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The Survival of Medieval Literature in the Early Modern World—The Case of Giovan Francesco Straparola's *Le piacevolinotti* and Their Medieval Sources

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Abstract

Many medieval literary texts survived, despite common assumptions as to the contrary, the Gutenberg Galaxy and continued to appeal to early modern audiences, especially within the genre of short prose stories. Often, however, only a careful comparative analysis makes it possible to detect the connections between a medieval tale and its inclusion in an early modern literary context. The case of Gian Francesco Straparola's *Piacevolinotti* (1550 and 1553) serves here ideally to track down a number of significant medieval sources, some of which had allegedly been entirely lost already in the thirteenth century. Disregarding his obvious use of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, it is often not easy to determine whether Straparola drew from French or German sources (romances, *fabliaux*, *mæren*, etc.). Nevertheless, as this study brings to light, but we can clearly identify a number of his tales where a medieval source emerges in the background. This study demonstrates how much storytellers such as Straparola still had good access to the vast treasure house of medieval romances and verse narratives and used them freely for their own purposes.

Keywords

Survival of medieval texts in the sixteenth century, Gian Francesco Straparola, Heldris de Cornwall, *Tristan and Isolde/Iseut*, Hans Rosenplüt, Niemand, *fabliaux*

1. Introduction: The Late Middle Ages and Its Paradigm Shift

When major paradigm shifts occurred at the end of the fifteenth century, when Martin Luther later initiated the Protestant Reformation (ninety-five theses, published in 1517), strongly helped by Johann Gutenberg's invention of the printing press around 1450, when the early modern book market emerged, when major technical and scientific inventions transformed the medieval world, a truly new age seemed to have emerged deftly leaving the Middle Ages behind. Medieval romances, courtly love poetry, the myth of King Arthur, or the deeply held Christian concepts as formulated in countless religious texts, all apparently fell by the wayside since ca. 1500 at the latest, a development which hence launched the early new period. Verse narratives were replaced by prose texts, and thus the romance was substituted by the novel, and more and more of the best-known medieval poets became prey to oblivion, remaining forgotten well until the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

This global process was accompanied and accelerated by the rise of urban life, the international market and banking, the steep decline of feudalism along with the development of new social-economic conditions, the loss of public respect for the emperor and also the pope, the emergence of new territorial princes, and hence also of new courtly centers situated in major cities. Gothic architecture and the visual arts lost in general appeal in face of the new style we commonly call Renaissance. We could easily expand these broad observations by referencing also to the transformation of fashion, commerce, schooling, the development of firearms, military defense systems, and even the gender relationships, all of which finds its common expression in the standard textbooks, literary, economic, and artistic histories dealing with the late Middle Ages and the early modern age.

Overall, there is nothing fundamentally wrong with these major aspects characteristic of the early modern age. We could also add to this mix the beginning exploration of the world by western travelers (Christopher Columbus, Vasco da Gama, Amerigo Vespucci, etc.), and the basic changes in medicine, for instance (Paracelsus). Technological innovations and their transfer across Europe, the novel awareness of time and new forms of time measurement, new food processing systems, innovative windmills, plows, ships, world maps, and global trade were all landmarks of the deep paradigm shift, and this along with the emergence of more dominant 'national' languages (Epstein, 2021, 57–76; for the paradigm shift, see Classen, ed., 2019).

From a literary perspective, all this finds strong confirmation in the gradual disappearance of the courtly romance (Arthurian, or Grail romances) and traditional courtly music (Gregorian chant, monophonic music, etc.). In religious terms, the Protestant Reformation destroyed the monopoly of the Catholic Church, but the latter fought back with its Counter Reformation and the establishment of the Jesuit Order in 1540 (see the contributions to Pettegree, ed., 2000; to Po-chia Hsia, ed. 2004, and to Scott, ed., 2015).

However, turning away from those historical, political, and economic factors and toward the literary discourse from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, the general impression of a complete transformation of the medieval world does not seem to hold true quite the same way. Even if we were to identify, for instance, William Shakespeare (1564–1616) as the great English Renaissance playwright, there are many good reasons to recognize in his vast and varied opus numerous medieval motifs and themes, even though employed here for new purposes. The same could be claimed for the famous Nuremberg cobbler Hans Sachs (1494–1576) who was one of the most prolific authors of his time, famous, above all, for his many Shrovetide plays and mastersongs, apart from other genres. Despite a changed outlook, a more modern worldview, and a somewhat transformed value system, both poets serve as vivid testimonies of the continuity of the Middle Ages in many different ways (for Shakespeare, see Cooper, 2010; for Sachs, see Classen, 2004). Both were most eager to quarry the literary annals and did not hesitate to utilize any material from the past for their own purposes, translating, adapting, or rephrasing it. Within the religious context, the creation of the Protestant Church naturally established a new large institution, but this did not change the essence of the Christian religion as such, as the literary and the artistic evidence demonstrates clearly. As Nikolaus Henkel now demonstrates, we can easily draw from the famous figure of the Humanist Sebastian Brant (1458–1521), best known for his *Narrenschiff* from 1494, as an impressive example of this cultural development, whether we emphasize the paradigm shift or the idea of the continuity of the medieval traditions well into the sixteenth century (Henkel, 2021). In fact, numerous literary works from the fifteenth century, often adaptations from earlier periods, continued to be popular far into the early modern age, particularly early prose novels, so our entire notion of literary history between ca. 1400 and 1650 or so might need profound revisions (Classen, 2022, "The Continuation"), particularly if we consider the vast corpus of entertaining prose narratives (e.g., *Schwänke*, *histori*, *novelle*, *tales*, etc.).

