

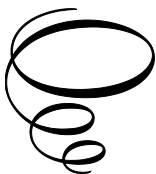
A New Translation  
of the Novellino of  
Masuccio Salernitano



# A New Translation of the Novellino of Masuccio Salernitano

By  
Christopher Stace

**Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing**



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This book first published 2022

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-7791-0

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-7791-6

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*Cover image:* Leonardo da Vinci, *The Lady with an Ermine*, ca. 1490. National Museum in Krakow/Princes Czartoryski Museum Inv. no. MNK-MKCz XII-209. Laboratory Stock, National Museum in Krakow. Used by permission. This is generally accepted as a portrait by Leonardo da Vinci of Cecilia Gallerani, mistress of Ludovico Sforza, Duke of Milan. See Prologue to Part Three, and n. 10.

*Page facing first Prologue:* Woodcut from the 1492 Venetian edition of the *Novellino* showing Masuccio presenting his volume to Ippolita Sforza, to whom he has dedicated the work. Copyright of the University of Manchester.

The *monochrome images* within the text are by E. R. Hughes, R.W.S., and were produced for the first translation of *Novellino* into English by W. G. Waters (London, 1895). The first edition, in two volumes, contained 18 of these: two others are found in different printings, those illustrating tales XXVI and XXX.

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# INTRODUCTION

MICHAEL PAPIO<sup>1</sup>

Who was Masuccio Salernitano? One would do well to begin with his name. Despite what Anglophone readers may assume, Salernitano was not in fact his surname. In reality, he was baptized Tommaso Guardati. The nickname Masuccio, somewhat akin to Tommy, was simply paired with the adjective Salernitano (that is, someone from Salerno) to create a playful *nom de plume*. Masuccio's ancestors first appear in twelfth-century notarial documents as a land-owning family from Sorrento who aligned themselves rather quickly with the Norman gentry. They benefited substantially from active participation in the governing bureaucracy and seem to have maintained their privileges without much difficulty both after the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II consolidated within his lands the Kingdom of Sicily, which then extended as far north as the region of Abruzzo, and after the death in 1266 of his son Manfred, the last of the direct Hohenstaufen line. Pope Urban IV, who had financed a large part of the military expenses that eventually extinguished the Swabian threat to the Papacy's ambitions, recognized Charles I of Anjou for his allegiance and officially welcomed him as the Kingdom of Sicily's new monarch. Despite the dangers intrinsic to changes in rulership, the Guardati family retained their lands in Sorrento and even expanded their influence into nearby Salerno. In fact, throughout the fourteenth century, Masuccio's forefathers demonstrated a fealty to the French aristocracy that was handsomely rewarded. Having served the Angevin cause as knights, judges, notaries, and merchants, several were even rewarded with titles of nobility. The Guardati adopted their own coat of arms (still visible on the doorframe of Masuccio's dilapidated family home in Salerno), a silver field upon which rests a golden tower representing his family's fief in Torricella. All things considered, it was good to be a Guardati.

About Masuccio's youth, in addition to what he himself tells us in a handful of passages in the *Novellino*, we know quite little. He was probably born around 1410 in Salerno, not long after his father, Loise Guardati, moved the family there from Sorrento in order to serve as the secretary of

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Raimondo Orsini. By this time, the Guardati were already bona fide nobility, as is clear in the fact that they straightaway took up residence in the prestigious Seggio di Campo section of the city. The Guardatis boasted a distinguished and highly respected lineage, especially on the side of Masuccio's mother, Margaritella Mariconda, who belonged to one of the families most favoured by Margaret of Durazzo. After fighting for years to control the throne, Margaret spent the last years of her life and was buried in Salerno. Tommaso, Masuccio's maternal grandfather and namesake, is described in the initial lines of novella 14 as a "a very notable and charming cavalier, and in his day [...] considered and respected as of no small importance in our city." He participated actively in the Angevin court and was, together with Guglielmo Solimene, appointed by Queen Margaret patron of the church of Santa Maria de Alimundo in Salerno. He bequeathed this right of patronage to his two grandsons, Masuccio and Marino Mariconda. This is the site where Masuccio was eventually buried in 1475, but his tomb remains unmarked. The church was deconsecrated in 1812 and is now an abandoned rubbish dump.

