Laurent, shows great respect for Boccaccio's Latin works and no awareness of his vernacular efforts except the *Decameron,* which it does not represent very accurately and seems to value mainly for the story of Griselda. In short, until he began to translate the *Decameron,* Laurent knew Boccaccio as

[22]Zeitlin, p. 157; Petrarca, *Prose,* p. 366.

[23]The phrase is Ricardo J. Quinones's; see his discussion of Petrarch's sense of time in *The Renaissance Discovery of Time* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp. 106–71, esp. 135–52.

[24]Zeitlin, p. 157.

most of the rest of Europe did: as the author of important humanist scholarship.[25]

In 1411 Laurent became aware of another side to Boccaccio's genius. For three years he worked on a translation of the *Decameron,* completing it in June, 1414, with a dedicatory letter to Jean, Duke of Berry, for whom he had also produced the second, much expanded, translation of *De casibus.* The circumstances of Laurent's translation, which he explains in the letter, are well known: since he did not know Italian, he worked with a Franciscan friar, Antonio of Arezzo, who turned the hundred tales into Latin in order for Laurent to be able to put them into French. His translation is, for good reason, usually discussed in terms of the ways it alters Boccaccio's text, for example, its greater concern for circumstantial detail, its occasional tendency to moralize or add sententious material. Similarly, the only substantial critical study of his prefatory letter stresses the greater didactic weight he gives to the *Decameron.*[26] But Laurent's preface is also a major statement of the recreational justification of literature, and it marks a fitting end both to an analysis of the early understanding of the *Decameron* and to this book as a whole. Although Norton has looked closely at some important elements of this text, another detailed reading from a different perspective is warranted.

The preface begins with the fall of man, as had the one to

[25]The best brief introduction to Laurent may still be G. S. Purkis, "Laurent de Premierfait, First French Translator of the *Decameron,*" *Italian Studies,* 4 (1949), 22–36. The only full-length work on him is Henri Hauvette's thesis, *De Laurentio de Primofato* (Paris: Hachette, 1903). On his translations see also Patricia M. Gathercole, "Fifteenth-Century Translation: The Development of Laurent de Premierfait," *Modern Language Quarterly,* 21 (1960), 365–70. For details on his connections with French and Italian humanists, see Ezio Ornato, *Jean Muret et ses amis Nicolas de Clamanges et Jean de Montreuil* (Geneva: Droz, 1969), passim. The most recent edition of his verses on Boccaccio is by Gathercole, "A Frenchman's Praise of Boccaccio," *Italica,* 40 (1963), 225–30; see also Hauvette, pp. 24–25, for the headnote to them in one MS. On the knowledge of Boccaccio in late medieval France, see the first three essays in *Il Boccaccio nella cultura francese,* ed. Carlo Pelligrini (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1971).

[26]Glyn P. Norton, "Laurent de Premierfait and the Fifteenth-Century French Assimilation of the *Decameron:* A Study in Tonal Transformation," *Comparative Literature Studies,* 9 (1972), 376–91. On the nature of the translation see, most recently and thoroughly, Paolo M. Cucchi, "The First French Decameron: Laurent de Premierfait's Translation and the Early French *Nouvelle,*" *French Literature Series* (University of South Carolina), 2 (1975), 1–14.

the *De casibus* translation. The sin of Adam and Eve issues in the world of fortune, turns love into hate, joy into sadness, and, most interestingly, idleness into care ("oysiuetez en cusancons").[27] Idleness, here used positively to denote prelapsarian self-sufficiency and contentment, turns into fretfulness. Man has become "ignorant, worrying, brooding, grieving, and subjected to the vagaries of fortune." But only foolish people let themselves be moved by such changes; fortune cannot destroy the calm of the wise. Moreover, it appears that wise men have a way of making ordinary people bear with fortune more easily: it is proper for them, in order to aid the distraught, to write books, especially stories, which will bring solace and happiness ("soulaz et leesse") to them, removing their troubles.[28] As an example Laurent cites Terence, whose comedies brought "great delight and joy" to their listeners and on holidays gave relief from continuously enervating work. By listening to his "narratives representing the true mirror of the ways of human life," citizens not only became comforted in spirit ("solaciez en courage") but were exposed to "the significant manners of all estates of lower- and middle-class people." It is clear that Laurent is thinking within the Horatian framework: the solace that beguiles troubles is delight, "delectacion"; Terence as well offers some kind of profit by revealing the nature of various types of people.

