

# *Did Edward de Vere Translate Boccaccio's Decameron into English, Published in 1620?*

by Richard M. Waugaman, M.D.

The year 2020 saw the world's worst pandemic since the "Spanish" flu of 1918. It also marked the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first English translation<sup>1</sup> of a book set in Florence in 1348, during Europe's "Black Death," the deadliest plague in human history, which may have killed three-fourths of the population of Florence (Cohn, 2010). So it is timely to take a fresh look at that influential but anonymous translation.<sup>2</sup>

Before going any further, since most readers will be unfamiliar with this 1620 translation, let me offer a sample:

Having thus spoken, he hung downe the head in his bosome, weeping as abundantly, as if it had beene a childe severely disciplinde. On the other side, *Ghismonda* hearing the speeches of her Father, and perceiving withall, that not onely her secret love was discovered, but also *Guiscardo* was in close prison, the matter which did most of all torment her; shee fell into a very strange kinde of extasie, scorning teares, and entreating tearmes, such as feminine frailety are alwayes aptest unto: but rather, with height of courage, controlling feare or servile basenesse, and declaring invincible fortitude in her very lookes, she concluded with her selfe, rather then to urge any humble perswasions, shee would lay her life downe at the stake. For plainly shee perceived, that *Guiscardo* was already a dead man in Law, and death

was likewise as welcome to her, rather then the deprivation of her Love; and therefore, not like a weeping woman, or as checkt by the offence committed, but carelesse of any harme happening to her: stoutly and courageously, not a teare appearing in her eye, or her soule any way to be perturbed, thus shee spake to her Father (482; IV.i, that is, first tale of the fourth day).

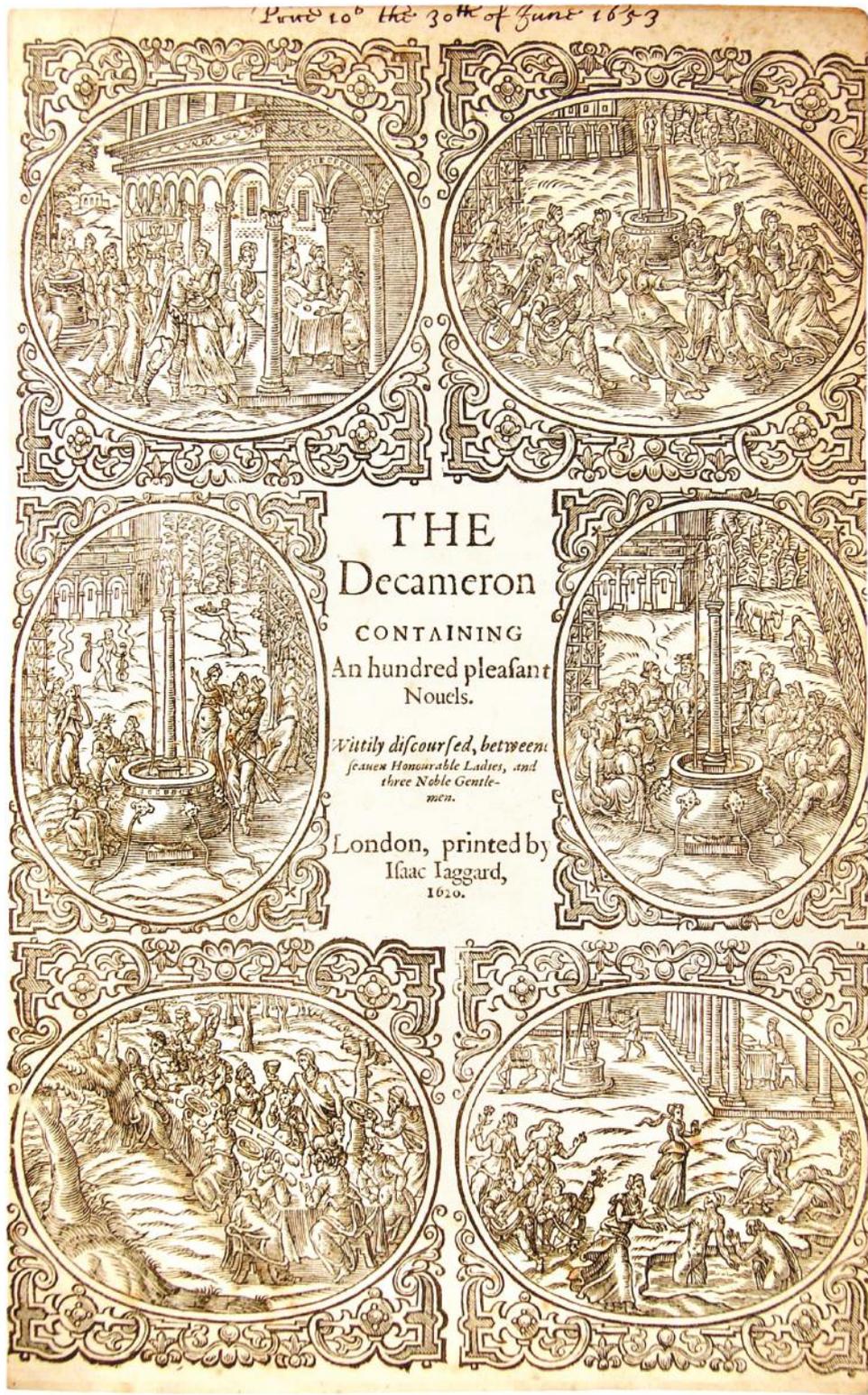
## Oxford and *Decameron* in Historical Context

We know *Decameron* influenced some of the plays of William Shakespeare, the pseudonym of Edward de Vere, 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford. In a 2019 study, Melissa Walter shows that a large number of Shakespeare's plays, and especially his comic heroines, were shaped by Italian novellas, particularly *Decameron*.<sup>3</sup> Scholar Herbert Wright speaks of "the problem of Shakespeare's knowledge of Boccaccio" (221 n.3)—that is, how he was familiar with tales in *Decameron* that had not yet been translated into English, and then used them in plays such as *Cymbeline*.<sup>4</sup> In this article, I will present evidence that suggests that Edward de Vere wrote the translation, which would highlight just how important *Decameron* was to him. Oxford's interest in Italy; in translations in general; in personally financing translations of works by Italian authors (*Cardanus Comfort*; *The Book of the Courtier*); and in literary classics are all consistent with having undertaken this translation. Most notably, the translator's use of anonymity is fully consistent with Oxford's pattern of concealing his authorship of many of his works.

