



# Umoreismo and critical reading in Boccaccio's vernacular and Latin opere 'minori'

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*Umorismo* and critical reading  
in Boccaccio's vernacular and Latin *opere 'minori'*

A dissertation presented by Sarah Luehrman Axelrod

to

The Department of Romance Languages and Literatures

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UMORISMO AND CRITICAL READING  
IN BOCCACCIO'S VERNACULAR AND LATIN *OPERE 'MINORI'*

Abstract

*Umorismo* as Luigi Pirandello defines it is distinct from the general body of literary material meant to invoke laughter. It consciously turns rhetorical convention on its head: it creates unexpected oppositions through conscious and careful use of certain types of language in contexts where it is not expected. The aim of my study is to offer readers new ways to approach Giovanni Boccaccio's lesser-known works as fundamentally humorous texts, among other things, and to observe how they are crafted and what sets them apart from other works to which one might compare them. I argue that Boccaccio created the *Amorosa visione*, the *Teseida delle nozze di Emilia*, the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*, and the *De mulieribus claris* with a sense of *umorismo*, that is to say, by playing with the conventions that each book's respective genre invokes and then subverting expectations set up by those conventions. I examine each of these four works in its own chapter, with special attention to authorial voice, fictionality, narrative strategies, and intertextual practices. I rely chiefly on close readings of the texts themselves, in the original language first and foremost, and I attempt to draw out the humor that I see in the way they have been composed, often a result of play between their content and their structure and style. Ultimately, the *umorismo* in these works is, as Pirandello would agree it should be, not immediately evident: it takes patience and close reading to uncover. Boccaccio is staunchly in favor of critical and persistent reading as a necessary value that all poetry and fiction should require. His treatise in the *Genealogia deorum gentilium* on how readers should interact with books explicitly promotes the sort of reading required to perceive and parse the *umorismo* within his texts.

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## RINGRAZIAMENTI

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## DEDICA

*For my daughter,  
with the hope that one day she will join me  
among Boccaccio's inquiring and exacting lettrici.*



## PREFACE

Well before the first word of the first chapter was written or even imagined, my own introduction to these wonderful and underappreciated texts came at just the right moment: during the final semester before my general exams, when Professor Jeffrey Schnapp began teaching a course called “Boccaccio and/on Authority” at Harvard (2012). Right away, the presence of the double preposition intrigued me; Boccaccio’s opus is anything but straightforward in any position it takes; he would never call himself an authority on anything, would never characterize his work as being “on” something with the sort of forthrightness that that preposition entails. Yet, he does not simply exist alongside a concept of authority that he accepts and follows, as “and” implies. This was one of the first courses I had taken that did not attempt to provide a straight answer to all the puzzles that such complicated works constitute. Rather, we tried to do as Boccaccio commanded in the *Genealogia*: we read intertextually, intratextually, and with attention. We discussed, we argued, and most importantly, we gave ourselves and each other permission to find the whole thing funny.

The humor, however, was contingent upon other readings that influenced and informed us. Each work we read benefited from the ones that had preceded it; having read the faux-glossator in the *Teseida*, “che sono io”, the self-commentary in the *Elegia* took on a much more complex and deliberately cagey tone. The *De mulieribus claris* and Boccaccio’s other Latin works seemed funny indeed when compared with what came before: here was someone clearly playing with the characteristics of encyclopedia, and with Latin prose itself. Reading these texts took on a different shape when we read them in dialogue with other texts: sometimes these were sources or derivatives, and sometimes they were just texts bearing some tangible and relevant material relationship

to the primary texts. Drawing upon the format of this course, I began exploring humor in Boccaccio through a similar type of inquiry to that the course had modeled. Read the text closely, deeply, and see what stands out when another text, whether a partner or a foil, sits next to it.

The more I pursued this topic, the more I began to perceive the subtle but no less present assumption of earnest and straightforward authorship in many medieval Italian texts. Either they were funny or they weren't, and the idea that they could be humorously exploring something quite serious was often not even considered, if not downright contradicted. I have been lucky to work with professors who were quite eager to see me contradict this conventional wisdom and explore these texts. I have also been fortunate in working on Boccaccio through the year of his seven-hundredth birthday, 2013, thanks to which I have benefited from the enthusiastic convergences of *boccaccisti* at conferences and from a flurry of new publications on the author and his work. Despite the overwhelming dominance of the *Decameron* in Boccaccio studies, I have found a wonderfully receptive and interested audience for my work on the *opere minori*.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### **'Lector, intende: laetaberis':<sup>1</sup>**

#### **Reading critically and uncovering humor from Apuleius to Pirandello**

Apuleius flourishingly opens his *Metamorphoses* with this wish, or command, or recommendation: pay attention, reader, and you will find delight.<sup>2</sup> *Laetare* requires *intendere*: it does not lie on the surface for just anyone to grasp without some effort. Unfortunately, however, literary criticism has a long history of characterizing what came before the Renaissance as simple, written completely in earnest, lacking in the complexity that modernity eventually introduced, and certainly devoid of real humor. Everything on the surface, little *intendere* needed, less *laetare* to be found.

Certain books were meant to make people laugh, but these were and are often subtly categorized as not only lower in status but superficial, straightforward, bawdy: funny, but in their composition ultimately unimaginative and indeed humorless themselves. Those works considered great literature, on the other hand, are serious, demonstrating a wealth of knowledge and a lifetime of study on the part of the author. The real foundations of Italian vernacular literature as we now know it are full of complexities, mysteries that will never be fully solved, long reflections on the nature of love, and most importantly, subversion and innovation. Boccaccio's *Decameron* as well as Dante's *Commedia* and Petrarch's *Canzoniere* each invented their respective forms in the vernacular, overturning long-standing precedents of Latin as the primary written language for any sort of high style. The *Decameron*, furthermore, is willingly credited with being a funny book. A sort of exception that proves the rule, Boccaccio's

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<sup>1</sup> APULEIUS and J. Arthur HANSON, ed. (1981), *Metamorphoses*, I.1.

<sup>2</sup> Trans. HANSON.

*centonovelle* is allowed to be both a serious, foundational work of literature and a funny book at the same time. Its very complexity is what Vittore Branca admiringly cites when he calls it the human comedy to complement Dante's divine comedy.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, it would seem that this is where our latter-day willingness to credit Boccaccio with the ability to write serious literature subversively and with humor ends, for the most part. Boccaccio criticism by and large will only discuss humor in the context of the *Decameron*, and furthermore, most of Boccaccio's so-called 'minor' works are only present in volumes and articles that compare them to the 'masterpiece'. In Boccaccio's career, all roads lead towards or away from the *Decameron*. Robert Hollander, in his volume dedicated to Boccaccio's *opere minori in volgare*, agrees that while Boccaccio's extra-*Decameron* output has not been completely neglected, it has nonetheless "paid the price of having been the companion of an undisputed masterwork," and as such it has been "underattended and perhaps therefore often misconceived."<sup>4</sup>

Introducing my own work on a selection of the *opere minori* by alluding to the masterwork, I too perpetuate the imbalance. Even as I protest, the only work of Boccaccio's that I have named so far is the *Decameron*, for the sake of the common ground it provides. I can only offer as apologia that I choose to meet readers where they are, where I was before I took up the *Amorosa visione* for the first time: wanting to read more from the pen that wrote the sentence:

*E se forse pure alcuna particella è in quella, alcuna paroletta più liberale che forse a spigolistra donna non si conviene, le quali più le parole pesan che' fatti e più d'apparer s'ingegnan che d'esser buone, dico che più non si dee a me esser disdetto d'averle scritte che generalmente si disdica agli uomini e alle donne di dir tutto di 'foro' e 'caviglia' e 'mortaio' e 'pestello' e 'salsiccia' e 'mortadello', e tutto pien di simiglianti cose.*

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<sup>3</sup> See Vittore BRANCA (1980) viii-xvii, xxxii-xxxix, also Robert HOLLANDER (2000) 17.

<sup>4</sup> HOLLANDER (1977), 1-3.

And even if the stories do, perhaps, contain one or two trifling expressions that are too unbridled for the liking of those prudish ladies who attach more weight to words than to deeds, and are more anxious to seem virtuous than to be virtuous, I assert that it was no more improper for me to have written them than for men and women at large, in their everyday speech, to use such words as *hole*, and *rod*, and *mortar*, and *pestle*, and *crumpet*, and *stuffing*, and any number of others.<sup>5</sup>

On one level, we have to laugh at this: the insistent and excessive listing of contemporary slang words for genitalia, in service of a point about being virtuous in the coda to the *Decameron*. He puts the words themselves in the mouths of those “uomini e donne,” distancing himself from their use even as he uses them. The words themselves may lack subtlety, but their context and their deployment is deftly humorous. Such humor does not detract from the point Boccaccio is seeking to make; on the contrary, by playing with the tone of the passage and eschewing the constraints of formula and convention, he draws readers in, inciting them to pay attention. In other words, as Apuleius’s nebulous *ego*-narrator would say, “Lector, intende: laetaberis.”

Apuleius’s prologue provides an elegant example of an author at play with narration, and one that Boccaccio almost certainly knew and engaged with.<sup>6</sup> Scholars have long argued over who is speaking to the *lector*, the narrator or Apuleius himself, and the presence of the seemingly willful ambiguity immediately sets a tone of lightness and humor for the work as a whole. “[T]he ambience of the prologue and the fact that there is a prologue at all point ... towards the comic stage” right away; even before we know of the comedy in the stories’ content, we perceive “the way that here and

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<sup>5</sup> Giovanni BOCCACCIO and Vittore BRANCA, ed. (1998), *Decameron*, “Conclusione dell’autore.” Trans. G. H. MCWILLIAM (2003). McWilliam is more polite than I; sausage really makes more sense when translated as “wiener” or something more explicit, but his translation is generally quite appropriately reflective of Boccaccio’s style.

<sup>6</sup> Boccaccio copied Apuleius’s complete works between 1350 and 1355: see Marco CURSI (2013), 31.

elsewhere Apuleius 'plays hide and seek' with the reader or 'peeks through the fabric of his novel'".<sup>7</sup> S.J. Harrison goes further, arguing that the speaker in the prologue is in fact the book itself: "a character who is permanently present in the novel, who can happily show detachment and omniscience about its contents, and who fits the autobiographical data given in a way that neither Apuleius nor [the protagonist] Lucius does."<sup>8</sup> The speaking book allows Apuleius to obfuscate, to play, to detach himself from the "ego" that opens the book ("at ego tibi") but without allowing the reader to relax into expectations as the narrative unfolds. "The opening sentence of the prologue directs our attention [to the fifteen tales] as if they were the novel's real substance and *raison d'être*," as John Winkler writes, but "[t]his is perhaps the most misleading sentence in the entire novel, implying that the separate, excerptible tales are to be the focus of our attention, and the manner of their introduction is an irrelevance, a mere device."<sup>9</sup> Of course, this is not the case; Apuleius's games with the narrator's identity are a ruse that will return to significance throughout the tales, as Winkler argues, employed as a sort of "hermeneutic entertainment" that exists explicitly to call into question how authoritative the narrator is, "what authority to give to any character who narrates his or her *own* experiences rather than hearsay."<sup>10</sup> This complexity regarding narratological authority, which requires attentive inquisitive reading to fully grasp, magnifies the humor and delight in reading Apuleius: it "contains many jokes, structural ironies, and explicit

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<sup>7</sup> Ken DOWDEN (1982), 427-428.

<sup>8</sup> S.J. HARRISON (1990), 509.

<sup>9</sup> John J. WINKLER (1985), 25.

<sup>10</sup> WINKLER, 13.

discussions concerning stories that take on new meanings at the end, particularly those that require a category shift or radical revision of sense.”<sup>11</sup>

This is not to say that Apuleius, or Boccaccio, for that matter, invests disproportionately in shadows and mirrors. Yet, as I will argue in the case of Boccaccio’s seemingly straightforward and earnest *opere minori* as well, the lightness with which Apuleius sets up and executes the *Metamorphoses* adds an element of humor that elegantly shapes and complicates the story itself. “L’umorismo,” in the words of Luigi Pirandello, “per lo specialissimo contrasto in esso, inevitabilmente *scompone*, disordina, discorda”; with the very particular contrast it presents, humor inevitably upsets, disorders, discords.<sup>12</sup> It undoes what logic does. Pirandello presents his views on humor in his essay *L’umorismo*, first published in 1908. The structure of the piece remains faithful to the spirit of what Pirandello wants to say about humor: it looks straight on at the logic usually applied to analyses of humor and it undoes them. This beautifully mirrors what I mean when I talk about humor in Boccaccio’s minor works as rooted in complexity and subversiveness. These texts take existing expectations about what they will offer, place numerous markers throughout that sustain these expectations in the form of style, structure, lexicon and even coherent statements, and then they slyly overturn them to create something unexpected, rich, and revealing. As I move through my selection of Boccaccio texts, a different one in each chapter, I will argue that there is humor in their composition, primarily based in the contradiction of genre expectations in a very intentional way. Contradiction, as Pirandello agrees, is essential to this interpretation, and intentional, essential contradiction at that. “La contraddizione

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<sup>11</sup> WINKLER, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Luigi PIRANDELLO (1986), 40.

dell'umorismo non è mai ... fittizia ma essenziale,"<sup>13</sup> never fictional but essential: it is what defines its presence.

To be clear: I am not setting out to 'prove' that humor is worthy of study in the field of medieval literature, nor do I wish to delve into the distinctions between parody, satire, burlesque, or the myriad other words that fall under the broad umbrella of styles and materials that make us laugh. Rather, I will investigate the comic in situations where it is not, ostensibly, the point, but where I see it as a fundamental element of the work at hand, one without which it would not be the same foundational work. I have found that many of the most interesting, rich and complex comic moments, the ones that stay with me and bring me back again and again, occur in works that are not 'comedies' as such but rather works that play with genre, works that strive to establish themselves very consciously as foundational.

