A Translation of Giambattista Basile's *The Tale of Tales*

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A New Translation by

Christopher Stace

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Portrait of Basile (1566 – 1632): 17C engraving by Nicolaus Perrey, after Jacobus Pecini (1641).

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CARMELA BERNADETTA SCALA

Basile's life

Giambattista Basile was born in Naples between 1566 and 1575[1]. Very little is known about his childhood and his family. Possibly he had six siblings and his family belonged to the Neapolitan middle class that emerged in Naples during the sixteenth century. Around 1603 he joined the army of the Venetian Republic and left Naples in search of a better fortune. Basile expressed his disappointment at his departure both in *Le avventurose disavventure* (The adventurous misadventure, 1611) and in one of the *cunti*, "Lo Mercante", (The Merchant, 1.7), where the protagonists, respectively Nifeo and Cienzo, lend their voices to Basile's thoughts and sadness.

He was sent to Candia[2], a Turkish city under the Venetian government, and while serving there he probably acquired much of the material that he would later use in his *cunti;* for example, he learned the Turkish people's accent when they spoke Italian, and he applied this knowledge in the shaping of the black slave character, who 'speaks' exactly with that accent. During his service in Candia he earned the respect and the affection of Andrea Cornaro, a Venetian nobleman, who invited him to join the Accademia degli Stravaganti, marking Basile's entrance into the literary world.

In 1604 Basile wrote some letters in Neapolitan dialect that he would then use as a proem to *La Vaiasseide,* (The epic of the servant girls, 1612), a poem written by his friend and countryman Giulio Cesare Cortese; these

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[1] There are no documents that attest the exact date of Basile's birth. Scholars have given approximate dates, and each has arrived at a different one: Benedetto Croce affirms that Basile was born in 1575; Emmanuele Coppola in 1566 and Giorgio Fulco in 1572.

[2] Candia was the official name for Crete while the island was a colony of the Republic of Venice.

letters represent the first document of his literary career.[3] Basile also experimented in the writing of popular songs and in 1605 he wrote a *villanelle,*[4] *Smorza crudel Amor* for which Gio. Domenico Montella wrote the music.

In 1607 he was able to return to Italy following the expedition lead by Pietro Bembo and in 1608 he was again in Naples, where he continued to be a courtier. In this same year he published his first work in Italian *Il pianto della vergine* (The tears of the virgin) that he had mostly prepared during his years in Crete. The following year he published the first edition of *Madriali et ode* (Madrigals and odes) and subsequently, in 1610, he published a volume of *canzonette* set to music by his brother Donato, and dedicated to Luigi Carafa di Stigliano, at whose court he was working at the time. To his 'master' Basile also dedicated his poem *Le avventurose disavventure*, published a year later, 1611; in this same year he became a member of the Accademia degli Oziosi, with the name of Il Pigro (The Lazy One), the same he had used for the Accademia degli Stravaganti in Candia.

In 1612 he followed his sister Adriana to Mantua and became a courtier for the Gonzaga family, for whom his sister had been working for several years. Here, in 1613, he published the *Egloghe amorose e lugubri* (Amorous and lugubrious eclogues), the *Venere addolorata* (Venus afflicted), a musical drama in five acts, and the first edition of *Opere poetiche*, (Poetic works), which included all the works he had written between 1608-12 and also the edited version of *Madrigali et ode*, to which he added a dedication to the Gonzaga family. At the end of the year 1613 Basile returned to Naples and here he served at various courts: in 1615 he was at Montemarano, (in the province of Avellino); in 1617 he was in Zuncoli, working for the Marquis of Trevico, Cecco di Loffredo; in 1618 he worked for Marino Caracciolo, the prince of Avellino; and in 1619 he became governor of Avellino. During these wandering years he dedicated himself to the philological studies of some classics texts, in particular he worked on texts of Petrarchan and mannerist traditions and on authors such as Pietro Bembo, Giovanni della Casa, and Galezzo di Tarsia. Among the works he published there are: *Rime d M. Pietro Bembo e de gli errori di tutte l'altre impressioni purgate. Aggiuntovi l'osservationi, la varietà*

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[3] In the proem for *La Vaiasseide,* Basile used for the first time his pseudonym Gian Alessio Abbattutis.

[4] The *villanella* is a type of popular and secular music that originated in Italy, and first appeared in Naples, during the sixteenth century. The subject of this kind of song is rustic, comic and often also satirical; it was introduced in opposition to the *madrigal*.

de' testi e la tavola di tutte le desinenze delle rime, 1616; *Tavola di tutte le desineze delle rime di Pitero Bembo, co' versi intieri sotto le lettere vocali raccolte già da Tommaso Porcacchi. Or in miglior ordine disposte,* 1617; *Rime di M. Giovanni della Casa riscontrate co' migliori originali e ricorette*, 1617; *Rime di Galeazzo di tarsia nobile cosentino,* 1617; and *Osservationi intorno alle rime del Bembo e del Casa,* 1618. It is possible that during this same time Basile begun to work on his dialect masterpiece *Lo cunto de li cunti.*

In 1619-1620 Basile was occupied in satisfying the courts requests for songs, anagrams, odes and verses written for special occasions. He wrote *Aretusa,* (1619) with a dedication to Marino Carraciolo; *Il guerriero amante*, (The warrior lover, 1620), a musical drama dedicated to Domizio Caracciolo, marquis of Bella, and performed in Naples by his sister Adriana. Upon her return to Naples, Adriana helped her brother to enter the court of the viceroy Antonio Alvarez of Toledo, the duke of Alba. He served as a governor in Lagolibero in Basilicata between 1621-1622 and then in 1626 he became governor of Aversa, (in the province of Avellino) a more prestigious title. During this time, he continued to work as a writer for the court and published several works inspired by court life such as the *Immagini delle più belle dame napoletane ritratte da' loro porpri nomi in tanti anagrammi* (Images of the most beautiful Neapolitan ladies, portrayed by their own names in anagram, 1624); and fifty more *Odes*, (1627); between 1622-1629 he also worked on a bilingual *Canzoniere* in Italian and Spanish that remained a manuscript and was never published.

