

# ‘UN GIUOCO MULTO SPAVENTEVOLE’: *ARS NECROMANTICA* IN 15<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY VERNACULAR NOVELLA

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## THE SUPERNATURAL IN *NOVELLE DI BEFFA*

**A**longside the blooming of Renaissance courts and their refined culture, the 15<sup>th</sup> century is also known for the emergence of modern demonology, setting the stage for the raging witch-hunts in the following centuries.<sup>1</sup> My paper aims to explore how this cultural background influenced the Italian vernacular *novella*, a traditionally realistic genre stemming from the prestigious model of Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (post 1348 – ante 1360),<sup>2</sup> by taking into account two examples of *novella di beffa* involving fake necromancers picked from the most important collections of the time: the twentieth novella in Masuccio Salernitano’s *Novellino* (1476) and the twenty-fifth *novella* of the *Porretane* by Sabadino degli Arienti (1492), based on the lesser-known *I negromanti* by Cesare Nappi. These stories are emblematic of a changing trend in the representation of magic in early modern Italian literature: at that time, the topic could no longer be regarded as a simple matter of jokes, but rather was seen as a potentially real and disturbing threat that could not

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<sup>1</sup> See Franco Cardini, *Magia, stregoneria, superstizioni nell’Occidente medievale* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1979); Sergio Abbiati, Attilio Agnoletto and Maria Rosario Lazzati, *La stregoneria. Diavoli, streghe, inquisitori dal Trecento al Settecento* (Milan: Mondadori, 1984); Colette Arnould, *La stregoneria. Storia di una follia profondamente umana* (Bari: Dedalo, 2011); *Demonology and Witch-Hunting in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Julian Goodare, Rita Voltmer, Liv Helene Willumsen (London: Routledge, 2020); Charles Zika, *Exorcising our Demons: Magic, Witchcraft and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from the *Decameron* (in short *Dec.*) are taken from Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ed. by Amedeo Quondam, Maurizio Fiorilla and Giancarlo Alfano (Milan: Rizzoli, 2013). For the date of the *Decameron*, see Giuliano Tanturli and Stefano Zamponi, ‘Biografia e cronologia delle opere’, in *Boccaccio autore e copista*, ed. by Teresa De Robertis and others (Verona: Mandragora, 2013), pp. 61-64 (p. 63) and the latest contribution of Maurizio Fiorilla, ‘Il capolavoro narrativo: il *Decameron*’, in *Boccaccio*, ed. by Maurizio Fiorilla and Irene Iocca (Rome: Carocci, 2021), pp. 95-140 (pp. 95-97).

be downplayed easily. I will argue that this shift in the authors' cultural background affected their execution of the intrinsically jocular and light-hearted narrative genre of *beffa*.

The *beffa* is a prank played by a smart trickster on ingenuous people. Boccaccio's *novelle di beffa* are narrated from the perspective of the tricksters and celebrate their wit, as they are usually able to deceive their foolish victims. Fake necromancers are a recurring trope in these plots: the trickster pretends to possess deep knowledge about conjuring spirits and demons, performing exorcisms, love magic, and various other rituals involving the occult. In this kind of short story, the trickster will fool the credulous victim into believing they are being helped by a powerful necromancer, while they are actually being ridiculed or, in the worst case, exploited for the trickster's personal benefit.

In order to prove themselves well-versed in the *ars necromantica*, the branch of the magical discipline heir to the classical evocation of the spirits of the dead, which over the centuries mingled with various philosophical and esoteric currents, the tricksters will speak about their abilities at length, especially when it comes to explaining their rituals.<sup>3</sup> Thus, this particular variation of *novella di beffa* can be seen as an example of what Francesco Orlando calls *soprannaturale di derisione*, that is, the presence of supernatural themes in a literary text as an object of mockery.<sup>4</sup> The author of *soprannaturale di derisione* gives no credit to the supernatural and criticises it as foolish superstition. However, to do so, they constantly refer to the paranormal, often indulging in the depiction of otherworldly entities and magical phenomena. One could argue that sometimes the author enjoys the topic more than they are willing to admit and that readers tend to unwittingly sympathise with the irrational beliefs that are the target of such criticism. In some cases, it is possible to read these texts as a sort of Freudian compromise formation *ante litteram*, such as negation ('the supernatural is *not* real') or displacement ('*foolish people* believe in the supernatural'). The more noticeable this attitude is, the more difficult it becomes to draw the line between *soprannaturale di derisione* and Orlando's third typological category, *soprannaturale di ignoranza con incertezza sul "se"*, that can be roughly equated to Todorov's definition of *fantastic*: a text in which one cannot be sure whether