Most of the relevant work on laughter in the Middle Ages specifically has appeared in the last century, and that which has been published in the last twenty years or so is the most enlightening and provocative (a number of collections of essays have sprung from conferences on medieval laughter, it seems, but fewer monographs exist that deal with this topic exclusively). In the introduction to a 2010 volume entitled *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, its editor, Albrecht Classen, discusses the role of laughter in everyday medieval life and its ability to reflect human culture and values. Humor and the impulse to laugh result from the conflict between norms, Classen argues, demonstrating a recognition and appreciation of the marginal and, thus, an idea of what constitutes marginal and thus what leads to laughter rather than tacit acceptance. The volume contains a great number of essays focusing on various medieval

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<sup>13</sup> PIRANDELLO, 9.



literary works reaching across the map of Europe and through the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Not surprisingly, Boccaccio is one of only a handful of authors discussed in the lengthy introduction; Classen refers to him as one of the first authors “to develop a coherent theory on laughter as a critical aspect of human life irrespective of social class.”<sup>14</sup> Yet, Boccaccio’s standing in the volume as one of the foremost humorists (two essays are dedicated to an analysis of his works) is regarded as a status he occupies apart from the political, philosophical, ethical and religious facets of his work.

I don’t intend to single Classen and his colleagues out for this rather narrow characterization of Boccaccio; I draw particular attention to his volume because this sort of separation between the humorous Boccaccio and the ‘other’ sides of Boccaccio is descriptive of most other scholarship that deals with Boccaccio and the comic. As Classen and many others readily state, Boccaccio the humorist indicates that laughter establishes community among characters, among readers, and indeed between readers and characters, yes. He also extols the ability of laughter to provide respite to bored women and even as a sort of remedy for the plague. Yet, there is no further exploration of the role of the comic in Boccaccio’s other personae, i.e. when he is not explicitly talking about humor or ostensibly seeking to be humorous.

Furthermore, nearly every piece of work on Boccaccio’s humor features the *Decameron* exclusively. It makes plenty of sense, of course; the *Decameron* was clearly written to make people laugh, and Boccaccio says as much as he defends the importance of *il novellare* at various moments throughout. Yet, it seems to me that to privilege the *Decameron* in such a way at the expense of the rest of Boccaccio’s opus deprives us of a more interesting discussion about Boccaccio’s skill in producing laughter, not to

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<sup>14</sup> Albrecht CLASSEN (2010), 23.

mention his larger, perhaps hidden objectives. In the last twenty years, a handful of books and edited volumes have been published with titles such as *Comedy in Chaucer and Boccaccio*; *The Comic Spirit: Boccaccio to Thomas Mann*; and *La novella e il comico da Boccaccio a Brancati*, all lacking any in-depth discussion of works besides the *Decameron*. It is in his so-called 'minor works', however, such as the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta* and *Il corbaccio*, and even in the more encyclopedic *De mulieribus claris* and *Genealogia deorum gentilium* that Boccaccio plays with tone, with genre, with language, and with expectations, in a way that I think opens a broader discussion of what writing is capable of and how humor can enhance it.

Part of what intrigues and amuses in these works is the way in which Boccaccio stages his narrative and his voice, and whether it is through overt, biting sarcasm expressed in the voice of a fictional character or through the deliberate staging of a scene taking place in the imagination in a certain way. The *Decameron* is in many ways one of his most transparent works, which at the same time continues to offer delightful new avenues of entry into its study: it is masterfully structured within the clear temporal and spatial arc of the *cornice*, and its intentions are openly discussed not only by the characters recounting the *novelle* to one another but also by the author himself in his various addresses to the reader. The narrator of the *Decameron* is by and large the Boccaccio that we imagine when we think of medieval humor, which is exactly why the field of Boccaccio studies would benefit greatly from an exploration of Boccaccio as a humorist when he is not wearing his humorist hat for his readers, so to speak.

The ultimate aim of my study is to offer readers new ways to approach Boccaccio's lesser-known works, to observe how they are crafted and what sets them apart from other works to which one might compare them. I rely chiefly on close

readings of the texts themselves, in the original language first and foremost, and I try to draw out the humor that I see in the way they have been composed, sometimes in their content and sometimes in their structure and style. Each work is accompanied by a companion text, and I consciously set the companion texts apart from the works' various source-texts in each chapter. In Chapters 2 and 5, dealing with the *Amorosa visione* and the *De mulieribus claris*, respectively, the companion text is a foil that will highlight the contrasts in a seemingly uniform genre. In Chapters 3 and 4, on the other hand, analyzing the *Teseida* and the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*, the companion text will demonstrate unexpected similarities across genres that at first look seem to be quite different. Reading Boccaccio in this way, comparing the approach of another author to a similar type of book or a similar type of story, is in my opinion the best way to shed light on the subversiveness and the playfulness of the primary texts.

It is in that spirit that I engage the question of what I recognize as humor in composition. One of its key components is certainly reflexivity and self-consciousness. Lucien Dallenbach's theorizing of the *mise en abyme* and its function as to the readability of a text (or lack thereof) is instructive in understanding the reasons for approaching Boccaccio's texts as self-reflexive, or "containing one or more doublings which function as mirrors or microcosms of the text".<sup>15</sup> Specific devices that channel reflexivity vary in their manifestations from text to text, and will be considered in turn in the chapters that follow: the use of terza rima narrating the act of looking and interpreting in the *Amorosa visione*; the disguised self-commentary glossing the verses of the *Teseida*; the female first-person narrator who claims abject humility and honesty as she describes the lies upon lies she tells in the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*; and the Latin historian whose

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<sup>15</sup> Lucien DALLENBACH and Ann TOMARKEN, trans. (1990) 9.

biographies of famous women make use of fiction as historical documentation and present multiplicities of historical viewpoints so the readers themselves might engage in the formation of history. Each of these texts, I believe, to quote Dallenbach, “conditions readings by its use of signals, instructions, or orders for decoding” and consequently allows “greater or smaller margin or freedom of movement ... to the reader.”<sup>16</sup> We have good reason, in other words, to read Boccaccio’s *opere minori* and credit him with consciously playing upon the role of the author and his relationship with the reader in a distinct way in each separate case.

The content and form of the texts themselves, then, justifies a reading that allows for reflexivity as an intentional facet of their composition. An analysis that scrutinizes a medieval text through this sort of analytic lens will require something of a defense, or apology, which I attempt to offer here. I am conscious that in the case of Boccaccio’s work under study, the *lectio facilior* paves the way to a formulaic interpretation of the genre conventions each work invokes. Indeed, as the respective chapters will touch upon, the road critics tend to travel in approaching each work is that of its precedents, of what cultural repetition it seems to be carrying out.

Fortunately, the latter half of the twentieth century has seen a handful of critics rejecting such simplicity. Umberto Eco, for one, argues on behalf of crediting medieval culture with an aesthetic sensibility, an appreciation for art and beauty, and the ability to theorize them, most notably in *Arte e bellezza nell’estetica medievale* and *Il problema estetico in Tommaso D’Aquino*. His recent compilation of all his life’s writings regarding medieval thought (*Scritti sul pensiero medievale*) demonstrates a feeling on his part that there is however still scant appreciation for the nuance and complexity of the art, literature and

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<sup>16</sup> DALLENBACH, 10.

philosophy of this period. As such, he extends a hand to the (“occasionale”) non-medievalist reader, offering what he hopes is a “meno surcigliosa e più affettuosa” [less supercilious and more affectionate] gloss on the centuries of the Middle Ages.<sup>17</sup> In Eco’s words, despite medieval culture’s appearing to “lavora[re] commentando commenti e citando formule autorevoli, con l’aria di non mai dire nulla di nuovo”, in fact, “[n]on è vero, la cultura medievale ha il senso dell’innovazione, ma si ingegna a nascondersela sotto le spoglie della ripetizione.”<sup>18</sup> Medieval culture only seems to work in repetition and formula, only seems to fail to say anything new, when in fact its sense of innovation is very much there, but the culture masks it beneath the guise of repetition.

In conjunction with the scant credit usually given to the Middle Ages for its accommodation of complexity in aesthetics, there prevails a generally anachronistic view on humor and its workings. Neither of these critical phenomena has done medieval literature any favors, particularly the latter. Luigi Pirandello, while acknowledging the “babilonica confusione”<sup>19</sup> in the interpretation of the term *umorismo*, attacks the viewpoint that humor is a literary phenomenon of modernity exclusively, which seems to have been the prevailing theory just over a century ago. Though Pirandello is arguing against the critics of the Romantic era and Eco is responding to more of a general cultural tendency in the twentieth century, bolstered by critics of Pirandello’s time like Benedetto Croce, they read as two critics in harmony with one another. Pirandello and Eco, furthermore, are both practitioners of literature; their theoretical views on medieval materials necessarily comprises a deep love for the

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<sup>17</sup> Umberto ECO (2012), 27. Translation mine.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> PIRANDELLO (1986), 8. All translations of passages in *L’umorismo* are mine. All emphasis is original.

classics they no doubt modeled themselves upon in some fashion. Pirandello visits a great number of classics in his *L'umorismo* as he analyzes with close readings the workings of humor within: Boccaccio, Ludovico Ariosto, Cervantes, and many others. Though he is not a medievalist in our sense of the word, as Eco certainly is, Pirandello's fictional and non-fictional works, *Enrico IV* being perhaps the most evident example, all depend upon a knowledge of and appreciation for the Middle Ages. This may perhaps contextualize the urgency of his desire to upend the reductionist criticism of its works and their complexity.

In framing his argument, Pirandello lets a direct quote from Enrico Nencioni, writing in 1884, demonstrate the period's totalizing and yet utterly limited stance on humor: "Noi guardiamo nell'anima umana e nella natura con una simpatia più penetrante ... Il riso d'artista e la comica fantasia di Aristofane, alcuni dialoghi di Luciano, sono eccezioni. L'antichità non ebbe, né poteva avere letteratura umoristica ...".<sup>20</sup> The knowing "we" with which Nencioni refers to modernity is clearly as exasperating to Pirandello as the rest of the quote that follows: "We look into the human soul and into nature with a more penetrating sensibility ... the artist's laughter and the comic fantasy in Aristophanes, a few of Lucian's dialogues, are exceptions. Antiquity did not have, nor could it have, humorous literature." Nencioni claims that modern man has learned to "contemplare l'infinito", thanks to the accumulated wisdom of the intervening centuries and of Christianity. Pirandello summarizes with no shortage of contempt the critical stance of Nencioni and others in his own words:

*Questi argomenti sono ben noti: il subiettivismo del poeta speculativo-sentimentale, rappresentante dell'arte moderna, in contrapposto con l'obiettivismo del poeta istintivo o ingenuo, rappresentante dell'arte antica; il*

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<sup>20</sup> PIRANDELLO, 15.

*contrasto tra l'ideale e il reale; la serenità marmorea, l'equilibrio dignitoso, la bellezza esteriore dell'arte antica contro l'esaltazione dei sentimenti, il vago, l'infinito, l'indeterminato delle aspirazioni, le melanconie, la nostalgia, la bellezza interiore dell'arte moderna; e da un canto le bassure del verismo della poesia ingenua, e dall'altro le nebbie dell'astrazione e il capogiro intellettuale della poesia sentimentale ... ecc. ecc.*

These topics are well known: the subjectivism of the speculative/sentimental poet, representative of modern art, in counterpoint to the objectivism of the instinctive or ingenuous poet, representative of ancient art; the contrast between the ideal and the real; the marble serenity, the dignified equilibrium, the exterior beauty of ancient art versus the exaltation of sentiment, the vague, the infinite, the indeterminate aspirations, the melancholy, the nostalgia, the interior beauty of modern art; and on one hand the baseness of the realism of naïve poetry, and on the other the fog of abstraction and the staggering intellect of modern poetry ... etc., etc.<sup>21</sup>

As he lays them out in this fashion, Pirandello calls particular attention to the ridiculousness of such neat binaries between antiquity and modernity. He makes it sound simplistic, hubristic, and more naïve than its would-be 'ingenuous poets' of antiquity could ever be. "[Q]ueste rapide sintesi, queste ideali ricostruzioni storiche non sono ammissibili," he says with finality: these rapid syntheses, these idealistic historical reconstructions are inadmissible.<sup>22</sup>

Put in another way, Pirandello rejects the widely accepted discontinuity between antiquity and modernity upon which his contemporaries have insisted, a barrier that allowed them a comfortable certainty of difference between themselves and the ancients.<sup>23</sup> He proceeds in a sort of textual conversation with the critics who perpetuate these views, often quoting them verbatim and then responding in his own voice with incredulousness, questions that poke holes in their reasoning as well as their wording.

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<sup>21</sup> PIRANDELLO, 14-15.

<sup>22</sup> PIRANDELLO, 17.

<sup>23</sup> See Francesco ERSPAMER (2009), 82.

Here, he tears down Giorgio Arcoleo sentence by sentence, quoting him and then responding:

*“L’Antichità costrinse serenamente le forme nell’armonia del finito”. Ecco una sintesi. Tutta l’antichità? Nessun antico escluso? ... “La vita non aveva che liberi o servi”. E non poteva qualche libero sentirsi servo e qualche servo sentirsi libero entro di sé?*

*“Antiquity calmly constrained forms into the harmony of the finite.” There’s a synthesis. All antiquity? No exceptions? ... “Life had nothing but the free and the enslaved.” And was it not possible for free men to feel like slaves and for slaves to feel like free men, within themselves?<sup>24</sup>*

The dialogue Pirandello stages between himself and the men who wrote such ill-advised platitudes is composed with lightness, keenly felt in his short fragments punctuated with accusing question marks. Though he transmits Arcoleo’s affected capitalization of *L’Antichità*, he declines to do so in his reply. His sharp incisions aim to nail these theorists to the wall, make them accountable for what they say, without claiming superior knowledge on his own behalf. The interchange resembles a somewhat insolent and certainly irreverent request for confirmation: are they sure this is what they mean to say? Can they explain it with more precision? Pirandello sets the example for his own readers in his way of approaching these prior treatises on humor in antiquity: with a critical eye. What do they mean when they make such sweeping statements about how different life was, and how can they claim a superior expressive capacity for modern times?