We might pause here for a moment to reflect on anonymous authorship in the Renaissance. Marcy North, who has done seminal work on this topic, warns us that we suffer from some unscholarly prejudices about anonymous works. For example, "scholars have traditionally preferred works with [known] authors," and anonymous works are assumed to be "far inferior to those of known authors" (2003, 10–1). One cannot help thinking of a parallel with the stigma of illegitimate birth, and even of Oxford's older sister taking him to court after their father died to claim he was illegitimate. It is noteworthy that Oxford's childhood guardian and later father-in-law, William Cecil, Lord Burghley, "used anonymity in printing surreptitious propaganda" (26). So he may have encouraged Oxford to conceal authorship of his own works.

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North even names Oxford as one of the Elizabethan poets whose attributed work is so scarce because of “the courtiers’ fashion of limiting readership through close manuscript circulation” (1999, 8). North concludes that scholars dislike an authorship vacuum, and that once it is filled with a speculative attribution, scholars may move on, without re-examining the accuracy of that initial authorship attribution. North uses the anonymous *Arte of English Poesie* as a salient example—the speculation that it was the work of George Puttenham is now nearly carved in stone. The history of the attribution of the 1620 *Decameron* translation to John Florio also illustrates this problem. Herbert Wright, the first to make this attribution, admitted he was uncertain, but in the years since he did so it is often treated as established fact, hanging on to the translation like barnacles. Just as with the false attribution of the works of Shakespeare to William Shakspere of Stratford, we face a struggle when we challenge such a flawed but traditional authorship assumption.

The 1620 translation was dedicated to Oxford’s son-in-law, Philip Herbert, Earl of Montgomery; moreover, it was published just three years before the First Folio. As with the lavish folio size of the book, even the publisher was the same as that of the First Folio—Isaac Jaggard.<sup>5</sup> It was published in an ornate, two-volume edition. It is intriguing that, in 1587, the printer John Wolfe entered an anonymous edition of *Decameron* into the Stationers’ Register. It was never published, unless it was the translation published in 1620. I suggest that this 1587 work was Oxford’s translation, but that it was too controversial to be published until 1620.

Why was the book so controversial? For centuries, Boccaccio was widely respected for his scholarly works in Latin. Eventually, the salacious and fiercely anti-clerical content of *Decameron* overshadowed his earlier reputation. In fact, the book was entered into the Catholic Church’s first Counter-Reformation Index of banned books in 1559. It was apparently offensive to the Vatican, and, in England, to Puritans, and probably to some Protestants as well. In 1582, Liornado Salviati published a new, bowdlerized translation that returned *Decameron* into the Church’s good graces, through deleting its more offensive material. In Salviati’s version, more than half of the 100 stories were significantly altered from Boccaccio’s original version. One can imagine the tension between the fame of this book, on the one hand, and its power to offend the Church with its relentless anti-clericalism.

Still, the 1620 English translation had difficulties with the legal authorities. The Bishop of London gave his approval for the book’s publication, only to be overruled by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Ultimately, though, the book found its way into print in 1620. The translation appeared in further editions in 1625, 1634, 1657, and 1684, attesting to its great popularity. Changes in the text—such as its faux-moralizing tone—may have been required to get past both Papal as well as British censorship.

It may seem surprising that so many years elapsed between Oxford's translation of this work by 1587 and its publication only in 1620. But recall that Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, for example, was first entered into the Stationers' Register in 1600, yet was not published for 23 years. In fact, half the plays in the First Folio were written by the time of Oxford's death in 1604 but remained unpublished until 1623. *Decameron* being published in 1620 by Jaggard, with a dedication to Philip Herbert, may be related to the circumstances that led the First Folio to be published in 1623, by the same publisher, and with Herbert and his noble brother as dedicatees. Herbert's wife was Oxford's daughter, Susan Vere, and she may well have been the owner of the manuscript of this translation.

*Decameron* was controversial not just in Oxford's time, but in many other eras. Boccaccio is remembered to this day in the Italian word "boccaccio," meaning "licentious." Oxford, however, would have known that there was much more to Boccaccio's contributions than this one book. As Boccaccio was writing it, he met Petrarch, who persuaded him to "turn away from the vernacular and from medieval genres...and [produce] scholarly works in Latin that looked forward to...the Renaissance" (Rebhorn xxiii–xxiv). Indeed, Boccaccio had a profound influence on medieval and early modern English literature. He was a major source for Chaucer, and his *De Casibus* was the model for *The Mirrour for Magistrates*. Boccaccio became an idealist about the need for people to put their obligations to their city and country above self-interest. Ironically, before he wrote *Decameron*, Boccaccio was regarded as a great moralist—at one time, "Boccaccio had the approval of the Church everywhere" (H. Wright, 1957, 4).

Herbert Wright notes that E.K., in *A Shepheard's Calendar*, "recalls how many poets, including Boccaccio, wrote pastorals before they had attained their full [poetic] power" (44). E.K. uses a touching metaphor and compares such early pastoral poems of famous poets with "young birdes, that be newly crept out of the nest, by little first to prove theyr tender wyngs, before they make a greater flyght" (Spenser 29). And in E.K.'s "Glosse" after the poem for April, he explains the mythological Graces, adding "and Boccace [adopting the French spelling] saith [in his *Genealogy of the Gods*], that they be painted naked..." (69).

What else may have appealed to Oxford about translating this work? We know that Oxford devoted much of his life and his career to establishing English as a respected literary language, at a time when few Europeans knew English. Given his interests, he knew that just as Dante and Petrarch made the "vulgar" language of Italian as respectable for poetry as Latin, so Boccaccio did the same for Italian for works in prose. Ovid was one of Oxford's models for poetry; Boccaccio may have been such a model for literary prose.

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Herbert Wright has shown that the Italian source text for the 1620 translation was Liornado Salviati's heavily censored Italian edition, first published in 1582, which is consistent with the English translation then being registered five years later.<sup>6</sup> He notes that the translator also made heavy use of Antoine le Maçon's 1545 French translation (which went through 20 further editions by 1600). Melissa Walter concludes that Shakespeare could read Italian and speculates that "Shakespeare could also have read *Decameron* in French, possibly alongside Italian" (loc. 563)—that is, precisely the two versions that scholars have concluded the anonymous translator of the 1620 edition used.

