Performing Confession in Dante and Boccaccio[1]

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Abstract
With the decree of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), the Church sought to implement changes to confessional practice, requiring (among other things) private confession to one's own priest once a year before Easter communion. I argue that both Dante and Boccaccio show an awareness of the decree, yet neither shows an uncritical acceptance of the intercessory role that the Church was trying to fashion for itself with recourse to the practice. Dante locates the source of authority for confession in Biblical precedents, and in the *Comedy* itself, downplaying the role of the Church in administering it. Boccaccio pokes fun at the Church's over-ambitious attempts at controlling the faithful via confessional practice. Both writers stress to different ends the performative nature of confession. For Dante, expressive difficulties bolster the truth-claims of the confessional utterance. For Boccaccio, confessional moments become spectacles conveying messages that may conceal or distort the truth.

Key words
Dante, Boccaccio, confessional practice, penance, contrition

In a culminating moment of the pilgrim's progress through the realm of penance, Dante meets Beatrice again for the first time since her death (*Purg.* XXX). Throughout his ascent, the pilgrim has not only been witnessing acts of penance made by the souls purging their vices, but he has also been participating in some penitential acts himself: an angel has carved seven "P"s (which stand for the seven vices purged in Purgatory, as well as more generally, *piaga*, *peccato* and *pentimento*) on his forehead (*Purg*. IX), which are erased on each terrace of the mountain.[2] Yet, before he may be cleansed of the memory of sin in the waters of Lethe (*Purg*. XXXI, 100-02), Beatrice requires more from the pilgrim. Berating him for the error that led him astray (*Purg*. XXXI, 44), she demands a "confession":

> "O tu che se' di là dal fiume sacro,"
> volgendo suo parlare a me per punta,
> che pur per taglio m'era paruto acro,
> ricominciò, seguendo sanza cunta,
> "dì, dì se questo è vero; a tanta accusa
> tua confession conviene esser congiunta."
>
> "O you on the far side of the sacred stream,"
> turning the point of her words on me
> that had seemed sharp enough with their edge,
> she then went on without a pause: "Say it,
> say if this is true. To such an accusation
> your confession must be joined.[3]"
> (*Purg*. XXXI, 1-6)

[1] I am grateful to Albrecht Diem for the idea to begin this project, and for inviting me to speak at the conference, *Confession, Truth and Power* that he organized at Syracuse University (May 3, 2019). Thank you to Zygmunt G. Barański, and to the anonymous reviewers of the article, for their helpful comments.
[2] Armour makes a convincing argument for the understanding of the "P"s as a "universal rite" (64). Even if Dante were guilty of all seven vices, why and how would he be able to absolve himself of each of these sins before dying, and before undergoing the penance that all souls must endure after their death? Thus, Armour argues that, in Purgatory, Dante does not "actually undergo the process of purgation as applied to his personal sins" (63). Instead, he "undergoes the universal process, but only after death will he return to certain cornices to wash away some of the P's at greater length" (64).
[3] All translations of the *Commedia* are by Robert and Jean Hollander.

We know that Dante must satisfy in some way Beatrice's demand to confess his sins, because later in the canto Matelda does indeed submerge him in the river's waters (*Purg*. XXXI, 100-02). Yet, it is difficult to see from what Dante describes how the pilgrim comes to earn this privilege. His response to Beatrice's demand for confession is barely verbal, and is instead marked by silences, gaps and failures of speech. Dante's voice struggles to leave his body but does not produce a sound (*Purg*. XXXI, 8-9); in a second attempt, he manages only silently to mouth the word 'sì' (*Purg*. XXXI, 14). When he tries to speak for a third time, his voice is compared to an arrow which strikes its target with less force because the bow has snapped from excess tension:

> Come balestro frange, quando scocca
> da troppa tesa, la sua corda e l'arco,
> e con men foga l'asta il segno tocca,
> sì scoppia' io sottesso grave carco,
> fuori sgorgando lagrime e sospiri,
> e la voce allentò per lo suo varco.
> Ond' ella a me: [. . .]
>
> A crossbow breaks with too much tension
> from the taut of cord and bow
> so that the arrow strikes the target with less force,
> thus I collapsed beneath that heavy load
> and, with a flood of tears and sights,
> my voice came strangled from my throat.
> At that she said to me: [. . .]
> (*Purg*. XXXI, 16-22)

Even here, where the reader is told that Dante finally manages to produce a sound, the text does not relate his words; instead, we are only told that the pilgrim says something, and then Beatrice begins speaking again. The only lines of dialogue that the pilgrim speaks in the entire canto occur in lines 34-36: "Piangendo dissi: 'Le presenti cose/ col falso lor piacer volser miei passi,/ tosto che 'l vostro viso si nascose' " [In tears I said: "Things set in front of me,/ with their false delights, turned back my steps/ the moment that Your countenance was hidden."] Can these three lines be considered a true and proper confession?

Beatrice herself – after having demanded a verbal confession and finally receiving three lines of it – then seems to dismiss its importance: "se tacessi o negassi/ ciò che confessi, non fora men nota/ la colpa tua: da tal giudice sassi!" [Had you stayed silent or denied what you confess […] your fault would not be any less apparent since it is known to such a Judge]. Indeed, the idea that the pilgrim is able to partake in any of the sacraments during his journey through the afterlife is questionable: sacraments are for the living, and take place on earth.[4] Why did Beatrice then insist that Dante make a confession in the first place? Why is it so difficult for him to speak? And why do the words that he finally produces seem to say so little? At the climax of Dante's penitential journey, we are presented with the near absence of confessional words. Does this reveal Dante's attitudes toward the practice of confession as prescribed by the Church?

To begin to answer these questions, I investigate this and other confessional moments in the *Comedy*, situating them within their contemporary historical and cultural context, and also comparing Dante's treatment of the practice in the poem to the way in which his near contemporary, Boccaccio, represents confession in the *Decameron*. While confession and the related issue of penance have a wide scope and central importance throughout both these works, this article focuses particularly on confessional practice, as defined by the changes implemented by the Church with the decree of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), requiring (among other things) private confession to one's own priest at least once a year before Easter communion. An ample body of research has investigated the issues of what the Church tried to accomplish with

[4] See Armour 7-15.

this decree and how these changes were implemented in practice.[5] My aim is to inquire if Dante and Boccaccio treated confessional practice in a way that took into account the changes implemented by the Fourth Lateran Council, and if so, whether it is possible to ascertain each writer's attitude towards the practice in light of the way in which they wrote about it in their masterpieces.[6]

I argue that both writers show an awareness of the decree, exploiting in particular its emphases on the confessor's investigative role and on the need for keeping confessions private, yet neither writer demonstrates an unequivocal acceptance of the practice. Boccaccio pokes fun at the Church's over-ambitious attempts at controlling the faithful with recourse to confession. Dante's treatment of confession, rather than accepting the regulating role that the Church sought to fashion for itself via the decree, locates the source of authority for the practice in Biblical precedents, and in the *Comedy* itself. Both writers stress what I call the performative nature of confession, but to different ends. For Dante, expressive difficulties bolster the truth-claims of the confessional utterance: in part because of how hard it is for the pilgrim to express his contrition, the reader is meant to believe it is genuine. For Boccaccio, confessional moments become spectacles conveying messages that may conceal or distort the truth.