*Com’era la vita? O tutta pianto o tutta riso? E come faceva allora l’intelletto a cogliere il contrasto? Ogni astrazione bisogna che abbia per forza radice in un fatto concreto. C’era dunque il pianto e il riso, non il pianto o il riso; e se l’intelletto poteva cogliere il contrasto, perché non avrebbe potuto esprimerlo l’arte?*

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<sup>24</sup> PIRANDELLO, 19.



What was life like? Either all tears or all laughter? And how was the intellect then able to grasp the contrast? Every abstraction must necessarily have its roots in a concrete fact. There were, then, tears *and* laughter, not tears *or* laughter; and if the intellect could grasp the difference, why would art have been unable to express it?<sup>25</sup>

Why insist, in other words, on the simplicity of antiquity? Why must it be so monochromatic? At its core, the idea that either there was no contrast or that the intellect lacked the capacity to grasp and express such contrast is indefensible. Pirandello points the finger at Romanticism and its “vecchi cavalli di battaglia” (old stand-bys), such laughable concepts as “[q]uel *felice equilibrio*, quella *calma statuaria* e l’*anima sana* e la *serena armonia* della vita e del temperamento degli antichi” [that *happy equilibrium*, that *statuary calm* and *peaceful soul* and *serene harmony* of the life and temperament of the ancients]. Palpable scorn communicated through demonstratives and the italics permeates this entire section of *L’umorismo*: what Pirandello wants to establish with his readers is that we should absolutely not repeat the mistakes of these arbitrary critics and circumscribe our discussions of dispositions towards humor to exclude the ancient. “[È] assolutamente arbitrario il negare che tali disposizioni non esistessero o non potessero esistere in antico.”<sup>26</sup>

Although I am conscious of the danger of anachronism in discussing medieval works of literature with a contemporary lens, I will respect Pirandello’s and Eco’s wishes and attempt to approach these texts without assumptions of some absolute discontinuity in ideas of humor between then and now. I will suggest, along with Hollander and other twentieth-century critics that I will visit along the way, that Boccaccio’s ‘minor’ works deal with serious material in a humorous way, with great,

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>26</sup> PIRANDELLO, 22.

sustained, minute attention to detail in the service of that goal. Hollander's *Boccaccio's Two Venuses* makes the claim that Boccaccio's *opere minori in volgare* intend "to make an ironic attack upon the religion of love, an attack which is at times interspersed with the praise of marital love"<sup>27</sup>, which does Boccaccio the credit of reading him as more than simply earnest, but does not go quite far enough. David Lummus counters that viewing his depiction of carnal love as entirely ironic "results in a moralist Boccaccio, the ambiguity of whose literary works are flattened in the name of moral clarity."<sup>28</sup> My analysis embraces that ambiguity in all its dimension, and it will also distinguish itself from Hollander's by including Latin works as well as those in *volgare*. My own work on the *opere minori* focuses more on the play and the *umorismo* in a Pirandellian sense involved in the structure and composition of each individual work, without limiting itself to a specific subset of subject matter (carnal love) or linguistic rendering (*volgare*). I join Lummus in reading Boccaccio as willingly complex, ambiguous, and polysemous: in his words, "the reader need not seek an easy moral to [Boccaccio's stories], nor read [them] as ... simple parody, since either interpretative operation inevitably eradicates [their] complexity, ambiguity and self-reflexivity."<sup>29</sup>

Once he begins addressing what humor is and where it can be found, Pirandello does not hesitate to credit Boccaccio with being a true humorist, surpassing "di gran

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<sup>27</sup> HOLLANDER (1977), 3. He subsequently assures us that the quoted sentence "summarizes my basic interpretation accurately and would fit into a telegram." However, as I have also noted, "few of Boccaccio's readers would accept the message as having any relationship to their own sense of Boccaccio's *opere minori*. And for that reason I have written at greater length." Hollander was probably cautious of what a Boccaccian *apologia* this seems, and I like to think that it was very intentionally written as such.

<sup>28</sup> David LUMMUS (2011), 65.

<sup>29</sup> LUMMUS, 78.

lunga” the author who is usually credited as the first humorist, Chaucer.<sup>30</sup> The “magnifica opulenza” of Boccaccio’s style, the copiousness and the striking nature of his form, these are what makes Boccaccio the humorist in perhaps a less obvious way than Chaucer. His capacity to condition content with form in a way that surprises is at the root of this distinction: “nell’arte di render verosimili certe avventure troppo strane”, in the art of making certain adventures that are too strange seem realistic, Boccaccio’s *umorismo* makes itself manifest.<sup>31</sup> Pirandello goes on to insist that true *umorismo* as distinguished from the larger and less finely drawn category of the comic in general is dependent on form: knowledge of how rhetoric operates and willingness to transgress it.

*La Retorica, in somma, era come un guardaroba: il guardaroba dell’eloquenza, dove i pensieri nudi andavano a vestirsi. E gli abiti, in quel guardaroba, eran già belli e pronti, tagliati tutti su i modelli antichi, più o meno adorni, di stoffa umile o mezzana o magnifica, divisi in tante scansie, appesi alle grucce e custoditi dalla guardarobiera che si chiamava Convenienza. Questa assegnava gli abiti acconci ai pensieri che si presentavano ignudi.*

Rhetoric, basically, was like a wardrobe: the wardrobe of eloquence, where naked thoughts went to dress themselves. And the clothes, in that wardrobe, were already good and ready, cut from ancient models, more or less decorated, in humble, or middling, or magnificent cloth, divided between so many shelves, hanging from hooks and watched over by the attendant named Convenience. She assigned the appropriate clothing to the bare thoughts that presented themselves.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> PIRANDELLO, 35. That those Italian contemporaries of his who claim to study humor give such credit to the Englishman while never dreaming of calling Boccaccio a humorist, he attributes to Pascoli’s observation that people are more ready to call something humorous if it is in a language other than their own. “Ogni lingua straniera,” says Pascoli, as quoted in Pirandello, “pur da voi non intesa, vi suona all’orecchio più, dirò, mirabilmente, che la vostra” [every foreign language, even if you don’t understand it, resounds in your ear more, I’ll say, more wonderfully than your own]. Perhaps this is why I as non-native Italian speaker have found myself so drawn to this topic in particular.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>32</sup> PIRANDELLO, 39.

Pirandello goes on to create an entire scene of these naked thoughts proceeding to the wardrobe and receiving their assigned clothes by Convenience. Thus, he asserts, “la forma non era propriamente forma, ma *formazione*: non nasceva, si faceva.” Form is not something that is born already being; it is created, according to pre-established norms. Humor needs those pre-established norms and expectations of genre, those created by Convenience in the wardrobe of Rhetoric, in Pirandello’s metaphor, in order to disrupt them with something unexpected. The humor in Boccaccio’s *opere minori*, I argue, consists precisely of this: playing to readers’ expectations with form and subverting them with content. Doing one thing and saying another, demonstrating the utmost dexterity with words while claiming the utmost humility as author.

One of Pirandello’s distinguishing features as theorist is, of course, dealing seriously with weighty matters without losing a sense of lightness. He has the advantage of theorizing as writer and not critic, which imbues his words with both a highly distinctive style and underlines his deep reverence for and solidarity with other writers, the writers who are being downtrodden by the other critics. *L’umorismo* works so well because it does what it does without taking itself too seriously as philosophical treatise, mostly due to Pirandello’s conversational but no less biting tone with his critical adversaries and his employment of metaphor that is subtle and nuanced in its form just as it is clear and accessible in its content. His praise of Boccaccio stems from his admiration of the *novelle* (and we can forgive him for limiting his literary examples to the masterpieces that constitute an accessible frame of reference for his primary audience), but his defense of Boccaccio as among the great humorists of all time rings particularly true when we examine the latter’s less well-read works.

Part of the appeal of Pirandello's approach to humor is his assertion that it complicates things, disrupts things; true *umorismo* requires good reading to be understood as such. In the centuries since Boccaccio, Pirandello's treatise is only one of many attempting to theorize the comic and differentiate between irony, satire, farce, and so on. Particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, scholarly and philosophical treatises on the subject abound. One of the most engaging and at times confounding texts on the matter is Friedrich Nietzsche's *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, translated as *The Gay Science*. Nietzsche is another author who, like the extra-*Decameronian* Boccaccio, is not often thought of as particularly humorous. Yet, he is one of few theorists who insist upon the coexistence of the comic and the serious. Nietzsche's tone is surprising, intimate, conversational, highly punctuated, at times seemingly earnest and at others admonishing readers for putting too much faith in earnestness. A close reading of his text will set up my approach to Boccaccio's work.

Though he so often deals in opacity, aphorism and gloom, Nietzsche writes *The Gay Science* with a voice that strives to be relatable, at times unpacking Schopenhauer and Hegel with a critical eye, at times speaking about propensities and tendencies of mankind in general. The work is divided into four books, in which are included a total of 381 numbered paragraphs, some a single sentence and others stretching on for pages. As the editor of one translation notes, it is all too common to strain oneself in an attempt to fit Nietzsche somewhere within the parameters of philosophy, to try and make sense of him by comparing him to his contemporaries or his predecessors. In a somewhat disparaging comment about approaching Nietzsche through books about Nietzsche, the editor writes that these are "usually boring, [and] you learn about the authors of those

books, not Nietzsche."<sup>33</sup> What I see in *The Gay Science* is a text that deserves to be read on its own terms and not schematized within a nineteenth-century paradigm of philosophy. Just as Boccaccio's "minor works" demand a more attentive critical reading as texts within their own right, so too does Nietzsche's *Gay Science* benefit from close reading, independent of any attempt to situate it within an autobiographical arc of the author's life.

Nietzsche was, among many other things, an admirer of medieval literature, particularly the provençal troubadours, "those brilliant, ingenious men of the "gai saber," to whom Europe owes so much, and almost owes itself."<sup>34</sup> Nicolas L'Hermitte argues that the intertextuality between Nietzsche's text and the actual troubadour songs themselves reveals a deep intertextuality, perhaps even the inspiration for Nietzsche's concept of joyful science.<sup>35</sup> In L'Hermitte's words, "[Nietzsche's] philosophical work can be seen as a troubadour performance."<sup>36</sup> Like Pirandello, Nietzsche is both theorist and practitioner; he writes as a writer and not principally as a critic, but in this text he is trying on his critic's hat as well as his troubadour's ensemble. Of most interest to the present study are his reflections in *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* on poetry, art, humor and seriousness, which he does not attempt to tackle in a single uninterrupted analysis. What he does instead is jump from weighty matter to weighty matter, never writing too much on the subject before switching to another weighty matter entirely and beginning to write about it as though nothing precedes it, fitting perfectly into Italo Calvino's

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<sup>33</sup> Bill CHAPKO (2010), "Introduction".

<sup>34</sup> NIETZSCHE, cited in Nicolas L'HERMITTE (2013), 111.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>36</sup> L'HERMITTE, 124.

conception of *leggerezza*. "Were I to choose an auspicious image for the new millennium," Calvino writes, it would be "the sudden agile leap of the poet-philosopher who raises himself above the weight of the world, showing that with all his gravity he has the secret of lightness."<sup>37</sup> In perfect harmony with Calvino's vision, Nietzsche's very first chapter deals explicitly with the longevity of comedy and its inextricable ties to tragedy:

... the short tragedy always gave way again and returned into the eternal comedy of existence; and the "waves of uncountable laughter" - to cite Aeschylus - must in the end overwhelm even the greatest of these tragedies. ... Gradually, man has become a fantastic animal that has to fulfill one more condition of existence than any other animal: man *has to* believe, to know, from time to time *why* he exists; his species cannot flourish without a periodic trust in life - without faith in *reason in life!* And again and again the human race will decree from time to time: "There is something at which it is absolutely forbidden henceforth to laugh." The most cautious friend of man will add: "Not only laughter and gay wisdom but the tragic, too, with all its sublime unreason, belongs among the means and necessities of the preservation of the species."<sup>38</sup>

In so few words, Nietzsche subverts so much: the idea that reason is something men believe in because they must in order to exist, not something that is a result of existence. The idea that what "it is absolutely forbidden to laugh" at is arbitrary. The notion that laughter is the bedrock of and not the relief from tragedy. As his thoughtful and insightful 'eternal returns' to these topics throughout the book show, Nietzsche is not *just* making light of existence, but he is *also* making light of it. The funny and the serious are not in opposition; he hardly considers a proposition that they might be, instead taking numerous opportunities to remind his reader that each is necessary for the fullness of the other. The concluding chapter puts this in no uncertain terms:

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<sup>37</sup> Italo CALVINO (1988), 12.

<sup>38</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm NIETZSCHE and Walter KAUFMANN, trans. (1974), I.1. All emphasis original.

