

“While I was suffering, the pleasant conversation and invaluable consolation certain friends provided gave me such relief that I am absolutely convinced they are the reason I did not die”: The remedial function of speech in the *Decameron* and *L’Heptaméron*.

During the Renaissance, with the rise of humanism and a renewed importance placed upon learning, intelligence was elevated to among the highest of virtues. Works of the period show the valorisation of intelligent speech and the celebration of verbal wit. But if skilled speech is a virtue, unskilled speech is a vice – where the former has the ability to remedy, the latter has the potential to harm. The power of speech, whether for better or worse, is a key theme in Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and its spiritual successor, *L’Heptaméron* of Marguerite de Navarre, across all three levels of the texts – at the level of the authors, of the narrators, and of the tales themselves.

This essay will discuss the remedial function of speech in these two seminal works, with additional reference to other significant works of Renaissance literature and to notable antecedents of the classical period. First, I will explore how speech can serve to remedy emotional pain by bringing pleasure, distraction and consolation. Next, I will discuss the remedial function of speech in curing moral ills, before examining the power of speech in remedying difficult or unpleasant situations. Finally, I will investigate the limits of the remedial function of speech: how it can be insufficient to bring remedy or can even be the *cause* of harm, rather than its cure.

From the very beginning of both the *Decameron* and *L’Heptaméron*, speech functions to remedy emotional pain. In his preface, Boccaccio bears testament to the curative properties of speech, describing how when suffering the pain of love, ‘the pleasant conversation and invaluable consolation certain friends provided gave me such relief that I am absolutely convinced they are the reason I did not die.’¹ The remedial function of pleasing speech is furthermore his own stated aim in writing the text, his intention being to use his own authorial ‘voice’ to provide ‘relief’ and ‘succor’ to those who are similarly suffering (pp. 2-3).

This power of speech to remedy emotional suffering is present not only at the authorial level, but also at the level of the narrative. The very storytelling projects around which both texts are based demonstrate this power, having been conceived by the characters as a cure to the emotional ailments that plague them: ‘l’ennuy’ which puts them ‘en danger de demourer malades’ or even of metaphorical death, the ‘maladie incurable’ of becoming ‘fascheuses’, or the ‘extreme tristesse’ of

¹ Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. by Wayne A. Rebhorn (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), Preface, p. 1. All further citations from the *Decameron* are taken from this edition.

their circumstances.² Both the *Decameron* and *L'Heptaméron* feature a recurring language of illness, suffering and death, for which speech is the remedy.

This language of 'curative' speech stands in contrast to the diseased and life-threatening settings of the two works: the plagued Florence of the *Decameron* and the mortally dangerous setting of *L'Heptaméron*. The storytelling projects serve to remedy the emotional damage wrought by these dangers. As Rebhorn argues, storytelling in the *Decameron* restores what has been lost to the plague, providing the characters with the sense of community, compassion and emotional wellbeing that had been destroyed, and 'thus, in a sense, supplies a cure'.³ In such ways speech, in both texts, functions to remedy emotional ills.

Speech serves a remedial function not only for emotional ills, but also for moral ones. Both the *Decameron* and *L'Heptaméron* showcase the power of speech to remedy moral wrongdoing. Each of the texts revolves around discussions of virtue and vice, and to that end many of the tales serve as exemplum of good and bad behaviour. Indeed, both of the works have an explicitly didactic function. In the preface to the *Decameron*, the author states his intention to provide 'useful advice' to young ladies through stories which 'will teach them how to recognize what they should avoid, and likewise, what they should pursue' (p. 3). *L'Heptaméron* meanwhile imparts frequent 'moralistic or prescriptive injunction[s]', often following the phrase 'voyla, mes dames';⁴ these lessons are thus directed both to the other narrators and to we the readers. Boccaccio's text shares this dual-level didacticism; when Pampinea states her intention 'to use this, the last of today's stories, which it now falls to me to tell, in order to teach you [...]' (I.10, p. 69), we can infer that her lesson in womanly virtue is intended not only for the other narrators, but for us as well. Both the narrator and the authorial 'voice' speak moral instruction, and thus demonstrate the capacity of speech to remedy moral faults.