2. Straparola as a Creative Heir of Medieval Literature

The purpose of this paper is to elucidate this phenomenon in greater detail by means of a close analysis of a number of stories contained in the famous collection, *Le piacevolinotti* by Gian or Giovanni Francesco Straparola from 1550 and 1553, by then in two volumes (Pirovano, ed., 2000). Research has already investigated this anthology from many different perspectives, highlighting, for example, the discursive element connecting the various storytellers, the inclusion of the first true fairytales which later influenced the early modern fairytale tradition (Brothers Grimm et al.; cf. Zipes, 2002; Bottigheimer, 2002; Rubini Messerli, 2016), the appearance of fantasy creatures, the rather graphic description of sexuality, the frame story created in imitation of the model provided by Boccaccio in his *Decameron* (ca. 1350; for parallel case studies, though surprisingly without a reference to Straparola, see Kleinschmidt and Japp, ed., 2018), and the like (for the role of violence, see Appelbaum, 2022). Magnanini (2015) has now made the *Piacevolinotti* available in a modern English translation (for an earlier edition, see Rua, 1927), and the poet himself has been the object of various biographical investigations (Rubini Messerli, 2007; Classen, 2022, "Straparola").

Magnanini characterizes this major collection of seventy-three prose narratives as a heterogenous literary enterprise with many different themes, a feature that might have contributed to its enormous success on the early modern book market, appealing to various tastes and interests. The tales are characterized by their realism, adventurous nature, sexual, and at times even scatological elements, with some of the tellers not shying away from bawdiness and jokes about all kinds of people (Magnanini, 2015, 11). Straparola also allowed at times the use of strong dialect features, such as those from Bergamo and Padua, and he relied on magic and the genre of the fairytale (Ziolkowski, 2010). In short, there is no doubt that the *Piacevolinotti* can be counted as one of the key texts from the early modern period, skillfully elaborating the model created by Boccaccio in his *Decameron*, drawing from past and contemporary sources, probably also from oral traditions, and deeply influencing many generations of future writers (see, e.g., Mazzacurati, 1974; Albanese, ed., 2000; Mondani, 2022), particularly because of the fanciful nature of many elements in his storytelling (Chaïeb-Demnati, 1989).

3. Straparola's Medieval Sources

It has been fashionable to refer to Boccaccio's *Decameron* as one of Straparola's major soures, but close readings have not yet been produced. In the prologue to the fifth story told in the twelfth night, for instance, the narrator even explicitly refers to his great Italian predecessor: "although the novella that I intend to tell was written by Giovanni Boccaccio in his *Decameron*, it is not however, told there in the way that you will hear it now" (427). However, when we scan the *Piacevolinotti*, we can identify a number of stories that draw more or less directly from medieval models created prior to Boccaccio, which invites us to treat this collection as a significant bridge between the medieval past and the literary world of the Renaissance.

A while ago, I had argued in a previous paper (author, X) that Straparole drew in one of his tales from the tradition of the romance of *Tristan and Isolde*, especially because here the queen is also accused of having committed adultery but can then 'prove' her innocence in public. Let us first review the case as I had elaborated it before, and then turn to other examples in the *Piacevoli Notti* that will demonstrate a definite popularity of a number of medieval texts still in the sixteenth century, though often subtly hidden behind the mask of formal changes to the basic literary material.

In the various medieval versions, Isolde had secretly arranged, in close collaboration with Tristan, a way that her lover, in the disguise of a fool, hugged and kissed her once in public on the way to the trial site where she is supposed to swear on her innocence concerning the charge of adultery against her. In Gottfried von Straßburg's romance (ca. 1210), Tristan appears as a pilgrim, carries Isolde from the ship to the shore where he then stumbles and falls down. This allows Isolde to rest in his arms from which the people then rescue her, all considering this as a good joke. Consequently, the young queen from Ireland can then swear that she has not committed any adultery. In Gottfried's text, we read: "'I don't know what will be made of all this. Every one of you can easily see that I can't swear anymore that no one except Mark has ever been embraced by me or lain at my side'" (193). In other versions, such as the *Oxford Folie*, Tristan appears in public and acts out the role of a fool, which ultimately allows him to place a kiss on his beloved queen, apparently against her will. But when she then has to submit to the ordeal, she can openly swear on her innocence because a kiss by that 'madman' would not really count (author, 2006).