Another ideal runs ahead of us ... : the ideal of a spirit who plays ... with all that has until now been called holy, good, untouchable, divine; for whom those supreme things that the people naturally accept as their value standards, signify danger, decay, debasement, or at least recreation, blindness, and temporary self-oblivion; the ideal of a human, superhuman well-being and benevolence that will often appear *inhuman* – for example, when it confronts all earthly seriousness so far, all solemnity in gesture, word, tone, eye, morality, and task so far, as if it were their most incarnate and involuntary parody – and in spite of all this, it is perhaps only with him that *great seriousness* really begins, that the real question mark is posed for the first time...<sup>39</sup>

The ideal of playing with the serious, the notion that playing with the serious is in fact necessary for “the proper interrogation mark”: this is a premise not widely accepted or even necessarily considered most of the time, particularly in the study of medieval literature. Something that looks like parody, that seems inhuman in comparison with seriousness and solemnity, is in fact humanly superhuman benevolence. The true danger, ruin, and abasement, as I read it, comes of measuring all value by what “has until now been called holy, good, inviolable, divine.” The entire book up to this concluding chapter has been concerned with picking apart so many concepts and tenets previously considered inviolable: this, Nietzsche says, the willingness to make light of what is heavy, is the key to the greatest seriousness, the fate of the soul. This is where “tragedy begins...” and as we are left hanging, perhaps we understand that this new tragedy, too, must be parodied so that it not give way to “relaxation, blindness or temporary self-forgetfulness.”

In discussing the pathology for seriousness, Nietzsche distinguishes between thinkers and artists and their associations with what “being serious about truth” means. While a thinker might consider certain “views and types of proof and scrutiny ... a frivolity in himself to which he has succumbed on this or that occasion to his shame”, an

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<sup>39</sup> NIETZSCHE, V.382.



artist who adopts the same self-important view of his work begins to feel “that he has now become deeply serious about truth and that it is admirable” to strive for “the opposite of mere appearance”. This pretension on the part of the artist, this “emphatic seriousness”, actually betrays the truth of how “superficial and modest his spirit has been all along when playing with knowledge.”<sup>40</sup> Though he has choice words for scholars and their own pretensions in other instances, here Nietzsche’s admonishment is aimed at artists and their misguided wish not to pursue truth but to be admired for appearing to pursue it.

Nietzsche is eager to undermine any veil of reverence towards poetry espoused by those “who love the fantastic side of man”, a sort of collective straw man who argues that verse is a whimsical creation that escapes the capacities of reason. In Nietzsche’s contrived dialogue, the interlocutor maintains that ““this rhythmic speech does anything but promote the clarity of communication”” and ““the wild and beautiful irrationality of poetry refutes ... utilitarianism.””<sup>41</sup> In other words, poetry is something that criticism cannot penetrate: it simply exists outside of laws and logic. Almost begrudgingly, Nietzsche avows that he “[has] to side with the utilitarians”, and he counters that the very aim of poetry when it came about was precisely utility. The “rhythmic force” of poetry not only “bids one choose one’s words with care,” but also, supposedly, “impress[es] the gods more deeply,” and furthermore makes verse easier than ordinary speech for men to memorize. Poetry is functional, accessible, and subject to critical analysis. It is not powerful because it is wildly and beautifully irrational, but because these *feelings* about its power prevail, themselves irrational. “Such a fundamental feeling

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<sup>40</sup> NIETZSCHE, II.88.

<sup>41</sup> NIETZSCHE, II.84.

[that by means of verse one almost became a god] can never be erased entirely; and even now, after men have fought against such superstitions for thousands of years, the wisest among us are still occasionally fooled by rhythm”, he says, “if only insofar as we sometimes consider an idea truer simply because it has a metrical form and presents itself with a divine skip and a jump.”<sup>42</sup> This is what causes Nietzsche to marvel, not the poetry itself. Poetry is very clear in its origins, intents and purposes; the way people respond to it even when they should know better is a little bit funny. “Isn’t it rather amusing that to this day the most serious philosophers, however strict they may be in questions of certainty, still call on what poets have said in order to lend their ideas force and credibility?”

The conditioned reactions elicited by poetry and art when one does not think about them critically, in other words, are both deserving of derision and yet essential to life. This position feeds his proposition, as Kathleen Higgins puts it, “that a comic outlook – a view that adjusts for and delights in incongruities that undercut one’s expectations – is optimal if a person is to thrive.”<sup>43</sup> Without such an outlook, Nietzsche says, how could we bear our existence? Science by itself, untempered, reveals the “general untruth and mendaciousness” in human existence; its capacity to do so is precisely what we value in it. Yet, without the “cult of the untrue” that art allows us to maintain, “[h]onesty would lead to nausea and suicide.”<sup>44</sup> Wisdom, not honesty, is what can give us pleasure in the end, and if we are to find pleasure in wisdom we must

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<sup>42</sup> NIETZSCHE, II.84.

<sup>43</sup> Kathleen HIGGINS (2000), 9.

<sup>44</sup> NIETZSCHE, II.107.

“occasionally find pleasure in our folly”; honesty is not sufficient without it. The ultimate plea for humor is here in these pages on “our ultimate gratitude to art”:

At times we need a rest from ourselves by looking upon, by looking *down* upon, ourselves and, from an artistic distance, laughing *over* ourselves or weeping *over* ourselves. ... Precisely because we are at bottom grave and serious human beings – really, more weights than human beings – nothing does us as much good as a *fool’s cap*: we need it in relation to ourselves ...<sup>45</sup>

We are limited, in other words, by refusing to pull away from our most earnest tendencies once in a while. Our seriousness is not diminished by laughter; they do not exist in a zero-sum relationship. Seriousness is not the problem so much as people’s misguided commitment to “taking [something] seriously,” as he asserts in a later passage: “They call it ‘taking the matter *seriously*’ when they want to work with [the intellect] and think well. How burdensome they must find good thinking!” He further derides these would-be thinkers whose “prejudice” leads them to believe that “where laughter and gaiety are found, thinking does not amount to anything”.<sup>46</sup>

If one were to walk away from *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* having understood it to be a warning against setting too much store by what claims to be serious and honest to the exclusion of all else, it wouldn’t contradict anything the text says. Yet, to do so would be to miss an opportunity for a serious discussion about humor. Furthermore, to pretend the whole thing is so easily understood would directly contradict the express desires of the author as stated in the penultimate section, “On the question of being understandable”:

One does not only wish to be understood when one writes; one wishes just as surely *not* to be understood. It is not by any means necessarily an objection to a book when anyone finds it impossible to understand:

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>46</sup> NIETZSCHE, IV.327.

perhaps that was part of the author's intention ... All the more subtle laws of any style have their origin at this point: they at the same time keep away, create a distance, forbid 'entrance,' understanding ... while they open the ears of those whose ears are related to ours.<sup>47</sup>

So much for our arrival at the end feeling enlightened; before we can feel too confident in having learned the correct lessons, Nietzsche is here to remind us that we cannot necessarily trust an author's intentions regarding our capacity to engage. In the next breath, he hastily reverses again, saying to his readers: "I don't want either my ignorance or the liveliness of my temperament to keep me from being understandable for *you*, my friends".<sup>48</sup> He is conspiratorial, reminding us once again of his great strength in comparison to other authors whose prose may alienate readers: "[f]or I approach deep problems like cold baths: quickly into them and quickly out again."<sup>49</sup> With his words he both invites readers to believe they understand him and at the same time defies them to believe that they ever could.

This kind of contradiction is consistently present in Boccaccio's introductions and conclusions to his own works; as the following chapters will explore, his texts are engaged in a continuous process of saying one thing and doing another, making claims and simultaneously undermining them. His texts look inward upon themselves, I argue, and they deliberately pose challenges to the reader who would take them entirely at face value. The Boccaccio who wrote the *Amorosa visione*, the *Teseida*, the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta* and the *De mulieribus claris* is an author who wants to invite skepticism and discourage blindly accepting what the 'io' in each work is claiming. Being

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<sup>47</sup> NIETZSCHE, V.381

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*.

understandable, just as Nietzsche declares, is not his first and foremost intention; it is my view, however, that he can nevertheless be understood, if one reads closely.

A distinct parallel to Nietzsche emerges when one takes up Boccaccio's *Genealogia deorum gentilium*, first of all a compendium of pagan gods, their stories and their meanings, and second of all, more relevantly in this context, an impassioned defense of poetry, fiction, and literature composed for its own sake. We have worked back in time from Umberto Eco, through Pirandello and Nietzsche, and we now find ourselves (having skipped quite a long series of centuries) near the end of Boccaccio's writing career. The last two books of the long and thorough *Genealogia* are devoted to this defense, anticipating the criticisms and addressing them one by one. Though it seldom touches explicitly upon humor, the *Genealogia* advocates reading deeply, the kind of reading without which Pirandello's *umorismo* would remain concealed, unacknowledged and unappreciated:

*Et ut iterum dixerim, volentibus intelligere et nexus ambiguus enodare legendum est, insistendum vigilandumque atque interrogandum, et omni modo premende cerebri vires. Et si non una via potest quis pervenire quo cupit, intret alteram, et, si obstent obices, arripiat aliam, donec, si valiture sint vires, lucidum illi appareat quod primo videbatur obscurum.*

And I'll say it again: for the one who wishes to understand, to dissolve the knots of ambiguity, it is necessary to read, to pore over the text, to stay awake interrogating it, to push the capacities of the brain in every way. And if by one way it isn't possible to get where one wants, one enters by another; and if obstacles arise, one tries a third, until the point where, if one's strength is sufficient, that which was obscure appears light.<sup>50</sup>

Ambiguity, obscurity, and the unexpected are what make poetry worth reading. The triple gerundive in the first sentence following "legendum est" ("insistendum vigilandumque atque interrogandum") tells us distinctly, rhythmically, what reading

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<sup>50</sup> Giovanni BOCCACCIO and Vittore BRANCA, ed. (1998). *Genealogia deorum gentilium*, XIV.xii.17.

means to Boccaccio, what poetry requires if it is to be fully grasped. The satisfaction that can be found in reading depends upon these.

What seems to concern Boccaccio most in the *Genealogia* is the charge that poets are liars and that fables are deceptions. Boccaccio spends much of Book XIV attacking this position from all sides, from the true meaning of the word “fabula”, or fictional story, to the folly of applying any sort of blanket accusation to an entire group of people without distinguishing, without thinking critically. Much has been made of the *Genealogia*’s analysis of what poetry is, what composing fictional stories is about, but here the key facet to focus on is its insistence that readers use their brains when reading.

In a line that Nietzsche might have quoted, Boccaccio insists that difficulty in poetry is a *good* thing, far from a weapon to be used against it; the twelfth chapter of Book XIV is thus appropriately named “*Damnanda non est obscuritas poetarum*”, or “The obscurity of poets is not to be condemned.” Poets may not say things as plainly as possible, but this is both intentional and for the best:

*Nec sit quis existimet a poetis veritates fictionibus invidia conditas, aut ut velint omnino absconditorum sensum negare lectoribus, aut ut artificiosiores appareant, sed ut, que apposita viluissent, labore ingeniorum quesita et diversimode intellecta comperta tandem faciant cariora.*

Let there not be anyone who thinks that poets have hidden the truth beneath fables either for envy or because they want to deny readers the meaning of hidden things, or to seem more capable with artifice; rather, they have done this so that, rather than being easy to grasp and therefore devalued, things might be sought after with the labor of the mind, differently understood, and finally found, and that they might thus be more dear.<sup>51</sup>

Reading poetry *should* take effort. Uncovering meaning makes that meaning more vital, powerful and lasting. Poets write verses that require “*labore[m] ingeniorum*” from

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<sup>51</sup> BOCCACCIO, *Genealogia*, XIV.xii.9.

readers because they know this and they want to craft an arduous but fruitful and lasting reading experience.

Furthermore, poets' concealing truths in such a way beneath their own inventions is not to be dismissed as malicious falsehood. "In and of themselves, the myths that entranced Boccaccio throughout a lifetime of writing are 'fables,' but when properly understood in their deeper sense, the doings of the gods become vehicles for truth," as Victoria Kirkham puts it in a monograph on Boccaccio's *Filocolo*.<sup>52</sup> Poets are doing more than just telling the story that is on the surface, Boccaccio maintains, when they recount a myth: they are not simply writing their words in earnest, spilling their personally held beliefs onto the page, but rather composing so as to draw out deeper levels of meaning. "Multos autem deos scripsisse poetas, cum unus tantum sit Deus" [the poets wrote of many gods, even if there exists only one], but this does not mean that they are any less devoutly Christian. "Minime illis in mendacium imputandum" [they should not be charged as liars at all], "quia non credentes neque firmantes, sed more suo fingentes scripsere" [because they wrote these things neither believing nor seeking to prove, but inventing, as is their practice].<sup>53</sup> Do not be so quick to label poets as earnest, in other words, for they are quite capable of manipulating their words to express something other than the abject truth.

The concept of *fingere*, inventing, creating fiction, is one that this dissertation will be exploring more deeply in Chapter 4, in the context of the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*; here, it suffices to say that Boccaccio is openly asking his readers to evaluate literature, including that which he has written previously, for more than just what it appears to say

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<sup>52</sup> KIRKHAM (2001), 11.

<sup>53</sup> *Genealogia*, XIV.xiii.7.

on the surface. He repeatedly admonishes those who assume that a superficial knowledge of anything is sufficient to move through the world of intellect: one who reads Boethius's *Consolationes* "solum inspicientes cortice" [only inspecting the surface] will completely misread him, thinking that he condemns the Muses as harlots and therefore poets as dishonest, when nothing could be further from the truth.<sup>54</sup> Boccaccio has particular scorn for such ignorant misappropriation of philosophers in this way: in one of the funnier passages of Book XIV, he mocks those who, before having even seen the threshold of the schoolhouse, having only heard the names of certain philosophers, nonetheless fancy themselves philosophers: "ante visum scholarum limen, se, quia quandoque phylosophorum quorundam audivere nomina, putant esse phylosophos".<sup>55</sup> He purposefully positions their faked gravity ("ficta gravitate verborum et morum ponderositate") with the true superficiality of what they say: "non nisi de apicibus rerum verba faciunt", they only speak of the very tips, the most obvious points, of the subject matter.<sup>56</sup>

Poets, however, are exceedingly conscious of the multiple levels upon which they operate. Boccaccio asserts that it is foolish to believe that the stories of poets stop at the surface, as he proclaims in a section title: "[s]ultum credere poetas nil sensisse sub cortice fabularum" [it is silly to think that poets intended to say nothing under the surface of their fables].<sup>57</sup> Poetry is a "fervor quidam exquisite inveniendi atque dicendi",

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<sup>54</sup> *Genealogia*, XIV.xx.1.