In 1630 Basile composed the musical drama *Monte Parnaso,* probably in honor of Maria d'Austria, the queen of Hungary. Furthermore, he published more madrigals *Sacri sospiri,* (Sacred sighs) and he also composed the poem *Del Teagene*, based on the *Aethiopica* by Heliodorus, which was published only after his death in 1637. It is probable that at this same time Basile was working on *Le muse napoletane*, (The Neapolitan muses) and on *Lo cunto de li cunti* (The tale of tales) two of his most acclaimed dialect works.

In 1631 he was elected governor of Giugliano, a city in the province of Naples and there he died on February 23rd, 1632, because of a flu epidemic. After his death his sister Adriana promoted the publication of Basile's unpublished and maybe incomplete works: *Del Teagene,* 1637; *Le muse napoletane,* 1635; and *Lo cunto de li cunti*, 1634-1636.

A historical background to Basile's collection

The telling of stories is one of the oldest pastimes in existence, and it belongs to the earliest societies as well as to very complex and modern ones. Since antiquity, stories had been passed down from one generation to the next, orally first and through written word later, giving birth to the long literary tradition of folktales, myths, and legends that still intrigues us today. In fact, it does not come as a surprise that since the beginning of civilization, folktales happened to be a vehicle for the preservation of all that the past generations wanted to pass on to their youth. In a way fairy tales were a sort of cultural and folkloristic encyclopedia; a journal that ancient generations kept, detailing their life experience and precious knowledge.

Furthermore, despite what one might think, fairy tales are not stagnant 'stories', rather they evolve with time, they are constantly revised and adapted to the needs of our ever-changing society— which is what makes them virtually immortal. Moreover, their 'social' role seems to have remained the same. Indeed, in ancient times, fairy tales were thought to explain the unexplainable, as they provided that emotional support fragile human beings needed in order to cope with the perils of the unknown and dispel the fear of death.[5] And it is remarkable how throughout the centuries fairy tales have continued serving this purpose, powerfully encompassing time and socio/cultural changes.[6] It was this very adaptability that, according to Zipes, made storytelling an irresistible genre capable of promoting new customs and social mores by altering "tiny tales" until they grew into the "whale like" narratives that have reached us today.

> "Think of a gigantic whale soaring through the ocean, swallowing each and every fish that comes across its path. The marvelous, majestic whale had once lived on land fifty-four million years ago and had been tiny. Part of a group of marine mammals now known as cetaceans, the land whale eventually came to depend on other fish for its subsistence and thrive on the bountiful richness of the ocean. To grow and to survive, it constantly adapted to its changing environment. The fairy tale is no different." (Zipes 2011, 221).

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[5] The comfort that fairy tales offered to people, and society is a topic touched upon by several scholars. See e.g. Bettelheim, 1989; Zipes, 1997 & 2006.

[6] In her *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale*, Marina Warner looks at fairy tales as a phenomenon capable of crossing borders and cultures through the sanitization and bowdlerization that the genre underwent especially in its adaptation for children.

Fairy tales have been around for as long as humanity can remember: tracing their origin to a definite time and place is almost impossible. Jack Zipes tries to explain why fairy tales cannot be "dated" and he writes:

> "It is next to impossible because the fairy-tale is similar to a mysterious biological species that appeared at one point in history, began to evolve almost naturally, and has continued to transform itself vigorously to the present day."[7]

Nevertheless, it is safe to say that a fairy tale is the "written form" of folktales featuring the presence of enchanted princes and princesses, kings and queens, and many characters belonging to the supernatural such as fairies, ogres, elves, goblins, as well as talking animals and plants all borrowed from the universe of fables.

This genre, despite its artistry, had long been ignored, and resurfaced in Europe only during the seventeenth century thanks, especially, to the work of Giambattista Basile (c.1575), author of *Lo cunto de li cunti* (1634-36) and Charles Perrault, who in the writing of his *Contes* (1697) borrowed from Basile, though adapting the material to his own distinctive style and his French culture. Also important was the contribution of Marie-Jeanne Lhéritier with *Oeuvres meslées* (1696); Madame d'Alnoy, with *L'ile de la félicité* (1660) and *Les Contes des fées* (1698); Jean de Mailly with *Les illustres feées* (1698); and Henriette Julie Murat with *Histoires sublimes et allégoriques* (1699), among other French fairy tale writers of the time.[8] However, it is *Lo cunto de li cunti, overo lo trattenemiento de peccerille* that represents the first integral collection of fairy tales, not only in Italy but also in Western Europe in general. This literary masterpiece, written in Neapolitan dialect, had a short-lived success right after it was published, but subsequently it was largely ignored. Indeed, the first modern, integral, and annotated translation of Basile's collection appeared in Italy only in 1925 thanks to Benedetto Croce, who greatly admired Basile and considered *Lo cunto* a masterpiece that illuminated the Baroque period. Croce declared Basile's collection as

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[7] Jack Zipes, *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition*, 2001: XI.

[8] Subsequently, the work of the German folklorists the Brothers Grimm, *Children's and Household Tales* (1812-15), was fundamental in the emergence of the modern literary fairytale.[8] In Italy, as Calvino suggests in *Le Fiabe Italiane* (1980), the most important contributions came from Gherardo Nerucci with *Sessanta novelle popolari montalesi* (1880), a collection of sixty tales written in Tuscan (specifically the "pistoiese") dialect, and from Giuseppe Pitrè, one of the most important Italian folklorists, author of a great collection of Sicilian tales *Fiabe novelle popolari e racconti siciliani* (1875).

"the greatest literary work of the Baroque because in it the Baroque
executes a merry dance and appears on the verge of dissolving: before
Basile the Baroque was torpid; with him it has become limpid gaiety."[9]

Prior to Croce's translation, there had been other translations in Italy (six
anonymous translations to be exact) but none of them was as complete; in
Europe however, exemplary translations were circulating as early as the
first half of the nineteenth century.[10]

There are many possible reasons for the scant success of *Lo cunto*.[11]
However I believe that a plausible motive for the lack of success of this
impressive collection of tales is its polemical and quarrelsome attitude
towards courtly society. Indeed, *Lo cunto* can be read as a harsh critique of
the society of Basile's time, and this probably affected the way people
reacted to it.[12]

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[9] Canepa, *From Court to Forest*, 1997: 14.