In the second story told in the fourth night, Straparola directly drew inspiration from the *Tristan* tradition and retold the account very closely to the original source, whatever version it might have been. The poet does not give any hint as to the medieval narrative employed and skillfully hides the direct connection with the medieval romance by situating his story in Athens sometime in the past, and not in Ireland and Cornwall as in the original texts. The rich and old Messer Erminione Glauco takes as his wife the young woman Filenia and immediately feels jealousy, fearing that she would attract a lover. Consequently, he 'imprisons' her in a tall tower to keep her out of sight from the public, a common trope in medieval literature, such as in the *lai* "Guigemar" by Marie de France (ca. 1190; Waters, ed. and trans., 2018).

The young lady had long been loved by the young and wealthy student Ippolito, who, having come back from a visit of Candia, feels deeply chagrined about the development and immediately sets up a plan to meet his beloved and to sleep with her in secret. He has two identical chests made and then asks Erminione, whom he has befriended, to keep one of them for him during his absence, allegedly filled with his treasures. In reality, he places himself in the second chest, which is then carried to Filenia's bedroom, and when Erminione is gone on a business trip for several days, Ippolito slips out of the chest and enjoys nights of pleasure with his beloved.

Later, the chest is carried back, and the adultery seems to be a well-hidden secret, except that Erminione discovers a spit high up on the wall which could not have come from him who is lacking the strength to spit all the way up to that spot. So, he then publicly accuses his wife of having committed adultery, though he has no other evidence available and could not explain at all how this might have been possible.

He would have liked to kill her without delay, but fearing dangerous consequences for himself, he brings the charge of her adultery to the city magistrate, where they decide to submit Filenia to an ordeal, exactly as was the case in the *Tristan* story. Straparola changes the setting slightly, and instead of being forced to carry a red-hot iron on her naked palm, the accused woman has to place her hand in a snake's mouth. According to tradition, in case of guilt, the snake would bite off the hand; otherwise, the accused person would be regarded as innocent.

Closely following the narrative model in Gottfried's romance, or similar ones from the French or Italian tradition (Stein, 2001; Dallapiazza, ed., 2003), the poor woman is now in a terrible plight because she knows that she is entirely guilty of the charge. But then her lover comes to her rescue, having dressed up as a madman "so that she would not be caught in the snare of an ignominious death" (185). When Filenia is led to the palace where the snake is waiting for her, a massive crowd has assembled to witness the scene, but Ippolito pushes his way through with all of his might, then approaches the accused and forcefully kisses her. We are not told explicitly whether she herself had arranged this plan, as Isolde did in Gottfried's text, or whether her lover was the initiator, but the narrator clearly indicates: "The young woman, who was clever and very wise, boldly swore that no one had ever touched her, save for her husband that madman who was present" (185). This is certainly true, and hence the snake does not bite her, which frees her from all charges. Of course, no one recognizes the madman's true identity, and so they do not understand the deliberate ambivalence of her oath, but love seems to justify all, and so this cheating as well.

Both her friends and relatives, angry about this 'false' accusation, then furiously demand that Erminione be punished for his crime against his wife. He is not burned alive, but thrown into prison, where he then dies soon after. Subsequently, Ippolito can marry Filenia, and both lead a happy life until their death (186).

The parallels to the *Tristan* story are evident, though Straparola changed some of the external circumstances, situating the events in Athens, and not in Cornwall, and offering a good outcome for the lovers, with the old man suffering his miserable death in prison. Whereas the medieval narratives are located within the social sphere of the royal court, in this Italian version, the focus rests on urban life and urban citizens. Most curiously, but certainly being a clear hint at Straparola's use of a medieval source, proves to be the use of the theme of the ordeal, which had actually been banned by the Church already at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 and which witnessed an afterlife only over the next hundred of years or so (Bartlett, 1986; Ziegler, 2004; Neumann, 2010, the latter with a focus on the duel). From a legal point of view, this story would not have made sense in the sixteenth century, but since the poet drew from an unspecified medieval source, here strongly adapted in the external setting, he did not feel any constraints to utilize this motif in his version. We are far removed from courtly culture, but the essential narrative elements are still present, with a young man in love with an unhappily married women, who detests her old and rich husband. The lovers then commit adultery, but they can hide it despite the official charge raised by the husband. Straparola did not reveal with even one word where he drew his material from, but our comparison makes it crystal clear that he worked with some medieval source and adapted it for his purposes.

Already in Gottfried's *Tristan*, the poet had satirically commented on the fake nature of the ordeal because, as it turned out concerning God's involvement in the trial: "It was revealed right then and there and proven to all the world that Christ, flawless as he is, can be supple like a sleeve. He is accommodating and compliant, if you know how to approach him, and as obliging and considerate as he by rights should be" (194). Both Erminione and King Mark in *Tristan* have serious doubts about their wives' innocence, but evidence is missing both times, hence the husbands' desperate attempt to resort to the ordeal. But both fail in getting their wives convicted and thus they themselves prove to be utter fools who lose all respect by the public and turn into old, bickering, and vengeful husbands who are despised, if not hated, by their wives and who are helpless in their effort to fend off their wives' lovers.