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<sup>3</sup> For this syncretic form of theurgy, which blends together Neo-Platonism, Hermeticism, the Christian medieval tradition and Renaissance magic, see Marina Montesano, *Fantasima, fantasima che di notte vai: la cultura magica nelle novelle toscane del Trecento* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2000), pp. 75-76; György E. Szónyi, 'Talking with demons. Early modern theories and practice', in *Christian Demonology and Popular Mythology*, ed. by Éva Pócs and Gábor Klaniczay (Budapest-New York: CEU Press, 2006), pp. 72-88.

<sup>4</sup> Francesco Orlando, *Il soprannaturale letterario: storia, logica e forme* (Turin: Einaudi, 2017), pp. 121-28.

the supernatural is real or not.<sup>5</sup> Orlando's framework has never been applied to literary texts written in the Quattrocento,<sup>6</sup> which I believe are particularly apt to provide new materials for the development of the theoretical discussion on these categories.

To work properly, the *beffa* mechanism requires that the tricksters do not believe in the supernatural and that their victims are punished for their gullibility. The examples here offered will show how the authors of the fifteenth-century *novella* differ from Boccaccio when they deal with this subject, proving a difficult negotiation between the scepticism required by the genre and the steadily increasing pervasiveness of occult themes in early modern society. In fact, their attitude towards the supernatural tends to lean towards the fantastic more than the realistic framework of the Decameronian tradition seems to allow.

### MASUCCIO SALERNITANO'S DEAL WITH THE DEVIL

The twentieth *novella* of Masuccio Salernitano's *Novellino* includes one of the most articulate representations of a fake demonic evocation in Renaissance literature.<sup>7</sup> The author contaminates two Decameronian hypotexts from the eighth day, the story of the scholar and the widow (*Dec.* VIII 7) and Bruno and Buffalmacco's *beffa* to Maestro Simone (*Dec.* VIII 9). Masuccio's victim is Iacomo Pinto, a gullible man hopelessly in love with a widow. His friend Loisi Pagano decides to prank him together with messer Angelo, who pretends to be a necromancer who will summon a demon able to make the woman fall in love with Iacomo. During the fake ritual, in which Loisi takes part dressed up as a demon, the man (unknowingly spied on by an amused crowd) gets too scared and runs away.

Comparing the *novella* to its models in the *Decameron*, the abundance of details included by Masuccio in the account of the magic ritual immediately stands out. Indeed, the author enriched his story with an extended description of the ritual, drawing not only from hagiography (as Boccaccio

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<sup>5</sup> Orlando, pp. 137-46; Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1973).

<sup>6</sup> To my knowledge, the only exception is Giovanna Rizzarelli, who applied these categories in her analysis of Boiardo's poem in her paper 'Liber ex machina. Lettori-paladini nell'"Inamoramento de Orlando"', *GSLI*, 198 (2021), 324-353 and in her book *Per figuras. Strategie narrative e rappresentative nei poemi di Boiardo e Ariosto* (Lucca: Pacini Fazzi, 2022), pp. 135-137

<sup>7</sup> All quotations from Masuccio Salernitano's *Novellino* (in short *Nov.*) are from Masuccio Salernitano, *Il novellino. Con appendice di prosatori napoletani del '400*, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi (Florence: Sansoni, 1957).