Masuccio's most formative years (those of his youth, adolescence, and early adulthood) were marked by a long and complicated power struggle featuring tumultuous years of military expansionism led by King Ladislaus of Naples, the son of Charles and Margaret of Durazzo. Ladislaus defended his claim to the Neapolitan throne against Louis III but died in 1414 at the young age of 37, either from poison administered at the behest of Florentine spies or from a disease of the genitals. He was succeeded by his sister Joanna II, the last member of the House of Durazzo. In 1421, childless Queen Joanna named as her heir Alfonso V of Aragon (the grandfather of Ferdinand II of Aragon who married Isabella of Castile), but Pope Martin V opposed her plan, openly supporting the Frenchman instead. When Louis died of malaria some two decades later, his brother René immediately asserted his own claim to the crown. After a long series of negotiations, betrayals, and other unexpected turns of events, Alfonso eventually prevailed, entering Naples in 1443 with memorable pomp and circumstance.

Despite their longstanding affiliation with the Angevins, members of the Guardati family seem to have aligned themselves with the new rulers rather quickly, just as they had done for generations. Loise may have been, as Masuccio's brother Francesco certainly was, entrusted with the office of salt customs officer, a duty of great prestige and importance under Alfonso. By 1450 or so, Masuccio had married an Apulian noblewoman called Cristina de Pandis in an arrangement that was extremely advantageous to his family. According to Petrocchi, he began to compose 'letter-novellas' not long after

getting married, most probably between 1450 and 1457. The four tales that survive in very few or only a single copy from this period are dedicated to Pontano (novella 3 in the *Novellino*), Antonella d'Aquino (novella 21), Eleonora of Aragon (novella 31) and Alfonso of Aragon (novella 2). Of great significance in Masuccio's choice of addressees is the apparent familiarity and often almost casual tone that he employs in some of his dedications, from which we can assume him to be (if not a peer, as in the case of the king and his immediate family) at least a familiar presence at court and an acquaintance of notable intellectuals and politicians of Naples. In 1458, Alfonso the Magnanimous passed away, leaving the royal sceptre to his illegitimate son Ferdinand I, known widely as Ferrante (to whom Masuccio dedicated the first of the *Novellino*'s tales). Shortly before his own death Pope Calixtus III, unwilling to accept his Aragonese succession, denounced Ferrante as a royal usurper. This cynical manoeuvre gave confidence to a significant number of barons who, having enjoyed recent financial success and upward social mobility, rebelled against the king in the first organized revolt. It was in this period that Roberto Sanseverino demonstrated his (nearly unwavering) loyalty to the Aragonese. The Crown rewarded him with the title of Grand Admiral (as we see in the dedication of novella 6), but his more concretely practical prize was the elimination of numerous barons who had been wealthier and more powerful than he was.

Masuccio was a familiar at the royal Neapolitan court by 1469 and worked as a secretary of the Orsini. It is clear from the *Novellino* that he was intimately acquainted with court life in Naples, but his greatest increase in prestige surely derived from having become the personal secretary of Roberto Sanseverino, Prince of Salerno, not long before the latter broke ground on the construction of a massive Renaissance palace near the Basilica of Santa Chiara in Naples, the same neighbourhood where the king's most trusted lords resided, including Antonello de Petrucciis (dedictee of novella 4) and Giovanni Pontano (novella 3). Roberto, a staunch supporter of literature and the arts, died in 1474 and was remembered with great affection in the final pages of this book. Perhaps only about a year later, Masuccio also passed away. Pontano, the greatest humanistic jewel in the Aragonese literary crown, composed our author's epitaph, which reads:

This man too sported tales that are delightful  
and spiced them with both eloquence and jest;  
a man of noble character and of gentle birth, he was  
favoured among the learned and likewise by the lords.