Of course, there are also major differences, the result of the poet's creativity and liberty in handling his source. Whereas all the medieval *Tristan* versions conclude with a tragic end because the lovers simply cannot overcome the social constraints resulting from Isolde being married to the old king, in Straparola's version, Erminione stands corrected, allegedly exposed as a fool who erroneously charged his wife with having committed adultery. If he did not enjoy such a public reputation, he would have been burned at the stake without delay, but due to his social status, he is 'only' thrown into prison where he then perishes very soon. Undoubtedly, Straparola had drawn very skillfully from a medieval source, but he transformed the narrative account into a melodrama, removing the tragic edges and projecting a happy end, at least for the lovers. Fitting for the entire volume, drastic humor, biting satire, and stronglyerotic elements characterize the text, so when Erminione then dies, no one is supposed to feel any pity. In the medieval tradition, however, King Mark also never cut a good figure, but he was also not characterized as a fool (see, for instance, Classen, 1993; Karg, 1994; Miyashiro, 2005) and did not face complete opposition from his wife's family, which was not even present, living far away in Ireland.

Particularly because of the various adaptations carried out by Straparola, we can recognize the extent to which the medieval source – here not concretely specified – served an important function for the poet. Only in the prologue to the second volume does he address the issue of his sources, but he formulates his position most obliquely, telling us more through keeping silence than by addressing his strategy as a narrator in explicit terms:

To tell the truth, I confess that they are not mine, and if I were to say otherwise, I would be lying; I have written them down quite faithfully according to the way they were recounted by the ten young maidens at that gathering. And if I bring them to light now, I do not do it to be haughty or to acquire honor and fame, but only to please you, and above all those of you whom I serve and those of you to whom I am eternally bound and indebted. (257)

Obviously, Straparolahid behind the screen projected by the company of storytellers, trying to defy any attempts to recognize the source material. However, our comparative analysis sheds important light on the working strategy employed in the *Piacevolinotti* and hence on the continuity of medieval narrative motifs also in the early modern age.

4. *The Roman de Silence* in the *Piacevolinotti*

Once we have realized the intriguing opportunity to uncover a complex operation of storytelling in the *Piacevolinotti*, which appear to contain more specific medieval narrative motifs and themes than we might have expected, we can search further for possible candidates among the seventy-three tales as mirrors of medieval literature. One intriguing example would be the first story told in the fourth night, which might have been modeled closely on a long-lost late medieval French romance, Heldris de Cornwall's *Roman de Silence* from ca. 1250 or a bit later (see the contributions to Bozkaya, Bußmann, and Philipowski, ed., 2020; and the monographic study by Rüthemann, 2022).

As far as we can currently say, this most remarkable romance has survived in only one manuscript and was re-discovered not until 1911 by W. H. Stevenson in Wollaton Hall in Nottingham, in a crate curiously and certainly misleadingly labeled "unimportant documents." The manuscript, now in the Wollaton Library Collection (WLC/LM/6), held by the Manuscripts and Special Collections of the University of Nottingham as MS. Mi.LM.6, was published in a critical edition first by Lewis Thorpe in 1972. It was re-edited and translated by Sarah Roche-Mahdi in 1992, parallel to the English translation by Regina Psaki in 1991. No other manuscript copy of this text has ever been discovered, and it seems like a mystery why this brilliant poem did not evoke any interest after it had been composed and recorded.

However, we might be able to identify one of Straparola's stories as a direct borrowing from Heldris's work. The narrator Fiordiana relates the history of King Ricardo of Thebes who marries Valeriana, the daughter of Marliano, King of Scotland; both have three daughters whom they later provide with a rich dowry, keeping only very little of his kingdom for themselves. However, Valeriana then conceives one more time, yet there is no property left for the fourth daughter, Costanza, when the time has arrived for her to get married. This young woman proves to be highly capable of learning all of the female skills, and also those characteristic of her male contemporaries: "More often than not she was the winner and took the prize just as those brave knights who are worthy of all glory do" (174).

Once she has become nubile, her father cannot afford to marry her off to a king due to his self-imposed poverty, but he suggests to her the hand of a marquis, which would be far below her social status. Costanza immediately refuses, takes leave of her family, and disguises herself as a man, taking on Costanzo as her new name because she wants to forge her own destiny. S/he finds quickly a king who wants her/him to join his service, and our protagonist soon proves to be a most impressive figure loved and admired by everyone. Tragically, however, the queen takes a strong liking of this young 'man' and tries to seduce him, and yet she fails because Costanzo adamantly refuses to accept any of her advances, which changes the queen's love for him into bitter hatred, a direct use of the biblical motif of Joseph and Potiphar's Wife in Gen. 39 (Merzetti, 2010; Tiemann, 2020).