Context: the Decree on Confession

Canon 21 of the Fourth Lateran Council states that:

> **All the faithful of either sex**, after they have reached the age of discernment, should **individually** confess all their sins in a faithful manner at least **once a year to their own priest** at least once a year, and let them take care to do what they can to perform the penance imposed on them. Let them reverently receive the sacrament of the Eucharist at least at Easter unless they think, for good reason and on advice of their own priest, that they should abstain from receiving it for a time. Otherwise they shall be barred from **entering a Church** during their lifetime and they shall be denied a **Christian burial at death**. Let this salutary decree **be frequently published in churches**, so that nobody may find the pretense of an excuse in the blindness of ignorance. If any persons wish, for good reasons, to confess their sins to another priest let them first ask and obtain the permission of their own priest; for otherwise the other priest will not have the **power to absolve or to bind them**. The priest shall be discerning and prudent, so that like a **skilled doctor he may pour wine and oil over the wounds** of the injured one. Let **him carefully inquire** about the circumstances of both the sinner and the sin, so that he may prudently discern what **sort of advice** he ought to give and what **remedy to apply, using various means to heal the sick person**. Let him take the utmost care, however, **not to betray the sinner at all by word or sign** or in any other way. If the priest needs wise advice, let him seek it cautiously without any mention of the person concerned. For if anyone presumes to **reveal a sin disclosed to him in**

[5] I can only scratch the surface of this body of work in an article of this length, but some important contributions to the related but not equivalent issues of confession and penance in the Middle Ages include: Anciaux; Biller and Minnis eds. 1998; Brooks; De Jong; Diem; Firey; Goering 2004; Hamilton; Heffernan; Newhauser; Larson; Lea; McNeill and Gamer; Meens 2014; Murray 2015; Payer; Poschmann 2018 and 1951; Roberts 1901; Rubin 2009; Rusconi 1986 and 2002; Tanner; Taylor; Tentler; Vogel 2012 and 1978 [1985].

[6] The structure of my argument is similar to one made by Peterson who uses the decree of the Fourth Lateran Council to analyze the first tale of the *Decameron* (as I also do, although I focus on different aspects of the decree, and I also analyze tale III.3, which she does not do); and she goes on to analyze the decree's influence on the *Heptaméron* of Marguerite de Navarre.

> **confession, we decree that he is not only to be deposed** from his priestly office but also to be confined to a strict monastery to do perpetual penance.[7]

Many aspects of the decree represent changes that the Church sought to impose upon existing penitential practices.[8] For instance, whereas previously it was acceptable to confess once on one's deathbed, the decree required that the faithful of both sexes confess regularly, and that this should be done at least once a year, lest one be denied a Christian burial or barred from entering a Church. Whereas previously it had been considered in some cases acceptable to confess to laypeople (male or female), the decree required that confession be made to one's own priest.[9] While previously some confessions had been public or done in groups, the decree required that confession be private, and issued the threat of punishment for priests should they reveal a sinner's secrets.

However, some aspects of the decree were grounded in existing religious and judicial practices, or in well-established theological and Biblical precedents. For instance, the stipulation that the confessor should interrogate the confessant in order to know how best to counsel her or him has been linked to a more general effort by the Church to instruct its flock. This effort pre-dates the decree by some time, as it can be traced back at least to the penitential handbooks of the sixth century.[10] Nonetheless, one way in which the decree marks a cultural shift concerns its motivation: the idea that the Church instituted the decree as a reaction to the fear of heresy. Requiring the priest to question the confessant was a way to effectively "cross-examine" parishioners on their beliefs. Indeed, confession became progressively more regulated. The Council of Narbonne in 1227 enforced confession on all people over the age of fourteen, requiring that lists be kept of those who obeyed the regulation. The Council of Toulouse in 1229

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[7] Canon 21 (emphases mine): "*De confessione facienda et non revelanda a sacerdote et saltem in pascha communicando.* Omnis utriusque sexus fidelis, postquam ad annos distretionis pervenerit, omnia sua solus peccata confiteatur fideliter, saltem semel in anno proprio sacerdoti, et iniunctam sibi poenitentiam studeat pro viribus adimplere, suscipiens reverenter ad minus in pascha eucharistiae sacramentum, nisi forte de consilio proprii sacerdotis ob aliquam rationabilem causam ad tempus ab eius perceptione duxerit abstinendum; alioquin et vivens ab ingressu ecclesiae arceatur et moriens christiana careat sepultura. Unde hoc salutare statutum frequenter in ecclesiis publicetur, ne quisquam ignorantiae caecitate velamen excusationis assumat. Si quis autem alieno sacerdoti voluerit iusta de causa sua confiteri peccata, licentiam prius postulet et obtineat a proprio sacerdote, cum aliter ille ipsum non possit solvere vel ligare. Sacerdos autem sit discretus et cautus, ut more periti medici superinfundat vinum et oleum vulneribus sauciati, diligenter inquirens et peccatoris circumstantias et peccati, per quas prudenter intelligat, quale illi consilium debeat exhibere et cuiusmodi remedium adhibere, diversis experimentis utendo ad sanandum aegrotum. Caveat autem omnino, ne verbo vel signo vel alio quovis modo prodat aliquatenus peccatorem, sed si prudentiori consilio indiguerit, illud absque ulla expressione personae caute requirat, quoniam qui peccatum in poenitentiali iudicio sibi detectum praesumpserit revelare, non solum a sacerdotali officio deponendum decernimus, verum etiam ad agendam perpetuam poenitentiam in arctum monasterium detrudendum" (ed. Tanner).

[8] Meens argues that the decree was motivated by the desire to "control an extremely diverse existing practice of penance" (1998: 36). Murray argues that the decree was effective because it "confirmed existing momentum" (1993:65); this article (based on a lecture given at Cambridge in 1992) may also be found as Chapter 1, "Confession before 1215," in Murray's more recent book (2015: 17-48).

[9] While it may have been acceptable to confess only on one's deathbed, Murray argues that regular confession was more common among lay people before the enacting of the decree than scholarship had previously acknowledged (2015: 17-48).

[10] Meens 2009: 147.

called for three confessions and three communions per year, and absentees were suspected of heresy. Thus, broadly speaking, the decree's fashioning of an investigative role for confessors reveals the Church's own anxieties about the need to correct, control and punish heretical thinking.[11] By making confessors into inquisitors, the decree also established a didactic role for confessors, which, as we will see, played an important role in Dante and Boccaccio's characterization of the practice of confession as well. Yet, in representations of the decree's new rules of confession, our authors present few examples of characters following these rules uncritically, if at all.

Dante: Confession in the Comedy

Dante treats the practice of confession in ways that are at times conventional and at other times idiosyncratic. Some of the *Comedy*'s references to confession seem to acknowledge, while poetically transforming, at least two of the decree's requirements: the characterization of the confessor as physician or healer, and the association of confession with inquiry and instruction. Other references which we might consider conventional, yet which are not explicitly addressed in the decree, include Dante's emphasis on *contritio cordis*, and his association of confession with the keys of Peter (an idea firmly rooted in Biblical exegesis).[12]

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[11] If the confessor questioned the confessant in order to discover (and presumably correct, control and punish) heretical thinking, the process might be compared to other forms of questioning by other institutions of authority, as Bestul argues. Building on an argument articulated by Edward Peters' book *Torture* – that the use of torture increased in the thirteenth century, due to the shift away from trial by ordeal, and the corresponding revival of Roman judicial law (Peters 154-55) –, Bestul suggests an intriguing correspondence between these changing judicial norms and increasingly detailed depictions, in Latin devotional texts, of the violence of Christ's suffering on the cross (Bestul 145-69). In Bestul's words: "both the discourse of mysticism and the discourse of the Passion offer us intimacy, exposing what it had been usual to conceal, the one in reference to the soul, the other to the body" (Bestul 162). In this sense, the interest in increasingly "detailed and naturalistic" Passion narratives relate to "new twelfth century concerns about [. . .] the cultivation of interior life," including changes in confessional practice (161). For Bestul, Passion narratives, mysticism and confession all share an emphasis on "verbal self-revealing," or an interest in what he calls "the exposure of the self in language" (161). Thus, the decree's emphasis on inquiry is not surprising, given the contemporaneous increase in practice and interest in other forms of self-revelation.