This remedial function of speech is also present at the level of the tales, many of which showcase the power of speech to correct poor behaviour. In *Decameron* I.9, after learning that a 'fainthearted' and 'shameful coward' of a king will not punish the men who have raped her, she is able to rebuke him through a single pointed remark into changing his ways completely (pp. 66-67). In I.10, an honourable doctor reproaches a young lady for mocking his feelings of love towards her, and she is thus made ashamed of her 'presumptuousness' (pp. 70-71). A similar transformation occurs in

² Marguerite de Navarre, *L'Heptaméron*, ed. by Nicole Cazauran (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), Prologue, p. 62. All further citations from the *Heptaméron* are taken from this edition.

³ Wayne A. Rebhorn, trans., 'Introduction', in *The Decameron*, p. xl.

⁴ Cathleen M. Bauschatz, "'Voyla, mes dames ...': Inscribed Women Listeners and Readers in the Heptameron', in *Critical Tales: New Studies of the Heptameron and Early Modern Culture*, ed. by John D. Lyons and Mary B. McKinley (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), pp. 104-122 <<https://doi.org/10.9783/9781512804171-009>>, (p. 106, p. 114).

L'Heptaméron 37; after her husband becomes unfaithful, La dame de Loué 'oublia les affaires de sa maison, sa personne et sa famille' and allows the estate to fall into debt. Seeing this, '[q]uelqu'un de ses parens, qui cognoissoit la maladie, luy remonstra la faulte qu'elle faisoit' to her children, and this reprimand causes the lady to 'reprendre ses esprits' and take action (pp. 383-84). In each of these tales, speech is able to redress a moral failing, be it cowardice, presumptuousness or negligence. Each of the *Decameron* and *L'Heptaméron* thus presents the power of speech to instil virtue and remedy moral ills.

Yet speech in both of these texts effects not only moral transformations, but material ones. In these works, as in others of the period, verbal wit is celebrated for its power to remedy difficult or unpleasant situations. For Rebhorn, in the *Decameron* the ability to speak well is 'both a defensive resource [...] and an offensive weapon', allowing the speaker to protect themselves from dangerous situations and to bring about desired outcomes.⁵ The text is full of stories demonstrating 'the power of prompt and witty retorts' (I.5, p. 50), tales of those who, using skilled speech, 'have managed to avoid danger, loss, or ridicule' (VI, p. 472). In VI.7, under threat of being condemned to death for adultery, Madonna Filippa uses the 'art' of speaking well to 'extricate[] herself from the snare of a shameful death' and change an unjust law (pp. 494-96). A similar case is found in Catherine Des Roches' *L'Agnodice*, in which the titular character's humble speech before her accusers saves her from a death sentence and brings about the lifting of a ban on women's education.⁶ In the latter case speech is literally curative, permitting Agnodice to continue working as a doctor.

In *Decameron* I.5, a noble woman uses a clever analogy to 'defend[] herself by both word and deed' from the unwanted attention of the King. In circumstances which constrain directness, her use of intelligent speech enables her to extricate herself from a difficult situation without causing dishonour or offence to a social superior (pp. 50-53). A similar story of remedial verbal wit is found in *L'Heptaméron* 54, in which a woman is able to put an end to her husband's adultery with a single remark. Upon seeing the shadow of him kissing the serving maid, she laughs, telling him, 'Mon amy, je suis si sotté, que je ris a mon ombre'; the implication of this sole phrase was such 'qu'il laissa ceste facea umbrageuse' (p. 488). In both this tale and *Decameron* I.5, women harness the power of verbal insinuation as a tool against the transgressions of men. Each of these texts demonstrates, in the words of Psaki, the 'ways that speakers can use their wits, especially witty answers, to restabilize a relationship gone dangerously awry', to 're-establish normalcy, and [...] to push back against the

⁵ Rebhorn, pp. xlii-iii.