Not knowing how to get him killed, she deceives of a plan to send him to his certain death, asking her husband to demand from his young servant to catch one of the wild satyrs. Those hybrid creatures are said to be extremely dangerous, having caused much damage, with no one having been able to overcome them or to fight against them successfully. Nevertheless, the king is most anxious to acquire one of those satyrs for his entertainment since they are so exotic and would increase his royal reputation. He thus follows his wife's evil advice and forces Costanzo to accept that charge, although it could cost him his life. The latter, however, proves to be so skillful and clever that he can set up a trap for the satyrs and to take one of them prisoner.

Unfortunately for Costanzo, he caught more than he or anyone else had expected because the satyr begins to laugh about various situations on their way home, and then even more when they have reached the court. While he remains silent for some time, Costanzo can eventually coax him into talking and thus into revealing the truth about his laughter. Most embarrassing and decisively, he had laughed about the false assumption that Costanzo is a man, and then, explaining the final laughter, he reveals: "'I laughed wildly, because the king and even you, still believe that the maidens who serve the queen are maidens, however, the majority of them are not maidens'" (180).

The truth has thus come out, and the king has the queen and the fake maidens all burned at the stake. Thereupon, recognizing Costanzo's great loyalty and prowess, and alsorealizing Costanza's great feminine beauty, he marries her, which the narrator comments with her concluding words: "And so Costanza, noble and magnanimous, became a queen as a reward for her good service and lived with King Cacco for a long time" (180). Although Costanza's father had not been able to secure a dowry for her good enough to get her married to a king, she achieved that goal by herself by proving both her manly and her female value so much that the king wants nothing more than to have her as his wife.

A number of important themes stand out which we can summarize fairly easily. First, the female protagonist cross-dresses in order to find her own fortune without her parents' help, especially because she does not want to lower her social standing or that of her parents. She assumes a male identity not because of an instability of her gender identity, but because it is the most effective way for her to gain highest praise as a knight and so to promote her own fortune. In other words, her cross-dressing has no bearing on her gender orientation or gender role, as was the case also in a number of other medieval tales with the same motif, such as in Dietrich von der Gletze's*Der Borte* (ca. 1280; Ridder and Ziegeler, ed., trans. Coxon, 2020, no. 43) or in Ulrich von Liechtenstein's *Frauendienst* (ca. 1270; Thomas, 1969; for the motif at large, see cf. Hotchkiss, 1996).

However, Costanza/o operates most effectively as a knight and proves to be truly loyal to the king, achieving accomplishments which no man had been able to do. In other words, as we hear much more explicitly in the medieval source by Heldris, both Nature and Nurture fight heavily against each other as to Silence's role, and both win and lose at the same time. The Italian poet, however, ignores all the theoretical aspects and carelessly presents Costanzo as a proud and successful knight who cannot do wrong although he is, biologically, a woman.

Both in Heldris's romance and in Straparola's prose narrative, the essential idea consists of the realization that we as people have both a biological and a social gender, as recent scholarship has unearthed convincingly (Butler, 1993; for a good summary, bibliography, and discussions, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judith_Butler#cite_note-10). Heldris has his narrator and allegorical figures reflect on that issue quite intensively, whereas Straparola simply plays freely with the exchange of gender roles and reverses it in the end with no concerns voiced on either side. The narrator only comments: "Having considered Costanza's praiseworthy loyalty . . ." (180), and thereupon the protagonist's heterosexual gender identity is cleared up again because the social constraints on her/him are lifted.

In the medieval romance, by contrast, the situation for Silence was much more dire and challenging, and at times s/he expresses the clear desire to live the life of a man since it offers so many social advantages. Because of the death of two of his best knights who had fought against each other over the inheritance rights of their wives, both sisters, the king had imposed a ban on any woman trying to inherit her father's property. Consequently, Silence's parents decide, since they have only a daughter, to raise her as a boy and later facilitate her to become a knight, hoping thereby to preserve the inheritance for their only child. Silence manages to operate very successfully as a male until he suffers from the queen's attempt to seduce him sexually. Even though he can resist all her seductive attempts, she then turns her hatred against Silence and tries to get him killed. Instead of setting up the task to catch a satyr, she convinces her husband to send his servant into the woods to capture Merlin, a task which only a woman could achieve, which she herself admits (5803), not aware of the young man's true gender identity.

Silence is smart enough to implement a strategy with which he can indeed take this mysterious figure from the world of King Arthur as prisoner. However, Merlin then bursts out laughing about various scenes they witness, and most intensively at court because he realizes immediately the true sexual identity both of Silence and the maidens serving the queen. As he states in response to the king's question, "I want you to understand that I laughed at the five of us / because there is not one of us / who has not tricked one of the others" (Roche-Mahdi, ed. and trans., 6477–79). And, upon further inquiry, "These two, Silence and the nun, / are the deceivers, / you and I are the deceived. / King, this nun is Eufeme's lover" (6528–30).