[12] See a forthcoming article by Mathukhin for a concise overview of the shift towards emphasizing *contritio cordis* (over satisfaction, or works of penance to be completed by the sinner). Peter Abelard's teachings (which influenced Alain de Lille, Gratian and Peter Lombard) were central to this shift in emphasis. As Matukhin writes: "this newfound focus on the internal process of *contritio cordis* ran the risk of undermining penance as a sacrament altogether: if the remission of sins could be granted as a result of mere contrition, there seemed to be no need for the involvement of a priest" (3). See also Thomas de Chobham who writes in *Summa confessorum*, which was completed soon after the decree of 1215: "Res est ipsa contritio cordis [. . .] erubescentia est signum interioris contritionis" (8). Despite the difficulty of explaining why oral confession is still necessary, many twelfth and thirteenth century thinkers (including Peter Lombard, Gratian, Richard of St. Victor, Hugh of St. Victor and Aquinas) also continued to emphasize the power of the keys of absolution – an idea based on Matthew 16:18-19: "And I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven. And whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth, it shall be bound also in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose upon earth, it shall be loosed also in heaven". As Peter Lombard writes: "Nec ideo tamen negamus sacerdotibus concessam potestatem dimittendi et retinendi peccata, cum hoc Veritas in Evangelio aperte doceat. […] solus Deus dimittit peccata et retinet;

In *Inferno*, references to confession are often parodic. The verb "confessare" is used in the *Comedy* for the first time in *Inferno* V.8. Just after Dante and Virgil have left Limbo, they encounter Minos, to whom all sinners, upon entering Hell, must "confess" their sins. On judging the sinner's admission, Minos' tail wraps around his body a certain number of times to indicate the level of Hell where the sinner will be cast down:

Stavvi Minòs orribilmente, e ringhia:	There stands Minos, snarling, terrible.
essamina le colpe ne l'intrata;	He examines each offender at the entrance,
giudica e manda secondo ch'avvinghia.	judges and dispatches as he encoils himself.
Dico che quando l'anima mal nata	I mean that when the ill-begotten soul
li vien dinanzi, tutta si confessa;	stands there before him it confesses all,
e quel conoscitor de le peccata	and that accomplished judge of sins
vede qual loco d'inferno è da essa;	decides what place in Hell is fit for it,
cignesi con la coda tante volte	then coils his tail around himself to count
quantunque gradi vuol che giù sia messa.	how many circles down the soul must go.
Sempre dinanzi a lui ne stanno molte:	Always before him stands a crowd of them,
vanno a vicenda ciascuna al giudizio,	going to judgment each in turn.
dicono e odono e poi son giù volte.	They tell, they hear, and then are hurled down.
	(*Inferno* V, 4-15)

As these souls have already been condemned for eternity, confession in Hell has no purgative function. The souls engage in a kind of hollow or false performance of the confessional utterance. For this reason, and because the text emphasizes "examination" and judgment (lines 5, 6 and 14), some scholars have suggested that Dante might be alluding to the practice of extracting confession in judicial procedures.[13] However, as we saw above, the decree of 1215 also urges priests to examine their confessants. Thus, we might posit that Dante invokes both the religious *and* judicial practices of confession in order to emphasize the opportunity for redemption that these souls have squandered. Before death, the souls could have chosen to undergo penance, thereby saving their souls, but they failed to do so. Instead of saving them, the sinners' admission of guilt expresses and cements their fate. Heightening the irony further, many souls in Hell continue to deny their sins even while being punished for them, and presumably after having confessed them to Minos. As the parodic approach to the sacred is a guiding principle throughout *Inferno*, and in particular governs Dante's treatment of the sacraments, it is not surprising to find it here in Dante's treatment of confession.[14] However, it does reveal an awareness on Dante's part of several specific aspects of the decree.

The second reference to confession in Hell, which takes place in *Inferno* XIX where the simonists are punished, may also be considered parodic. Kneeling down next to the hole in

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et tamen Ecclesiae contulit potestatem ligandi et solvendi, sed aliter ipse solvit vel ligat, aliter Ecclesia [we do not for this reason deny that the power of remitting and retaining sins was granted to priests since Truth manifestly teaches this in the Gospel […] God alone remits and retains sins, and yet he confers upon the Church the power of binding and loosing. But he binds and looses in one way and the Church in another] (Peter Lombard, *The Sentences*, Liber IV. D. XVIII, 5). Aquinas writes of the keys: "duae claves distinguuntur, quarum una pertinet ad judicium de idoneitate ejus qui absolvendus est, et alia ad ipsam absolutionem [two keys are distinguished, one of which pertains to the judgment of the fitness of the one to be absolved, and the other to the absolution itself], *Commentary on the Sentences*, D.18, Q.1, A.1, Re. Quaestiuncula 3.

[13] See Senior; Valterza.

[14] See for instance Herzman and Stephany; and Kleinhenz.

which Pope Nicholas III is punished for abusing his powers of holy office (his oily feet burn in a parody of the sacrament of unction), Dante (the author) compares himself (as the character) to a 'frate' confessing a murderer before his execution:

> Io stava come 'l frate che confessa
> lo perfido assessin, che, poi ch'è fitto,
> richiama lui per che la morte cessa.
>
> And I stood there like a friar who confesses
> a treacherous assassin. Once fixed in place,
> he calls the friar back to stay his death.
> (*Inf*. XIX, 49-51)

The comparison of Dante-*personaggio* to a confessor may cause the reader to reflect on the many ways in which the pilgrim elicits confessional stories from the sinners he meets along his journey through Hell: often when he encounters sinners, he requests to hear – or the sinners request to tell – their stories. Dante the author subsequently records these stories in his poem. Thus, Dante – as author and as pilgrim – acts as confessor at both the textual and metatextual levels.

Yet, does Dante – as author or as pilgrim – also act as confessant? Given the fact that Beatrice sends him on this journey through the afterlife in order to save his own soul, and given the progress that the pilgrim makes throughout Purgatory which is the realm of penance, one might expect Dante (either as *personaggio* or as author, or as both) to utter some confessional words. As we saw in the opening of this article, while Beatrice demands a confession from the pilgrim upon their reunion in the terrestrial paradise, Dante's response is barely verbal. Even if the sacraments might not be present in the afterlife and therefore the pilgrim is not able to perform them during his journey, it would make sense for Dante-author to acknowledge some of his own sins in the poem. There are indeed a number of moments in the *Commedia* where the empathy the pilgrim shows towards sinners might reveal something autobiographical about the poet, or even be seen as implicit admissions of guilt.[15] In addition, the three beasts that he encounters in the opening canto of *Inferno* have been interpreted (since the earliest commentaries) as symbols of Dante's sins. More explicitly, he suggests that his main sin is pride, and that to a lesser extent he is guilty of envy as well (on the corresponding Terraces in Purgatory).[16] George Corbett goes so far as to argue that Statius is a "moral cypher" for Dante;

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[15] I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for making this point about Dante's empathy. Indeed, many readers have speculated about what the pilgrim's reactions to meeting souls in the afterlife can tell us about his own life – whether they be admissions of his own guilt, or revelations about injustices perpetrated against him. In the latter case, Olschki for instance argues that Dante shows sympathy for souls "whose lives were undone by envy" – Romieu de Villeneuve in the Heaven of Mercury (*Par*. VII, 133-42), Pierre de la Brosse (*Purg*. VI, 22-24), and Pier delle Vigne (*Inferno* XIII) –, since Dante considers himself to be a victim of envious slander as well (Olschki 109-11). Many scholars have also seen Dante's pity for Francesca as indicative of his own temptations, or of his own responsibilities as a poet. In her analysis of *Inferno* V, for instance, Noakes argues that the pilgrim faints after his encounter with Paolo and Francesca because he recognizes that works such as the text that the lovers were reading, "can be misread, even in a sense which changes the meaning the authors intended into its opposite" (229).