[10] In German, *Lo cunto* was first translated in 1846 by Felix Liebrecht, (Liebrecht
omits the eclogues in his translation), while the first English translation appeared
in 1848 by John Edward Taylor, who translated only 30 of the 50 tales.

[11] According to Canepa, there are four possible causes for the poor reception of the
book. First, she believes, and I concur, that one of the biggest impediments in
Basile's work was the dialect employed. Basile, who was a courtier and a
renowned "Tuscan" writer of his time, decided to write *Lo cunto* de li cunti in the
Neapolitan dialect, which made the book intelligible only to a limited group of
people. The second reason she adduces is the naturally negative disposition that the
Italian literary world has long had towards the Baroque period and its artistic
productions, an attitude that has changed only in the last few decades.
Furthermore, the scant success of *Lo cunto* was due to a general misunderstanding
on the part of the early modern world, in that it identified fairytales with children's
literature, which was actually recognized as a genre only in the late
eighteenth/early nineteenth century. Modern scholarship, however, has finally
agreed that *Lo cunto* de li cunti, *Overo Lo Trattenemiento de' Peccerille* was
intended for an adult audience, namely the courtiers and friends of the author to
whom he probably read parts of the book before it was even finished. This
approach justifies and explains the language, which is often coarse, vulgar or
complicated by myriads of metaphors, hyperboles and by all the elements typical
of Baroque prose, and inevitably leaves doubts as to how to interpret the subtitle of
the text. The most plausible explanation for the subtitle is that by *peccerille* Basile
meant the simple people, the populace, considered "little" when compared to the
inhabitants of the court or the members of the higher classes for whom the *cunti*
were recited. Canepa also attributes the lack of popularity of *Lo cunto* to its hybrid
nature. See, Canepa, *From Court to Forest*, 1997: 14.

[12] For the literary tradition of satire against "villans" see Morlini, *Saggio di ricerca
contro il villano*, 1898.

Ironically, it is its satirical tone and its hybrid composition that, together with its Baroque stylistic features, and the vividness and vitality of its Neapolitan language, make *Lo cunto de li cunti* an original and unparalleled masterpiece. As such, it has become the subject of numerous scholarly studies that have investigated the relationship between Basile's text and the narrative tradition, highlighting both the debt of the Neapolitan author to this tradition, as well as the innovation he brought to the writing of tales.

In Italy the tradition of storytelling dates back to the medieval *exemplum* and anecdotes, which were told with no artistic pretension but just for the fun of revealing something new (*nova* in Provençal, from which the word *novella* originated in the West). Many of the plots of the anecdotes came from the Orient, as told by the merchants who used to travel back and forth, importing into Italy not only the material goods but also fragments of Indian and Arabic culture. It was through the Indian literary tradition that the device of the *cornice,* the frame tale, was introduced.[13] These oriental collections provided a great source of themes and motifs for the Italian *novella*. However, what made them so successful in Europe was their brevity and their moral content which were in perfect harmony with the western tradition of *exempla.*[14]

The transition from the *brevitas* of the *exempla* to the extended *novella* took quite a while and it started with the rewriting in the vernacular of some of the most popular tale collections. Besides translating the tales from Latin, the authors also added details to the stories making them more realistic, with a typically popular flavor. Furthermore, the tales became more dialogic as dialogues came to occupy most of the narrative text. All of these innovations are found in the *Novellino,* a collection of one

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[13] The oriental *cornice* differed a lot from the later form developed by Boccaccio (1315-1375) in the *Decameron* (c.1350.) The Oriental *cornice* was a kind of circular tale that would "embrace" the different tales that made up the collection. An example of it is found in the aforementioned *Arabian Nights*, in which the *cornice* is actually the originating tale, which opens and closes the narrative, and from which the entire collection of tales springs. Instead, in the *Decameron* the *cornice* is an independent story whose only purpose is to provide a setting for the *brigata*. Basile's *cornice* replicates the frame-tale style of the *Arabian Nights* more than that of the *Decameron*.

[14] The oriental tales and the exempla were so similar that often writers would choose to quote an oriental tale, instead of an *exemplum*, to convey a moral teaching, as happens, for example, in the *Disciplina Clericalis*, a sort a manual to educate clerics, written by Petrus Alfonsi. See, Lucia Battaglia Ricci, "*Introduzione",* in Novelle Italiane, 1982: IX-X.

hundred tales[15] that appeared in Italy towards the end of the thirteenth century. Nevertheless, it is the advent of the *Decameron* that marks the "birth" of the modern Italian *novella*. Boccaccio stretches the length of the *novella* and embellishes it with a more sophisticated prose and abundant details, both of the psychology of his protagonists and of the places where his stories are set.

The tradition of storytelling in the 1400s penetrated the epic narrative, which recovered many of the fairy tale motifs present in the earlier tradition of the *cantari*. [16] This tradition continued through the Renaissance, when the imitation of the Boccaccian *novella* continued to flourish, if only during the first half of the century; subsequently the discovery of the Aesopian fables aroused strong interest and provided new subject matter for the narrations. The first collection of tales that incorporated not only the traditional *novellas* but also the first rudimentary example of "real" fairy tales was *Le piacevoli notti* (The pleasant nights) by Giovan Francesco Straparola, which appeared in 1530-33. It definitely had an important influence on Basile, and also on Perrault and other French writers of the time, as well as on the Brothers Grimm. After Straparola came the one who, we believe, could be considered the *father* of literary fairy tale: Giambattista Basile, whose work unquestionably designates the passage from the oral folk tale to the "authored" and sophisticated literary version of such tales. But what exactly does Basile owe to his predecessors?

The structure of *Lo cunto* has received much attention due to its noticeable resemblance to Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Indeed, Basile's work is often referred to as the *Pentamerone*.[17] For a long time, though, *Lo cunto* was seen as a parody or at most as a poor imitation of the *Decameron*. But Basile's collection is neither a parody nor a poor imitation. Basile was certainly inspired by Boccaccio and by the other great predecessors, but he

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[15] Originally there were 130 tales.