<sup>55</sup> *Genealogia*, XIV.iii.1.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>57</sup> *Genealogia*, XIV.x.



a force that inspires the poet to find exquisite things and put them into words. From these deeper thoughts, the poet works outward:

*Huius enim fervoris sunt sublimus effectus, ut-puta-mentem in desiderium dicendi compellere, peregrinas et inauditas inventiones excogitare, meditata ordine certo componere, ornare compositum inusitato quodam verborum atque sententiarum contextu, velamento fabuloso atque decenti veritatem contegere.*

The effects of this fervor are sublime: such as, for example, to push the mind toward the desire to express or imagine rare and never understood inventions, to compose those already imagined in some determined order, to decorate the composition with a certain unusual formation of words and concepts, and to cover the truth with a pleasing, storied veil.<sup>58</sup>

The poet is the master of what he writes at every level, from the initial invention to its composition in words to the ordering of those words to the final decoration, the veil.

One who skims the very surface can have no way of understanding anything about what an author intends to say. Reading Virgil's *Aeneid* superficially, certain "insipidi" would call the great poet "mendax", liar, for his having created the story of Dido's and Aeneas's love affair, insulting the memory of the Carthaginian queen. Boccaccio hastens to correct this knee-jerk reaction on the part of such readers: Virgil was not trying and failing to tell the 'true' story of Dido. Such a "doctissimus" clearly knew quite well that in reality, "Didonem honestate precipuam fuisse mulierem," [Dido was a woman of unassailable honesty], "eamque manu propria mori maluisse, quam infixum pio pectori castimonie propositum secundis inficere nuptiis" [who would have killed herself before she sullied her vow of chastity with a second marriage]. Poets are not like historians, first of all, recounting the facts of a story from start to finish; they operate "verum artificio quodam longe maiori", with much more subtle artifice, sometimes beginning their stories in the middle, "aut circa medium hystorie", and then moving through time

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<sup>58</sup> *Genealogia*, XIV.vi.1.

as they please, adding details as they are necessary. This is an intentional part of their work. Moreover, Virgil wrote the *Aeneid* for the glory of Caesar Augustus and of Rome, meaning that Aeneas's ultimate refusal of carnal love and feminine delights ("lascivias et immunditas carnis et muliebres delicias robore mentem spernentem atque calcantem"<sup>59</sup>) for the sake of his Roman destiny constitutes an expression of something more complex than simply the facts of history. Most importantly, however, Virgil is writing about deeper human truths, through the vehicle of Dido and Aeneas:

*...quod sub velamento latet poetico, intendit Virgilius per totum opus ostendere quibus passionibus humana fragilitas infestetur, et quibus viribus a constanti viro superentur.*

this is hidden beneath the veil of poetry: Virgil intends to demonstrate throughout the work what passions disturb human fragility and with which forces these are conquered by the constant man.<sup>60</sup>

In other words, Virgil uses a story, a fiction, to talk about very real and profoundly felt human sentiment, instinct, and forbearance. He was inventing when he wrote Book IV of the *Aeneid*, meaning that he was neither earnestly trying to transmit straightforward fact nor mendaciously attempting to spread a lie; his agenda requires deep, intentional reading to tease out.

Boccaccio furthermore makes it clear, though as indirectly and diminutively as he can, that he, too, is among those *poetas* who intend to say a great deal *sub cortice fabularum*. Having spoken of Dante, Petrarch, and several other well-established poetic masters, he briefly notes:

*Possem preterea et meum ... inducere... sed omittendum censui, quia nec adhuc tanti sum ut inter prestantes viros misceri debeam, et quia propria sunt alienis linquenda sermonibus.*

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<sup>59</sup> *Genealogia*, XIV.xiii.17.

<sup>60</sup> *Genealogia*, XIV.xiii.12.

I could also invoke my own [work] ... , but I thought it best to stay silent, both because I am not yet so important as to be mixed among excellent men and because one's own things must be left to the discourses of others.<sup>61</sup>

It is up to us, then, to praise Boccaccio's work, to read with intent and to discuss what is to be found *sub cortice fabularum*.

In Chapter 2, we visit the *Amorosa visione*, one of Boccaccio's early vernacular poems first written during his time in Naples in the 1330s. The setup of the work provides clear expectations for the reader: a poem composed of fifty cantos, written in Dante's already famous *terza rima*, in which a young man finds himself suddenly in the midst of a dream wherein a guide visits him and tells him to follow closely that he may learn the truth about earthly love. Fully aware of the glaringly obvious parallels to a certain other dream-vision in *terza rima*, Boccaccio takes every opportunity to play with the standards that such a structure sets up. The protagonist does not want to obey the guide, or follow her; in fact, the moment he is invited to follow another path, he makes up his mind to leave her immediately and go after what his instantaneous desire seeks. In the end it is she who reluctantly follows him where he wishes to go, nagging him all the while to listen to her counsel. What we have by the end of the dream is a Boccaccian story told in Dantean form, a reverent tribute to the latter's work as well as a playful appropriation of it in order to tell a different story, transmit a different set of reading values. Though there are some moments that one can easily read as overtly comic when reading the *Visione* alongside the *Commedia*, the humor in this piece comes from this juxtaposition: the dressing of a Boccaccian thought in a Dantean robe, as Pirandello might put it.

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<sup>61</sup> *Genealogia*, XIV.x.6.

Chapter 3 deals with genre expectations, as well, in examining Boccaccio's *Teseida*, which first appeared not long after the *Visione*. This epic poem almost exactly imitates the structure of the *Aeneid*, down to the distribution of verses across its twelve books. Its story bears more resemblance to that of the *Thebaid*, which Boccaccio knew well and had even copied for himself and commented upon. The *Aeneid* and the *Thebaid*, therefore, tend to be the critical points of comparison for the *Teseida* in most of the critical literature, and they generally lead to an unfavorable view of the latter, which seems to have failed the "classical epic" test presented by Virgil and Statius. I propose to read the *Teseida* as poem alongside a *roman* in *ancien français*, Chrétien de Troyes's *Cligès*, because such a juxtaposition offers a much more nuanced view of what Boccaccio is doing with genre. The *Teseida* is telling a romantic story with epic trappings: though it displays a Virgilian structure on the surface, its vernacular *ottava rima* and its eventual bypassing of the standards dictated by epic to tell a love story feels much closer to Chrétien's *roman*. The humor in the *Teseida*, I argue, is found in the lightness with which Boccaccio leaps from role to role, as epic author, romantic author, and critic: the final piece of the poem that reveals the great complexity of the project is the critical apparatus that Boccaccio has penned alongside the poetic text itself. He is not only writing but also reading at the same time, and his reader commenting in the margins seems to miss the point the author makes many more times than he enhances it. The explicit self-referentiality of the *Teseida*'s composition, I argue, demands a kind of reading that credits it with nuance and the ability to do several things at once despite its appearances. Reading it in such a way demonstrates the humor in it, ever-present alongside the seriousness of the project itself.

Boccaccio's most enigmatic author-persona presents itself before the reader in Chapter 4, by way of the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*: a first-person female narrator, writing an elegy that claims to be telling the utmost, abject truth while showing the reader at every opportunity what an extensive fiction it all is. Because of the autobiographical notes the *Elegia* seems to strike, readers have almost instinctively attributed Fiammetta and her woeful tale of being first loved and then rejected by Panfilo to a true-to-life story of Boccaccio's affair with a married woman. Fiammetta comes across in the *Elegia* as heartbroken to the point of being slightly deranged (plot points include marked decline in physical health and eventually attempted suicide), but she is nonetheless devious, putting on a show for her long-suffering, unwitting husband and for everyone else she knows so as to mask the true cause of her obviously deteriorated condition. She maintains the façade of being completely earnest, and honest, with her readers, but Boccaccio populates both the character and her narrative with signs that the reader should hesitate to believe the truth of any of this. The *Elegia* is a fiction, Fiammetta is a fiction, and the entire saga is all about creating and perpetuating fiction. I read this text alongside another Boccaccio text, this one much more obvious in its problems with truth-telling and earnestness: the *Corbaccio*. Though many read it as a heartfelt invective leveled against women by the author himself, critics of the last few decades have started to advocate for its being an elaborate joke, one not intended to be taken seriously and certainly not meant to be attributed to Boccaccio himself. The *Corbaccio*'s narrator is set up in so many ways as a buffoon, and his interlocutor who 'teaches' him about the evils of women just as much; the text *says* many things on this matter, but it *does* even more to separate Boccaccio itself from its characters. I argue that the *Elegia* is very similarly staged as a playful fiction, giving us

certain elegiac expectations and subverting them with all the signals the text can provide. This interpretation allows us to read the *Corbaccio* and the *Elegia* not as two extreme sides of Boccaccio's personality, as so many unfortunately have, but rather as two texts in a continuous literary catalogue that explores the potential of creative fiction for exploring complicated, weighty matters with lightness.

Finally, Chapter 5 turns to Boccaccio's Latin output with the *De mulieribus claris*, in accordance with my view that we can and should discuss these works alongside the vernacular works as many parts of a continuous exploration of established genres and ways to play with them. The *De mulieribus* is an encyclopedic compendium of 106 women's lives, beginning with Eve, the first woman and continuing chronologically through goddess-figures of antiquity before arriving at Boccaccio's own time, which unfortunately presents relatively few examples of praiseworthy women. The text aspires to the status of Francesco Petrarca's *De viris illustribus*, which I adopt as dialogue text, and though it displays similar surface-level trappings, including its Latin prose and its chronological biographical structure, the two works take quite different approaches to what history is and how it should be written. For Boccaccio, the "ego" who narrates the *De mulieribus* is just as much an adopted persona as Fiammetta in the *Elegia*. It is a narrator who claims to have no patience for people who would believe embellished, magical tales of goddesses, despite the insistence upon the truth of these tales in other works of his: here, we are concerned with history and with truth. However, Boccaccio the historian still makes extensive use of these fictions in composing his biographies of famous women: at times, they are all he has to go on. The longest biographies are ones in which he parses the stories about a certain woman that have been handed down through various sources, evaluates those sources, and speculates about how some of the

less believable stories came to be. This process of assessing the truth and reliability of history and its relationship to myth is laid bare for the readers, and in some cases there is no conclusive bottom line about what is true. The contrast to Petrarch's methods are evident, when the two texts are read together: the *De viribus* is much more conclusive and opaque, much less willing to let ambiguity lie before the reader. It is Boccaccio himself who explicitly draws a comparison between his compendium and that of Petrarch, however, which leads readers to expect a certain kind of historian, only to be presented with something quite different. This is another role that allows Boccaccio to play, to subvert, and to lightly remind us that he, too, while he claims to give the most truthful account of these women's stories possible, is just another one of the authors whose trustworthiness he constantly reminds us to doubt.

In concluding, I hope to offer readers a new kind of approach to Boccaccio's *opere minori* in general, one that does not limit itself to those discussed within the confines of this admittedly limited dissertation. Each type of text exemplified here within allows Boccaccio to conduct genre experiments with *umorismo*, the type of *umorismo* that relies on the existence of standards so that it may subvert them in a way that amuses, delights, instructs, and exposes deep human truths about reading. This is not the type of *umorismo* that is easy to see, and it likely will not make any reader laugh who remains on the surface of the works in question: it rewards only a deep, insistent kind of reading, *insistendum vigilandumque atque interrogandum*, and I hope that the following chapters may constitute a beginning to this long, fruitful, and delightful process, which Boccaccio deserves from us. *Lector, intende: laetaberis.*

## CHAPTER 2

### **In favor of the 'carne impigrita': Resisting authority in the *Amorosa visione***

*La donna mi parlava, ed io mirando  
con l'occhio andava pure ove 'l disio  
mi tenea fitto, non so che ascoltando.*

The lady was speaking to me, and I, gazing, kept moving my eyes there  
where my desire held me transfixed, listening to I know not what.<sup>1</sup>

"There where my desire held me transfixed" is, unfortunately for the lady leading the dreamer, not where *she* wants his attention to be. But, alas, the narrator of the *Amorosa visione* is no Dante, who attentively and eagerly follows Beatrice through part of the *Purgatorio* and most of the *Paradiso* (well over 3000 verses), all the while listening intently to her lectures despite their admitted difficulty. Rather, Boccaccio's protagonist is locked in a constant struggle with his would-be spiritual guide throughout the *Amorosa Visione*, consistently resisting her counsel and forcing her to resort to what we might even call nagging to get him to follow the path that has been set out for him. Where Dante is reverent, ever seeking to rein in his impulses, Boccaccio is jocular, willing to follow his desire wherever it might lead him.

This chapter is to be a close study of Boccaccio's *Amorosa Visione* alongside Dante's *Divina Commedia*, focusing particularly on *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. The traces of Dante in Boccaccio's text are rather dominant, from the general content and plot structure (a dream-vision that transports the dreamer to an otherworld through which he passes in a series of phases) to the poetic structure (the organization into cantos and

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<sup>1</sup> Giovanni BOCCACCIO, *Amorosa visione*, Canto XL.1-3. I will refer throughout the chapter to the edition of Vittore BRANCA, ed. (1974). I have quoted only from "Testo B", Boccaccio's second edition of the text. Translations are mine, and I have included them wherever context does not adequately provide meaning.



the use of *terza rima*) to the very words themselves, often lifted directly from one of Dante's own cantos. There is a lightness and amusement to the *Amorosa visione*, however, that derives from all three of these elements and yet is quite absent in Dante's *Commedia*, a quality that makes the poem resound differently. In enacting this transposition, Boccaccio consciously sets his work apart from Dante's with respect to its tone. The heavy use of ekphrasis in the *Visione* works alongside the *terza rima* structure of the verses, figuring a vision that cannot but remind the reader of Dante's great work. Having set up such expectations, Boccaccio then takes the poem in a different direction: his protagonist actively and repeatedly resists the guidance of the great lady come to save him, something a Dante reader would hardly expect from the pilgrim towards his beloved Beatrice, from whom his eyes never stray. This interaction between dreamer and guide in the *Visione* plays out with a sense of lightness and humor, and the comic effect becomes most apparent when looking at Boccaccio's verses next to Dante's.