[16] See for instance the passage in the Terrace of Envy where Dante seems to admit the sins of pride and envy: "Troppa è più la paura ond'è sospesa/ l'anima mia del tormento di sotto,/ che già lo 'ncarco di là giù mi pesa" [Greater is the fear, which fills my soul with dread,/ of torments lower down, those heavy loads –/ I can almost feel their weight upon me now] (*Purg*. XIII, 136-38). In the Terrace of Pride, Dante thanks Oderisi da Gubbio for deflating the swelling of pride in his heart: "E io a lui: 'Tuo vero dir m'incora/ bona umiltà, e gran tumor m'appiani' " [And I to him: "Your true words pierce my heart/ with

thus, the poem's catalogue of Statius' sins "might contribute to a speculative and partial profile of Dante's sense of his own sins" (209). In a related way, Corbett sees *Purgatorio* as for Dante a "personally purgative experience," claiming that Dante-*personaggio* "undergoes the sufferings of the penitent sinners through each of the seven terraces" (206). Yet, even if we do consider these moments to be partial or implicit admissions of guilt, to what extent – if at all – are they framed within the context of confessional practice as prescribed by the Church? And why does Beatrice demand a confession from him at the top of mount Purgatory, *after* Dante has been doing penance (if we accept Corbett's argument)? Furthermore, what are we to make of the fact that when the practice of confession *is* explicitly invoked in the *Comedy*, in the examples we discuss in this article, Dante is often silent or suffers from failures of speech?

In *Purgatorio* IX, the pilgrim participates in a penitential act, but here again, Dante does not verbally confess any specific sins. As Dante and Virgil approach the gate of Purgatory, three steps leading up to the gate are described. These are guarded by an angel carrying a sword. While the words "confessione" and "confessare" are not used here, the canto has been interpreted, from the time of the earliest commentators, as a figuration of the act of penance. The first step is of polished white marble, allowing Dante to see his reflection and recognize his sin, which corresponds to the first part of penance: contrition (94-96). The second step is cracked and purple, representing humbling oneself in the act of confession (97-99); the third step, of porphyry and flaming red, represents the blood of Christ (100-02) that makes "satisfaction" of sin possible (120). Dante climbs the steps (106), kneels before the angel,[17] smites his breast three times and begs for mercy and entry (109-11). The angel inscribes seven P's on Dante's forehead with his sword – each letter representing the wounds of the inclination to sin (*plaga*, *penitenzia*, *peccatum*[18]), which will be erased, one on each terrace, as Dante travels up the mountain of Purgatory (112-14). With two keys given to him by St. Peter, the angel opens the gate for Dante so that he and Virgil can pass through (117-20).

Dante-*personaggio* does not utter confessional words here. Instead, we are told that the pilgrim says something to the Angel, but these are general pleas for mercy and entry: "misericordia chiesi e ch'el m'aprisse" [I begged him for mercy and to let me enter] (110), rather than a catalogue and admission of his sins.[19] The pilgrim enacts a penitential ritual which does not appear to resemble confessional practice as defined by the Church's decree. However, at least one and perhaps two aspects of the episode might remind us of that decree. The association of wounds with sin is found in both the decree and in the canto. And, the mention of ashes (*Purg*. IX, 115) might perhaps recall the decree's emphasis on confessing before taking communion at Easter (given the tradition of Ash Wednesday). A third aspect of the decree, the association of the forgiveness of sins with the keys given to Peter by Christ (Matthew 16:18-19), entrusting him with the forgiveness of sins, is not found in the decree. However, the association of keys with

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fit humility and ease a heavy swelling there"] (*Purg*. XI, 118-19). Corbett concludes, on the basis of his analysis of *Purg*. XIII, 133-38 as well as several passages in the Terrace of Pride, that Dante acknowledges his own guilt for pride and to a lesser extent also envy (123). He argues further that pride is "the source of sin from which all others flow" (Corbett 124).

[17] For the implications of this gesture, see Webb.

[18] See Martinez and Durling's note to *Pg*. IX, 112-14: "The Ps have been taken to stand for *Peccatum* [sin], *Plaga* [wound], and *Penitentia* [penitence] (these are all more or less equivalent)" (155).

[19] As Ledda writes of this canto: "nell'incontro con l'angelo davanti alla porta del *Purgatorio*, Dante non svolge neanche una piena *confessio oris*: ammette sì di aver peccato e chiede misericordia, ma non offre una vera e propria confessione" (25).

confession, and of the priesthood as holding these keys, was commonplace in the writings of many twelfth- and thirteenth-century theologians.[20] As the first two aspects are found in the decree, and the third is not, we can conclude that Dante was aware of the decree, yet, he tended to return to Scripture for sources of textual authority. A fourth aspect of Dante's treatment of confession in this passage, which might be considered more innovative than the first three aforementioned features, concerns the emphasis on the salvific power of written letters. The letter "P" is inscribed on Dante's body, which therefore becomes a kind of text; his skin the parchment, his (implied) blood the ink. The blood that might escape from a wound, thereby cleansing it, is not mentioned here, but it will be implied in the next major confessional moment, which occurs at another threshold.[21]

Dante encounters Beatrice for the first time since her death in *Purgatorio* XXX. Virgil will soon depart (*Purg*. XXX, 49) and Beatrice will take over as Dante's guide in *Paradiso*. Before the journey can continue, however, Beatrice bitterly reproaches Dante, her words compared to a sword which will make him weep: "Dante, perché Virgilio se ne vada,/ non pianger anco, non piangere ancora;/ ché pianger ti conven per altra spada" [Dante, because Virgil has departed,/ do not weep, do not weep yet –/ there is another sword to make you weep] (*Purg*. XXX, 55-57). According to Beatrice, Dante had taken an "untrue way" [via non vera] (130), and had almost lost himself and was on the brink of damnation before she interceded to save him, thereby instigating his otherworldly journey. She now demands a "price" of penance, to be shown in tears (144-45):

"Per questo visitai l'uscio d'i morti, e a colui che l'ha qua sù condotto, li preghi miei, piangendo, furon porti. Alto fato di Dio sarebbe rotto, se Letè si passasse e tal vivanda fosse gustata sanza alcuno scotto di pentimento che lagrime spanda."	"And so I visited the threshold of the dead and, weeping, offered up my prayers to the one who has conducted him this far. Broken would be the high decree of God should Lethe be crossed and its sustenance be tasted without payment of some fee: his penitence that shows itself in tears." (*Purgatorio* XXX, 139-45)

In order to extract this payment, Beatrice requires a confession from the pilgrim, the words of her "accusations" (*Purg*. XXXI, 5) figured as the sharp edge of a weapon: ("volgendo suo parlare a me per punta,/ che pur per taglio m'era paruto acro" [turning the point of her words on me/ that had seemed sharp enough when I felt their edge] *Purg*. XXXI, 2-3). She continues to use weapon-related imagery as she orders Dante to bear his shame[22]:

[20] See note 12 above on the association of the keys with the power to absolve sins. See also Chapter 6 of Armour's book, "The Keys" (76-99).
[21] On confession and liminality in Dante's works, see Goering 2005: 23-30.
[22] See Delcorno who argues that Beatrice is figured here in the role not only of confessor but also of preacher, since preaching was associated with sword-related imagery (2006: 90-92).