[16] In 1483 Luigi Pulci wrote his comic epic *Morgante*, in which we can identify many common fairytale themes, as well as protagonists such as dragons and wild men who somewhat resemble the ogre of fairytales. Also, of the fifteenth century is Matteo Maria Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato* (1495), in which we find many ogres, fairies and all sorts of "magical" happenings. Finally, Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* is rich in fairytales elements, episodes and characters; one only needs to think of Astolfo who goes to the moon to retrieve Orlando's "wits", or of Alcina, the *maga* (witch) who enchants all knights who enter her castle

[17] Benedetto Croce a Neapolitan writer and literary critic was the first to refer to Lo *cunto,* as *Il Pentamerone.* See Benedetto Croce, *Giambattista Basile e l'Elaborazione Artistica delle Fiabe Popolari,* in *Il Pentamerone Ossia La Fiaba delle Fiabe,* tradotta dall'antico dialetto napoletano e corredata di note storiche da Benedetto Croce, Napoli: Bibliopoli, 2001, p. XVI.

was more interested in experimenting and innovating the writing of tales. He did not simply write a book of tales: rather he produced a completely new genre, that of fairy tales, and the fact that he was a pioneer gave him the freedom to play with the language, the narrative style and the structures, satisfying all the impulses of his restless creative genius.

Basile looked at the *Decameron* with a critical eye and borrowed themes from it; nevertheless, his intention was not to *scimmiottare* (ape) the Florentine masterpiece. Indeed, even if the structure of the *Cunto* may appear, at first glance, to be a faithful copy of Boccaccio's collection, under closer inspection it reveals a strong incongruence with its "progenitor". The first evident difference between the two is found in the structure of the frame tale. The *cornice* in the *Decameron* represents a tale in and by itself, in which the author informs the reader of the background of the ten tellers and contextualizes the stories and the events of the deadly plague that afflicted Florence in 1348, leading to the decision to leave Florence and take refuge in a villa in the country. The narrative of the *cornice* links all the other stories together, as it provides for them a common reason to exist. On the contrary, the *cornice* of *Lo cunto* is not a simple introduction separated by the rest of the narration, nor does it have the same function that the *Introduzione* has in Boccaccio. Picone writes:

> "Questa pagina, con la quale la raccolta basiliana si apre, non corrisponde all' Introduzione alla prima giornata del *Decameron*, (contenente la famosa descrizione della peste fiorentina del 1348, occasione storica da cui si era originato il libro di novelle), e non corrisponde nemmeno al *Proemio* (dove Boccaccio si rivolge al suo pubblico privilegiato di lettrici innamorate e malinconiche); mentre questi sono infatti dei testi non-narrativi, appartengono al mondo commentato, la 'Ntroduzzione al *Pentamerone* è un testo narrativo: non solo appartiene al mondo narrato, ma genera la narrazione stessa."

> [This page, with which Basile's collection opens, does not correspond to the *Introduzione* on the first day of the *Decameron* (containing the famous description of the plague that affected Florence in 1348, the historical circumstance which gave rise to the book of tales), and it does not even correspond to the *Proemio* (where Boccaccio addresses his privileged audience composed of enamored and melancholic female readers); while these are in fact more commentaries than narrative texts, the "'Ntroduzzione" to the *Pentamerone* is a narrative text: not only does it belong to the narrated world, but it generates the narration itself.][18]

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[18] Michelangelo Picone, "La Cornice Novellistica dal Decameron al Pentamerone", in *Giovan Battista Basile e L'Invenzione della Fiaba*, 107.

Furthermore, in the *Pentamerone* the *cornice* is not a complete tale: the body of the narrative extends itself to all the other tales. The conclusion of the introductory narrative in Basile coincides with the end of the book and the end of storytelling. This atypical *cornice* eloquently reveals the Baroque substrate of Basile's work, as it clearly represents the idea of the *mis en abime,* that is the idea of "art within art" very much pursued during that period. The *cornice* indeed represents the tale that generates and contains all the other tales, so *Lo Cunto* is a collection of "tales within a tale" which further clarifies the meaning of the title *Lo cunto de li Cunti* (The tale of the tales).

Another element that is often seen as a point of agreement, but which represents a point of variation and separation between the *Decameron* and *Lo cunto* is the presence of what Boccaccio calls "*la brigata*" and Basile calls "*la marmaglia*" (the rabble). In both collections we find ten narrators who every day—for ten days in the *Decameron* and five in *Lo Cunto*—take turns in the telling of stories; nevertheless, the similarities between the *brigata* and the *marmaglia* begin and end with the number. Indeed, while Boccaccio's *brigata* willingly comes together in the church of Santa Croce and decides to leave the city to escape the death and suffering caused by the plague: *la marmaglia* in *Lo Cunto* is summoned to come to court, to satisfy one of the many whims of the slave-princess and are chosen by Prince Tadeo. In the *Decameron*, furthermore, a king or a queen is chosen every day and he/she has the responsibility of choosing the topic for the tales of that day and the order in which the tellers will speak. Most significant is the difference between the presence of the slave-princess in *Lo cunto* as opposed to the presence of a king and a queen— "real" royalty—in the *Decameron.* In *Lo cunto* there is only one king, Tadeo, who decides the order in which the storytellers will speak but has no say on the topic. Moreover, the *brigata* of the *Decameron* is composed of ten young aristocrats, or more precisely, of "seven young ladies … all … intelligent, gently bred, fair to look upon, graceful in bearing, and charmingly unaffected", [19] and "three young men.… each of them … most agreeable and gently bred".[20] In contrast, in the *Pentamerone* the group of tellers is composed of ten old hags, poor and uncouth in their manners, whose only ability is to know how to tell stories better than anybody else in their town.

Another difference in the two works is in the names of the storytellers. Boccaccio chooses names of literary and mythological origin. Basile, on

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[19] McWilliam, *Giovanni Boccaccio: The Decameron*, 1972: 58.
[20] *Ibid.,* 62.

the contrary, uses names and nicknames that tend to highlight the low birth and both the physical and behavioral distortions of the women.