Masuccio was his name and generous Salerno his land;  
that city gave him life and took it back again.<sup>2</sup>

We know very little about Masuccio's composition of the *Novellino*, other than that only four tales are extant in manuscript form, the same mentioned above. However, inasmuch as no other isolated tales have been found, we cannot say with any certainty that all fifty circulated independently from the final form in which we have them today, even despite a longstanding belief that Masuccio had sent them in epistolary form to correspondents before ultimately collecting them together for publication. The first printed edition of the *Novellino* was edited by Francesco Del Tuppo and published by his partner Sisto Reissinger in 1476, after which the autograph was lost. Del Tuppo, in his early thirties at the time, had been born in Naples and was a dedicated supporter of the Aragonese who repaid his loyalty with favours, encouragement, and protection. Reissinger, who was about the same age, was born in southern Germany but began making a name for himself whilst employed in the Roman Curia. Working together in Naples, the two men produced almost sixty editions of classic and contemporary works between 1474 and 1478. Like most of their other volumes, however, the *Novellino's editio princeps*, mentioned in private library catalogues as late as the nineteenth century, has disappeared. The oldest remaining editions are those of Valdarfer (Milan, 1483) and De Tortis (Venice, 1484), both of which seem to have derived from that prepared by Del Tuppo and Reissinger. All modern editions ultimately derive from these two; Luigi Settembrini (1874) essentially used the Venetian edition (in a 1492 reprint), Alfredo Mauro (1940) used both, and Giorgio Petrocchi (1957), who prepared the only edition that may be called critical, rigorously studied the Milanese edition, which is widely believed to be the more correct of the two. In the absence of an autograph copy and the *princeps*, we can be sure neither that we possess the *Novellino* precisely as Masuccio wrote it nor that points of confusion can always be sufficiently resolved. For the reader of this English translation, the chief philological difficulties present in the textual tradition are largely removed to footnotes, but for Italian readers (and the translator, of course), Masuccio's language is a kaleidoscopic mix of Neapolitan,

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<sup>2</sup> "Hic quoque fabellas lusit tinxitque lepore / condiit ornatis et sua dicta jocis; / nobilis ingenio, natu quoque nobilis, idem / et doctis placuit principibusque viris. / Masutius nomen, patria est generosa Salernum; / haec simul et vitam praebuit et rapuit." Though Pontano's words are preserved for posterity in his *De tumulis*, we cannot know for sure whether they were ever engraved on the lid of Masuccio's tomb.



Salernitan, and Florentine that additionally contains a healthy dose of Latinate lexical forms and long, syntactically complex sentences. Commonly referred to as Masuccio's *koine*, this heterogeneous style reflects the coeval lack of linguistic standardization in the Italian peninsula and the perfectly acceptable tendency to use terms and phrases of all origins without any real regard for consistency. Our author's acceptance of a surprisingly wide range of lexical forms has no doubt been further complicated by a series of well-meaning editors intent on 'correcting' authorial choices that may have seemed to them somewhat out of place. Moreover, the nine editions produced (mostly in Venice) during the sixteenth century, the heyday of the *Questione della lingua*, are even more noticeably contaminated by the unwarranted insertion of Tuscanisms.