"Ma quando scoppia de la propria gota
l'accusa del peccato, in nostra corte
rivolge sé contra 'l taglio la rota.
Tuttavia, perché mo vergogna porte
del tuo errore e perché altra volta,
udendo le serene, sie più forte,
pon giù il seme del piangere e ascolta:"

"But when a man's own blushing cheek reveals
the condemnation of this sin, in our high court
the grindstone dulls the sharp edge of the sword.
Nonetheless, so that you now may bear
the shame of your straying and the next time
that you hear the Sirens' call, be stronger,
stop sowing tears and listen."
(*Purg*. XXXI, 40-46)

Dante's tearful response is barely verbal.[23] Yet, like Beatrice's words, it is also associated with weapon-related imagery: his voice collapses like a bow pulled too tight; he weeps, blushes, stutters, sighs, turns red, and manages only a few faltering words:

Confusione e paura insieme miste
mi pinsero un tal 'sì' fuor de la bocca,
al quale intender fuor mestier le viste.
Come balestro frange, quando scocca
da troppa tesa, la sua corda e l'arco,
e con men foga l'asta il segno tocca,
sì scoppia' io sottesso grave carco,
fuori sgorgando lagrime e sospiri,
e la voce allentò per lo suo varco.

Confusion and fear, mixed together,
drove from my mouth a yes –
but one had need of eyes to hear it.
A crossbow breaks with too much tension
from the taut of cord and bow
so that the arrow strikes the target with less force,
thus I collapsed beneath that heavy load
and, with a flood of tears and sights,
my voice came strangled from my throat.
(*Purg*. XXXI, 13-21)

By figuring the words of the confessor's "accusation" – as well as the confessional words of the confessant – as weapons, Dante emphasizes the dialogue (figured almost as a duel) required of the confessant and the confessor, thereby presenting a figurative re-imagining of the decree's characterization of confession as cross-examination. At the same time, the martial imagery recalls the violent methods with which confessions could be extracted in judicial proceedings. Furthermore, the repeated association of Beatrice's words with sharp weapons in *Purgatorio* XXX and XXXI might well allude to the Angel's sword in *Purgatorio* IX, which inscribed the P's of penance onto the pilgrim's forehead.[24] While the Angel's inscription signaled the beginning of his penitential journey, now in a culminating confessional moment, Dante must be wounded again – figuratively, linguistically, by Beatrice – in order to elicit the exposure of, or performance of, his feelings of contrition. As we saw in the decree, the confessor was characterized as a physician, diagnosing the sin and applying penitent acts as a salve to heal the wound. Here, Dante poetically transforms this idea, not only representing sin as a wound (which was a commonplace[25]), but also representing the words of Beatrice-confessor as weapons that wound the sinner, thereby exposing his guilt.

However, with recourse to images of words as weapons, Dante focuses the reader's attention more on the pain that Beatrice's accusatory words inflict on him than on his less than comprehensive response. Indeed, Dante's emotional reply hinders his linguistic capacities

[23] For another interpretation of Dante's reticence here, see Levenstein (194), who posits that Dante's failures to speak echo Io's difficulty speaking in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.
[24] Ledda also points out that the theme of the sword is found in both episodes (25).
[25] For the four wounds of Original Sin, see Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* Ia-IIae 85, article 3. See also Augustine, *Contra Faustum* 22: PL 42, 418. For the concept of Christ as physician, which was also a commonplace, see Arbesmann.

throughout the episode. The more difficult it is for the pilgrim to speak, the more genuine his remorse seems (to Beatrice and perhaps also to the reader). The pilgrim's reactions to Beatrice's demands for confession are more emotional than verbal. The pilgrim does more crying than speaking in both cantos. He begins crying at the loss of Virgil (*Purg*. XXX, 46-54), at which point Beatrice promises to give him another reason to weep (55-57). She berates him until her acrid words cause the ice around the pilgrim's heart to melt into tears: "lo gel che m'era intorno al cor ristretto,/ spirito e acqua fessi, e con angoscia/ de la bocca e de li occhi uscì del petto" [the ice that had confined my heart/ was turned to breath and water and in anguish/ flowed from my breast through eyes and mouth] (*Purg*. XXX, 97-99). The pilgrim's tears also express his guilt (lines 20, 34, and 46), and the frequency with which they are mentioned, coupled with the emphasis in the canto on the cleansing waters of Lethe, present the reader with an abundance of watery imagery.[26] The cleansing theme, figured by water and tears, is fortified by the fact that Dante (following medieval scientific opinion) believed that bleeding was thought to help purge the body of waste.[27] Beatrice's sharp words pierce Dante's heart with remorse, Dante's "bleeding" tearful words acknowledge his sins, and Lethe then washes away his memory of them.

In addition, genuine remorse – figured as Beatrice's words piercing his heart – has more weight than his verbal expression of guilt. While Dante cries and speaks in a weak voice, Beatrice continues to prod him until his remorse reaches a peak, which is again figured as a wound: "di penter sì mi punse ivi l'ortica" [the nettle of remorse so stung me then] (*Purg*. XXXI. 85), and the acknowledgement of his sins wounds his heart: "tanta riconoscenza il cor mi morse/ ch'io caddi vinto" [such knowledge of my fault was gnawing at my heart/ that I was overcome] (*Purg*. XXXI, 88-89). Earlier in the canto, as we saw above, Beatrice suggests that his shame – exposed by his blushing cheek – fulfills the same purpose as do his words (*Purg*. XXXI, 37-42).[28] Dante's "confession," if we may even call it that, is more emotional than verbal. Beatrice, as his confessor, wounds him with her words, and elicits the expression of genuine remorse – through tears, blushing cheeks and difficulty speaking.

If Dante's encounter with Beatrice in these cantos marks a culmination of his penitential journey, it diverges from the decree in several major ways. The pilgrim does not confess to a priest, nor is Dante's exchange with Beatrice in any way private (the angels express their sympathy for him *Purg*. XXX, 94-96, and intercede on his behalf by singing, *Purg*. XXX, 82-84). The pilgrim does not enumerate or describe any of his sins. And even Beatrice, who demanded the "confession" in the first place, emphasizes *contritio cordis* over any verbal response the pilgrim might give. The difficulty of verbal expression in this episode strengthens the impression of genuine interior remorse; Dante is so deeply repentant that words fail him; tears replace language.[29]

In *Paradiso*, we find another example of Dante's poetic transformation of contemporary confessional doctrine and practice. The final use of the verb "confessare" occurs in *Paradiso*

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[26] On the Baptismal elements of Matelda immersing Dante in the waters of Lethe, see Delcorno (2006: 108-10). In this sense, both female protagonists of the canto – Beatrice and Matelda – fulfill sacramental roles otherwise reserved for male priests.

[27] See Leone (8, 17-20).

[28] See Delcorno for the importance of blushing (*erubescentia*) in this passage and how the idea is borrowed from the "moralisti" of the thirteenth century (2006: 101-02).

[29] For a study of tears in *Purgatorio*, see Chiavacci Leonardi. Other studies on tears in Dante's works include instance Barbera; and Williamson.

XXIV, where Dante is given a theological examination by Peter, James and John. Peter asks Dante "what is faith?" (53), and Dante's response begins by characterizing what will follow as a confession:

> "La Grazia che mi dà ch'io mi confessi,"
> comincia' io, "da l'alto primipilo,
> faccia li miei concetti bene espressi."
>
> "May the grace that allows me to make confession
> to the great centurion," I began,
> "grant clear expression to my thoughts."
> (*Paradiso* XXIV, 58-60)

The context of a theological examination in *Paradiso* XXIV might suggest a link with the didactic purpose of confession as decreed by the Council of 1215.[30] Yet, once again, Dante transforms conventional and ecclesiastical implications of the discourse surrounding the practice. The use of the unusual term "primipilo" prompted some of Dante's commentators to reference *Purgatorio* IX since both the Angel and Peter are standard bearers for Rome.[31] The cantos also share a concern with the issue of confession: both the Angel and Peter hold the keys of forgiveness. In this way, *Purgatorio* XXX-XXXI, *Purgatorio* IX and *Paradiso* XXIV allude to one another: *Paradiso* XXIV alludes to *Purgatorio* IX via the imagery of keys; *Purgatorio* IX and *Purgatorio* XXX-XXXI emphasize the wounds of guilt, and both make recourse to the image of swords; all three cantos allude to confessional practice. The consistency of the *Commedia*'s imagery as regards confession contributes to a sense of coherence: the poem's treatment of confession relies not only on ecclesiastical and biblical authority, but also on its own internal logic. Thus, Dante associates confessional practice not only with the conventional idea of the wound of sin, but he also goes further to develop the metaphor in a way that restricts the role of the Church and emphasizes the authority of his own text.