did): his text bears a striking resemblance to necromantic manuals, which circulated in Italian courts from North to South and described how to perform rituals involving supernatural entities.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Orlando's observations can be easily applied to Masuccio. I hypothesise that the author, by indulging in these details, betrays his likely first-hand knowledge of these heterodox practices, which would be all but uncommon in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Some aspects of the *novella* in particular are interesting in comparison with a notable example of coeval *ars necromantica*, contained in a northern Italian manuscript that collects several astrological and magic treaties, currently kept at the Bibliothèque Nationale Française, the BNF Italien 1524.<sup>9</sup> This exoteric miscellany was probably commissioned by a member of the Visconti court in Milan around 1446,<sup>10</sup> and it offers a glimpse of an Italian courtly milieu interested in the magical arts, which in all likelihood also involved the authors under consideration.<sup>11</sup>

The ritual described by Masuccio Salernitano in his *novella* is set at a specific time and place: the men will wait for the new moon to meet at a farmhouse in ruins (*Nov. II 20, 18*). It was widely known that night is the privileged moment to see the spirits, but Christian texts were extremely vague in this regard. Conversely, the necromantic manuals discussed in-depth details such as the hours of the night and, in particular, the phases of the moon required for every spell. The latter are of primary importance for the experiments; moreover, some spells can only be performed on an even or an odd day of the moon cycle and, to be sure of which day it is, the safest way is waiting for a new moon (*Necromantia, 2*). Therefore, Messer Angelo's indication could be motivated not so much by the

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<sup>8</sup> On the dependence of 14<sup>th</sup>-century *novella* on hagiographical models, see Montesano, p. 80; Carlo Delcorno, 'Modelli agiografici e modelli narrativi. Tra Cavalca e Boccaccio', in *La novella italiana. Atti del Convegno di Caprarola 19-24 settembre 1988*, ed. by Stefano Bianchi (Rome: Salerno, 1989), I, pp. 337-63. For the specific case of the deal with the Devil, see Alfonso D'Agostino, *Gli antenati di Faust. Il patto col demonio nella letteratura medievale* (Milan: Mimesis, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> All quotations from this *Necromantia* are from *Vedrai mirabilia: un libro di magia del Quattrocento*, ed. by Florence Gal, Jean-Patrice Boudet and Laurence Moulinier-Brogi (Rome: Viella, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> See *Vedrai mirabilia*, pp. 44-62.

<sup>11</sup> Masuccio could have run into similar manuscripts in the Aragonese Library in Naples, such as the *Miscellanea ad alchimiam et medicinam spectantia* (BNF Lat. 7147), the *Miscellanea alchemica* (BNF Lat. 7161) and the *Miscellanea astrologica* (BNF Lat. 7329): see Tammaro De Marinis, *La biblioteca napoletana dei re d'Aragona* (Milan: Hoepli, 1947-1969), I, pp. 66-67 and pp. 201-3. Likewise, Sabadino and Nappi could have been exposed to analogous texts, since they lived in Bologna, one of the main centres for the development of astrology and witchcraft in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, as also testified by authors like Cellini and Firenzuola: see Ferdinando Gabotto, *L'astrologia nel Quattrocento in rapporto colla civiltà. Osservazioni e documenti inediti* (Milan-Turin: Dumolard, 1889), p. 10; *I negromanti. Novella di Messer Cesare Nappi edita per le nozze di Guglielmo Guerrini colla Marchesina Ottavia Antinori*, ed. by Olindo Guerrini (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1885), p. 11.

need for complete darkness, but by the (simulated) need to be certain of the propitious moment in which to celebrate the rite. One might begin to suspect that the trickster is introducing real necromantic details in his deceptive performance. However, it should also be pointed out that the *Necromantia* of ms. BNF ital. 1524 specifies that 'li experimenti d'amore se puossono fare in tutti i giorni dilla settimana, purché sia nel'hora dil suo pianeta' (*Necromantia*, 11): although the rate of variability in such practices is extremely high, it seems peculiar that Messer Angelo never mentions the planet Venus in such an accurately staged and articulate *beffa*.