The king, once he has learned the truth and understood the reason for Silence to put on the disguise of a man/knight, praises her/him for her/his loyalty, but then also for her virtuosity as a woman (6634; "bone feme"), and subsequently marries her after the queen and her lover have been executed. The allegorical figure of Nature is satisfied about this outcome, whereas Nurture is no longer present in this debate. Heldris concludes his romance with a brief reference to the wedding to which Silence's parents are invited, to their great joy. Similarly, in Straparola's version, the entire family is informed about the happy outcome for Costanza, who is characterized as "noble and magnanimous" (180) and worthy of having found a king as her husband. In her concluding riddle, the narrator Fiordiana reflects on the supreme power of justice, which she identifies as "gentle and sweet to the good, and harsh and bitter to the wicked" (181).

Naturally, as in the previous case, Straparola changed some of the features in Heldris's romance, particularly concerning the frame conditions. Instead of trying to preserve her inheritance rights (Silence), Costanza/o simply tries her/his luck in finding a royal husband by putting on the male disguise. S/he does not face an immediate death threat by the queen, as is the case in the French romance, but s/he still has to fend for his/her life in the attempt to catch a satyr for the king. In both texts, to be sure, the queen assumes an extremely negative role, first, committing adultery with a lover hidden behind the mask of a nun, then, trying to seduce the protagonist, who is only a male in appearance, but not in body. In both versions of the same story, the queen fails in getting Silence/Costanzo killed despite all her machinations, and then brings death upon herself because her own plan with Merlin/the satyr fails in a rather surprising manner. Altogether, I dare say, this story in the *Piacevolinotti* is the first solid proof that Heldris's romance did not simply disappear from public view and must have exerted some influence on later poets, though there is no written record of it between ca. 1260 and 1550.

Most importantly, finally, we can draw on this story about Costanzo as further evidence that medieval literature continued to exert influence on early modern authors at large. Considering the very different context of Straparola's collection of stories, it does not come as a surprise that there are a number of changes to the basic plot line as developed by Heldris. The essential features, topics, ideas, and figures, by contrast, are virtually the same, although we cannot yet determine the ways how this Italian poet might have gained familiarity with this Old French romance. To be sure, then, the *Roman de Silence* experienced a glorious revival in the *Piacevolinotti*, a fact that has strong bearings on the history of reception of this romance and also on our understanding of the continuity of medieval literature at large on early modern poets.

5. The Three Killed Hunchbacks

Whereas the two previous examples from medieval literature can be identified as direct sources for Straparola's tales, there are also other cases where it seems rather difficult to determine which one of the various medieval sources the Italian poet might have used and for what purposes. However, this challenge does not undermine our argument that the *Piacevolinotti* reflect an ongoing reception process facilitating the survival of much older literary texts still in the sixteenth century, if not even much later. On the contrary, when there are numerous options available, we can determine even better the inspiration and influence of the premodern works in the succeeding centuries. This phenomenon is well demonstrable in the third tale told in the fifth night, which first proves to be a rather complex, if not convoluted narrative with numerous stages in the plot development.

The premise of this account consists of the fact that Bertoldo of Valsabbia in the region of Bergamo has three hunchbacked sons who all look identical. Moreover, they all possess a terrible character, being lazy, ignorant, and violence prone. In plain words, the narrator calls them "wicked" (233): "if Zambò was 22 carats wicked, they [his two twin brothers] were 26 carats wicked, because always where nature is lacking, wit and malice make up for it" (233). Zambò leaves home to find an easy way of making a good living without having to work hard, but wherever he turns, he experiences misfortune and misery. Finally, almost at the end of his rope, he is hired by Ser Ambros dal Mul who owns a cloth shop in Rome, and now Zambò decides to behave more properly, to learn the trade, and to make himself irreplaceable for his master. Unfortunately, Ambros then dies from dysentery while on a business trip, and his servant has the good luck that the widow then decides to marry him.

Soon, however, Zambò turns into a horrible tyrant who badly beats up his wife whenever she utters any wish for herself. He commits the worst form of domestic violence and terrorizes his wife to no end; at the same time, he is afraid that his two brothers might come to visit them because he knows only too well that they would rob him of everything (237–38). When he has to travel for some time to collect money owed to him, he severely warns his wife from welcoming his brothers "because they are wicked, evil, and cunning" (238). Then he leaves, and his brothers arrive, as expected. They manage to weasel their way into the house, overwhelming the poor woman, and stay with their sister-in-law for several days. When Zambò returns, she desperately tries to hide them and puts them under a tub in which normally the pigs are skinned. Searching the entire house, their brother does not find them despite his many efforts and threats against his wife, but during the whole time the twins become so scared "that they shit out their souls" (239). After Zambò has given up his search and left again for the market to do some business, his wife discovers the corpses, and is of course desperately trying to get rid of them. She calls a gravedigger into the house whose job it also is to carry deceased foreigners and pilgrims outside of the city and to throw their bodies into the river Tiber.

At this point, we need to remember that the three brothers look identical, especially because they are all hunchbacks. When the gravedigger returns to collect his payment for the service, she complains that the dead man has returned, pointing out the second brother. Grudgingly, the gravedigger carries him to the river as well and gets rid of him there. However, on his way back, he happens to run into Zambò and believes that he is the same corpse, like a revenant. He kills him by beating him up badly, and then also throws him into the Tiber, which thus finishes these three really bad people. The male storyteller Molino concludes with the revealing comment, in strong support of women's rights and dignity: "Madonna Felicetta was very joyful and content that she had left so many trials behind her and returned to being free, as she had been before" (240).