In sum, Dante exploits several commonplace ideas associated with confession: its didactic function, its question-and-answer structure, and the emphasis on wounds, shame, and the keys of heaven. However, Dante's treatment of confession places greater importance on the personal responsibility of the confessant, and on the salvific and purgative power of true remorse, than on verbal expression, or on comprehensive catalogues of particular sins. Conspicuously absent from Dante's treatment of confession is an emphasis on the Church's role (as an institution) in administering the practice. Beatrice (albeit a figure for Christ, but hardly a priest) is his confessor and intercessor. While the decree of 1215 states that failing to participate in confession, penance and communion will preclude a Christian burial, thereby making the role of the Church central for salvation, Dante figures lay people – specifically, himself in *Inf.* XIX and Beatrice in *Purg.* XXX-XXXI – as confessors. Dante seems to be suggesting in these cantos that the motivation behind (even barely uttered) penitent words is more important than the institutional context in which the Church wants them to be expressed.[32]

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[30] Barański has argued recently that "Lateran IV and its canons are unquestionably germane to *Paradiso* 24" (501). I agree and add the related point that there is a specific connection between the didactic purpose of confession emphasized in Canon 21 and the canto's examination of faith.

[31] See for instance the commentaries by Alessandro Vellutello and P. Pompeo Venturi on *Paradiso* XXIV.58-60, accessed on the Dartmouth Dante Project website https://dante.dartmouth.edu/.

[32] Barański makes a related point about Dante's treatment of the profession of faith: "In an environment in which matters of faith had become increasingly centralized, controlled, and prescriptive, the poet reminded his contemporary readers that faith is nothing if not quintessentially personal. Its successful fostering is ultimately their responsibility and not that of the Church, especially when that institution is as corrupt as Dante claimed it to be" (511).

A fitting symmetry defines the confessional utterances in Hell with those in Purgatory. In Purgatory, the pilgrim as confessant barely manages to say a single word; yet, we are meant to believe in his true contrition. Conversely, Dante in Hell figures himself as confessor: the pilgrim kneels down before the feet of the simonists, as would a "frate" confessing a murderer (*Inf.* XIX). He elicits (and subsequently conveys in his poem) the hollow confessions of sinners who are beyond redemption. While sinners in Hell might relate their crimes in ways that structurally mimic confessions, they are anything but genuinely repentant. Their words are false performances of confession that have no power to save. In addition, Dante himself – as pilgrim and as author – never properly spells out for his readers what his sins actually are (with the exception as noted above of his brief admission that he suffers from pride and to a lesser extent envy.) Is it possible that, in Dante's self-proclaimed salvific poem, the most genuine confessions are the most vague and the least verbal, while the most elaborate and detailed are the least genuine? Is Dante as author better at confessing other people's sins, and revealing them, than he is at confessing his own?

Confession in Boccaccio: Decameron I.1 and III.3

One of Dante's most intuitive and influential commentators may have asked himself a similar question. The first of the hundred tales comprising Boccaccio's *Decameron* thematizes the issue of confessional practice, and may also take a sly dig at Dante's *Comedy* in the process.[33] A moneylender who is about to move elsewhere needs his loans in Burgundy collected, so he asks the most evil man he knows, Ser Ciappelletto, to do so on his behalf. (The narrator catalogues Ciappelletto's 'résumé of sin' in great detail.) Arriving in Burgundy, Ciappelletto becomes gravely ill. The brothers, a pair of usurers, with whom he is staying, express their worry: their guest has been too evil during his life to confess; if the confessor were to know what Ciappelletto had done, he would forbid his being buried. However, without confessing, Ciappelletto would also be denied a Christian burial. The brothers cannot turn him out of their home for their fellow-villagers would react negatively. They are in a quandary. Ciappelletto, overhearing their conversation, requests that a most holy friar come to confess him. The *frate* questions the sinner systematically: when did you last confess? Have you committed adultery? Have you ever lied? Are you guilty of gluttony? Yes father! I fast three times a week but one time I craved those little salad greens that women love . . . and so on. Despite being a vicious lying swindling murderer who delights in his evil acts, Ser Ciappelletto responds to each question with – what seems to the friar – genuine remorse, reproaching himself even more than his confessor does, and at one point reproaching the friar (for spitting in the house of God). Just before he dies, Ciappelletto is absolved by his confessor, who proceeds to convince his Order and everyone in the region of the notary's virtue. He preaches about the man's life as an example with which to reproach his parishioners' sinfulness and to inspire in them better behavior. The *novella* draws to a close as the people, believing Ciappelletto to be a saint, tear the clothes from his corpse in a frenzy of veneration.

As in the decree, Boccaccio depicts confession as a kind of cross-examination: the friar systematically asks Ciappelletto about each sin, as if he were following one of the confessors' manuals that proliferated in the period. Yet, instead of the examination being used to teach something to the sinner, the friar makes Ciappelletto's story public, exposing his confession in

[33] The first tale of the *Decameron* has unsurprisingly enjoyed a wealth of scholarly attention. See for instance Almansi; Canova; D'Agostino; Ciabattoni 2010; Delcorno 1989; Fido 2004; Fido, 1988; Getto.

order to turn (the false story of) his life into an *exemplum* from which others might benefit. In this sense, the friar's actions seem to place two of the decree's stipulations at odds with each other. He chooses to reveal the contents of the confession, thereby breaking the rule of secrecy, in order to fulfill a morally useful didactic purpose. However, while the friar might think he does this to instruct and ultimately bring his parishioners closer to salvation, Boccaccio appears to suggest that, lurking behind these actions, one might find less generous motivations connected to the Church as an institution. By making a spectacle of Ciappelletto's life and death, and whipping the townspeople into a frenzy, the friar increases the influence and visibility of his Order, and perhaps of Catholic teachings more generally. Yet, in order to do so, he must break the seal of confession.

Interestingly, the order in which the *frate* confesses Ser Ciappelletto's sins corresponds not to the order in which sins were supposed to be confessed, following the penitential manuals instructing priests on how to conduct confessions, nor to the most widely disseminated and authoritative theological texts of the time. Instead, Ciappelletto's sins are catalogued according to the order of sins forming the structure and topography of Dante's Hell, as Simone Marchesi has recently argued (Marchesi 157-77). While penitential handbooks and theological texts suggested either allowing the confessant to choose the order, or using the seven deadly sins as a guide for determining the order, both Dante's *Inferno* and the first *novella* of Boccaccio's *Decameron* leave out pride (for the most part) and envy[34]; both progress from lust, to gluttony, avarice, wrath, violence, and to fraud. Although Boccaccio leaves some room at the end of the false confession for various other offenses: neglecting to attend mass on Sunday, spitting in church, and worst of all – a sin he can barely bring himself to "confess" – having cursed his mother's name.

Why does the first tale of Boccaccio's *Decameron* emphasize not only a false confession, but also one in which sins are catalogued according to the order in which Dante's Hell is structured? Boccaccio might on the one hand wish simply to make a nod to Dante's work here and borrow some of its moral authority. But on the other hand, the allusion begs the question: is Boccaccio also making a comment about the way in which Dante's *Inferno* treats the issue of confession and its role in the pathway to redemption? Dante as the author of the *Comedy* claims to have been sent on a journey through the afterlife to save his soul, which Beatrice commands him to write down so that its message may also save its readers (*Purg*. XXXII, 103-05). "Read about my experience," Dante-author implies, "and you too can achieve redemption!" But, when we read Boccaccio's first tale, in which Ciappelletto fools a priest and a whole community of believers with a false confession, following closely the order of sins structuring Dante's Hell, it might cause a reader to wonder: how can Dante be saved, let alone save us (his readers), if he continually points fingers at other people's sins, while seeming to avoid examining and acknowledging his own? For Boccaccio, the friar who confesses Ser Ciappelletto may be a figure for Dante-*poeta*; both are confessors who elicit misleading confessional performances from sinners who are beyond redemption. Both Ser Ciappelletto's confessor and Dante publicize these false confessional performances in the name of trying to save other souls.