At this point Laurent shifts focus rather abruptly. He notes that "noble and exalted poets" were honored publicly and supported financially in order that they might try to surpass their competitors. He approves of such virtuous competition, adding that the noblest spirit tries to excel "not in fiction but in more

[27]Bibliothèque Nationale MS f. fr. 129, f. 1, checked against Bodleian Library MS Douce 213, f. 1, the only other MS to include Laurent's preface. Ed. Hortis, p. 743. Cf. Chap. 2, n. 56. All subsequent quotations are from B.N. fr. 129, ff. 1–3v. For a full inventory of all the MSS, see Paolo Cucchi and Norris J. Lacy, "La tradition manuscrite des *Cent nouvelles* de Laurent de Premierfait," *Le Moyen Age*, 80 (1974), 483–502, which supersedes the earlier work of Purkis and Gathercole.

[28]"Pour secourir doncques aux turbacions et mouuemens des folz hommes, jadiz fu et est licite et permis aux sages hommes de faire mesmement soubz fiction aucuns liures en quelconque honneste langaige, parquoy les hommes perturbez et esmeuz pour aucuns cas prengnent en lisant ou en escoutant aucun soulaz et leesse pour hors chasser du courage les pensemens qui troublent et empeschent les cueurs humains." F. 1v; Hortis, p. 744.

explicit [nonfictional] work (non pas par fiction mais par oeuure tresclere)." Now Boccaccio appears. He was in his time expert in "divine and human learning and history." He also recognized the ills that fallen man is heir to, especially "fear and sadness, through which all other worldly goods are erased and destroyed." These emotions cannot be eradicated, since they are part of our fallen state, but they can be deflected or diminished by decent pleasures and joys ("souspenduz ou admoindriz par quelconques honnestes delectations et joies"). Witnessing the effects of the plague, the "grant mortalite," Boccaccio wrote the *Decameron* "for the comfort and solace of the survivors," for those who lived through the plague still continued to exist in fear of death and in sadness for their lost friends and relatives. Laurent then turns from *intentio* to *utilitas*. Although some readers may think that the *Decameron* is mainly for entertainment, one who reflects on each story will find more profit than pleasure, for Boccaccio delineates and criticizes vices and commends virtues in a variety of ways.[29] What distinguishes the book from the "stories of poets" is its greater social scope; ancient poetry tended to delight or profit only the common people or to reprove only the higher or middle classes. But the hundred tales include men and women of all estates, pagan as well as Christian, clerical as well as lay.

Norton is certainly right to point out (390 n. 17) the parallel between Laurent's treatment of the *Decameron* and Boccaccio's discussion, in the *Genealogy of the Gods,* of the third kind of fiction. The translator seems to have come to terms with the stories by treating them more or less as Boccaccio treated Terence and Plautus. Like them, Boccaccio seems to be principally offering *delectatio.* But they all reveal human behavior and thus can be read in exemplary ways. Laurent goes further, though, arguing that the *Decameron* is really more for profit than for pleasure, that one learns from it not "incidentally" but pur-

[29]"Et combien que selon le hastif jugement de celui ou de ceulx qui sans precedente et longue consideracion dient et prononcent leur sentence, les Cent nouuelles semblent plus seruir a delectacion que au commun ou particulier prouffit, neantmoins l'escouteur ou liseur qui longuement et meurement aduisera le compte de chacune nouuelle, il trouuera es histoires racomptees plus profit que delict; car illec sont tous vices morsillez et reprins, et les vertus et bonnes meurs y sont admonnestees et loees en autant et plus de manieres comme est le nombre des nouuelles." F. 2; Hortis, p. 745.

posefully and consistently. He had read in Boccaccio's preface that the idle ladies would learn what to avoid and what to pursue, and he takes that idea and restates it more forcefully in his own, a natural emphasis, perhaps, given the familiarity of the poetics of praise and blame. If we focus only on this sentence, we might well find his interpretation far too categorically moralistic.