This is not to say that Boccaccio intended this text to be a parody of Dante, by any means, even if subversion so often implies parody. Rather, the redirecting of expectations generated by the *Commedia*-oriented aesthetic on one level is matched by a deep reverence for the beauty of Dante's verses on another that separates this poem from the parodic. While the dreamer in the *Visione* is much more flawed as a moral learner than Dante's textual version of himself, the former is still deeply in awe of Dante, so much so that when he meets the great poet in his own dream, his reaction is one of awe and humility, in marked contrast with his rather flippant attitude towards the lady guiding him. Furthermore, Dante's most celebrated verses tangibly echo throughout the chambers of the castle that Boccaccio's dreamer explores, marking moments of quite sincere joy and wonder. This is a work in which serious admiration interacts constantly

with humorous play, demonstrating the author's capacity to take on the voice of a source text to say something that is very much his own. In the microcosm of the *Amorosa Visione* presented in Canto XL, verses 1-3, we are afforded a taste of what is at work in Boccaccio's language throughout the poem: from the very beginning he recreates in many ways the experience of reading the *Commedia*, demonstrating both his knowledge of the great Dante and his own poetic dexterity.

The protagonist of the *Amorosa visione* is in the midst of a dream, one he's embarked upon after falling into a deep sleep, "un sonno sì dolce e soave".<sup>2</sup> He then sees himself, as he sleeps, wandering afraid and alone: "errar mi vidi...or quà or là, null'ordine tenendo".<sup>3</sup> Just then, a glowing, beautiful lady appears to rescue him from his confusion, promising to guide him to a place where his every desire will be fulfilled. The poem is composed of fifty cantos, each containing eighty-eight verses in rhyming tercets, and it follows the dreamer's journey in the company of the guide, beginning in the "strana pianura" where they meet and concluding in the idyllic garden where the dreamer comes upon the lady he desires more than anything. Before he reaches her, however, he has physical distances to traverse and moral lessons to learn, and his guide insists that she knows the quickest way to bring him to the object of his desire if he follows her "di soglia in soglia," from threshold to threshold, "con voler temperato," controlling his longing.<sup>4</sup> "Tosto dimosterroti la via corta," she says, "per la qual girvi ti serà diletto se non ti volta coscienza torta" [Soon I will show you the short way, which

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<sup>2</sup> Giovanni BOCCACCIO, *Amorosa visione* I.17.

<sup>3</sup> *Amorosa visione*, I.23-25

<sup>4</sup> *Amorosa visione*, I.82-83.

you will delight in following provided that no faulty conscience turns you astray].<sup>5</sup> A premise that the reader will, perhaps, have seen before: wandering pilgrim, miraculous apparition of guiding light, promise of reward after traversing long road, warning about the consequences of a contorted conscience.

Unfortunately for the guide attempting to lead the dreamer through his *Amorosa visione*, his “conscienza torta” has a stronger hold upon him than she perhaps realizes, and rather than follow her obediently as promised, he’s barely into the second canto before his desiring heart begins to question the guide’s proposed “dritta via,” which is rather arduous-looking, “piccioletta assai e stretta ed alta, in nulla parte torta” [quite little and narrow and high, with not a single turn].<sup>6</sup> Seeing this, he is immediately put off, only to be drawn to a much more welcoming prospect elsewhere, a big, wide, open door through which he hears the sounds of merrymaking: “vidi una porta grande aperta stare, e dentro festeggiar mi parve udire”.<sup>7</sup> A struggle ensues, the guide protesting that the happy song the dreamer thinks he is hearing can only bring him tears: “piuttosto pianto si dovrìa dire ‘n lingua retta.” This “lingua retta” is clearly not the language that the dreamer chooses to hear, and she insists that he should trust in the promises of the “via stretta,” which are actually sculpted above the door for all to read:

... “Questa  
picciola porta mena a via di vita;  
posto che paia nel salir molesta  
riposo eterno dà cotal salita  
dunque salite su senza esser lenti,  
l’animo vinca la carne impigrita.”

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<sup>5</sup> *Amorosa visione*, I. 75.

<sup>6</sup> *Amorosa visione*, II.38-39.

<sup>7</sup> *Amorosa visione*, II.44-45.

...“This little door leads to the vital way; though it seems bothersome to climb, such ascent gives eternal repose, so climb up without slowing, that the mind may overcome the flesh turned lazy.”<sup>8</sup>

Despite the inscription’s commands, in harmony with those of the guide, Boccaccio’s dreamer remains unconvinced, and the guide is left with no choice but to let him go his own way, through the wide open door that his heart longs for. So much for the guide actually guiding the dreamer; it will be he who dictates the direction and the length of his journey.

The geography of the castle slowly reveals itself as the text unfolds: there are two paths, one that the guide wants to follow, the short but difficult way that will lead most quickly to salvation. In contrast, the dreamer wishes to abandon difficulty and go through the much more inviting door, to where he hears the sounds of happiness. He will eventually see what is behind both doors, though he will choose the order in which he progresses through them, and what he finds is ultimately two different sides of the truth of earthly love. Depicted in two different series of galleries, he will see rich images laden with characters from ancient Greek myths, medieval romantic tales and documented history as well. Orpheus, Tristan and Charles of Anjou all have their moments to capture the dreamer’s attention, and when he sees their images figured into the walls of the gallery, his mind ignites with wonder, and he narrates as he goes a story playing out for each figure. The path behind the wide open door shows these figures happily in love, while the difficult-looking passage contains many of the same characters experiencing the pain of that same love. What we learn is that the lady guiding the dreamer hopes to lead him the shortest way possible, through the painful images, that

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<sup>8</sup> *Amorosa visione*, II.64-69.

he might see them and be duly instructed as to the dangers of love; he, however, is having none of this, at least not until he has seen the other side first.

When he finally arrives in the garden of delights, the ultimate destination that both paths lead to, where the lady guide has been trying to lead him the shortest way possible, the dreamer has seen the galleries that depict the travails of love, as she wanted him to. However, he has also insisted on visiting those that show the joy love brings. By maintaining control over his viewing experience, he has seen the fullness of what the galleries have to teach him in his own time, and he is thus equipped to choose earthly love with complete knowledge of its delights and consequences and surrender to his desire for it. He promptly does so when he finally sees the object of his true love waiting for him in the garden. The dream ends with the two lovers running away and hiding in the garden, away from the admonitions of the guide, and consummating their desires.

In analyzing the *Amorosa visione* and uncovering its intentions vis-à-vis the reader, it is necessary to unpack the traditions Boccaccio is working with and draw out the impressions that his verses create in the mind of his audience, whom he explicitly calls out in his author's prologue: "O chi che voi siate, o gratiosi animi virtuosi, ... io vi priego c'un poco prestate lo 'ntellecto agli amorosi versi" [O, whoever you may be, graceful and virtuous souls ... I pray that you lend just a little of your intellect to these verses on love].<sup>9</sup> Perhaps, he worries, when writing he was too inflamed by his desires, and though perhaps readers might find his "cantar" too light, or too rough, he hopes that it may bring them delight all the same. The delight that it does indeed bring is one that derives from the beauty of the poetry itself, the marveling of the dreamer as he gazes at the images and narrates them to the reader. More critical and more contested, as

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<sup>9</sup> *Amorosa visione*, Acrostico 2, 1-6.

far as the tradition is concerned, is the interpretation of the struggle between the dreamer and the guide as comedy, one which arises from the author's insistence on this liberty of the reader to "leggere," as in both to read and also interpret, investigate with the intellect.<sup>10</sup> As Boccaccio's dreamer staunchly maintains throughout, he too is a reader, an interpreter, and the narrative he reads into each image comes from his mind alone: he gazes upon the figures and his verses tell what they seem to say, what they seem to feel. The experience he describes is incredibly rich, and obviously informed by a wealth of detailed knowledge of myth, romance and history. Every time the guide tries to intervene in his experience, he balks, insisting that he be the one to dictate how long he spends staring at the images, taking them in, and interpreting them in words: this after all encompasses the root of what the Latin "legere" means (to choose, gather, in the process of reading).<sup>11</sup> The comic bickering between the dreamer and his guide is entirely derivative of this insistence on choosing his own experience – the dreamer who unquestioningly follows the guide is not the sort of reader that Boccaccio imagines.

The *Amorosa Visione* has not come across as funny to very many critics in the centuries since its composition, mostly because it tends to shrink in the shadow of what came after, i.e. the *Decameron* and Chaucer. These are the works where funny is expected and honored, but the *Visione* doesn't quite meet the same standards. In keeping with 19<sup>th</sup>-century perspectives on Boccaccio's work as fitting neatly into an autobiographical arc, this poem seems to have been viewed by many as a sort of growth phase for Boccaccio, not terribly good but at best worth slogging through for the merit of having

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<sup>10</sup> Salvatore BATTAGLIA (1984), VIII 904: "Leggere ... 5. *Figur*. Indagare con l'intelletto; considerare, comprendere, interpretare; intuire, intravedere, scoprire." He cites Dante's *Vita nuova* and *Purgatorio* as sources of this particular definition.

<sup>11</sup> Michiel DE VAAN (2008) and D.R. HOWLETT, ed. (1975-2013).

read it. One English poet and critic characterized the *Visione* as a work of soul-contemplation written “in manifest rivalry with Dante,” demonstrative proof “that Boccaccio was still wandering, uncertain of his destination, in the fields of literature” at that point in his life.<sup>12</sup> In another essay on Boccaccio’s *Visione* and Chaucer’s *House of Fame*, after noting that the English poet reportedly found the Italian poem so tiresome he couldn’t finish it, another critic remarks that the two poets do “favor” one another in all *but* “the element of humor, which Chaucer loved at all times but which Boccaccio abstained from in his verse.”<sup>13</sup> To insist on comparing the *Visione* to a later text, however, seems to obscure any possible reflection on its own merits. It is Boccaccio’s engagement with preceding tradition and his skilled diversions from the expectations created therein that gives rise to the very immediate and delightful sense of humor playing around Boccaccio’s verses. And yet, 19<sup>th</sup>-century critics were not the only ones who failed to give the text its due. When the work was translated into English by Robert Hollander et al and published in a bilingual edition,<sup>14</sup> a 1988 review spent most of its column praising the translators for a job well done, even if on a rather unworthy poem. “Paradoxically the *Amorosa visione*’s great importance in terms of Boccaccio’s career and the evolution of trecento literature stands in inverse relation to its poetic quality,” the reviewer says, ultimately concluding that its “stylistic achievement remains

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<sup>12</sup> John Addington SYMONDS (1895), 41.

<sup>13</sup> C. G. CHILD (1895), 190

<sup>14</sup> Robert HOLLANDER, Timothy HAMPTON and Margherita FRANKEL, trans. (1986).

disappointingly meager.”<sup>15</sup> It is rare to find anyone who considers the text as anything but inferior to the *Decameron* in the context of Boccaccio’s opus.<sup>16</sup>

Hollander himself, in a later volume titled *Boccaccio’s Dante and the Shaping of Satire*, mentions the *Visione* once, in passing, before making the claim that the *Decameron* is the more interesting work to consider in the analysis of Boccaccio as *dantista* because of how superficially, obviously and overtly the *Visione* imitates Dante.<sup>17</sup> The *Visione*, according to Hollander, is “Boccaccio’s most elaborate imitation of Dante,” seemingly a “moralizing instance of a Boccaccio temporarily ‘gone over to the other side’”.<sup>18</sup>

Hollander may be correct in pointing out the forthright nature of Boccaccio’s Dantean style in the *Visione*, but it hardly seems reason enough to dispense with it so quickly. Rather, this gives us a point from which to begin considering what the poem has to say of its own right: if it is, and we will see that it is, an outright, obvious, unapologetic imitation of the *Commedia*, what do we find in the details that sets it apart? With regard to the *Decameron*, Hollander is admiring of the jocular nature of Boccaccio’s imitation, noting “some remarkable moments in which we can see [Boccaccio] playfully pillaging his poet for a passage that enters his work with its full Dantean context.” This praise could be just as meaningfully applied to the *Amorosa Visione*, in which Boccaccio ‘pillages’ not just passages, but style, down to rhyme and meter, word sequences that

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<sup>15</sup> Todd BOLI (1988), 625.

<sup>16</sup> Though this is a mere sampling of *Visione* reception, to be sure, it adequately represents the nonetheless quite small pool of criticism on the poem, and as we can see, it sets the reader up for a disappointing and rather humorless experience in tackling the text, if indeed any reader still has the desire to give it a try after reading such paltry reviews.

<sup>17</sup> Robert HOLLANDER (1986), 280. He later republished the same essay arguing these points in HOLLANDER (2000), 11, though the latter contains only a passing reference to the *Amorosa visione*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.



don't amount to passages but that transmit a 'feeling' of Dante. These elements, too, are appropriated with the full weight of their Dantean context behind them, inviting us to consider this style imitation beyond what is obvious.