Particularly significant is the discrepancy in the way the male protagonists are named in the two collections. The three young men in Boccaccio carry names that allude to their nobility and to their character. In Basile the king is named Tadeo, which etymologically means "stupid", and thus emphasizes the ineptitude of the king who never imposes orders, never chooses which teller should speak first, or the topic of the stories. Ultimately, he is simply a puppet that Zoza manipulates at her will, and this represents another major change. In the *Decameron* the three young men are needed by the women in part because of what Filomena says about women:

> "We are fickle, quarrelsome, suspicious, cowardly, and easily frightened; hence I greatly fear that if we have none but ourselves to guide us, our little band will break up much more swiftly…"
> Then Elissa said: "It is certainly true that man is the head of the woman, and that without a man to guide us it rarely happens that any enterprise of ours is brought to a worthy conclusion."[21]

In *Lo cunto,* Zoza has the "head" of a man, she is not afraid to fight for what she wants and in the end her "enterprise…is brought to a worthy conclusion."

Basile turns the idyllic world of the Florentine master upside down and in doing so he makes a strong ideological statement, wanting to break with the tradition and start a new trend. Thus, *Lo cunto* could be read as an ideological manifesto of its author.

On the other hand, it is also true that the structure of the individual tales resembles that of the Boccaccian *novella*. Basile mirrors Boccaccio in a parodic mode and reproduces the structure of the stories in the *Decameron*. In *Lo cunto de li cunti,* each *cunto*, except the introduction, opens with the summary of the *cunto* that is about to be told, followed by a commentary by the women on the *cunto* that they have just heard, followed then by a proverb (a motto in Boccaccio) that introduces the new story that they are getting ready to hear. Then there is the actual *cunto,* which is concluded—except for the introductive and conclusive tales— with another proverb (also a motto in Boccaccio), which represents a sort of moral (or sometimes ironic) take on the story.[22] In Boccaccio we find approximately the same structure. each tale is introduced by a summary of

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[21] McWilliam, *Giovanni Boccaccio: The Decameron*, 1972: 62.
[22] As an example, see *cunto* 1.2 "*La Mortella*" (*The Myrtle*).

the story the *brigata* will hear, followed (except for the first tale) by a commentary on the previous tale, then a motto—an admonition to capture the attention of the listeners; finally, there is the actual tale, which is concluded always with another motto, a moral teaching.

The distance between the two collections is emphasized by other features as well: while in Boccaccio there is always a direct address to the women,[23] to whom the entire collection is dedicated, in Basile there is not. Also, Boccaccio becomes himself a narrator when on the fourth day he has a *Defense,*[24] creating thus a tale within a tale; Basile, on the contrary, never interferes with the narrators and speaks always through them. The two collections vary also in the conclusion. In Basile the last tale, the one told by Zoza, concludes not only the activity of storytelling but also the book, whereas in Boccaccio the last tale is then followed by the "*Conclusione*" of the author. Furthermore, Basile's tales are intertwined with myriad metaphors that generate other stories within the main tales. As Rak says, the metaphors in *Lo cunto*, especially those pertaining to the alternation between the sun and the moon, form "*micro-racconti*" (micro-tales) populated with their own characters and stories, which are completely independent from the main narrative.[25] In the *Decameron* the tales are more linear and there are fewer metaphors.

Boccaccio was certainly a role model for Basile: in fact, stylistically Basile wants to excel in the narrative forum in dialect as Boccaccio did in Italian Tuscan. Nonetheless, to consider the *Decameron* as the only source for Basile's work would be a mistake,[26] as we cannot ignore the debt that Basile owes to the other Italian narrators such as Giovanni Sercambi, the author of *Il Novelliere* (c. 1399-1400), and Giovan Francesco Straparola, the author of *Le piacevoli notti* (1550-53).

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[23] See for example McWilliam, 1972: "dearest ladies" (68); "delectable ladies" (169); "fair ladies" (241).

[24] Boccaccio defends his work against the many critiques made to the single novellas that had been circulating before the publication of the Decameron.

[25] See Michele Rak, *Giambattista Basile. Lo cunto de li cunti,* a cura di Michele Rak, Milano: Garzanti, 2006.

[26] "In *Lo cunto* are intertwined diverse traditions of narrative and non-narrative forms. Among the sources from which Basile drew his materials were 'the fireside tales of the popular store of legends; the Greek novel; …Baroque narrative; the late-medieval exempla traditions; jokes; the erudite humanistic novella; street theater "numbers"; the semi-literate narratives of public notices and gazettes; the micro-chronicles of pamphlets;… the "open" narration of conversation around country hearths, in taverns, at fairs, in the marketplace, in military camps, at villages bonfires; and traveler's tales'" (Canepa, 1997: 53).

The influence of Sercambi on Basile has been generally ignored or just mentioned *en passant* but it has never been really studied. Nonetheless, in reading *Il Novelliere* (a collection of 155 tales) we find at least seven tales that have elements typical of the fairy tale, and four of them are particularly interesting because they have a strong resemblance with some of Basile's *cunti.* The tales that carry the features of fairy tale are II, V, XV, XXVIIII, CXXII, CXL, and CXLII:[27] in all of these tales we find the triplication of the action (the obstacles that the protagonist has to overcome). Besides, in XXVIIII we find the motif of the discovery of the princess's birthmarks (AARNE 850); in CXXII we have the presence of dragon; and in CXLII there are magical animals that with their magical gifts help the "hero" to succeed in his enterprise.

Those of Sercambi's tales[28] that are strongly echoed in some of Basile's *cunti* are: XV "*De bono Facto*", XXVIIII "*De astutia in juvene*", CXXII "*De Apetito canino et non temperato*", and CXL "*De bona et justa fortuna*". "*De bono facto*" is a tale in two parts, and the second part of it might possibly have been a source for Basile's *cunto* "*Lo 'ngnorante*" (The Dullard, 3.8), for it bears many similarities to Sercambi's tale.[29] The influence of Sercambi's *Novelliere* on Basile is thus significant even

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[27] This is the numeration used by Sinicropi in *Giovanni Sercambi, Novelle,* 1995. There are two editions of Sercambi's collection, one is *Novelle*, edited by Sinicropi, and the other is *Il Novelliere*, edited by Luciano Rossi. It is interesting to note the different titles the two editors give to Sercambi's collection. The first editor calls it *Novelle*, which seems to stress the variety of the tales it contains; the second calls it *Il Novelliere* which seems to emphasize the coherence of the entire collection. (Unless otherwise noted I will subsequently be referring to Sinicropi's edition.)