But he has given us more. The analogy to Terence is in fact helpful in regard to the nature of Boccaccio's stories, and Laurent is not alone in finding the closest rapprochement between the *Decameron* and the *Genealogy* to lie in that third kind of fiction.[30] He also appreciates the great social range of the work. But principally he thinks of the text as one of "delectacion," an attempt to beguile fear and sadness, two of the principal *accidentia animae* that regimens and *consilia* recommend avoiding. He thinks of the *Decameron*'s audience as profoundly affected by the plague and Boccaccio's immediate purpose as alleviating their grief. This reasoning is an extension of the logic of the plague to pleasure structure. Laurent does not speak directly of the idle ladies, whose immediate cause of sadness is love, not pestilence, but they are perhaps implicitly included, along with the survivors of the Black Death, in his remarks about wise men writing for more ordinary people disturbed by events of fortune. He may be thinking of Boccaccio's narrative pose at the beginning of the *Decameron,* that of a man who has transcended passionate love, who through time has emerged from its "noia" into a state that seems to bear some of the detachment from worldly cares that Laurent imputes to those "sages" who have ceased to involve themselves with the transitory goods of a fallen world. If so, his perspective is not the "simplistic moral dichotomy" argued by Norton, who assumes a "fundamental discontinuity between the youthful and the mature Boccaccio" (378–79) and attributes the distinction between wise and foolish people only to Laurent's carrying over an idea from his preface to the *De casibus* translation. It is a rather more sympathetic reading, one anticipating Hollander's in some respects, of part of the *Decameron*'s complex structure of framing material. Boccaccio, a man learned in di-

[30]See e.g. Branca, *Boccaccio,* p. 211; Tateo, esp. 325 n. 2, 332–39.

vine and human knowledge, realizing that emotional relief comes especially through narrative ("mesmement soubz fiction"), ceases to pursue the "noble labour" of writing the most excellent "tresclere" works (one of which Laurent had translated twice) and turns instead to pleasing "fiction" as a response to the widespread grief he sees around him. This view may be reading Boccaccio backwards chronologically, moving from the later Latin scholarship to the *Decameron;* but it has a basis in the text, Boccaccio's own narrative posture, and it has not led to any serious distortions of the recreational purposes the author emphasizes in the framing structures.

In fact, the rest of Laurent's preface, except for those passages where he discusses the genesis of the work and his efforts to obey the desires of the Duke of Berry, is wholly concerned with the value of the *Decameron* as solace. He specifies the various profits that arise from pleasure, beginning with a simple Cato-like statement about the need to mix entertainment with one's worldly cares ("cusancons mondaines") and continuing with more distinctly medical arguments concerning the value of joy, which we examined in Chapter 2. He next anticipates the potential objection of detractors that material from the Bible would offer greater "delectacion." This he admits, but biblical mysteries should not be translated, whereas translating purely literal narratives such as the hundred tales is permissible. Besides, one cannot read the Bible continually, for everyone feels the need to take time out occasionally in order to "bring solace and comfort to one's intellect, one's spirits, and one's pursuit of learning (soulacer et conforter son engin, ses esperiz, et aussi son estude)."

To support his claim that such recuperation is necessary and legitimate, Laurent brings forth a number of arguments. First he cites the bent bow analogy, which he applies to academic experience: teachers intersperse "some fables or tales" in their lessons, thus enabling their readers or listeners to refresh themselves and renew their capacity to follow diligently the rest of the instruction. Then he appeals to the evidence of animal behavior: birds fly, but not always; beasts are not constantly in motion but at times rest and recuperate. "Car chose longuement ne dure qui n'a repoz, delict, pasture" (f. 3); nothing can live for long without rest, delight, sustenance—that collection

of physical and psychological needs which the Middle Ages embodied in the term *recreatio.* Then comes another analogy, significantly a hygienic one, this time focusing on variety rather than on relaxation: a change in food refreshes one's appetite. And finally: although gold and silver are the most precious metals, nevertheless lead and tin "are not to be condemned or disparaged"; each has its value. Or as a more vigorous defender of the imperfect put it,

> For wel ye knowe, a lord in his houshold,
> He nath nat every vessel al of gold;
> Somme been of tree, and doon hir lord servyse.
> God clepeth folk to hym in sondry wyse,
> And everich hath of God a propre yifte,
> Some this, som that, as hym liketh shifte.