The initial reception of the *Novellino* seems to have been very favourable. Although Masuccio was born a bit too early to participate fully in the humanistic literary fervour of Aragonese Naples, his renowned near-contemporaries Giovanni Pontano, Luigi Pulci and even Leonardo da Vinci seem to have found his tales entertaining. In fact, scholars have frequently noted that Masuccio's popularity was not restricted to the Italian upper classes or to Aragonese loyalists. As a matter of fact, the English translator and nobleman Henry Parker put the forty-ninth tale of the *Novellino* (the story of Frederick Barbarossa) into English in 1554, dedicating it to Henry VIII and his last wife, Catherine Parr. Just a decade later, the *Novellino* appeared as "Massuccii Salernitani Novellae" on the *Index of Prohibited Books* prepared in 1564 by the Council of Trent and remained there in numerous subsequent editions. It is not difficult to imagine reasons why the book was banned, as it contains, in addition to all the illicit sexual activity, a particularly dim view of the mendicant Orders. Hardly unexpectedly, a new edition of the *Novellino* soon appeared. It was known as *La Gatta*, so-called because its frontispiece and colophon feature a woodcut image of a cat catching a mouse (despite the victim's rather greater similarity to a lizard), which appeared in several subsequent reprintings unexpurgated, undated, and unattributed (though in reality put out by the Sessa family in Venice). Another clandestine edition was printed in 1765, dedicated to Aristarco Scannabue (the pseudonym of Giuseppe Baretti, a controversial literary critic and adamant Anglophile) and bearing the name of Geneva on its cover even though it had really been printed in Lucca. It is hard to assess the likely effects of the work's ban, but whoever spotted a copy of it on a bookshelf may have recognized it as a bit naughty.

Our author's most well-known claim to fame is closely related to Luigi da Porto (1485-1529) who adapted the story of Mariotto and Ganozza (no-

vella 33) to his *Newfound History of Two Noble Lovers*, which in turn inspired William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Masuccio's first tale was adapted by Thomas Heywood for his *Gunaikeion* and later for *The Captives*. A perennial favourite, the tale of the galloping cadaver (1) was also rewritten in verse by Domenico Batacchi. The genre of the Italian novella, which easily lent itself to imitation and adaptation on account of the immense popularity of the *Decameron*, surely contributed to Masuccio's fame in Spain and France as well. His tales echoed throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries wherever the genre of the novella was known. Sometimes his stories are taken *en masse* as in the *Comptes du monde aventureux*, which reproduces over a dozen, and sometimes it is just a theme or plot twist that surfaces in the works of others, as in the case of Christine de Pizan, who plays on novellas 6, 24, and 26, or that of Rabelais who incorporates novella 41's enigmatic inscription in a ring into one of Pantagruel's adventures. Masuccio's influence among Spanish authors is perhaps even richer. Joan Timoneda's *Patrañuelo* contains several borrowings from both the *Decameron* and the *Novellino* (e.g., novellas 1 and 43), and María de Zayas does much the same (e.g., novellas 24, 26, and 41). Masuccio's creations similarly reappear in Mateo Alemán's *Guzmán de Alfarache* (novellas 32, 49), *Lazarillo de Tormes* (novella 4), and even in the theatre of Lope de Vega (47) and Calderón de la Barca (again 47). During the first decades of the last century, the *Novellino* was translated into Russian by a professor of theatre and Western European Neoclassicism, but soon became an object of anticapitalistic, antimonarchic scorn. It may indeed surprise the reader to know that Masuccio remained artistically relevant, even if mainly through the spicier tales, up to our own generation. John Keefauver (known principally as the main writer of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*) rewrote novella 5 for the November 1965 edition of *Playboy*, and Silvio Amadio directed a light-hearted episodic film *Come fu che Masuccio Salernitano, fuggendo con le brache in mano, riuscì a conservarlo sano* (*How Masuccio Salernitano Flew Carrying His Underpants and Managed to Keep It Safe and Sound*) in 1972. The movie, which features two scoundrels disguised as priests, is related only tenuously to the plots of the *Novellino*, but something must be said for the fact that its makers believed putting Masuccio's name in the title would help its sales within the ephemeral cinematic genre of "Decamerotica."