Herbert Wright speculated that John Florio was the translator, but other scholars "are skeptical about this attribution, claiming that there is insufficient evidence" (Armstrong 91). I doubt that Wright thought of Oxford as an alternative translation candidate, despite evidence that Oxford financed the translation of such Italian works as *Cardanus Comfort* and *The Book of the Courtier*. For Oxford, translations were an important means of making foreign texts widely accessible to English readers, honing his writing skill, and enriching the English language in the process.

### Attributes of the Translator

A review of Herbert Wright's 1953 book by Douglas Bush states, "The translator, like Elizabethan translators in general, and more than most of them, gave free rein to his own personal and stylistic idiosyncrasies..." (227). Further, "In general, he is exuberantly, not to say intemperately, word-conscious" (228). Bush is ambivalent about Wright's attribution of the translation to Florio, wondering if Wright developed his list of parallel characteristics in the anonymous translator and in Florio because he had already chosen Florio (which would illustrate the well-known phenomenon of confirmation bias). Bush gives the example of Florio's Montaigne being "moralistic," but he does not find an equivalently moralistic strain in the Boccaccio translation. Bush concludes that "Until we have a better claimant to suggest, we may *provisionally* assent" (my emphasis) to Wright's attribution (228). In fact, Wright himself declined to state he was certain his attribution was accurate.

It is worth listing the characteristics that Herbert Wright found in the anonymous translator: "in addition to his competence in both French and Italian, [he] manifests a special interest in dogs and horses,<sup>[7]</sup> the sea,<sup>[8]</sup> the law,<sup>[9]</sup> drama and fine arts and music,<sup>[10]</sup> a courtly relish for ceremony and rank..." (Bush 227). While many of those qualities describe Oxford, Bush does not agree with Wright that they describe Florio. It is instructive that Wright's methodology for identifying an unknown author resembles J. Thomas Looney's for identifying Oxford as Shakespeare. In fact, let us compare Wright's

findings with Looney’s relevant “characteristics” of the author of Shakespeare’s works, shown in square brackets:

“The translator...more than most {Elizabethan translators} gave free rein to his own personal and stylistic idiosyncracies [“eccentric and mysterious”; “unconventional”]...in addition to his competence in both French and Italian [“an enthusiast for Italy”], {the translator} manifests a special interest in dogs and horses [“a follower of sport”], the sea, the law, drama [“an enthusiast in the world of drama”] and fine arts and music [“a lover of music”]; a courtly relish for ceremony and rank [“a member of the higher aristocracy”]...he heightens emotional effects through vivid phrasing and dramatic particularity. The translator’s style...reveals a concern for rhythm and balance, for alliteration in a score of various forms (including doublets and triplets and compound adjectives), and for repetition of words. In general, he is exuberantly, not to say intemperately, word-conscious” [“a lyric poet of recognized talent”].

What of the dedicatory epistle to the Earl of Montgomery? Having died in 1604, Oxford could not have written it in 1620. However, it is possible that he was hoping his translation would finally be published after his death and wrote this dedication in his final months of life, when his daughter Susan was engaged but not yet married to Phillip Herbert. Alternatively, Oxford may have written the dedication to someone else in 1587, when the book was entered in the Stationers’ Register, and Jaggard and Oxford’s family later changed the dedicatee in 1620.

What was happening in Oxford’s life in the early 1580s, when he may have obtained the new, expurgated Salviati translation, which brought *Decameron* out of its exile on the Church’s Index of banned books, and in 1587, when a new edition of the book was entered into the Stationers’ Register? A great deal. Highly relevant was Oxford’s purchase of Fisher’s Folly in 1580, which Mark Anderson has called “a bohemian retreat for *Euphuist* writers [my emphasis].” Euphuism, which scholars acknowledge heavily influenced the style of the 1620 translation, was at its height in the 1580s, then fell out of favor. Oxford was exiled from court in 1581 and was re-admitted to court two years later. In 1586, Queen Elizabeth granted him a £1,000 annuity. About the same year, I believe he probably wrote *The Arte of English Poesie*, though it was not published until 1589. Finally, Oxford may also have been attracted to Salviati’s 1582 edition in part because being in exile from court himself made him identify with the 10 young people in the *Decameron*, who were in self-imposed exile from Florence.

So, Oxford may have executed the translation in the years following 1582, then decided against publication at the request of Queen Elizabeth, who

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may have found its racy, “de-bowdlerized” stories too controversial. Oxford would have been more compliant with her wishes than previously, not wanting to jeopardize his generous annuity from the state.

## Linguistic Parallels with Oxford/Shakespeare

At this point it is vital to answer the question of Oxford's fluency in Italian. The definitive answer is given by a contemporary of Oxford's named Orazio Coquo, a 17-year-old choirboy from Venice who accompanied Oxford to England from Italy and stayed with him for 11 months. On his return to Italy in 1577, Coquo appeared before the Venetian Inquisition and testified that, among other things, Oxford was fluent in both Italian and Latin (Nelson 157).

In the same vein, it is necessary to determine Shakespeare's knowledge of Italian. According to Shakespeare scholar Roger Prior, Shakespeare's “knowledge of Italian was extensive” (275). In support of this assessment, he writes: “As he wrote it [*Love's Labour's Lost*], Shakespeare consulted four poems in the original Italian... Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato*, Berni's *rifacimento* of that poem... and Torquato Tasso's pastoral drama in verse, *Aminta*...” (269).

In the same vein, Andrew Cairncross concluded that “Shakespeare's knowledge and use of Italian... can be illustrated and established by reference to Cantos IV–VI of *Orlando Furioso*. These cantos provided Shakespeare with material not only for the Hero-Claudio theme in *Much Ado About Nothing*, but also for *King Lear* and *Othello*.” Further, “Shakespeare had at least a reading knowledge of Italian and had read and been fascinated by certain sections of *Orlando Furioso*, which he used, so far as the present evidence goes, independently of translations” (Cairncross 178, 182). In short, Shakespeare was not only fluent in Italian but used Italian literary sources in his plays.