When a learned humanist begins to appropriate some of the Wife of Bath's arguments, it is time to stop and take stock. Laurent's last analogy probably tells us more about his attitude toward the *Decameron* than he would have cared to admit publicly. For all his attempts at justification, the fact is that Boccaccio's work, as far as he is concerned, is not literary gold. But he spent three years of labor on it, and he is determined to make it as noble an enterprise as he can. He pulls out every argument for legitimate recreation he can think of, and by couching it all in the context of fallen man, gives, as Norton has argued, a more "ponderous" and moralistic view of the *Decameron* than the work probably warrants. Yet although he claims that the hundred tales offer "more profit than delight," he does not really argue this point at length; one doubts that—even allowing for his tendency (or perhaps Antonio's?) to moralize a few of the stories—he would be comfortable explicating the ethical lessons of some of Boccaccio's more ribald tales. As in the *Decameron* itself, there is a claim to profit as well as to please, yet the more extended defense appeals not to didactic but to psychological and physical benefits. If Laurent had not perceived the work as fundamentally intended to recreate he would not have devoted most of his preface to rehearsing the standard justifications of literary entertainment.

The letter defends recreation thoroughly, yet reveals an un-

dertone of defensiveness. Laurent tries hard, awfully hard, to make enjoyment respectable, but the more he works at it the more we realize the differences between the *Decameron* and what he really values. It does not, unlike *De casibus,* contain "only authoritative histories and serious matters"; it is not the Bible; it is lead, not gold or silver. When Laurent says to the Duke, "I give over its defense to you" because in the future there may be people more inclined to attack or condemn him and his work than to excuse its failings, one suspects that more than a conventional modesty topos is at work. Laurent's prefatory letter to the *De casibus* translation contains an appeal for protection against detractors, but a shorter and more traditional one.[31] And although three years of work is admittedly substantial, Laurent's references to "the long and burdensome work of translation" and "the load on my shoulders" make the enterprise sound much more like duty than pleasure. Unlike Petrarch, he could not just glance through this *levis* collection in his moments of leisure; a book meant for recreation, addressed to idle ladies rather than serious scholars, became an assignment. Laurent correspondingly makes it more serious, and at the same time intimates some slight uneasiness about the ultimate value of the work. Yet he never loses sight of its central purposes; and like other early critics of the *Decameron,* he thinks of those purposes in terms of the psychological and hygienic values of literary pleasure.

Laurent's preface makes an appropriate end to this book for two reasons. First, it is a capstone to many of the arguments and images that appeared throughout the Middle Ages to defend literary pleasure. It is one of the period's most vigorous and thorough affirmations of the value of recreational reading. As such, it epitomizes my central concern, to articulate some later medieval literary ideas that accept and justify reading or hearing stories for the pleasure they bring. As we have seen, these justifications tend, implicitly or explicitly, to operate within the Horatian context of pleasure and profit. But to affirm the value of literary pleasure is certainly not to deny the value of literary profit. The ideas I have explored are perfectly

[31]Ed. Hortis, pp. 731–40.

compatible with medieval ethical and allegorical theories, and may in fact help lead to a more rounded, sympathetic understanding of medieval literary thought that acknowledges the mutual and interacting roles of pleasure and learning without devaluing either.[32]