[28] Sercambi's *Novelliere* resembles the *Decameron* more than *Lo cunto*, especially for the structure and the function of the frame tale. The organization of the individual novella varies; most of them seem to have a linear structure: introduction-body-conclusion (some of them end with a proverb, others without). However, there are some tales whose structure includes introduction—moral or apostrophe to the author—body—conclusion; one such example is "CXXII: *De Apetito canino et non temperato*." For more information on Sercambi's tales see Sinicropi, "*Le Classificazioni Tematiche Nelle Novelle Del Sercambi*", 2001. The collections are different from one another in terms of the location in which the tales are told. In the *Decameron* the story-telling takes place in a villa; in *Il Novelliere* we find an iterant group (thus the story-telling takes place every day in a different place); and finally, in *Lo Cunto*, "*la marmaglia*" is entertained at court.

[29] For a detailed comparison between Basile and Sercambi see Carmela B. Scala *Fairytales, a world between the imaginary: Metaphor at play in Lo cunto de li Cunti by Giambattista Basile,* Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014.

though it has been overshadowed by Straparola's collection *Le piacevoli notti*.

Le piacevoli notti is a collection of seventy-three tales, only thirteen of which are fairy tales, and it represents the most eminent prototype of *Lo cunto*. It has given us one of the most famous fairy tales "*Il gatto con gli stivali*" (Puss in Boots)*,* reclaimed, translated and transformed by Basile in "*Cagliuso*" (4.2), and also by Perrault in "*Master Cat*". However, Basile owes Straparola much more, especially in regard to the story "*Biancabella*" (night 3, story 3) in *Le piacevoli notti.* Zoza's story in *Lo cunto* has similarities with "*Biancabella*"*;* indeed, they both present the "false bride motif".[30] Biancabella, like Zoza, loses her prince because of a jealous and envious woman, and to win him back, just like Zoza, goes to live in a palace across from the royal residence of her prince. In the end, thanks to her "art" of recounting stories, she is recognized by her estranged husband and reinstated as queen, while her adversary, together with her bewitched mother, dies a terrible death. The same motif is also present in Basile's "*Le Tre Cetra*" (The Three Citrons, 5.9), which reflects the frame-tale. Furthermore, Basile inherited from Straparola a series of motifs and episodes; as Bottigheimer points out, Biancabella "also produced a stock of pearls and stones whenever she combed her hair. In so doing, she set a style for countless fairy tale good sisters' wealth-producing bodies".[31] In Basile's work, we find the same motif in "*Le due Pizzette*" (The Two Little Pizzas, 4.7) where Marziella receives the gift of producing pearls and flowers whenever she combs her hair or breathes, as a reward for showing kindness to an old woman who turns out to be a fairy in disguise. Finally, Biancabella also contains the motif of the princess with chopped-off hands which returns in Basile's "*Penta Mano Mozza*" (Penta, the Girl who chopped her Hands off, 3.2)[32].

Moreover Straparola's "*Peter the Fool*" (night 3, story1), and "*The Magic Doll*" (night 5, story 2) are the prototype for all the fools' stories in Basile, particularly for that of "*Peruonto*" (1.3) and "*La papera*" (The Goose, 5.1). Finally, in Basile we find an abundance of "rise tales": "*Il racconto dell'Orco*" (The Tale of the Ogre, 1.1) and "*Peruonto*" (1.3), which tell the stories of two ugly, poor and rather stupid boys who become rich and happy thanks to some magical intervention. "*Cagliuso"* (2.4), is

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[30] Aarne/Thompson tale type 437.
[31] Ruth B. Bottigheimer, *Fairy Godfather*, 2002: 131.
[32] The motif of this tale is Aarne/Thompson 706. In particular, Basile's variation could also be listed as Aarne/Thompson 706B: Present to the Lover. For this type the "maiden sends to her lecherous lover (brother) her eyes (hands, breasts) which he has admired." Aarne, 1987: 242.

also a "rise tale", about a poor fellow who becomes rich thanks to the help of an enchanted cat he has inherited from his father.

Additionally, there are "restoration tales", which were introduced for the first time in *Le piacevoli notti*; these are the stories of people whose "legitimate role" has been usurped, but who in the end regain the power, the happiness and the wealth they had been deprived of throughout the tale. Along these lines, see the story of princess Zoza, which begins in the "'*Ntroduzzione*" and ends with the "*Scompetura de Lo cunto de li cunte*" (End of The Tale of Tales, 5.10), "La gatta Cenerentola" (The Cinderella Cat, 1.6), "*La Penta Mano-Mozza*" (Penta, the Girl who chopped her Hands off, 3.2), "*Lo Dragone*" (The Dragon, 4.5), and "*La soperbia casticata*" (Pride Punished, 4.10.) The likeness of the two collections goes further: Rak believes that Straparola and Basile not only shared a fertile imagination, but more importantly they shared a 'library': they possibly studied the same texts.[33] Although Basile borrows from the *Piacevoli Notti*, he does not slavishly imitate him, just as he did not simply imitate Boccaccio. On the contrary, he reworks the borrowed material, as Rak suggests:

> "Questi materiali erano lavorati nel *Cunto* con un humor paradossale e teatrale, comico e solenne nello stesso tempo, e, soprattutto, ridisposti in una tavola di conversioni di intrecci e figure, luoghi e storia regolate da un codice ferreo. Ogni racconto era nello stesso tempo assolutamente irreale e innocente e nello stesso tempo a cifra, da raccontare-—o da ascoltare-— modulandone i messaggi possibili a seconda della circostanza e degli ascoltatori."

> [These materials were reworked in the *Cunto* with paradoxical and theatrical humor, comical and solemn at the same time; most importantly, these materials have been re-disposed in a table of intricate plots and figures, places and stories regulated by a strict code. Each tale is, at the same time, absolutely unrealistic and innocent and yet it is a tale to be told, or heard, while trying to decipher the hidden messages which vary accordingly with the circumstance and the audience.][34]

When it comes to the bare structure of fairy tales, Basile follows tradition in terms of the structure proposed by Vladimir Propp,[35] however he departs from it, accomplishing a complete innovation, a true revolution in the genre, particularly regarding the characterization of the protagonists, the settings of the tales and the language. The fairy tales of Basile's

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[33] Rak, *Da Cenerentola a Cappuccetto rosso*, 2007: 34.
[34] *Ibid*., 35.
[35] Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 1986.