In this regard, we can start our linguistic analysis by examining the wording of the translation's dedication. Strikingly, the phrase “foule mouthed slander and detraction” also appears word for word in the dedication of Munday's 1618 *Sidero-Thriambos*. Even the context is comparable. The 1620 dedication asserts that the book, with Herbert as patron, will “be safely sheilded from foule mouthed slander and detraction.” Similarly, Munday's work asks a patron to be “protector from *foule-mouthed slander and detraction*” (these are the only two works in EEBO [Early English Books Online] that contain the highlighted phrase). One explanation might be that, as one of Oxford's former literary secretaries, Munday played a role in writing the 1620 dedication. Alternatively, he may have borrowed the wording from Oxford's manuscript. For that matter, given the phrases from the translation that also appear in Munday's later works, it is even conceivable that he collaborated with Oxford in writing the translation. Munday's entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National*

*Biography* (ODNB) asserts that, “In the late 1580s and 1590s particularly, he [Munday] functioned single-handedly as a major translation factory,” translating works into English from French, Italian, and Spanish.<sup>11</sup>

Herbert Wright did much to renew interest in the 1620 translation. He suggested that it led to increased appreciation of *Decameron* in England. Wright comments that this translation “is often marked by an emotional and a dramatic quality as well as by a partiality for significant detail. This vividness is strengthened by a considerable range of stylistic effects from the simple and racy to the elaborate and ornate. The translator makes extensive use of *balance*, and his work has a well-defined rhythm. These unite with a complicated and skillfully devised system of *alliteration* to leave a deep impression on the ear” (191; my emphasis). Desmond O’Connor, in his entry on Florio in the ODNB, concludes that Florio “lacked the inspiration and originality of the poet and playwright.” Unlike Oxford, Florio wrote no dramas, and Wright’s praise sounds far more consistent with the writings of Shakespeare. O’Connor writes of Wright’s attribution: “If the work was indeed his [Florio’s], however, it certainly did not provide him with any financial reward, because in 1619 he was already residing in poverty at Fulham, where, despite his attempts, he was unsuccessful in extracting a pension from the Lord Treasurer” (ODNB Florio entry).

Donatella Montini characterizes the translator’s style as Euphuistic; however, Euphuism flourished during the 1580s, which adds to the evidence that this translation dates to that decade, rather than to the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century. In addition, Oxford was known as the patron of the Euphuistic school, further connecting him with this translation. Indeed, his secretary, John Lyly, initiated the Euphuistic fashion with his 1579 novel, *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit*, and followed this with his second novel in 1580, *Euphues and His England*, both of which feature an Italianized Englishman. Moreover, Lyly dedicated his second Euphues novel to the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford.

C.S. Lewis characterized Euphuism as “antithesis, alliteration, balance, rhyme, and assonance” (312), *all taken to excess*. Here is one example of the translation’s (possibly excessive) alliteration—in VII.ii (the second tale of the seventh day) we see the quadruple alliteration of “f” followed in the same word by “r” in “free from future feare.” Significantly, Montini cites a passage in the anonymous 1589 *Arte of English Poesie* as she examines the translator’s style. Previously, I have attributed the *Arte* to Oxford himself. Montini believes the 1620 translation makes heavy use of what the *Arte* calls “the ‘climbing’ figure of *climax*, a scheme that presents a mounting over a series of words, clauses or sentences” (96; note the alliterative repetition of “clim-”). Montini then concludes, “The structured principle which shapes the whole work [i.e., the 1620 translation] is that of *copia* [abundance], of increase, of crescendo.... In various forms and at different levels, [the translator] develops

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a homogeneous, pervasive strategy of addition and expansion” (96). Again, a description of Euphuism—“The translator’s style presents the usual arsenal of devices typical of Euphuism” (97).

Equally important is that Shakespeare extensively used hendiadys, a particular kind of verbal doublet, more than any other Elizabethan writer (George Wright, 1981). Here is Montini on its use in the English translation:

[The translation] presents numerous examples of *doublets* which were often used to gain the rhetorical ornament of successive phrases or clauses of approximately equal length. Nouns, adjectives, verbs are *doubled* and piled up in order to heighten the emotional pitch of the situation or event described: they are added as an ornamental device, but also to clarify the subject, provide details and make the content more vivid and effective. Or *doublets* of adjectives and verbs are used as a variation for a single verb in the attempt to avoid repetitions (98, my emphasis).

Montini also links alliteration with such doubling, in many cases, writing of the translator’s “love for alliterations...to couple two terms different in meaning and similar in form” (98). Montini illustrates this doubling on the part of the English translator with an example:

Italian: “E dimorando col tenero padre, sì come gran donna, in molte delicatezze...” English: “Continuing thus in Court with the King her father, who loved her beyond all his future hopes; like a Lady of *great and glorious* magnificence, she lived in all *delights and pleasure*.”

Note the two added doublings of adjectives, then of nouns, that were not in the Italian.

Guyda Armstrong’s comments on the 1620 translation weaken Herbert Wright’s attribution of it to John Florio in several ways, opening up the possibility of a different translator. Armstrong observes, “The [1620] edition is unusual among Boccaccio’s works in English translation in that there is absolutely no indication of the identity of the translator... Boccaccio is not named on the title page, or indeed anywhere in this book.” There have been no other anonymous works attributed to Florio. The attribution to Florio “remains problematic...it is probably safest to refer to the ‘translator,’ rather than to Florio...” (219–20). Armstrong also notes the paradox that Florio would have concealed his role in translating this book, when he took credit for his highly regarded 1603 translation of Montaigne’s *Essays*.

As we engage in a close reading of the 1620 English translation, we face obstacles in ascertaining what exactly the translator changed from Boccaccio’s original Italian version, for it is not clear whether Oxford saw an early, banned Italian edition, or if he knew the work only through the expurgated

Salviati Italian version, as well as through Maçon's French translation. I am on more solid ground, however, in noting parallels with Oxford's other works in word coinages; quirky spellings; and phrases that are also found in works signed by Shakespeare or by Oxford's literary secretaries, especially Anthony Munday and John Lyly.

I am struck by the likelihood that the same anonymous author who used the trope "*his haire stooode upright like Porcupines quill*," also, as Shakespeare, had the Ghost in *Hamlet* (I.v) say, "I could a tale unfold whose lightest word/Would harrow up thy soul...*And [make] each particular hair to stand on end/ Like quills upon the fretful porcupine.*" Spurgeon wrote that "Shakespeare's intense interest in the human face has never, I think, been adequately noticed" (58); in particular, she cogently highlighted the many ways that Shakespeare was deeply fascinated with outward expressions of a character's inner emotions. Although Spurgeon seems to have overlooked this example, what a vivid image of fright!