While Dante and Boccaccio thus both reveal an awareness of the didactic purpose of confession as stipulated in the decree of 1215, they also both choose to dramatize moments in which another stipulation of the decree – the seal of confession – is broken. In fact, both authors place these two stipulations at odds with each other: in order to fulfil the didactic purpose of

[34] As mentioned above, these are interestingly the only two vices that Dante may implicitly admit to in Purgatory (on corresponding Terrace).

confession, the seal must be broken. Furthermore, both Dante (through the lips of Beatrice in *Purgatorio* XXXI), and Boccaccio (through the voice of the narrator in I.1) also call into question the necessity of confessional words at all. As we saw above, Beatrice suggests that Dante's confessional words are less important than his cheeks flushed with shame (*Purg*. XXXI, 37-42). While, in *Decameron* I.1, the narrator tells the reader that believers will not be punished for venerating an evil man through ignorance – their prayers will be heard in any case by God.[35] As Millicent Marcus rightly asks: "if God will bypass the saint in favor of the suppliant, why bother with mediators at all?" (Marcus 19). And, by extension, one might ask: why bother with confession? While both Dante and Boccaccio show an awareness of the decree of the Fourth Lateran Council, it is clear that neither author accepted uncritically the intercessory role that the Church was trying to fashion for itself with respect to confessional practice.

Boccaccio's treatment of confession elsewhere in the *Decameron* continues to reveal an awareness of the decree's aspirations mixed with a sardonic dose of realism about its effectiveness. Confession is thematized for a second time in the work in the third tale of the third day.[36] As in I.1, here again Boccaccio turns the expectation of secrecy on its head. In both tales, confession is represented as a mode of communication, in which the confessor is transformed into an instrument for rendering public what he has learned in the confessional. Both of these tales also reveal an awareness of the decree's characterization of the confessor's role as investigator and educator.

In III.3, the protagonist is a Florentine woman (whom the narrator refrains from naming in order to protect her identity) who disdains her husband because of his lower social status.[37] Deciding to take a lover, she devises a plan to attract the attention of a certain gentleman. She goes to confession, telling the *frate* (whom she knows to associate with the gentleman), that the

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[35] " [. . .] e dico costui piú tosto dovere essere nelle mani del diavolo in perdizione che in Paradiso. E se cosí è, grandissima si può la benignità di Dio cognoscere verso noi, la quale non al nostro errore ma alla purità della fé riguardando, cosí faccendo noi nostro mezzano un suo nemico, amico credendolo, ci essaudisce, come se a uno veramente santo per mezzano della sua grazia ricorressimo. E per ciò, acciò che noi per la sua grazia nelle presenti avversità e in questa compagnia cosí lieta siamo sani e salvi servati, lodando il suo nome nel quale cominciata l'abbiamo, Lui in reverenza avendo, ne' nostri bisogni gli ci raccomanderemo sicurissimi d'essere uditi." [I believe that he is he is, instead, in the hands of the Devil in Hell rather than in Paradise. And if this is the case, we can recognize the greatness of God's mercy toward us, which pays more attention to the purity of our faith than to our errors by granting our prayers in spite of the fact that we choose His enemy as our intercessor – fulfilling our requests to Him just as if we had chosen a true saint as intermediary for His grace. And so, that we may be kept healthy and safe through the present adversity and in this joyful company by His grace, praising the name of Him when, being most certain that we shall be heard]. *Decameron* I.1, 89-91. All translations of the *Decameron* are by Musa and Bondanella.

[36] Confessional practice plays a key role in several of the *Decameron*'s one hundred tales, and each of these tales has received a large amount of critical attention. For the purposes of this essay, I limit my focus to two *novelle* which demonstrate Boccaccio's awareness of the decree on confession of Lateran IV. As Brown points out, confession is "central to the plot" in tales I.1, III.3 and VII.5, which she analyzes in her useful article (Brown 41). Brown mentions that at least two other tales (III.8 and II.8) deal with confession but does not discuss them in the article. I am also indebted to the other two contributions to that same special issue of *Quaderni d'italianistica*, which also explore aspects of Boccaccio's treatment of confession by Barsella and Marchesi. See also Ferroni (242-43; 246) for an analysis of the theme of confession in III.3 and III.8.

[37] For studies on day three as a whole, see for instance Cottino-Jones; Eisner; Ciabattoni and Forni.

gentleman has been pursuing her, but that she does not want to tell her brothers for fear they would do the man harm. She asks the confessor to intercede discretely on her behalf, assuming that he will speak to the gentleman about the matter. The confessor confronts the gentleman, demanding that he stop pursuing the lady. The gentleman realizes that the lady is trying to communicate her interest in him, so he passes by her home to signal his own interest. The lady returns to her confessor with money for masses, and tells him that the gentleman has given her gifts; she gives the gifts to the friar to "return" them on her behalf. The friar gives the gifts to the gentleman and again urges him to stop pursuing the lady. The gentleman interprets this message as further encouragement of her interest, and makes further advances towards her. A third time, the lady tells her confessor that the gentleman must have heard that her husband was away, since he came in through the back garden, climbed a tree and tried to enter her room. The friar again reproaches the gentleman with these details and by so doing communicates what the lady wanted him to know: that her husband is away and that he should climb a tree to enter her room, which he promptly does. The lovers satisfy their desires, and the lady jokes to the gentleman: "Gran mercé a messer lo frate, che cosí bene t'insegnò la via da venirci" (III.3.54) [A thousand thanks to our friend the friar, who has taught you so well the way to come here].

The culminating joke of the tale hinges on the attribution of didactic purposes to the practice of confession. The confessor thinks that he has been instructing both lovers in avoiding sexual transgression. Instead, he has unwittingly "taught" (insegnò) the gentleman how to realize a sexual encounter with a married woman. Not only does the lady manipulate the friar and the office of confession for her own ends, but she does so by exploiting the friar's naïve faith in his office. It does not occur to the friar that the lady could be using him as a go-between; instead, he genuinely praises the virtue of the lady while reproaching the gentleman. Thus, the story reveals an awareness, on the part of Boccaccio, of the Church's aspirations for the office of confession: to instruct believers in the ways of the faith. However, Boccaccio appears to have little faith that confessants are learning what the Church hopes to teach them.

The *novella* also exploits for comic effect the decree's requirement that confession be sealed.[38] Secrecy and discretion are emphasized throughout: the narrator claims to be protecting the protagonist of the story by not naming her; the lady asks her confessor to intervene in order to avoid a scandal and any violence that would result from her family knowing about the affair. The motif of confidentiality thus becomes the backbone of the story's comic irony. The tale is in fact anything but secret. At the metaliterary level, the narrator reveals the story by recounting it, while the author reveals the story by recording it.[39] At the narrative level too, the issue of secrecy is emphasized and exploited: the lady uses the confessor as an instrument to convey a message learned in confidence – an idea that is, if not antithetical to the decree's demand that confessors keep confessions private, at least a distortion of it.[40]

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[38] Peterson and Brown also note that the *frate* violates the seal of confession imposed by the Decree of 1215. As the latter writes: "The focus for the confessor, according to Canon law (Canon 21), relates more to the secrecy of the confession and of the penitent's speech, but the friar in this novella clearly violates this secrecy as he betrays his concern for the visual" (Brown 54).