One critic who has truly advocated for the *Visione* is the late Vittore Branca, the 20<sup>th</sup> century's foremost Boccaccio scholar, who edited and annotated what is still the predominant edition of the *Visione*. Indeed, Hollander's aforementioned 1986 bilingual edition is prefaced by an English translation of Branca's 1974 introduction, and as reviewers attest, it is Branca's work that brings to the reader's attention the vital cultural and literary importance of the *Visione*.<sup>19</sup> Among other things, Branca credits the text as a feat of ekphrasis that corresponds in the visuals it creates with certain strains of Italian painting of the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>20</sup> He ultimately regards the *Visione* as a work vital to the establishment and sustenance of the dream-vision genre, a work that at the same time profoundly renews and changes the character of that genre.<sup>21</sup>

While Branca has added a great deal of substance and credibility to the study of the *Amorosa visione*, he still reserves his considerations of the 'comic' Boccaccio for his much more extensive work on the *Decameron*, as most critics do.<sup>22</sup> This analysis of the text means to broaden the ways in which we allow ourselves to read the *Visione* and to credit Boccaccio with more intentionality in its composition than most critics do. In recreating so precisely and obviously the experience of reading the *Commedia*, Boccaccio sets up his own dream vision to land lightly, with humor, and his methods and his skill

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<sup>19</sup> See Sylvia HUOT (1989).

<sup>20</sup> Vittore BRANCA (1974), xiii-xiv.

<sup>21</sup> BRANCA, xi.

<sup>22</sup> See *supra*, Chapter 1, 7-8.

in so doing are worth exploring. If, as Branca asserts, Boccaccio turns to Dante for inspiration in creating nobility and solemnity almost subconsciously,<sup>23</sup> what is he contributing to the archly Dantean motif that is purely and intentionally his own?

From the moment we begin to read, we feel almost as if we are immersed once more in Dante because of the verse and rhyme structure: the *terza rima* (aba, bcb, cdc, etc) of the *Visione's* fifty cantos recreates the experience of reading the *Commedia* in a very immediate way. Dante's invention of the *terza rima* for the composition of the *Commedia* is the fruit of a lengthy and detailed argument about the need to employ the highest poetic form with the highest and most noble material and nothing lesser, as the poet himself advanced in Book II of the *De vulgari eloquentia*: "Stilo equidem tragico tunc uti videmur quando cum gravitate sententie tam superbia carminum quam constructionis elatio et excellentia vocabulorum concordat" [It must be clear to us that we use the tragic style when the splendor of the verses as much as the exaltedness of the construction and the excellence of the words are in concordance with the profundity of the way of thinking].<sup>24</sup> The highest is deserving of the highest, Dante continues, and thus if the tragic style is the highest of all styles, then those topics which have proven deserving of being sung in this highest style, such as salvation, love and virtue, "salus, amor et virtus", are to be sung *only* in such style, "isto solo sunt stilo canenda", so that they might not be deprived of worth accidentally.<sup>25</sup>

On the other side, just as salvation, love and virtue run the risk of debasement in the clutches of the wrong sort of poetry, so too does the tragic style of poetry suffer if it

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<sup>23</sup> BRANCA, xiv-xv.

<sup>24</sup> Dante ALIGHIERI and Vittorio COLETTI ed. (2005), *De vulgari eloquentia* 2.4.7 All translations mine.

<sup>25</sup> DANTE, *De vulgari eloquentia*, 2.4.8.

is used in reference to unworthy subject matter: “si anseres natura vel desidia sunt, nolint astripetam aquilam imitari” [if by nature they indeed be indolent geese, may they not strive to imitate the eagle rising in the sky]. Though he doesn’t claim to set too much store by one rhyme scheme or another – most poets enjoy “amplissimam...licentiam” in deciding upon how to proceed with their own – his admiration for “ipsius stantie concatenatio pulcra” [graceful transitions between stanzas], facilitated by rhymes, is evident.<sup>26</sup> This, and his utmost regard for the hendecasyllable above all other verses, “quorum omnium ... videtur esse superbium”,<sup>27</sup> seem logically tied to the famous *terza rima* chosen for his masterpiece. Of course, Dante himself does not necessarily deign to heed these recommendations for matching style to content, as when he portrays some of the darker, baser moments in his *Inferno* with the *altissimo* register of the *dolce stil nuovo*.<sup>28</sup> An attentive reader of Dante, such as Boccaccio, would have been well aware that Dante liked to make rules as in the *De vulgari* almost as much as he liked to break them, presumably so as to demonstrate his poetic mastery.

Some scholars have identified the *terza rima* as a way of maintaining poetic unity in a work of such great diversity, rising above the ability of other poets to modify the text. One remarks particularly on its “Protean ability to adapt to any content, narrative situation, or style”.<sup>29</sup> Dante was masterful at switching styles to enhance the feelings he was striving to create in his poetry from one moment to another, and the *terza rima* allowed him to do so and all the while maintain the perfect, intact unity of his form.

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<sup>26</sup> *De vulgari eloquentia*, 2.13.7.

<sup>27</sup> *De vulgari eloquentia*, 2.5.3.

<sup>28</sup> See Amilcare A. IANNUCCI (1973), 10.

<sup>29</sup> IANNUCCI, 15.

Some have even speculated that he perhaps crafted the *terza rima* for his *Commedia* to maximize the difficulty for would-be redactors seeking to make changes or add verses to the poem while still preserving the rhyme and meter as written. As J.S.P. Tatlock supposed in a 1936 essay, “at no point could the sequence of rimes be broken by an insertion without leaving one, or two, of the rime-words on each side of the insertion, and therefore without repeating the rime”.<sup>30</sup> To further his point, Tatlock asserts that “any seeming humility [on Dante’s part] appears solely in the title ‘Commedia,’” which he had already designated in the *De vulgari* as a lower class of poetry, “undoubtedly due to discretion and good taste, and possibly with a dash of sour bitterness”.<sup>31</sup>

Boccaccio shared Dante’s acute awareness of genre and style conventions and defied them with as much vigor, but not without first making a great show of deference to them, as we will explore further with the *Teseida* in Chapter 3. To him, the greatness and irreproachability of the *Commedia* is very much tied up in the “mirabile ordine” with which it is composed: in his *Trattatello in laude di Dante*, Boccaccio introduces the reader to the wonders of the great poem by describing its organization into cantos and tercets, composed “con tanta arte, con sì mirabile ordine e con sì bello” [with such art, such beautiful and wondrous order] that no one yet has been able to justly criticize it.<sup>32</sup>

Later in the *Trattatello*, Boccaccio tells the story of how the great poet’s son Iacopo managed to complete the *Commedia* eight months after his father’s death: the deceased Dante evidently visited Iacopo in a dream and, when the son asked whether his father had ever completed the work, the latter responded with a simple “sì, io la compie’ ” and

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<sup>30</sup> J. S. P. TATLOCK (1936), 895.

<sup>31</sup> TATLOCK, 901.

<sup>32</sup> Giovanni BOCCACCIO and Luigi SASSO, ed. (1995), *Trattatello in laude di Dante*, I redazione 177.

led his son to a hiding spot where the remaining thirteen cantos lay. When he woke, as Boccaccio narrates, Iacopo immediately sought out another “disciple” of Dante’s, Pier Giardino, and upon reaching the place indicated in Iacopo’s dream, they found thirteen missing cantos of the *Commedia*. It was not, however, the dream alone and Dante’s presence in it that confirmed the authenticity of their discovery, but the numbers they found upon the missing cantos. In Boccaccio’s words, they discovered writings “segnate per numeri”, and thus “conobbero quello, che in esse scritto era” [they recognized that which was written there] to be “de’ rittimi della *Comedia*.”<sup>33</sup> The “ordine dei numeri” is then what confirmed for them that these were indeed the thirteen cantos they had been missing, and with such proof in hand, they recopied the verses and thus completed the *Commedia*’s text.<sup>34</sup> The reliance on Dante’s numbers might seem a small matter, but it is worth noting that in this second *redazione* of the *Trattatello*, where he has mostly cut back from the first *redazione*, Boccaccio elaborates on this discovery and insists much more explicitly on the importance of the numbers in correctly identifying the missing verses and restoring them to their proper place in the *Commedia*’s text.

It is with these impressions in mind that we move to consider the way in which Boccaccio handles form and structure in his own dream vision, the primary focus of the present chapter. He begins the *Amorosa visione* with an explicit consideration of structure and its imposition, though he does not set such store by divinely inspired numerical schemes as Dante does. Rather, he begins by way of prologue with a series of three sonnets containing, in order, the first letters of all the verses in all fifty cantos of the *Visione*, composing “perhaps the most lengthy literary acrostic in Western (world?)

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<sup>33</sup> BOCCACCIO, *Trattatello in laude di Dante*, II red. 126.

<sup>34</sup> *Trattatello*, II red. 127.

literature".<sup>35</sup> He declares the accomplishment of this quite "mirabil cosa" (which the lady for whom it is written might consider it, he hopes) unceremoniously in the brief sentences preceding the sonnets: "Nelli tre infrascritti sonetti," he begins, "si contengono per ordine tutte le lettere principali de' rittimi della infrascritta Amorosa Visione" [In the three sonnets written here, there are, contained in order, all the beginning letters of the rhymes in the Amorosa Visione].<sup>36</sup> He goes on to say that since the author's name is therein contained (in v. 17 of the first sonnet), "altrimenti non si cura di porlo:" there is no need to put it in any other part.<sup>37</sup>

Through his self-reference in these sentences, phrased in this rather cagey impersonal third person that suggests anything but bravado, Boccaccio mounts this introductory poetic feat in what can only be a little homage to his own mastery of verse and rhyme. Almost all of his other works contain a prologue of some sort in which he permits himself to address the reader directly as author, but in this case, he is even more explicit in defining his role vis-à-vis the poem. He has crafted it precisely, comprehensively, fitting the entire work into a neat scheme whose continuity must remain intact in order for the whole thing to function. Everything has its place. Lest this *mirabil ordine* go unnoticed, he has simply and without grandeur alerted the reader to its presence and then stepped back from it. He connects his own name to the prologue only indirectly, without attributing it to the first-person speaker:

*Cara Fiamma, per cui 'l core ò caldo  
que' che vi manda questa Visione  
Giovanni è di Boccaccio da Certaldo.*

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<sup>35</sup> BRANCA et. al. (1986), 209.

<sup>36</sup> *Amorosa visione*, "Acrostici".

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*.

Dear Flame, for whom I keep my heart warm,  
he who sends you this Vision  
is Giovanni of Boccaccio from Certaldo.<sup>38</sup>

This sort of distancing and self-diminishing is quite characteristic of Boccaccio, and we can certainly trace some of it back to Dante, whose great poem does not display his own name until nearly the end of the *Purgatorio* (in fact, the sixty-fourth canto of the *Commedia!*), and even at that point, it is Beatrice who speaks it, not the poet himself; he merely turns around “al suon del nome mio”.<sup>39</sup> Even then, he expresses a reluctance similar to Boccaccio’s: only “di necessità qui si registra,” using the impersonal as Boccaccio does to distance himself from the act of writing his own name in his poem.

To what end, then, does Boccaccio go to all this trouble, of writing an elaborate acrostic poem in sonnet form? On its face, the exercise borders on the ridiculous, as certain critics have pointed out, while seeming only questionably useful: indeed, the same disparaging reviewer of the translation by Hollander, Hampton and Frankel blames the work’s aforementioned “prosodic clumsiness” in part upon the “elaborate acrostic imposed by the poem’s three introductory sonnets,” thus giving rise to a “welter of verbal shims and crutches”.<sup>40</sup>

Rather than throw our hands up and declare this little scheme of Boccaccio’s an unfortunate mistake that only makes our lives harder, let us assume that the poet took the composition of the *Visione* seriously and gave its opening considerable thought (enough, indeed, to have re-elaborated and rewritten the poem a second time<sup>41</sup>). To

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<sup>38</sup> *Amorosa visione*, Acrostici, 15-17.

<sup>39</sup> Dante ALIGHIERI and Anna Maria CHIAVACCI LEONARDI, ed. (1991), *Purgatorio* XXX.62.

<sup>40</sup> BOLI, 625-626.

<sup>41</sup> The edition of BRANCA (2000) contains both Testo A and Testo B of the poem. The content of the poem has not changed, nor has the sequence of first letters beginning each rhyme as

return for a moment to the matter of the *Commedia's* organization and structure, let us recall that quite beyond Boccaccio's admiration for its order, Dante is famous for having ordered his poem in reverence of the Holy Trinity: written in three canticles, each thirty-three cantos long (plus the introductory canto, creating a divine total of one hundred) composed of tercets, and, some argue, with particular dramatic weight given to cantos which happen to be multiples of three. Countless essays and even entire books have been written on the significance of various numbers in Dante and on elaborate numerical schemes that he may or may not have intentionally imposed upon his work, but rarely, if ever, does anyone question the legitimacy of his doing so.<sup>42</sup>

As we saw previously, though he does not dwell at all in the *Trattatello* on the divinity many presume to be associated with the numerical structure, Boccaccio's admiration of the *Commedia* is explicitly connected to its organization. In crafting his dream vision, then, an overarching scheme that imposes a kind of order and unifies the work while also making it in some ways untouchable (or at least extremely hard to edit without disturbing the scheme) seems entirely appropriate. Boccaccio certainly wanted his execution of the acrostic to be recognized, hence the explanatory sentences at the beginning of the sonnets. As Chapter 1's discussion of the *Genealogia deorum gentilium* made clear, Boccaccio was throughout his career quite concerned with his own reception and legacy in the world of literature, as of course was Dante, who famously positions himself in *Purgatorio* as the poet now living who may supplant his *dolce stil novo*

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designated by the acrostic. Changes are stylistic, smoothing transitions and making hendecasyllables more uniform.