Just what is it that makes readers return, generation after generation, to the *Novellino*? More than anything else, the work's most appealing characteristics must be its quick-paced dénouements and the unabashedly lewd (or even grotesque) plot twists. Whilst the work's three principal themes (anti-clericalism, misogyny, and moral tales or exempla) are deeply rooted in the

Middle Ages, Masuccio's immediacy of narration and his cheerful willingness to favour frank speech over polite euphemisms earned him a new reading public. The "Italian Renaissance," an historical period that often suggests the highest ideals of self-expression, was actually in many ways almost indistinguishable from earlier generations and improved incrementally. In other words, whilst it may be historically true that the seeds of modernity were sown by minds such as those of Ficino, Alberti, and Leonardo, we should not be too quick to assume that their ideas wholly permeated their contemporary society. In fifteenth-century Italy, warfare, starvation, public torture and execution, slavery and the malevolent persecution of heresy were far from uncommon. This is the world of the *Novellino*, the place where Masuccio and his readers lived. In the Kingdom of Naples, it should be not at all astonishing that one of the defining stylistic motifs of a collection of novellas is the grotesque, a hyperbolic narration of stories that relies both on a certain kind of comedy (the dominating characteristic of the Italian short story genre) and on a tendency to present disgusting or frightening situations for their voyeuristic entertainment value. At first blush, it seems that Masuccio was most directly inspired by the *Decameron*, but the innovative realism of Boccaccio's masterpiece is decidedly multifaceted, having its roots in a wide variety of perspectives on medieval life, and reflects a local society that is far more influenced by the proto-democratic inclinations of Florentine politics than by the policies of an aristocratic system like that in vigour in Naples. Boccaccio's experiences, conditioned by his position in a nascent and increasingly mercantile society, led to an eclectic narrative style. The narration of the *Decameron* (in contrast to that of the *Novellino*) consequently lends itself easily to a compassionate perspective on nearly all social stations. There should be little wonder that the work rapidly gained a large and diverse reading public. Sacchetti's *Trecentonovelle* also had wide public appeal and, though the author was of noble extraction, his tales are similarly directed toward what we could more modernly call a 'middle-class' audience. Masuccio, by contrast, does not present perspectives that endear his novellas to a wide audience as did Boccaccio and Sacchetti. Moreover, inclusive apostrophes to "women in love" (*donne innamorate*) and casual asides to any reader oppressed by the "human condition" (*condizione dell'umana vita*) at large are almost completely absent. The world of the *Novellino* is an exclusive aristocratic domain, conceived for the benefit of the author's peers and political superiors. It is the literary equivalent of the "delightful and beautiful garden" tucked within the "grievous labyrinth" into which its author stumbles at the opening of the third set of tales. Within the confines of the collection's narrative space the reader is free from

the “inordinati disvarioni e grosso parlar de’ volgari”; he is removed from a world populated by those who did not share Masuccio’s privileged opinions and who often lived in conflict with the tales’ dedicatees. Among these of course are the poor themselves but also the malevolent readers against whose interpretations the ‘truths’ of the *Novellino* are for Masuccio “ottimo ed eterno difensore e scudo.” The *Novellino* is not a mercantile epic, not the literature of leisure of the Everyman, yet it is, nevertheless, a notable milestone in the evolution of the Italian short story. The collection’s epistolary structure was Masuccio’s invention, but it was followed later by Matteo Bandello (1480-1562) who composed his own version of the Romeo and Juliet story and indulged, like Masuccio, in unexpectedly cruel or gruesome plot twists. Masuccio’s influence is also clear in the stories of Giovanni Battista Giraldi, aka Cinzio (1504-1573), a university professor in Ferrara who delighted in the fusion of Senecan tragedy and mythological depravity. By the sixteenth century, innumerable novella motifs made popular two hundred years earlier were adapted to a new narrative style that refused to shy away from uncomfortable subjects and that, in fact, welcomed them as more faithful to lived experience. Not coincidentally, Giraldi’s sometimes violent plot lines and preference for psychologically complex characters made his stories particularly successful in Elizabethan England, where William Shakespeare made full use of so many of them.