The last episode of this story with all three brothers dying a miserable death is directly borrowed from one or several medieval sources, though the circumstances there are quite different. For instance, the late medieval German verse narrative "Die dreiMönchezu Kolmar" by a poet anonymously identified as Niemand (No One, late thirteenth or up to the middle of the fourteenth century) was predicated on this motive of the triple murder as well. However, here three monks are separately trying to woo the honorable wife of a wealthy citizen, each offering her a considerable payment (Ridder and Ziegeler, vol. 4, no. 130, 35–49).

After having consulted with her husband about this precarious situation, they plot together how to gain the money and to get rid of the monks at the same time. She invites them all in to her house, but each at a different time slot. As soon as the first monk has entered the room, her husband appears on the outside with a mighty club scaring the monk out of his wit. She makes him hide in a tub, which is filled, however, with boiling water, so he scalds to death. The two other monks suffer the same destiny, which means that the husband has to get rid of the corpses. He asks a drunken student to carry the corpse to the river Rhine and to dump it there. Just as in Straparola's much later version, when the student then has returned, the second corpse is already waiting for him, as if it had returned from the river. The husband plays the same trick with the third, and this to the student's great chagrin. The latter is so deeply incensed that when he encounters on his way back a fourth monk who is completely innocent and only intends to attend the early morning service, he believes that the ghost has returned once again. In his fury, he beats him up badly and drags him to the river where he drowns him, which completes the cycle of events. The husband, however, ruefully realizes that the fourth monk was actually murdered, and the narrator concludes his tale with the comment in the epimythium that often the innocent ones have to suffer for the guilty ones: "daz der unschuldigmüßengelten / dezschuldigenmissetat" (392–93). As to the three other monks, however, he clearly spells out his condemnation because they had badly abused their authority as confessors and had tried to seduce the young wife.

This late medieval German verse narrative has survived in only one manuscript, Karlsruhe, BadischeLandesbibliothek, Donaueschingen 104, No. 34, fol. 41vb–44rb, but it could in turn have been based on any of the three *fabliaux*, "Des trois boçusmenestrels" (first half of the thirteenth century), "Les quatres prestres" (same time), or "Estormi" by Hues Piaucele (late thirteenth century) (Felder, 2020, vol. 4, 46–47). It might have been unlikely that Straparola had access to the German source, whereas the Old French versions could have served him well to write his own story. Whatever the actual situation might have been, we can trust that here we face yet another significant example of the Italian poet's deliberate use of medieval narratives for his own purposes.

The variations are also clearly visible. The evil twins have no erotic interests in their sister-in-law, and only use the comfort of her house to enjoy a few days of comfort. But they are fully aware of their brother's hatred against them, so they voluntarily hide in the tub not to be discovered by Zambò. This one, however, is not filled with boiling water, as in the medieval story, and yet they die, this time out of fear of Zambò's wrath and violence which could badly hurt them if he were to discover them. In addition, they basically suffocate in that tub, which deserves to be quoted again, but now in full: "He continued doing these things [looking for the hidden brothers] for so long that from fear, the great heat, and the incredible stench of the pig tub, poor Bertaz and Santi were so worried that they shit out their souls" (239).

Both here and in the German verse narrative, the wife makes the men hide in the tub, but in the Italian version, she does not pursue any plan to get them killed, as is the case in the medieval source/s. Whereas the plot in the latter is determined by husband and wife cooperating together to defeat and kill the monks as a punishment for their evil intent to sexually abuse the wife, in Straparola's version, she acts the way she does out of terror of her husband and then is deeply relieved about his death. It remains difficult to determine the exact connections or to identify the specific source used by the Italian poet, but we can be certain that this story in the *Piaecevolinotti* drew the motive of the three dead bodies and the effort to get rid of them from medieval literature, whether in German or in French.

6. The History of Storytelling:

From the Middle Ages to the Sixteenth Century; Further Evidence

All storytelling, and so Straparola's, is determined by a huge amalgamation of sources, parallels, analogies, inspirational ideas, themes, and motifs. It would be difficult to separate exactly an original from a later version since each retelling is determined by many new factors and author interests. As we have already observed, Straparola obviously drew from a variety of medieval narratives and then adapted them for his own purposes. Sometimes, the connections are very obvious and specific, but sometimes we only recognize allusions, shared tropes, and borrowed narrative elements. For instance, in the first tale of the fifth night, we hear of a wild man whom the only son of King Filippomaria of Sicily liberates in order to retrieve a cherished arrow which the wild man had taken away from him. Wild men were common features in late medieval art and literature, so it is not surprising to find one of them in this story as well (cf. Jones, 2000).