The same could be argued for fumigations, which in various magical traditions have the aim to attract spirits at the beginning of the ritual. However, in order to attract the spirits to perform a beneficial task (such as conquering the love of a woman), ingredients such as incense, aloe wood and myrrh would be normally used, whereas the malodorous substances used in Masuccio's *novella* (*Nov.* II 20, 21) are employed for hate experiments, which are intended to harm someone (*Necromantia*, 9). If Messer Angelo had a real knowledge of necromancy, the use of such fumigation could be an integral part of the *beffa*: witnessing this fake rite, anyone who was proficient in the practice of necromancy — especially among Masuccio's readers — could perceive Iacomo Pinto's naivety as he easily falls for this parodic inversion of a rite of love.

Another remarkable feature of this *novella* is the explicit identification of a precise demon to summon, Barabas (*Nov.* II 20, 23-25). It would be perfectly in line with the farce against Iacomo Pinto to have invented a demonic name. On the other hand, the proliferation of made-up minor demons was a widespread phenomenon even in esoteric manuals, as also testified by ms. BNF ital. 1524.<sup>12</sup> Barabas could also be easily inspired by the biblical character of Barabbas, the evildoer *par excellence*, which would be extremely appropriate given that this would be the role played by Loisi, the perpetrator of the *beffa*.<sup>13</sup> And yet, without excluding polygenesis for obvious reasons, it is curious to find not once, but twice a homonymous demon, precisely designated for love magic, in the *Necromantia* (135; 138). A more unsettling coincidence, however, is the presence of a 'Barbas' in a list that will constitute the foundation for some of the most famous grimoires (spellbooks to

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<sup>12</sup> See *Vedrai mirabilia*, pp. 79-81.

<sup>13</sup> Derivatives from Barabbas (including *baraban*) with the meaning of 'scoundrel' or 'demon, bogeyman' have been documented by Gian Luigi Beccaria, *Sicuterat. Il latino di chi non lo sa: Bibbia e liturgia nell'italiano dei dialetti* (Milan: Garzanti, 1999), pp. 187-89.

create amulets and perform magic rituals and summonings) of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, namely in the *Pseudomonarchia daemonum*, an appendix to the *De praestigiis daemonum* by Johan Wier, a student of Cornelius Agrippa. The text, published for the first time in 1563, contains a hierarchical classification of 69 demons, among which Barbas appears in third place.<sup>14</sup>

Taking all these elements into account, not only one can detect the ill-concealed pleasure of the author in dealing with magic rituals at length; it would also seem that the parodic discourse carried out by Masuccio would be fully comprehensible in all its features only to a reader who was knowledgeable of the *ars necromantica*.

### A POSSESSED WOMAN BETWEEN CESARE NAPPI AND SABADINO DEGLI ARIENTI

In this section, I will highlight a similar shift in the attitude towards the supernatural by taking into account the motif of exorcism, through a contrastive reading of two different narratives of the same story. In the twenty-fifth *novella* of the *Porretane*, Sabadino degli Arienti rewrites a *novella* by the notary Cesare Nappi, in which the protagonist, Nestore, is in love with a married girl, Magdalena, whose mother believes herself to be possessed.<sup>15</sup> Nestore's friend, messer Piero, has the reputation of being a necromancer, and this is why Magdalena's mother asks them for help. Messer Piero, assisted by Cesare Nappi himself, who features as a character, pretends to exorcise the woman to distract her, giving Nestore the chance to have sex with Magdalena in her own home.

For this *novella*, it is useful to make use of the framework outlined by Michel de Certeau in *The Writing of History*.<sup>16</sup> In the chapter dedicated to the Sorcerer's speech, in which the author takes Inquisition trials as a case study for the historiographical problem of accessing the speech of ethnologically diverse individuals, he argues that demonological discourse, as the discourse of knowledge that is an expression of the dominant culture, assumes an entitled position towards the possessed woman — as de Certeau phrases it, 'I know what you are saying better than you'.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ioannis Vvieri, *De praestigiis daemonum incantationibus ac ueneficiis Libri sex*, 5th edn. (Basel: Officina Oporiniana, 1577, 5ed), col. 913.