We may, therefore, rightly place Masuccio’s *Novellino* on a genealogical line that extends from the admirably compassionate storytelling of the *Decameron* all the way to the almost Old-Testament style of severe truth telling of the Counter-Reformation. If we are to understand Masuccio’s work fully, we must never lose sight of the fact that his ideals and perspectives were conditioned by his place in society. Like the majority of those to whom his novellas are dedicated, Masuccio was an aristocrat (as Pontano’s epitaph reminds us), a landed member of the ruling class of Renaissance Naples whose political views were entirely formed from a pragmatic conception of power and prestige. Perhaps the best insight into the odd universe of the *Novellino* is the one provided by Masuccio’s allegorical encounter with Mercury in the Dantesque “tortuous and shadowy wood” within the prologue to the work’s third section. The sanctuary of chastity motif, a literary descendant of the *hortus conclusus*, is put together in such a way as to isolate Ippolita Maria Sforza, the fruit of a marriage between the Sforza and Visconti clans of Milan, within the safe confines of Aragonese *pudicitia*. Her companions are her sisters-in-law, Eleonora (who married Ercole d’Este, Duke of Ferrara, in 1473) and Beatrice (who was Queen of Hungary

through two marriages). Each of these three women provided a key link between the Aragonese crown and a geopolitically essential ally.

The larger-than-life Ippolita, to whom Masuccio dedicated this book, married Alfonso of Aragon, the son of King Ferrante, in 1465, the same year in which he established the Order of the Ermine. Her reputation of possessing unassailable chastity appears to have been its chief inspiration. It was renowned not only in Naples, but also in her hometown of Milan. There is no question that Leonardo had this Order in mind as he painted the portrait that graces this book's cover. According to its statutes, exclusive membership was extended, by invitation only, to no more than twenty-seven knights at a time. Each swore allegiance to the Church and to the King. In addition to a crimson cloak, lined with the fur of the ermine, they wore a necklace (at least once per week) from which hung the Order's emblem: a small enamel figure of a white ermine, as it was believed that the animal would in no instance allow its pelt to be sullied. The Order's motto, *malo mori quam foedari* (death before dishonour), was emblazoned also upon the banner that the knights carried into battle, the very same that Masuccio describes unfurled above the three ladies in the allegorical garden. Naturally, many of the Order's members are remembered in the *Novellino* as addressees of tales. Among them are Marino Caracciolo (dedictee of 7 and protagonist of 44), Íñigo d'Avalos (dedictee of 12, and whose wife Antonella d'Aquino is the dedictee of 21), Alfonso of Aragon (dedictee of 2), Ercole d'Este (whose wife is the dedictee of 31), Roberto Sanseverino (dedictee of 6, and whose death is lamented in the collection's final pages), Onorato Gaetano (dedictee of 46), and Giulio Antonio Acquaviva (dedictee of 25). These men, who breathed the rarefied air of the highest levels of Neapolitan society, composed Masuccio's ideal audience, and it is their ethical code that is reproduced in the *Novellino*.

When Mercury tells our author's fictional stand-in that he should follow the footsteps of Juvenal, he clearly has in mind the type of mordant satire that was directed at hypocrites, the corrupt, the pretentious, immoral partygoers, faithless women, liars, crooks, and the dregs of society more generally. When he mentions Boccaccio, however, we should take that as a reference not to the author of the *Decameron*, but instead to the man who wrote the *Corbaccio*, a work whose satirical misogyny is so off-putting and unrelenting that many scholars are convinced it is no more than an insincere effort at irony. Masuccio, then, was above all a satirist intent upon correcting (or at least denouncing) what was wrong with his contemporary society, and he chose as his chief targets those whose behaviour had the potential to disturb the status quo. The values of the *Decameron*, as we mentioned

above, derive from a permissive understanding of the ever-evolving plight of the common man or woman, a moral relativity practically enshrined in the notion of Florentine *libertas*. Indeed, if Florence and Venice are in this period leading the way toward what would eventually be called capitalism, Naples and Southern Italy are going through what economists have called the “refeudalization” of their economies. That said, the hierarchy of Aragonese Naples depended upon undisturbed social stratification. In fact, the first revolt of the barons was fuelled precisely by the ambitions of a rising entrepreneurial class. (Masuccio was not alive to witness the result of the second.)