> *Pentamerone* form a hybrid between the typical fantastic elements proper to folktales, and the remarkable realistic features that the author introduces in the frame tale. The tale opens with the king of Vallepelosa (Hairy Valley), who is desperate because he has a daughter, Zoza,[36] who never laughs, and has never laughed despite his many attempts to amuse her.

In this first part of the tale we have elements typical of the fairy tale world: there is the presence of royal characters and there is the theme of the princess who would not laugh[37] (of which Propp speaks in his *Theory and History of Folklore*[38]); also the name, Vallepelosa, chosen to identify the kingdom where the initial actions take place, is in perfect harmony with fairy tale contest, as it respects the canon of the 'no place' and 'no real name'.[39] The remedies tried by the king involve spectacles and games, as well as the presence and participation of people typical of Basile's Naples.[40] However, the most interesting of expedients employed by the desperate father is the oil fountain, which works as a sort of bridge between the fairy tale world and the real one. In fact, while fountains are typically found in fairy tales and always generate a pivotal scene for the resolution of the *villainy*, the insertion of the oil element makes it "dramatically Baroque" and relevant for Basile's time.

Up to this point, we are still not in fairy tale territory, for the actual entrance into the fairy tale world is marked by "*la scena voscareccia*" (the "woody" scene) where the old *popolana* shows the young rascal her "wood" by lifting her skirt. Upon seeing an old woman who, without decorum and modesty, shows her private parts to the public, Zoza bursts out in an uncontrollable laughter and causes, as a chain reaction, the rejoinder of the old hag who curses the princess by telling her that she will never marry unless she is able to wake up the beautiful dormant Tadeo.

Zoza, upon learning that she has been cursed and that her prince lies enchanted in a deep sleep very similar to death in the middle of a forest,

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[36] It is interesting to point out that "Zoza" in Neapolitan dialect means "soft" (or "wet mud"), "slush"; it is used to indicate people and things that are worthless. See Zazzera, *Dizionario*, 2007.

[37] Aarne/Thompson tale type 437.

[38] Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore*, 1993.

[39] In Boccaccio there is "La valle delle donne", (The valley of the women), which represents a utopic place; see the conclusion of day VI in the *Decameron*.

[40] In fact, as Croce explains in the notes to his translation, the games mentioned in this tale were typically played by Neapolitan children as an entertaining pastime, and the stilt-walkers and hoop-jumpers were familiar to the Neapolitans as they performed at their festivals; also "bitchy Lucia", although originating in Malta, had become a popular dance in Naples.

and that the only way of waking him is to fill a pitcher with tears in three days,[41] goes into the woods searching for her beautiful prince. The entrance of Zoza into the forest marks the entrance of *Lo cunto* into the world of fairy tales, a world that remains, however, very much grounded in reality, as the setting for the narrative is totally realistic: Naples, with its provinces, its culture, its people and, more importantly, its language,[42] which is the most innovative feature of *Lo cunto*.

Marco Petrini considers Basile's choice to write in Neapolitan as one of the most important characteristics of *Lo cunto*. He believes that the Neapolitan dialect was particularly fit for the fairy tale world and granted a natural comical spirit to the stories.[43] Neapolitan was used as comic relief in Baroque tragedies, but what makes the difference here is that Basile's dialect is a highly stylized and erudite Neapolitan, embellished with myriad metaphors and hyperboles, and with a richer vocabulary. Moreover, while it was customary at the time to have only characters representing the people, *il popolino*, speaking dialect,[44] in *Lo cunto* we find kings, queens, princes and princesses speaking in the same manner, with the same vernacular language (a sort of Rabelaisian language) as the petty villains. Never, before Basile, did royalty speak in such a fashion, which makes us question the author's intent: why did he dare to choose such a language? Primarily, it is probable that Basile was reacting against the tradition of using Neapolitan tongue simply as a means to "spice things up" in theatrical representation.[45] Once again he was distancing himself from the custom, of which he had also been part with his works in standard Italian, by creating a collection of tales written in a "minor"

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[41] The triplication of the action is a typical element of the fairytale.

[42] All of Basile's heroes and heroines are originally from Naples or its provinces; for example Antuono, the hero of the first *cunto*, is from Marigliano, a small town on the periphery of Naples; the prince of "*La Palomma*" (*The Dove*, 2.7), lives "lontano otto miglia da Napole" (eight miles from Naples); Nardiello (3.5) is from "lo Vommaro" (a neighborhood on the upper side of Naples); and in "Cagliuso" (2.4), Tolla opens her story saying "Era na vota a la cettà de Napole mio…"[42] (There was once in my city of Naples…). Naples is ever-present and is a major protagonist in the farewell of Cienzo, who is forced to leave his beloved city because he has broken the head of the king's son during an unfortunate game (see the tale "*Lo Mercante*" [*The Merchant*, 1.7])

[43] Petrini, *Il Gran Basile*, 1989: 133.

[44] See for example *La Vaiasseide* by Giulio Cesare Cortese; this is a poem in octaves about the life of female servants in Naples, and the protagonists, who speak dialect, are part of the *popolino*.

[45] Canepa, 1997: 65.

language yet enriched with highly stylistic devices often borrowed from it and from contemporary Baroque poetry.

Apart from the desire to revolutionize the literary tradition, the choice to use dialect responded also to other needs. *Lo cunto* is a collection of "popular tales" told by the people in street markets, inns, or in the town squares, spoken originally in their dialect, the only language the people knew how to speak fluently. Hence, to keep the literary fairy tale as faithful as possible to its original form and truly represent the culture from which it originated, Basile had to maintain the language of the people, as language mirrors the culture of the people who speak it. Besides, using the Neapolitan vernacular, which at the time was generally understood only by Neapolitans and not much by other Italians (nor by the Spaniards who occupied the city), served to emphasize the polemical and political intent that underlines the whole collection.