<sup>15</sup> All quotations from Sabadino degli Arienti's *Porretane* (in short *Por.*) are from *Le Porretane*, ed. by Bruno Basile (Rome: Salerno, 1981). All quotations from Cesare Nappi's *novella* (in short *Neg.*) are from *I negromanti*.

<sup>16</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. by Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

<sup>17</sup> de Certeau, p. 250.

Therefore, the high culture speaks for the possessed woman, filters her words and attempts to erase the alterity that she represents. We will never be able to get access to the original speech of the possessed; however, 'when the possessed woman speaks the language which is imposed upon her and which has put itself in her place, the alienating but necessary discourse that she utters will bear the trace — the "wound" — of the alterity that knowledge claims to conceal'.<sup>18</sup> The forces in play in the texts produced by the dominant discourse are akin to Freud's *return of the removed*. When the demonologist, inquisitor or, in our case, the literature author rewrites the possessed woman's speech, especially in case they quote her, complete integration of her otherness in the dominant knowledge can never be achieved. As de Certeau argues, 'something different *returns* in this discourse [...] along with the citation of the other; it remains ambivalent; it upholds the danger of an uncanniness which alters the translator's or commentator's knowledge. For discourse, a citation is the menace and suspense of a *lapsus*. Alterity dominated — or possessed — through discourse maintains the power of being a fantastic ghost, or indeed a possessor in a latent state'.<sup>19</sup>

The twenty-fifth *novella* of the *Porretane* contains a perfect example of these dynamics. In the original version by Nappi, the possessed woman recounts her previous experience of an exorcism to Nestore with plenty of details. The most impressive feature of her recollection is the description of what she vomited during the ritual. After she was subjected to incantations and fumigations, the woman throws up twisted nails, needles, hooks, balls of hair and, what is most striking, two human effigies full of pins and with their limbs tied (*Neg.*, p. 22). However, this passage undergoes significant censorship in Arienti's version: the whole list of objects expelled by the woman is cut, and the paragraph stops with the reticent sentence 'fui costretta a vomitare cose sì orribile che difficile sarebbe a credere a chi non l'avesse vedute' (*Por.* 25, 11). It can be argued that literary discourse follows the same pattern as demonological discourse, rewriting the possessed woman's speech in a way that alters and filters her voice. Although Nappi's original story is already a product of the dominant discourse, it represents an intermediate stage between the speech of the possessed and the final textual outcome. As such, it gives us the uncommon possibility to discover what the removed is, and to understand the reasons behind the suppression.

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<sup>18</sup> de Certeau, p. 250.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 251.

Arienti's cut testifies to the uneasiness towards a very specific subject, that is, the form of black magic now known as a voodoo doll. Contrary to popular belief, we can trace the origin of this figurative image magic in Europe, as the first evidence is found in the Greco-Roman world.<sup>20</sup> While initially the main focus of the practice was transfixing spirits or deities to the ritual object through the use of nails, in the Middle Ages, piercing effigies implied 'a much more personal, and indeed malicious, intention', that is, inflicting harm to the same body part of the target through the intervention of a demonic entity, according to the principle of sympathetic magic.<sup>21</sup> This process was recently studied by Natalie Armitage, confirming that in the late medieval period, 'magic started to be largely resituated in the realms of the satanic, and thus more firmly equated with witchcraft'.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, first published in 1486, contains a story that is very similar to Nappi's *novella*: a woman finds out her sickness is being caused by malevolent witchcraft performed by her neighbour, involving 'a wax image a palm's length long [...] pierced through everywhere, having two needles going from side to side in the same way that she felt jabbings from the left side to the right'.<sup>23</sup>

As Armitage points out, 'as the perceived threat of witchcraft grew, such practice became increasingly taboo'.<sup>24</sup> These rituals were not only employed against poor widows and farmworkers; there are many accounts of attempted regicide by the means of figurative image magic.<sup>25</sup> Dismissing this practice as foolish folklore was no longer an option: the clergy had to persuade believers that they were able to successfully counteract black magic, and by doing so, they implicitly admitted that wax dolls were indeed dangerous and *could* conjure real demons who were able to inflict harm through sympathetic magic. This is the essence of the unspeakable 'alterity' that the Church, as the representative and shaper of the dominant culture, tried to assimilate in its domain by rephrasing it through its discourse in the treatises. In my proposed trajectory going from the *Malleus*