Masuccio himself underscores this unyielding perspective in ‘bookend’ stories. The opening anecdote, in which the well-to-do messer Guardo Salusgio finds a trampled ducat to the great vexation of the sad tailor, not only casts the collection of novellas as a valuable, though easily overlooked, contribution to the Aragonese library but also situates its author in a correct and socially viable political posture with respect to the concerns of the noble addressees who would presumably have subscribed to the underlying call for civic stability. The tale illustrates the rights of the upper classes against the desires of the lower in a tidy overturning of the more normal, perhaps even expected, conclusions reached in the homilies of no small number of mendicant preachers. Whoever does not use his ‘talent’ properly is both blasphemer and bad servant, deserving reprehension rather than praise. Hence, Guardo (the representative of the higher class, whose very name suggests a link with our author) gains both the coin and the moral high ground. The complementary lesson appears in Masuccio’s concluding speech to his own work in the exemplum of Xerxes. The king, “accompanied by many of his barons, as befitted such a great prince,” is greeted by a destitute farmer, “overwhelmed by a remarkable wave of affection that poured from the very centre of his heart” who has nothing but water to offer him as oblation. The poor man blames his own crushing poverty not on the economic policies of the Crown, but on the fickle nature of fate. Xerxes graciously sips the water offered to him. “Then, thanking the man for his fond love, he rode off and went on his way with God’s blessing.” Only where the established social order is respected can a member of a lower social rank be treated with compassion within the pages of the *Novellino*. This general mechanism holds true as well in Masuccio’s treatment of the different layers of the ruling class. The lower levels of society are kept in their places through degrading or punitive dénouements, but among the upper strata of society, Masuccio consistently respects the static, feudal order

by using Fortune as a determining factor in the resolution of his characters' stories.

The *Novellino*'s main themes are thoroughly consistent with this outlook. Whilst some scholars have claimed that Masuccio is an incorrigible opponent of religious institutions, we should resist meaningless generalizations. Of his five children, three joined the clergy. The early fifteenth century was a difficult time for the Church and the conditions among the priesthood were appallingly bad: some men of the cloth were habitually absent, unable to name the seven mortal sins or even to read the breviary. The socio-religious crises unfolding in and around Naples during the work's composition were perhaps the worst in all of Italy. Perhaps not coincidentally, it was during this period that the mendicants began to enjoy a vigorous, celebrity-like following. Their sermons drew large crowds, and they were supported by the generosity (or pious gullibility, as Masuccio would perhaps have called it) of the nobles—caught between the ideal and the real—who must not have been able to understand that upward social mobility was an irresistible goal. Mendicant preachers were free, unlike their Benedictine brethren, to move about within cities and were bringing dangerous ideas to the masses. Is it ethically correct, for example, to spend lavish amounts of money on luxury items when there are other Christians dying of hunger? The energy and enthusiasm generated by these popular preachers had the potential to be extremely disruptive. To make matters worse, the frequent conflict between the Observants and the Conventuals, whose followers continued to preach the merits of upholding Saint Francis' legacy of humility and poverty, must have seemed absurd to someone like Masuccio. We see particular venom in the *Novellino* directed against mendicant preachers, including even famous and respected figures such as Saint Bernardino of Siena (especially popular in Tuscany), Saint Vincent Ferrer (actually a Dominican), Roberto Caracciolo of Lecce (whose renowned histrionics must have seemed undignified), and Giovanni da Capestrano (a favourite of Ladislaus and student of Bernardino). Again, the question of Masuccio's vehemence is not as much religious as it is pragmatic.