After this brief account of Basile's relationship with his forefathers, I would now like to briefly discuss the innovations Basile brought to the structure of classical fairy tales and specifically in the treatment of the fairy tale personae, by looking at the heroes and heroines in *Lo cunto*. One of the most complete studies on the characteristics of the fairy tale hero is the one presented by Max Luthi,[46] in which he defines the fundamental traits of the hero. Luthi maintains that the fairy tale hero is typified by a "one dimensionality", which indicates the attitude of the fairy tale personae in treating the supernatural beings they come across as if they were part of the same physical and spiritual universe. He adds that the fairy tale protagonist is also distinguished by a complete lack of psychological insight, a trait called "depthlessness". This depthlessness indicates that the protagonists of fairy tales do not have an inner life; they do not have a psychological dimension. Luthi writes:

> "Not internal emotions but external impulses propel the characters of the folktale onward. They are impelled and guided by gifts, discoveries, tasks, suggestions, prohibitions, miraculous aids, challenges, difficulties, and lucky happenstances, not by the prompting of their hearts. When it is important to stay awake the antiheroes can be counted upon to fall asleep as mechanically as puppets. No mention is made of their having struggled to stay awake. If the hero wishes to stay awake, however, he sits down on an ant heap or in a thicket of thorns. Here again he relies not on the strength and persistence of his own will but on a form of external "help". Wherever possible, the folktale expresses internal feelings through

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[46] See, *The Fairytale as Art Form and Portrait of Man*, translated by Jon Erickson, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.

external events, psychological motivations through external impulses. In essence, folktale characters always act with composure."[47]

Lastly, he says that the hero lives in "isolation", which means that he/she is always singled out from his/her group. Upon examining Basile's tales closely, one soon realizes that while criteria such as isolation and "one dimensionality" are present, that of "depthlessness" is not. In fact, Basile's characters are far from plain: they have a strong psychological depth, which obviously sets Basile apart from the traditional fairy tale writers.

The notion of "depthlessness" is also disproved by the initiative most of Basile's characters take in shaping their destiny, for example Betta in "*Pinto Smauto*" (3.5), who refuses to marry any of the men her father proposes to her and so forges her own "perfect man" out of almond paste and precious stones. In addition, Penta, in "*La Penta Mano-Mozza*" (Penta, the Girl who chopped her hands off, 3.2), cuts her hands off rather than surrender to her brother's incestuous love; while Grannonia, in "*Vardiello*" (1.4), makes her own fortune by playing a trick on her foolish son and using his idiocy to her advantage.

Lo cunto is also non-traditional in that it defeats the notion of "abstract style", introduced by Luthi, which requires a linear, simple style of writing, without excessive rhetorical embellishment, and with not too many metaphors, if not without them at all:

> "The European folktale is not addicted to description. When it has its hero set off in search of his brother and sister and come upon a town made of iron, it does not waste a single word describing the iron buildings. Looking neither left nor right, and without the slightest trace of astonishment, the hero pursues his goal…. Only what is essential to the plot is mentioned; nothing is stated for its own sake, and nothing is amplified. As a rule, only one attribute goes with each noun: a town made all of iron, a big house, a big dragon, the young king, a bloody struggle."[48]

Luthi's notion of abstract style is somewhat endorsed by Propp who, in fact, allows a certain freedom in the use of the attributes that he defines as "the totality of all external qualities of the characters: their age, sex, status, external appearance, peculiarities of this appearance, and so forth." While many authors did follow the rule of the abstract style, Basile did not; rather he freely exploits the language, creating endless lists of adjectives, metaphors, and conceits to describe the character's emotion or simply to

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[47] Max Luthi, *The European Folktale. Form and Nature*, translated by John D. Niles, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1982, p.14.
[48] *Ibid*, p. 15.

describe a place or a situation. In point of fact this abundance of metaphors strongly contradicts Luthi's notion of abstract style. What we find in Basile is, rather, a tendency towards accumulation, together with his predilection for scatological language, a characteristic of Bakhtin's carnivalesque style, which calls to mind Rabelais, the forefather of laughter, satire and scatological literature.[49] Both writers (that is, Rabelais and Basile) share a preference for long and detailed descriptions characterized by an incredible accumulation of adjectives, metaphors and other literary devices; moreover, food plays a major role in their literature and ultimately they both have a penchant for the representation of deformed bodies or bodies caught in the most intimate moments (while urinating, defecating or vomiting), which are not usually a feature of canonical literary texts. But while the Frenchman represents mostly people of the populace[50] in these embarrassing moments, Basile takes it a step further and portrays a prince in the act of defecating.

What is the implication of Basile's daring choice?

Representing people while they perform the most basic bodily functions is a way of stressing their "being human" and mortal; thus, it is plausible that representing a prince, a member of the *untouchable* royalty, in this way, was a means for Basile to launch a *veiled* message to the real kings and princes of the time, a way to remind them that in spite of their power and wealth they were still only *humans*. This reading would fit perfectly with the critical vein that pervades the collection, and that becomes extremely clear in the satire of the four eclogues included as *intermezzi* between the five days.

Also, the act of defecating indicates a moment of 'transformation', or better yet, 'creation'. It is known that excrement is amongst the best fertilizers, and once absorbed by the earth it contributes to the generation of new crops (new life). In literature, and especially in Basile's case, the action of defecating is not an isolated episode, rather it is a pivotal moment

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[49] There are doubts that Basile read Rabelais, given the unpopularity of this writer during the seventeenth century and after both in Italy and abroad. "Of all great writers of world literature, Rabelais is the least popular, the least understood and appreciated" says Bakhtin. However, the resemblance of their styles is undeniable.

[50] In Boccaccio there are simple people represented in embarrassing moments: see the story of Andreuccio da Perugia, 2.5. See also Dante's *Inferno*, canto XVIII vv.127-132, " <<Fa che pinghe>>/ mi disse <<il viso un poco più avante,/sì che la faccia ben con l'occhio attinghe/di quella sozza e scapigliata fante/ che là si graffia con l'unghie merdose,/ e or s'accoscia e ora è in piedi stante." (Emphasis is mine.)