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<sup>20</sup> Natalie Armitage, 'European and African figural ritual magic: The beginnings of the voodoo doll myth', in *The Materiality of Magic: An Artifactual Investigation into Ritual Practices and Popular Beliefs*, ed. by Ceri Houlbrook e Natalie Armitage (Oxford: Oxbow Book, 2015), pp. 85-101 (p. 87).

<sup>21</sup> Armitage, pp. 87-88.

<sup>22</sup> *Ivi*.

<sup>23</sup> Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum* (Speyer: Peter Drach, 1486), coll. 135C-D. The English translation is from *The Hammer of Witches. A Complete Translation of the Malleus Maleficarum*, ed. by Christopher S. Mackay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 364.

<sup>24</sup> Armitage, p. 89.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 88-89.



*Maleficarum* to the *novella* by Nappi (who makes no mention of the sympathetic principle), to Sabadino's Decameronian literary product, such alterity is progressively repressed, but it remains hinted at as an unutterable but ineradicable uncanny reality.

### FALTERING TRICKSTERS

I would like to conclude with one last episode from Nappi's *novella* that Arienti, perhaps not by chance, chose not to include in his. After the exorcism of Magdalena's mother, the same tricksters decide to extend the prank to a wider audience and perform a complicated ritual in front of all the community of Bologna. One of the rules of this experiment is the prohibition of uttering holy names (God, Jesus, the Virgin Mary) during the whole course of the ritual (*Neg.*, p. 52). This custom is widely testified to in hagiographical literature, through which it arrived at secular fiction; notably, the rule is also present in the story of Maestro Simone (*Dec.* VIII 9, 82), the archetype of this kind of *novella di beffa*, as well as in Masuccio's twentieth *novella* (*Nov.* II 20, 19).

In Nappi's story, among the various tricks, the group of friends pretends to summon a presence through a dead man's skull that will appear to move on its own thanks to a rope that Cesare will have to pull at an agreed time. However, Cesare does not wait for the signal and, by untimely pulling the rope, he involuntarily moves not only the skull but also some swords accidentally placed there. For a moment, seeing that the blades threaten to strike him, Messer Piero's confidence wavers and he suspects that the swords have indeed been moved by some supernatural force, in this case by God:

El che vedendo messer piero, non credendo che Cesare hauesse tirato per che douea tirare al terzo crido e non essendosi adueduto che le spate fussero sopra la fune, temete che dio nol volesse punire de questi soi erori, et quanto potè cridò: Iesù, Iesù.

(*Neg.*, p. 53)

Even without admitting the existence of the spirits they are pretending to summon, the iron certainty that characterised Boccaccio's tricksters, steadfast in their disbelief, fails. This occurs when Messer Piero himself breaks the first rule of the ritual, calling on the name of Jesus twice for help.

It should be noted that traditionally, it is the victim of the *beffa* who violates this rule, as Boccaccio and Masuccio exemplify: ‘sceso dello avello, pianamente dicendo “Dio m’aiuti!” sù vi sali e acconciosi molto bene’ (*Dec.* VIII 9, 96); ‘tremando tutto, non recordandose de l’asina de Ierusalem, non vi lassò santo in cielo a chiamare in suo soccorso’ (*Nov.* II 20, 22). Therefore, I find this reversal of roles in Nappi’s story truly emblematic, especially because the trickster’s mindset is the reflection of the author’s and the one the readers are supposed to identify with. Gradually gaining narrative space, supernatural beliefs dangerously exceed their safe displacement on the mocked and start spreading to the protagonists too, proving that the containment of narrative within the realistic framework of Boccaccio’s *novella* for authors who were exposed to a changing popular and literary culture about magic was increasingly difficult.