What about the misogyny? Given Masuccio's assiduous adherence to the established hierarchical conceptions of his day, it is not at all surprising that his privileging of the accepted feudal structure should likewise translate into support for a male-dominated society at the level of the individual. Women, seen through this lens, are principally the fragile vessel of familial honour. Though some scholars have been perplexed by what they perceive to be in Masuccio a pathological hatred for women, the truth is rather more nuanced. Masuccio quite intentionally places himself within an accepted

and appreciated literary tradition at the Aragonese court: the *querelle des femmes* so popular in the Naples of his day. While the late fourteenth-century *Corbaccio* is the best-known example of misogynistic literature in Italian, the full-fledged genre reached its peak in popularity in Catalonia precisely in the same years of the *Novellino*'s production. The great figures of Catalonian misogyny, authors such as Francesc Ferrer, Bernat Metge, Ausiàs March, Pere Torroella and Jaume Roig, were all known in the Aragonese court of Naples. In fact, King Ferrante preferred Spanish and Catalan throughout his entire life, and seldom spoke in Italian. The conscious placement of the *Novellino* within these literary currents of the wider Mediterranean Quattrocento casts new light on the question of Masuccio's apparent 'hatred' of women and does much to put into perspective the often-prejudiced readings of the work that have appeared over the last several decades. Jaume Roig is an excellent example. Almost an exact contemporary of Masuccio, Roig was an accepted and greatly esteemed member of the Aragonese court. His *Espill*, or *Llibre de les dones* (ca. 1462), contains horrendous descriptions of the personal habits of women and recounts remarkable tales of sexual perversion, including cannibalism. His is a misogyny that appears entirely excessive to the modern eye and yet he too enjoyed a very successful career, including the role in Valencia of the personal physician to Maria of Castile, wife of Alfonso the Magnanimous. It would be all too easy, however, to leave it at that.

In reality, once Ippolita and her kin are safely tucked away in the *locus amoenus* of Mercury's Forest, insulated from incidental defamation, Masuccio is free to develop one of the themes that arguably interests him and his readers the most: the spectacle of a woman engaged in sexual misconduct. Masuccio was keenly aware of the ethical underpinnings of proper court behaviour and knew well the power of public opinion to elevate or cast down members of the aristocracy. The wife, sister or daughter who is unable to make her desires conform to socially sanctioned sobriety invites the fear of sexual pollution. Novella 28, for instance, is the stuff of aristocratic nightmares. It tells the story of a woman who has everything a normal person of her station could desire: a devoted noble husband, high social status, and the sincere affection of her family. Once that unthreatening scene is established, she decides to have sex with a dwarf, tantamount in the Renaissance to bestiality. These unexpected plot twists that drag the reader uncomfortably close to the limits of literary decorum are the very same that produce the moments in which Masuccio's talent for startling his reader is most appreciable.



The twenty-first-century reader may find the *Novellino* embraces a curious combination of styles and motifs. Indeed, Masuccio's sources go beyond Boccaccio to the fabliaux, the *Cent nouvelles nouvelles*, anecdote, chronicle, and even Chaucer. Some, in fact, may be less intrigued by what came before, and more interested in the fascinating literary echoes that follow. Several of our tales take place in drafty castles or ill-lit interiors; one is even set in a leper hospital on a stormy night. These characteristics make some novellas appear uncannily evocative of scenes invented much later by authors like Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe and yet, at the same time, somewhat familiar. Said another way, the world of the *Novellino* survives, if indirectly, also in the imagination and recollections of generations of young European elites whose families sent them on the Grand Tour. In truth, some of this feeling is conjured up in the illustrations of E. R. Hughes that are reproduced here. Nowadays, movie critics might describe the work with labels somewhere between "Renaissance period piece" and "gritty urban action." Possessing an enviable historical 'ear' for these narratives, Christopher Stace crisply captures complex turns of phrase that are a challenge in any language and puts them into lively yet dignified prose. His is an ideal voice for a definitive English Masuccio.

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