⁶ Catherine Des Roches, 'L'Agnodice', in *Les œuvres*, ed. by Anne R. Larsen (Geneva: Droz, 1993), pp. 333-40 (p. 339).

abuse of power'.⁷ Speech is thus valorised as a powerful tool, particularly for women, to remedy situations which may be difficult, unpleasant or even dangerous.

But the remedial function of speech has its limits. While speech certainly plays a role in setting things right in the *Decameron* VI.7 and *Agnodice*, the importance of the women's beauty is undeniable. In the former, the *podesta* is moved to pity not only by Madonna Filippa's words, but also by the fact that she was 'very beautiful and extremely well mannered' (p. 495). In *L'Agnodice*, the heroine's words are accompanied by the revealing of 'l'or de sa blonde teste' and 'son sein beau'; her accusers 'esmerveille[nt] ceste rare excellence', '[e]ntentifs seulement à l'ouyr et la voir'.⁸ The effect of speaking is equalled, if not surpassed, by the effect of seeing; we must question whether speech alone would be enough.

In some cases, speech may not only be insufficient to bring remedy, but may even have the opposite function. In *Decameron* VI.1, a knight seeks to alleviate a long journey on foot by giving a lady 'a horseback ride there astride one of the finest stories in the world', but he tells the story so poorly that it causes her to 'br[eak] out in a sweat and experience[] heart palpitations, as if she had become ill and was almost at the point of death' (p. 476). In contrast to the earlier function of speech as the cure of illness, in this tale it is the cause.

Speech can also bring harm of a different sort, that being harm to reputation – particularly when the speaker is a woman. In *L'Heptaméron* 62, a woman seeks to amuse the court with a scandalous story, but a slip of the tongue reveals it to be about herself; with this, 'son honneur [...] estoit desja vole si loing, qu'elle ne le pouvoit rappeller' (p. 533). Her speech causes irreparable damage to her reputation; both the events revealed in the story and the act of telling it publicly bring shame and castigation. Where in earlier tales speech serves to protect a woman's honour, here it does the opposite.

Public speech in general carries a threat to a woman's reputation, often serving as an indication of indecency. In *Decameron* I.10, Boccaccio states that 'it is much less becoming [for women than men] to give long, elaborate speeches' (p. 68), and in the introduction to the Sixth Day a female servant is threatened with whipping for her excessive (and scandalous) speech in front of her superiors (pp. 473-74). Following on from textual antecedents, a parallel is drawn between the 'simultaneous crimes of sexual and linguistic impropriety';⁹ indeed one of these antecedents, Juvenal's *Satire VI*, is little more than a litany of women's sexual and linguistic faults. In this text, a

⁷ F. Regina Psaki, 'Voicing Gender in the *Decameron*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Boccaccio*, ed. by Guyda Armstrong, Rhiannon Daniels and Stephen J. Milner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 101-118 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781139013987.009>>, (pp. 103-05).

⁸ *L'Agnodice*, pp. 338-39.

⁹ Psaki, p. 111.

woman's speech – be that 'talking Greek', talking of news, talking of literature, and so on – serves only to earn her ridicule and castigation.¹⁰ Speech across these works is thus paradoxical in its function; while in some cases it brings remedy, in others it causes harm.

Across these works of Renaissance and classical literature, speech plays a central role, be that positive or negative. In many cases, speech has a remarkable remedial power – to remedy emotional pain, to cure moral ills, or to redress difficult or dangerous situations. Yet in others, speech may be insufficient as the sole bringer of remedy or may even have the opposite effect, acting not as the cure of harm, but the cause – particularly for unskilled or female speakers. In the *Decameron* and *L'Heptaméron* speech operates as such across all three levels of the text, with the authors, the narrators and the characters of the tales all harnessing the power of speech to either their benefit or their detriment. With their contemporary popularity and enduring influence, these texts have much to tell us about the societies in which they were written and their legacies into the present.

¹⁰ Juvenal, 'Satire VI', in *The Sixteen Satires*, ed. by Peter Green, 3rd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), pp. 35-54.

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