[39] This is a point that others have made about I.1 as well: the storyteller has to get "caught" by the narrator/reader for the story to work. One might also think of more general connections between literature and confession; is all literature at least in the first person in some way confessional? (See for instance Matukhin on this point.)

[40] An interesting question is whether Boccaccio might be suggesting in this tale that he believes that people in general, or just the clergy, are incapable of keeping secrets. A further study might begin to

The woman cleverly uses the friar's wish to be discrete – indeed, he may actually believe that he is following the decree to the letter ("Sacerdos autem sit discretus et cautus") –, in order to turn his voice into an instrument for coded communication with her lover.[41] She exploits the friar's aversion to scandal: he is eager to intervene in order to prevent knowledge of the gentleman's alleged behavior becoming public. In this way, the lady's manipulation of the friar reveals a sinister side of confessional practice. As McNamara has argued, the Church routinely used the idea that scandal could harm parishioners as a reason for covering up sexual indiscretions on the part of the clergy, a strategy that was often facilitated by the seal of confession: for instance, confessors would threaten to expose a confessant's sin unless the confessant engaged in sexual relations with him; or the secrecy of the confessional allowed the confessor a cover under which to propose or engage in amorous relationships with parishioners.[42]

The Florentine lady of III.3 might also be said to exploit the Church's reliance on money. The narrator tells us that the friar knows that the lady is rich, and for that reason he eagerly agrees to help her. The lady does not disappoint, since she gives the friar money ostensibly to say masses on her behalf. In this sense, the *novella* exploits a play on words: the friar, as confessor, is a *mezzano* (8) – an intermediary who will act on behalf of the sinner in requesting mercy and forgiveness from God. But *mezzano*, given its connections with *ruffiano*, or a procurer of sexual favors, may also have a double sense – an association which is perhaps supported even further by the *Decameron*'s description of itself as a "galeotto."[43] Indeed, in the *Decameron*'s opening novella as well, the confessor is referred to repeatedly as a "procuratore," or a "mezzano,"[44] and we also find an emphasis on money.[45] Thus, the Florentine lady of III.3 effectively pays her confessor to procure an extra-marital relationship for her. The confessor, supposedly the instrument that will conduct a message of contrition from his confessants to God, instead becomes an instrument of sexual gratification. Priest has become pimp.[46]

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answer this question, and/or the related but more broad question of how secrecy is addressed throughout the *Decameron* in other confessional and non-confessional settings. It is certainly plausible that the *novella* is mainly concerned with emphasizing this particular woman's cleverness, and the fact that she – knowing the nature of her confessor – is able to exploit his particular weaknesses. That said, especially given the examples elsewhere in the *Decameron* of confessors breaking the seal of secrecy (for example in I.1 as we saw above), it would not be implausible to interpret the confessor's naivety as a commentary on the Church's failure to understand the needs of its parishioners, and the realities of their everyday lives.

[41] On the theme of the "trick" in this tale, employed by the lady to masterful success, see Wheelock; and Gulizia. Wheelock points out that the lady and the gentleman must engage in coded communication in order to achieve their union: "The valente uomo's success, a function of his achieved awareness, is, of course, a result of effective decoding" (Wheelock 268).

[42] See McNamara (talk from 2019) and the article based on this talk which is under review.

[43] See the entry on "ruffian" in the *Dizionario Treccani*. On the *Decameron*'s characterization of itself as a "galeotto", see Veglia.

[44] Barsella makes a similar point about the related term "procuratore," although in the context of her insightful analysis of the first novella of the collection: "Boccaccio seems to exploit the polysemy of the term *procuratore* – legal, erotic, and theological, as its semantic field includes the terms 'procurator,' 'pander,' and 'instrument of divine Providence' " (Barsella 32).

[45] See Barsella on financial and economic implications of I.1.

[46] See also Hanning (27) on Alberto as Gabriel's pimp in IV.2 and on the seal of confession being exploited in IV.2 as well as in III.3 (14-41). While a lot more could be, and has been, said about this *novella*, for the purposes of this article's modest scope, I limit myself to pointing out the didactic and

In light of the possibility that the Church tried to increase its power over the minds of the people through confessional practice, the way in which it is depicted in both tales (I.1 and III.3) seems particularly incisive and subversive. If it was the Church's goal to investigate the hearts and minds of their members, both *novelle* reveal the Church's failure in this respect: not only are the confessors clueless about their parishioners' motivations, but they also fail to understand their modes of communication. In the tale of the Florentine lady, the friar hears and relays the confessant's very words to the gentleman, but in no way does he understand their ultimate meaning. In the tale of Ser Ciappelletto, the friar naively and erroneously believes the sinner's performance of contrition, and proceeds to make his story an instrument for publicity. While the Church might try to interrogate and instruct laypeople through the practice of confession, Boccaccio seems to be suggesting that sometimes lay people and members of the clergy are not speaking the same language. In order to be an effective confessor, one needs to be attuned to the complexities of language, like a good reader, or a writer.

As we have seen, both Boccaccio and Dante repeatedly emphasize the performative aspect of confessional practice, but to different ends. In *Purgatorio,* the difficulty that the pilgrim has in producing language bolsters his claims of genuine remorse; he performs evidence of his contrition through emotion (crying, blushing, etc.) which hinders his ability to speak. Boccaccio's characters on the other hand have no difficulty producing or exploiting language; they are good actors who easily fool their confessors, and there is nothing genuine about their performance of contrition.

Despite the fundamentally different ways in which the *Decameron* and the *Comedy* treat the issue of confession, each author demonstrates an awareness of some of the ways in which the Church tried to exert control over the practice through the decree of 1215: namely, the didactic and investigative purposes of confession; its structure as a kind of cross-examination; and its depiction of the confessor as intercessor. Neither author embraces uncritically the role that the Church seemed to want to fashion for itself in this regard. While Dante's treatment of confession might be more earnest and personal than Boccaccio's, both authors raise the question of whether it is necessary to speak out loud something that God already knows. Dante resoundingly answers yes, albeit while emphasizing affective as well as verbal expression. Boccaccio's answer, if he gives one, is more ambiguous.

Both authors acknowledge the didactic purpose and salvific promise of the practice, and interestingly, these two aspects of confession are – broadly speaking – the explicitly stated goals of each work as a whole. The author of the *Comedy* represents himself as the hero, sent on a divinely-sanctioned journey towards salvation through the afterlife, who is charged by his savior, Beatrice, to write the work in order to save other souls. In the author's Introduction to the *Decameron,* Boccaccio claims a didactic purpose for the work: reading it will help his female readers respond more adeptly to situations in their own lives. In addition, the narrators within the

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investigative elements of the tale that reveal the author's awareness of the decree on confession. However, it would be useful in further studies to examine how Boccaccio's treatment of confession relates to his treatment of other religious institutions, of other offices of the church, and to his orthodox Catholicism elsewhere in the collection. As Kriesel writes: "Boccaccio categorized his poetics as elegiac to contrast them to Dante's comedic poetics. The narrator encourages such comparison by appropriating a common contemporary definition of the *Comedy*'s register as low and humble for the *Decameron* [. . . by so doing] Dante was [. . .] affirming that his low, or earthly writings could be as symbolically efficacious and orthodox as Dante's sublime, or otherworldly, poem" (Kriesel 190); see also all of Chapter 4: "The Love of the Corpus: *Decameron*" (Kriesel 157-202).

frame-tale of the *Decameron* tell their tales while seeking refuge in the country from the plague devastating Florence in 1348. Thus, the fact that both authors resist or question the ways in which the Church tried to exert control over confessional practice does not diminish the importance of the issue in their works. To the contrary: given the salvific and didactic scope of the *Comedy* and the *Decameron*, the performance of penance may be too important to be confined to a single moment, framed only by the decree's stipulations for confessional practice, in each work.

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