More common, however, was the theme of love, i.e., sexual joys, adultery, and also violent treatment of women. We find those topics in virtually all collections of medieval and early modern tales, but many times they come with rather unique twists that make them identifiable also across translations and adaptations. One final example will cement our argument that Straparola was not simply creating his volumes by drawing from contemporary sources or his own personal experiences; instead, in many different ways, medieval themes permeated his own stories, and quite often we can establish direct connections between a source and the Italian rendering.

The third story told in the eighth night focuses on a highly reputed monk, Maestro Tiberio, who finally decides to leave his monastery in Florence and to turn into a preacher, perhaps of a Dominican or a Franciscan kind. He ardently falls in love with a young beautiful woman who comes for confession to him, and he begins to woo her, though he runs into considerable resistance on her part. She is married to a woodcarver whom she loves and trusts, so when she feels pestered and even harassed by the priest, she shares this with her husband, who quickly comes up with a plan to defy the priest and to teach him a good lesson.

Upon his urging, she invites Maestro Tiberio to her house one night, pretending that the woodcarver is gone to do some business. The foolish priest, not knowing that the couple is secretly plotting to trick him, brings food for her to prepare, and goes to bed, stripping naked, waiting for his lady to join him there. She lingers, however, pretending all the time that she also wants to sleep with him, when her husband suddenly appears. Terrified, the priest wants his clothing back, but there would not be enough time for him to get dressed, as she asserts. Instead, she tells him to jump onto the emptied armoire and to stretch out his arms, pretending to be a crucifix. While the priest is following his advice, the husband enters the room, pretending not to see him. Instead, the couple consumes the meal together and then goes to bed, enjoying each other during the night.

Early in the morning, two nuns arrive to demand that the woodcarver finally deliver a long-promised crucifix. They marvel at the natural appearance of the sculpture, but object to the visible presence of the penis. The artist is immediately ready to cut it off, but the priest, finally realizing that his pretense is of no use, runs away to save his life: "Chechino ran after him with the tool in hand in order to remove the annoyance that he had up front" (324). Tiberio manages to escape, especially because Chechino's wife holds him back to avoid bloodshed, but the entire city laughs about this preacher, which forces him to move away never to be seen again.

As the narrator then comments, this was a "ridiculous tale" (324), but the ladies cannot stop laughing about it. The subsequent riddle at first reads almost like a pornographic description of the penis, but the storyteller Arianna then reveals that it referred only to a quill used for writing. More importantly, we recognize here strong criticism of the clergy (anticlericalism), high praise for the wife and her strong sense of morality and ethics, and great respect for the woodcarver and his smart strategy in teaching a harsh lesson to the priest.

There is, however, nothing really new about this story since it can be traced back to a number of medieval sources. Again, I suspect that Straparola had available a copy of one of those fabliaux in which the theme was already fully developed, but it is not impossible to imagine that he could also have learned about this story, or at least the motif, through personal contacts with any of the German merchants doing business in the famous Fondacodei Tedeschi in

Venice (Pfotenhauer, 2016).

7. Conclusion

However, we do not need to nail down the specific text version, or even manuscript, which Straparola might have had available to write his version of this narrative or any others. Instead, we can conclude that the *Piacevolinotti* clearly demonstrate the long afterlife of numerous medieval narratives, motives, themes, ideas, and concepts, often molded into the new Italian version without many significant changes to the plot, the characterization of the major figures, and the value system. This is not to say that we would have to identify Straparola as a late representative of medieval literature. His collection overall certainly mirrors the modern world of sixteenth-century Venice, or Italy at large.

However, just as in the cases of Hans Sachs and William Shakespeare, we must always keep in mind that storytelling has always been a long-term process, determined by much give-and-take across the centuries, languages, religions, and cultures. To assume that with the major paradigm shifts at the end of the fifteenth and in the early sixteenth centuries all of culture would have become transformed represents a crude misunderstanding. The early modern book markets continued to offer a vast number of medieval narratives (Classen, 2022, “The Continuation”), and the interest in erotic topics so commonly developed in *fabliaux*, *novelle*, *tales*, and *mæren* did not diminish at all. Undoubtedly, and Straparola is also a good example for this, the frameworks of storytelling changed, the social conditions were transformed, but we cannot maintain any radical breaks, or closures.

The use of medieval themes in the *Piacevolinotti* actually highlights one of the intriguing features making this collection so valuable also for us today. While the Italian poet drew quite heavily on a variety of medieval sources, his own work became a literary quarry for centuries of fairy tale authors and others since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Bragantini, 1981-1982; Barsch, 1988). This observation carries considerable consequences for us because the evidence presented indicates not only the general interest in medieval themes, but it also indicates that we cannot simply dismiss medieval literature as antiquated and irrelevant for us today. Behind the typically medieval frameworks, there were universal themes and ideas, and those appealed to Straparola, and they continue to appeal to us today. Only a comparative analysis empowers us to detect those connections that have great relevance for the Humanities at large insofar as the suggest the huge impact of medieval literature on our modern world. The alleged hiatus between ca. 1500 and 1800, when the Middle Ages were rediscovered, needs to be questioned more carefully since there are good chances that many more medieval themes might have transpired during that period than we might have assumed.

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