The word "over-plus" meaning "excess libido" first occurs in Shakespeare's Sonnet 135: "Thou hast they Will, and Will to boote, and Will in *over-plus*." And Phillippa, in this translation, uses the word in just the same sense. In addition, the translation of tale III.ix adds details about Bertrand being a royal "ward," who is freed from his "wardship." The translator seems to have emphasized this parallel with Oxford's experience as the first royal ward under Queen Elizabeth.<sup>12</sup>

A major objection to Florio as translator was the heavy use of the Antoine Le Maçon French translation as a primary source (probably its 1578 edition). Florio knew Italian well—probably better than Oxford—so it is difficult to explain why he would have relied on the French translation as a primary source text. Even Herbert Wright, in his 1936 article, writes that "[the translator's] *mastery of Italian was not complete*.... The inaccuracy of the English translator is a serious defect and so is his diffuseness.... Not infrequently tales are given a turn which is entirely foreign to the spirit of Boccaccio" (500, my emphasis). One example of the translator's incomplete knowledge of Italian is the translation of "latino" as "Latin," whereas it meant "Italian" in Boccaccio's day. Florio should have known better—in his day, he was primarily a teacher of Italian, and an author of books for teaching Italian, including a collection of 6,000 Italian proverbs.

"Two tales [of Boccaccio] were entirely removed and substituted" with other stories in the 1620 translation (Montini 93. n.14). These two stories were III.x,<sup>13</sup> about Rustico, a monk, seducing a naive young woman, Alibech; and VI.vi, that "proves" the Baronci are the oldest, most noble family, because God created their ancestors first, before becoming more skillful; the Baronci family were notoriously ugly. Those tales are replaced by more acceptable

alternatives. The Rustico story “is perhaps one of the most notorious of all the tales of *Decameron* and has certainly been subject to the most stringent censorship over the years...” (221). Instead, the 1620 translator substituted a story from François Belleforest's *Histoires tragiques*, about the chaste princess Serictha. We know that Oxford also used Belleforest as a literary source for *Hamlet*.

Oxford loved to coin words, but also to turn nouns into verbs, to noun verbs, and to give old words new meanings. The OED gives this 1620 translation as the source of five newly coined words: heart-aching, low-hanging, monkey-faced, reflight, and mocked (an adjective meaning “derided” or “ridiculed”); it also offers an excellent example of Oxford using a word doublet to explain his newly coined word: “Thus the *mocked and derided* Nicostratus” in II.vii; my emphasis). If the translation was written by 1587, it coined many other words, such as “separatist.” It seems to have coined “insidiator” and “virgin-man.” It also coined “irreciprocally” (VII.vi), which is not in the OED. “Reciprocal” is first listed in EEBO in 1555; it is used twice by Shakespeare.

The translation also coined new meanings for 22 words: country-bred, distastably (“with distaste”), goatherdess, hen pen (again, Oxford explains this in his word doublet: “A coope or Hen pen” in I.v). He also revives “hen-coope” three times in the work (it was used as early as 1423, but Oxford's is the first use in EEBO), house bell, instructed (OED 3.a., based on authoritative instructions), marinal (OED 2, meaning nautical), miscaller, mount (OED 10.a., “to blush with rage or passion”<sup>14</sup>). Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* is listed as the first example of definition OED 3.b. of “mount”: “to rise or soar up to or into.” Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* is the first example of OED 9, “of a road, stair, etc.: to go up”; and his *Tempest* for OED 25, “to cause to stand upright or erect”; apparently, Oxford loved to play with the word “mount”), painting-apron, pallet bed, Perugian (OED B., a native of Perugia), pledge (OED 1.d., a thing put in pawn), prevent (OED 14.a., to stop someone from doing something), rapture (OED 1.e., a strong emotional attack; Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* is cited as the first example of OED 1.d., meaning “a state of passion.” In addition, Troilus in *Troilus and Cressida* says “Cassandra's mad: her brain-sick raptures...”; later, Cressida repeats the word); and recluse (as an adjective).

Let me highlight additional words and phrases in this 1620 translation that have linguistic parallels with works of Shakespeare; other works by Oxford; and works by his literary secretaries who may have served as collaborators or as allonyms for some of Oxford's own writing. Encountering a phrase here that was also used by Shakespeare may be merely a coincidence. It may suggest that another translator knew Shakespeare's works and borrowed phrases from them, or it may be that Shakespeare saw the circa 1587 manuscript of

this translation by someone else and borrowed from it. I would suggest, however, that the cumulative weight of these numerous parallels of vocabulary; the same fondness for coining words and phrases; similar spelling eccentricities; and a similar interest in religious books add to the other lines of evidence that link this book with Oxford, and that his authorship of the translation is the most parsimonious interpretation of this cumulative evidence.

The 1620 translation speaks of a monk feeling “effeminate temptations” toward a kneeling “wench.” The OED gives meaning 3 of effeminate as “devoted to women.” It states that “unequivocal instances are rare,” and it gives only two such examples: Caxton in 1490 (translating Virgil’s “uxorius”); and the 1589 *Arte of English Poesie*, that I have attributed to Oxford. We might add Henry IV’s description of Prince Hal’s low life in the taverns as “wanton and effeminate”; and Romeo’s complaint that Juliet “hath made me effeminate.”

Another quirky word: “rere-banquet,” meaning “a sumptuous meal taken late at night.” The third example in the OED is from *The Arte of English Poesie*. The fifth is from this translation of *Decameron*. Assuming this translation is the one entered into the Stationers’ Register in 1587, it has the first three uses of “logger-headed” for stupid. Assuming an earlier date of composition of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, it was coined in that play. It is also used in *The Taming of the Shrew*.

It is one of only three works published in 1620 that use the word “steepy” to mean “steep.” Oxford had used “steepy” as early as 1567 in his translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (EEBO lists no earlier use). It is also in the phrase “age’s steepy night” in Sonnet 63. And it was used in 1597 by his literary secretary John Lyly in *The Woman in the Moone*, as well as in a 1602 translation by Anthony Munday. One is reminded of the similar “paly flames”; “stilly sounds”; and “vasty fields of France” in *Henry V*, as well as four other times Shakespeare used this comparatively rare spelling of vasty. In writing poetry, the unstressed “y” suffix facilitated iambic meter. Oxford’s reason for using it in prose may have reflected his love of “infinite variety” in spelling.