Yet it is true that the defenses of pleasure examined here occur much more frequently in connection with nondidactic literature than with narratives of explicit moral intent. In this sense the recreational argument associates itself with the rise of secular fiction in the later Middle Ages, a rise that can be linked to various social, intellectual, and technological developments between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. To explore all these developments is far beyond the scope of this book; but I believe that the acceptance of literary pleasure in theory is part of the distinctive cultural climate of the later Middle Ages, a period that saw the emergence of what Donald R. Howard calls "fiction" as opposed to "myth" or "legend"—a body of narrative told principally not as an illustration of exemplary or allegorical truth, and not as a recounting of historical events, but as an imaginative construction interesting and significant in itself.[33] The presence of such fictions—fabliaux, romances, Boccaccian *novelle*, Chaucerian tales—is itself evidence of a growing secular sensibility; and justifications of literary pleasure are correlative to that material and that sensibility. They open up from the standpoint of theory the possibility, even the desirability, of taking pleasure in literature. For many people in the later Middle Ages that possibility, that ethical space in which delight could flourish, must have been exciting and liberating.

But it would be wrong to think that the defenses celebrate pure aesthetic pleasure or that they promote literary enjoyment as an end in itself. As I have stressed, the justifications are pragmatic, claiming physical or psychological or ethical benefits that make the gaining of pleasure from stories rationally acceptable. That acceptability presumes that recreative values are limited, not ultimate. And for all the increasing secularity of the later Middle Ages, those ultimate Christian values still per-

[32]Salman's "Instruction and Delight" is a pioneering effort in this direction.

[33]"Fiction and Religion in Boccaccio and Chaucer," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 47, Supplement (1979), 307–28, esp. 310–11.

meate the culture. To Dante and Deguileville the recreational argument must have seemed to endorse only distraction from what is really worth attending to. And, from a different perspective, to early humanists the argument must have appeared to trivialize the importance of literary studies. Here is the second reason why Laurent's preface is such a suitable concluding text, for beneath its extended affirmation of the value of recreation lies, I think, a slightly ambivalent undertone. He and Petrarch believed that the best literature did more than refresh physically or psychologically, and neither would have wanted to spend prolonged time with fictions that offered only *levis* pleasures. The recreational argument makes literary delight acceptable, but in a context that gives that delight only certain restorative rather than contemplative functions. And it insists that delight be useful. In *Anatomy of the Novella* (pp. 48–49) Clements and Gibaldi argue that the evolution of Renaissance tale collections points to an increasing willingness to accept fiction simply for the pleasure it provides without feeling the need to articulate or imply recreational benefits. That kind of sensibility does not appear often in the Middle Ages.

The idea of recreation is, of course, not uniquely medieval. As a literary defense it can be found in Greek romance and in many Renaissance works; it is familiar today, though almost always in the restricted context of sports activities. What seems to me most distinctive about its place in late medieval culture is the implicit tension between the affirmative and the defensive aspects of the argument. Recreational and hygienic ideas reveal both a tolerance of the purely entertaining, one based on the conviction that pleasure promotes well-being, and at the same time a feeling that such experience cannot stand by itself, that without constant reassertion of its acknowledged values and limits vacation becomes too much like truancy. The discrepancy between enjoyment and the need to justify enjoyment becomes most apparent in the later fourteenth century, as we see traditional recreational arguments being used to explain secular experiences—the joys of hunting, the joys of the *Decameron*—that seem far too rich, far too significant culturally, to be satisfactorily contained within notions of proper play. We can see the ideas under strain as they have to encompass a more extended secular vision than they had to before. The principles that Aris-

totle invoked to discuss the role of jests in casual conversation now become stretched to accommodate many different forms of activity and a wide range of literary endeavor. The expanded secular culture of the later Middle Ages still relies heavily on the recreational idea to understand and justify its interest in worldly pleasures. It does not yet give those pleasures independent status as goods in themselves.

As this summary implies, my approach has been principally historical. But I think that the recreational theories and applications presented here may reveal more than the accommodations worked out in the later Middle Ages between a Christian culture and the impulse to be entertained. They reflect as well some perennial concerns in people's thinking about fiction—the relationship between literature and life, the ways in which artistic delight affects an audience. In the later Middle Ages a number of writers—physicians, philosophers, and poets—dealt with those concerns in terms of recreational and hygienic ideas, affirmed the very significant power of fiction and entertainment to revitalize. Their recognition and understanding of that power may well help illuminate the pleasure that every age has taken in storytelling. For we know that, in mind and body, literary delight makes something happen.