Story III.ix is well known to be a source for *All’s Well That Ends Well*. In his translation, Oxford emphasizes a parallel with his own life. The Italian version said “morto il conte e lui nelle mani del re lasciato...” (“once the Count [his father] died, he was left in the hands of the king”; Maçon wrote the same in French). But Oxford translates this as “Old Count Isnard dying, yong Bertrand fell as a *Ward* to the King...” (my emphasis). Oxford became the first royal ward in Elizabeth’s new wardship system, after the 16<sup>th</sup> Earl (“Conte” in Italian) died in 1562. Later in the story, the Italian version has the king say to Bertrand, “Beltramo, voi siete omai grande e fornito” [“Beltramo, you are henceforth great and provided”]. Once more, Oxford’s longer

English translation introduces a key autobiographical word—again, it is not in Maçon: “Noble Count, it is not unknowne to us, that you are a Gentleman of great honour, and it is our royall pleasure, to discharge your *wardship*” (emphasis added; only instance of “discharge your wardship” in EEBO). It is likely that Oxford thus drew attention to a pivotal parallel with his life not only because he identified with Bertrand, but because he wished that at least some readers of his manuscript translation would recognize this parallel with his life. It would lead readers to understand, further, that Oxford identified with Bertrand's unwillingness to marry the woman he was ordered to marry. Oxfordians have speculated that one reason he borrowed the “bed trick” from this story for *AWTW* is that his wife Anne played this very trick on him before he left for Italy in 1575. However, we must be cautious in making too much of this since Rebhorn reports that “The bed trick, which is central to Boccaccio's plot, was a widely diffused motif in both Eastern and Western story collections in the Middle Ages” (Rebhorn 889 n.1).

In story V.iii there is the intriguing phrase, “he had a conceit [idea] *hammering in his head*...” The italicized phrase was used in a 1581 work by Henri Estienne. The OED reports that the transitive verb “to hammer,” in definition II.3.b., means “of an idea: to present itself persistently in one's mind as matter of debate; to be in agitation.” The second example it gives is in *Titus Andronicus* II.iii.39, when Aaron says, “Blood and revenge are *hammering in my head*.”

In V.iv we find “There shall we heare the *sweete Birds sing*,” recalling that highlighted phrase in *The Rape of Lucrece* (line 922), as well as “where late the *sweet birds sang*” in Sonnet 73, and “the *sweet birds*, O, how they *sing!*” in *The Winter's Tale* (IV.iii). The only other example of “sweet birds sing” in EEBO before 1620 is in an Ignoto poem in *England's Helicon* (“The unknowne Shepherds complaint”). I agree with Looney that Ignoto was one of Oxford's pen names, further connecting the 1620 work with Oxford.

In V.viii there is the wonderful phrase, “the onely fuell which fed this *furious fire*” (just “son amour” in Maçon). “Kindled a *furious fyre*” occurs in the 1562 poem “Romeus and Juliet,” thought by some Oxfordians to be written by a young Oxford. Thomas Adams, in his 1614 *The devills banquet*, also used the phrase “like Porcupines quills” as a trope for shooting “bitter invectives”; but only this translator used the lively trope of “*his haire stode upright like Porcupines quills*.” *Hamlet* (I.v) includes the phrase, spoken by the Ghost: “I could a tale unfold whose lightest word/ Would harrow up thy soul...*And [make] each particular hair to stand on end/ Like quills upon the fretful porcupine*.” Again, a complex phrase and image in the 1620 work with strong Shakespearean associations.

In Vi.vii Phillippa argues that she never refused to have sex with her husband, but her libido is stronger than his. She asks the judge, “what should I doe with the *over-plus* remaining in mine owne power, and whereof he had no need?” “Over-plus” here means excess libido. The OED gives the first use of this meaning of “over-plus” as “excess” in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 135: “Thou hast they Will, and Will to boote, and Will in *over-plus*.” “Will” here means “carnal appetite”; the OED gives two examples of this definition 2 from Shakespeare.

In Oxford’s private letters, he favored double vowels in words that were seldom spelled that way in his time. This translation also favors such spellings, including “wee,” “hee,” and “shee.” It uses “woorthy,” which is found in only three other works in 1620, whereas “worthy” is used 40 times as often (and “woorthy” was used about 20 times per year between 1582 and 1588).

It has the first EEBO instance of “wedding and bedding,” referring to a couple who marry only hours after their first meeting. So, the phrase does a good job of capturing the fast pace of such a courtship. “Logger-headed” (stupid) is used three times in the 1620 translation, and is also used in *Taming of the Shrew*. “Loggerhead” was probably coined in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. The translation includes one of the earliest uses of “mountainets” (little mountains, a trope for a woman’s breasts).

Caroline Spurgeon observed that one of Shakespeare’s favorite images was the human body in motion. She wrote, “Indeed, pictures drawn from the body and bodily actions form the largest single sections of Shakespeare’s imagery” (49). “This marked delight in swift nimble bodily movement leads one to surmise...that Shakespeare himself was as agile in body as in mind...” (50). Oxford was indeed highly regarded for both his jousting as well as his dancing skills, winning three tournament jousts and even being asked by Elizabeth to dance for her French guests. Oxford’s *Arte of English Poesie* has an extended passage that compares the long and short syllables of the “feet” in Greek and Latin poetry with different speeds at which runners move in a race. Similarly, the 1620 translation uses the trope of a race: “The field is very large and spacious, wherein all this day we have walked, and there is not any one here, so wearied with running the former races, but nimbly would adventure on many more, so copious are the alterations of Fortune, in sad repetition of her wonderfull changes; and among the infinity of her various courses [meaning “races”—OED def. 3], I must make addition of another...” (loc. 2859).

Spurgeon also noted that Shakespeare is closely attentive to changes in a person’s complexion, as an outward manifestation of their emotional state. “Shakespeare’s intense interest in the human face has never, I believe, been

adequately noticed...above all, the way he continually makes us *see* the emotions of his characters by chasing changes of colors in their cheeks” (58). So it is notable that, in II.ix, the translator renders “nel viso cambiato” (with a changed face) as “by the changing of his *colour*” (emphasis added). This is said of Bernardo, when he falsely believes his wife has been unfaithful to him.

The 1565–67 translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which I have attributed to Oxford (see 2018 *Oxfordian*), transformed the original Latin to a much longer and even more ribald English poem. Similarly, the 1620 translation is also longer and more ribald than Boccaccio's original, and certainly more salacious than Salviati's expurgated Italian edition. We might recall in this context Sidney Lee's description that Oxford's “guardian Cecil found his [Oxford's] sense of humour a source of grave embarrassment” (*DNB*, 1899).

The 1620 translation made many changes from the original Italian. In I.iii the Italian reads “In queste nostre contrade” (“in our district”; similarly, in Maçon, “En cestuy nostre pais”); the translation changes this to, “Not far from Alexandria...” More boldly, the 1620 version invents the racy detail that, every three years, the Sultan had three virgins from a convent sent to him, for purposes that are left the reader's imagination. Masetto is transformed into “a yong Hebrew” in the translation. Oxford thus adds an inter-faith element to Boccaccio's tale, playing off the Christian nuns against the Muslim Sultan and the Jewish gardener who sleeps with the nuns.

The translation adds a complaint from the nun who first proposes having sex with Masetto that “we are barred [from sexual pleasure] by our unkind parents, binding us to perpetuall chastity, which they were never able to observe themselves. A sister of this house once told me, that before her turne came to be sent to the Soldane [Sultan], she fell in frailty, with a man that was both lame and blinde, and discovering the same to her Ghostly Father in confession; he absolved her of that sinne; affirming, that she had not transgressed with a man, because he wanted his rationally and understanding parts.” Further, the translator introduces a blasphemous trope in comparing the nuns' sexual liaison with Masetto with confession—“having beene with Masetto at this new former of confession, where enjoyned (by him) such an easie and silent penance, as brought them the oftner to shrift [confession], and made him to prove a perfect Confessour.” Anti-papal sentiment in England would have permitted such a mocking of Catholic tradition given the political violence of the Counter-Reformation along with Pope Pius's excommunication of Elizabeth in 1570. Only in the English does Masetto ponder that “he had undertaken a taske belonging to great Hercules, in giving [sexual] contentment to so many.” This story also coins the phrase “misse-proud,” meaning “perversely proud.”

## Connections to Works by Oxford's Secretaries

We do not know with certainty just what Oxford's several literary secretaries did on his behalf. Research for his literary works? Other, more active forms of literary collaboration with Oxford, such as collaborating with him on this translation? Given their reputations as respected writers, it is unlikely that they simply prepared fair copies of his revised manuscripts. Since it is possible that they sometimes offered their names to Oxford as allonyms for some of his anonymous works, I believe it is legitimate to include here several parallels between their works and the 1620 translation.

"Defailance" [failure] (II.vi) is used once in the 1620 book; it is found also in a 1618 publication of Munday. "Lineature" (outline) (II.vi), also used once here, is found only ten other times in EEBO; the first two (1592 and 1595) are written or translated by Munday. "Imbarment" (prohibition or hindrance) occurs twice in this translation and is in seven other EEBO works; the second is Anthony Munday's "*A Briefe Chronicle*," where it is also used twice. "Interparlance" (conference or conversation) (II.viii) occurs three times. It is found in six EEBO works, with its fourth use being Munday.<sup>15</sup>

"His vertues and commendable qualities" (III.v) recalls that Munday's 1611 *Briefe chronicle* has the second EEBO use of "good *vertues, and commendable qualities*." The italicized phrase is used two other times in the 1620 translation. "Griefe and melancholy" are used in this story and in two other works in 1620; they were used by Munday in his 1590 *The first booke of Amadis of Gaule*. "Chinkes and crannies" occurs here, and Munday used the phrase in 1618. Snout speaks of "a crannied hole or chink" in *Midsummer Night's Dream* (V.i).

V.v. has "Overcome with excesse of joy, which made the teares to trickle downe his cheekes...." Tears were said to trickle down a person's cheeks in a 1577 work of Eusebius, translated by one Meredith Hanmer, and published by Vautroullier. Tears next trickled down cheeks in Munday's translation of the 1588 *Palmerin D'Oliva*, where they did so no less than five times, with exactly the same wording we find in the 1620 *Decameron*: "[made] the teares to trickle downe his cheekes." Once again, this would suggest some connection between Oxford and Munday. And we might further note that it was "joy" that caused the tears to trickle in both 1588 and in 1620. Further, the 1620 passage is "Overcome with excesse of *joy* which made *the teares to trickle downe his cheekes*, he proffered to *embrace* and kisse the Maide...." Similarly, in one example from Munday, "With these wordes the King *embraced* him, and meere *joy* caused the *teares to trickle downe his cheekes*" (in chap. 18). Given the number of parallels, it seems worthwhile to dwell on these superabundant similarities that support the possibility that Oxford and Munday collaborated on the translation.

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The translation uses the rare word “furtherous” (advantageous) five times. It is also used in two works signed by Munday. Similarly, “Beating and misusing” occurs three times in this translation; it was used in 1590 by Munday and was used only one other time in EEBO.

In 1584, John Southern dedicated a book of poetry titled *Pandora* to Oxford (“Pandora” is a Greek word meaning “all gifts,” and it refers to the mythical first human female, but it was used only in the 1584 book's title, not its contents). Although he may well have written it himself, Southern attributed to Oxford's wife Anne some poetry in memory of her son, who died soon after his birth the previous year. In III.ii Oxford writes, “he sent a woman to me, one of his Pandoraes, as it appeared.” The first four uses of Pandoraes in EEBO all refer to “Pandoraes boxe.” But the next five examples do not; they are all in *The Woman in the Moone*, the 1597 play by John Lyly, one of Oxford's literary secretaries. Departing from “Pandoraes boxe,” Lyly speaks of Pandoraes's thoughts; hart; brest; name; and harmes. So, Oxford and Lyly are unlike other authors at the time in separating Pandora from her box, and possibly alluding to Southern's book, publicly connected with Oxford and his wife.

V.vi has the alliterative phrase “maiden modesty,” that was first used in Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing*. John Lyly may have been the first to use the closely related “maidenly modesty” in 1578. In VIII.x we find “open scorn.” It was used for the fifth time in EEBO by Lyly in 1580; it is an uncommon word doublet. Finally, *Decameron* is the only 1620 work to use the spelling “unkle.” That spelling had only been used in 15 earlier works, according to EEBO; the second was by Angel Day—another of Oxford's literary secretaries.

## Conclusions

What would have attracted Oxford to this particular work? First, it was a classic of Italian literature, and we know that Oxford loved Italy so much that he spent a year traveling there, then set 10 of his subsequent plays in Italy (Roe 3). For another, Boccaccio helped establish Italian as a respectable language for prose works, as Dante and Petrarch had done for poetry. Since Oxford was strongly committed to elevating the status of English as a suitable literary language for poetry and prose, Boccaccio may have served as a role model in this regard. There is another personal connection with *Decameron*: the year after his father died in 1562 and he began living with Sir William Cecil, London experienced an epidemic that killed as much as 25 percent of its inhabitants. Put another way: the death of Oxford's father was shortly followed by the death of a quarter of the population of his new home of London. Once again, in the years 1585–87, England suffered another outbreak of plague,

which may have reminded Oxford of those earlier times. Indeed, in Oxford's day, *Decameron* would have been one of the best-known books about living through a plague.<sup>16</sup>

Just as today, while we try to survive the COVID-19 pandemic, we feel a special kinship with books about plagues and pandemics, Oxford would likely have had similar feelings about Boccaccio's collection of stories. A more speculative connection—we know Oxford suffered from a severe case of jealousy of his wife Anne. After Anne's death in 1588, he seemed to overcome that malady, and even to condemn his own past troubles with pathological marital jealousy in characters such as Othello and Leontes. Possibly, he was attracted to the many stories in *Decameron* about cuckolded wittols who suffered from gullibility (e.g., "Credulano") and a pathological *lack* of jealousy. Such stories may have helped him rationalize and justify his past suspicions that his Anne's first child was not his.

In the translation and its dedication, Oxford comes full circle from his adolescent translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In his commentaries on both works, he defends them from charges of encouraging vice by disingenuous claims that sinful behavior in both works is depicted solely as a warning to avoid it. Here, "every true and upright judgement, in observing the course of these well carried Novels, shall plainly perceive, that there is no spare made of reproofe in any degree whatsoever, where sin is embraced, and grace neglected; but the just deserving shame and punishment thereon inflicted, that others may be warned by their example."

I think this essay makes Oxford's role as translator of this 1620 work a plausible hypothesis. At the very least, I have brought the attribution of it to John Florio into question. Naturally, other explanations for the parallels I have found with Shakespeare's works are possible but not likely, for the anonymous translator would have had to know the works of Shakespeare and of his literary secretaries so well that he could borrow from them with ease.

To date, we have failed to give Oxford credit for the full range of his brilliant literary creativity. In this case, I hope other scholars will further investigate his possible translation of *Decameron*.

### Acknowledgments

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## Endnotes

1. 1620 was relatively late, as the book had already been translated into Spanish, Catalan, and German during the 15<sup>th</sup> Century.
2. In April 2020 I felt moved to read *Decameron* for the first time, partly as a way of coping with the COVID-19 pandemic. Only after I finished it three weeks later did I learn that its first complete English translation was anonymous, and that realization compelled me to investigate further.
3. Walter suggests that Shakespeare found in *Decameron* a variety of strong female voices (think, for example, of Ghismonda, quoted at the beginning of this essay): “Shakespeare’s reading of the novella tradition... registers an appreciation of female agency and personhood” (loc. 191). As Oxford was writing plays with Queen Elizabeth as the most salient member of his audience, it is understandable that he highlighted these female voices. Importantly, Walter states that “there is no single conduit for novella plot sources into Shakespeare plays, and indeed, most of Shakespeare’s novellesque sources are not found in Painter (i.e., Painter’s *Palace of Pleasure*). And only half of the major novella plot sources Shakespeare borrowed for his comedies were available in English translation during his lifetime” (loc. 525).
4. Wright suggests Shakespeare may have known French well enough to read Maçon’s translation (H.G. Wright, 1955); he speculates that Shakespeare borrowed the wager theme in *Cymbeline* from Maçon’s translation, not from Painter’s. Apparently, Wright did not seriously question the assumption that Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare, nor consider the possibility that someone whose knowledge of French and Italian are well documented wrote the works of “Shakespeare,” as well as this 1620 translation.
5. In his address “To the Reader,” Jaggard refers to receiving “a ragged written Copy” of the translation. In this context, “ragged” is consistent with a manuscript that was, by 1620, some 33 years old.
6. Guyda Armstrong suggests this possible scenario (220). Yet Wright demonstrates convincingly that the 1620 translator did not go as far as Salviati in removing material that was insulting to the Church:  
[T]he translation of 1620 is far from agreeing with Salviati’s main object in suppressing all criticism of priests, monks and friars. On

the contrary, it conforms to Boccaccio's intention by exhibiting their greed and hypocrisy, their luxurious living and extravagance in dress, their sensuality and lasciviousness, and the wantonness of nuns is exposed with equal candor." Unlike Salviati, he did not transform monks and friars into judges and physicians. "Again, unlike Salviati, the English translator shows no concern to screen the Pope and the cardinals from the consequences of worldly living, and he makes no attempt to remove all suggestion that Papal authority may not be omnipotent.... Nor does he reveal any anxiety lest ridicule should be cast on Paradise and Purgatory, confession, canonization and holy relics, prayer and worship" (Wright, 1936, 506–7).

7. From his recurrent imagery, Caroline Spurgeon concluded that Shakespeare "loved horses" (204).
8. Spurgeon observed that a large number of Shakespeare's nature images came from the "sea, ships and seafaring" (47).
9. H. Wright wrote of "the ease with which legal metaphors came to the translator's mind" (1953, 17). Many scholars have described Shakespeare's sophisticated legal knowledge; Oxford had formal legal training, having matriculated at Gray's Inn in 1567 when he was 17 years of age.
10. "Still more conspicuous than his knowledge of drama is the translator's delight in music.... Music provides him with numerous metaphors" (H. Wright, 1953, 20–21). Music or musical metaphors occur in every Shakespeare play; Oxford's musical skills were described by Elizabethan composer John Farmer as that of a professional.
11. Munday knew both French and Italian and had traveled throughout France and Italy.
12. Oxford's depiction of inner conflict in the plays is one of the ways he anticipated Freud's discoveries about the mind in conflict. H. Wright perceptively comments on the similar interest of the 1620 translator: "In particular he is fond of employing the word 'halfe' to convey a state of mind or an intensity of emotion. We may mention 'halfe of the mind', 'halfe suspecting', 'halfe perswaded'..." (103).
13. Capital Roman numerals indicate the day of the story, whereas lower case numerals indicate which story of that day.
14. Note Caroline Spurgeon on Shakespeare's frequent use of imagery alluding to facial signs of inner emotions, especially blushing.

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15. EEBO changed between May 2020, when I began this research, and late July, when its earlier version disappeared. Unfortunately, searches now seem to deliver a variety of results. Even when one activates the option to search for spelling variants, few such variants are returned with one's search.
16. Does the raciness of the book have anything to do with the Black Death? Perhaps. An April 20, 2020 *New York Times* article by Diana Spechler reported a large increase in "nude selfies" during the 2020 pandemic. It linked this surge with the bawdy tales in Boccaccio during the 1348 pandemic. And, from the May 20, 2020 *New York Times*: "Dutch officials said that if one partner was isolated because of suspected or confirmed coronavirus infection, sex at a distance was still possible, such as by *telling erotic stories*" (my emphasis).

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