<sup>42</sup> See for example Thomas RENDALL (2010), Robert HOLLANDER (2000-2007), Charles SINGLETON (1965), to name only a very few.



predecessors with the famous line “forse è nato chi l’uno e l’altro caccerà del nido” [perhaps he is born who will drive one and then the other from the nest].<sup>43</sup>

With the future admiration of his poem firmly in mind, Boccaccio begins his opening sonnets with the words “mirabil cosa:” the word *mirabile* is one that Dante uses quite frequently, though the phrase “mirabile cosa” appears almost exclusively in the *Paradiso*, first of all in reference to the sphere of the moon, the very first thing he sees in that realm. To write of the marvelous, according to Douglas Biow’s assessment of the phenomenon as narrated in epic, is to “[call] attention to the transgression of boundaries defining a cultural system” and to “[disclose] the poet’s awareness of his or her imagination as an act unto itself.”<sup>44</sup> These marvels, we must remember, are ultimately the creation of the author: they are events narrated in the poem, but they are also acts of writing carried out by the author himself. The imperial eagle in *Paradiso XX* is *mirabile*, but so too is Dante’s poetic execution of such a vision. Biow observes that “Dante’s God also sometimes displays in select, concentrated moments an egregious excess ... a willful overabundance in his capacity to represent and in his desire to make the wayfarer lift up his brow in admiration and awe.”<sup>45</sup> While in the context of the narrative this is Dante’s God, as Biow says, it is also, in our world as readers, Dante the poet. He is the author of *mirabile cosa* after *mirabile cosa*, and his staging of himself as pilgrim within the story, capable of marveling at these things is his way of performing each wondrous thing as his own poetic creation. The other *mirabile cosa* of Dante’s that is worth noting is, of course, the dream vision narrated in the beginning of the *Vita nuova*:

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<sup>43</sup> DANTE, *Purgatorio* XI.98-99. All translations of the *Commedia* in this chapter are from Robert HOLLANDER and Jean HOLLANDER (2000, 2003, 2007).

<sup>44</sup> Douglas BIOW (1996), 4.

<sup>45</sup> BIOW, 62-63.

*mi pareva di vedere ... una nebula di colore di fuoco, dentro a la quale io discerna una figura d'uno signore di pauroso aspetto...; e pareami con tanta letizia che mirabile cosa era; e ne le sue parole dicea molte cose ... tra le quali intendea queste "Ego dominus tuus."*

It seemed to me that I saw...a cloud the color of fire, inside of which I discerned a figure of a lord with a frightening countenance ...; and he appeared to me with so much joy that it was a marvelous thing; and with his words he said many things ... among which I understood this: "Ego dominus tuus."<sup>46</sup>

In the *Vita nuova*, this wondrous vision marks the beginning of a new life, a new understanding of and devotion to the divine, and also to the poetic. The work is staged as a series of lyrics, each preceded by a piece of narrative that gave rise to each of their poetic compositions and followed by a didactic explanation of what is at work in the poem. The entire text's having come into being, as Dante tells it, is a result of his visions and his desire to give them poetic form. *Mirabile cosa*: words which, in the mouth of Dante, speak in a highly performative way of phenomena which are truly divine, beyond the "normative boundaries of a cultural system."<sup>47</sup>

Consequently, Boccaccio's invocation of *mirabile cosa* with the very first words of his text is far from a casual reference, and yet in his eternally present self-awareness, he immediately mitigates this connection to Dante's words with "*forse la presente/vision vi parrà*" [*perhaps the present vision will appear to you*].<sup>48</sup> As ever, the poet steps back from anything that might seem to be overt self-praise, leaving it to the reader to decide whether *mirabile cosa* is an accurate descriptor. Most important to note is the fact that Boccaccio's concept of *mirabile*, of the wonder created in poetry, is fundamentally disconnected, as we will see, from the sacred divinity upon which Dante relies in

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<sup>46</sup> Dante ALIGHIERI and Luca Carlo ROSSI, ed. (1999), *Vita nuova*, III.3. Translation mine.

<sup>47</sup> BIOW, 6.

<sup>48</sup> *Amorosa visione*, "Acrostici" 1-2. Emphasis added.

creating the aesthetic of the *Commedia*. Where Dante's imposed structure is inextricably linked to the Trinity, Boccaccio's foundational model is that of the sonnet: it is indeed poetry itself that gives order to his *visione*. That Boccaccio goes to such lengths to maintain this order is part of the point: he is deliberately pushing the seriousness of poetry and the organization it imposes to its logical extreme, creating an effect that is impressive to behold in its precision. At the same time, he intends to play with this exploration of where poetry can lead him.

The key element of Boccaccio's recreation of the *Commedia* experience is that of quite literally creating a vision for his readers that echoes visions of the *Commedia* and, with it, the works that the *Commedia* sought to channel as well. Indeed, one of the qualities for which the *Visione* is known is its extensive use of ekphrasis: in the rich galleries of images that the dreamer traverses, he sees there "figurati" scores of well-known heroes and anti-heroes of the classical and the medieval tradition, much as Dante does as he looks upon the column of relief sculptures in *Purgatorio* X-XII, and as Aeneas does in Book VI of the *Aeneid* as his father shows to him his entire lineage standing before them. The creation of vivid images in the minds of readers seems to dominate the narrative, and indeed it seems likely to have been Boccaccio's primary objective and the first step in figuring the *Commedia* inside his audience's imagination.

The dreamer in the *Visione* is an interpreter of images, a reader, and his descriptions often flow from both the verb *vedere* and the verb *parere*: he first sees what physical attributes each figure displays ("vid'io"), and then the narrative of that figure manifests itself to him ("mi pareva"). Gianfranco Contini's interpretation of the verb *parere* in Dante's *Vita nuova* equates it to the subject's "manifesting itself to one's consciousness" rather than "seeming", the former lacking the ambiguity of the latter,

more modern meaning of *parere*.<sup>49</sup> Boccaccio, however, seems to be engaging with both meanings: at times a person or a figure “*e’ mi parve colui quel Carlo ardito ch’ebbe il maschil naso insieme con virtù molta,*” but more often than not the subject of “*parere*” is in fact an infinitive clause (“*mi parve vedere*”) or, most frequently, a dependent subjunctive clause (“*Parevami, nel creder, veramente che loro eccelsa fama gloriosi far li dovesse*”), suggesting a more subjective meaning based on “conjecture, supposition, simple clues (at times disputable), [or] personal conviction” coming together to form a subjective opinion.<sup>50</sup> The high proliferation of “*parere*” with the subjunctive clause as well as “*parere*” as noun, meaning “way of thinking derived from subjective analysis of the facts”<sup>51</sup> ties it to subjectivity and interpretation rather explicitly, a point particularly important in unpacking Boccaccio’s creation of vision for the reader as invitation to analyze, interpret and ultimately choose one’s way of reading the images presented.

Scholars have presented a good deal of evidence to demonstrate the deeply image-based nature of medieval literary culture and the centrality of vision and interpretation as a part of reading and acquiring knowledge. In her detailed *Book of Memory*, Mary Carruthers discusses the centrality of memory to the concept of the intellect and, consequently, the ways of remembering in which medieval thinkers were deeply invested themselves.<sup>52</sup> Because these scholars understood memory as “a process of mentally visualizing ‘signale’ both of sense objects and objects of thought,” the visual cues meant to recall certain images, scenes and ideas constituted one of the pillars of

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<sup>49</sup> Gianfranco CONTINI (1976), 23-24, and BATTAGLIA (1984), XIII.592.

<sup>50</sup> BATTAGLIA, XIII.593.

<sup>51</sup> BATTAGLIA, XIII.592.

<sup>52</sup> Mary CARRUTHERS (1990).

creating works of literature and philosophy. “Ancients and their medieval heirs,” according to Carruthers, “thought that each ‘bit’ of knowledge was remembered in a particular place in the memory, which it occupied just as a letter occupies spaces on a writing surface.”<sup>53</sup> To read a passage, therefore, is to gather (as indicated by the Latin *legere*) images scattered across the brain’s surface as they are recalled in turn by the words on the page, creating one composite image. Mnemonic devices relying on visualization are a fixture in medieval written works of all kinds, and Carruthers argues that these, when considered alongside the diffuse metaphoric interpretations of memory-making as a visual process (many of which derive from Aristotle and medieval Aristotelian philosophers), constitute convincing proof of image as a central pillar of intellect.

Ekphrasis in medieval narrative, like that which Boccaccio writes into his dreamer’s script, is not simply an imitation of classical models, nor is it merely a device intended to show off the degree of detail with which the writer can recall something. Rather, it is a way of sketching an image quite deliberately within the reader’s mind, created from that which is written into the description itself and also from what its compositional elements draw out of the reader’s *arca sapientiae*, the ark of knowing, or the memory storage-chest that each individual builds inside his own mind throughout life, as described by Hugh of St. Victor in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>54</sup> In addition to the purely visual image, an intentionally crafted ekphrasis produces an affective response to it; this, too, is an integral part of remembering. Drawing on Averroes’s reading of Aristotle, Carruthers argues that “successful memory schemes all acknowledge the importance of

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<sup>53</sup> CARRUTHERS, 29.

<sup>54</sup> CARRUTHERS, 44.

tagging material emotionally as well as schematically";<sup>55</sup> images stored in memory are imprinted with the sensory and the emotional, or in other words the subjective, the *parere*.

Part of Boccaccio's project in the design of the *Amorosa visione* is to recreate both the images as the dreamer sees them on the gallery walls and also the subjective interpretation that he (the dreamer) attaches to them as he looks and draws from his own memory, creating an experience for readers that is both visual and emotional, intended to reach into their memories as well. One of the most profoundly moving memories that Boccaccio conjures in the *Amorosa visione* is that of Dante's tragic lovers Paolo and Francesca, whose story marks a moment of elegant and beautiful poetry that sharply contrasts the darkness and foulness of the Inferno's atmosphere. Among the most quoted lines of the entire *Commedia* are those of Francesca's monologue to Dante, with the repeated apostrophe to love: "'Amor ch'al cor gentil ratto s'apprende... Amor ch'a null'amato amar perdona... Amor condusse noi ad una morte'" ["'Love, quick to kindle in the gentle heart, ... Love, which absolves no one beloved from loving, Love brought us to one death'"].<sup>56</sup> Francesca is describing how her love for Paolo brought not only death but damnation upon the two of them, and her words move Dante to the point that he faints: "di pietade io venni men così com' io morisse" [for pity I swooned as if in death].<sup>57</sup> Boccaccio manages to recreate in his own way the anaphor of the Dantean verses when he comes across the image of Orpheus, a character also associated with tragic earthly love. The dreamer comes across this figure for the first time in the

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<sup>55</sup> CARRUTHERS, 60.

<sup>56</sup> *Inferno*, V.100-106.

<sup>57</sup> *Inferno*, V.141-142.

first half of the poem, in which he takes in the happiness of earthly love figured with all its intensity in the images on the wall. This iteration of Orpheus, then, is still united with his Eurydice, and it seems to the dreamer that he is singing of his love for her:

*Sonando ancora quivi il vidi stare  
con Euridice sua, e mi pareva  
che sonando 'l vedessi lì cantare  
soavi e dolci versi, e sì dicea,  
"Amore, a questa gioia mi conduce  
la fiamma tua che nel mio cor si crea.  
Amor, dell'alme sagge chiara luce  
tu sei colui che 'ngentilisci i cuori  
e a cose eccelse li sei guida e duce.*

Playing still, I saw him standing there with his Euridice, and it appeared to me that in playing I saw him singing gentle and sweet verses, and thus he said: "Love, to this joy brings me your flame that stokes itself in my heart. Love, bright light of wise souls, you are the one who refines hearts and guides them towards the exalted things."<sup>58</sup>

The presence of the repeated *amore* and the re-appropriation of the verb *condurre* bring Francesca's words quite clearly to mind, and thus Boccaccio has figured the simultaneous presence of these two stories, that of Orpheus and that of Francesca, into this moment that the dreamer is experiencing. Yet, there is nothing of the tragic in this Orpheus; rather, *amore* is banishing all that is ill and harboring all that is good:

*"Per te si fuggon gli agri e fier dolori,  
per te allegrezza, gioia ed ogni festa  
nasce e dimora dove tu dimori.  
O spegnitor di cosa molesta!  
luce degli occhi miei, dolce Euridice  
lunga stagion con gioia la mi presta!"*

"Through you the bitter and fierce pain is banished, through you lightness, joy and every celebration is born and dwells where you dwell. O, extinguisher of harm! Light of my eyes, sweet Euridice, the long season offers her to me with joy!"<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> *Amorosa visione*, XXIII.10-18.

<sup>59</sup> *Amorosa visione*, XXIII.19-24.

This is among the text's greatest moments of beauty, in part because of its echoing another beautiful, if tragic, poetic moment, and it warms the heart of the dreamer looking at the image as well: "immaginando quelle parolette a me, non ch'a lui, pur cresceva il valore" [imagining those words, its strength grew even for me, let alone for him].<sup>60</sup> In his approach towards the image of Orpheus, he moves from one tragic figure of the *Heroides* to another, seeing in these as well not the cruelty of earthly love but rather the passionate desire it brings, the "gloria mundana" as the characters depicted feel deeply.

The transition from the images the dreamer has insisted on viewing, "le cose più leggiere," to those the guide has been imploring him to see, "quelle c'han più gravitate,"<sup>61</sup> finally comes in the thirtieth canto, quite some time after the initial struggle over which path to follow. Triumphantly, the dreamer declares how much he values having seen these things the guide had been so against: "o quanto vale aver vedute queste varie cose che dicevate piene di gran male!" [oh, how worthy to have seen these many things that you said were full of great evil!]<sup>62</sup> She responds with force, reiterating how foolishly "tal vista sospinto in falsa oppenion t'abbia la mente," how he's let his mind be pushed in the wrong direction by the "gloria mundana" he's seen. Her subsequent diatribe, fifty-two verses long, proceeds to admonish him further for his "erranza" and insist once again that he follow her, so she might show him how the happiness of those who, like the dreamer, had faith in earthly love, quickly changes into painful sadness: "la gioia e 'l lieto canto de' tristi, che 'n tal cose ebben già fede, cangiarsi

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<sup>60</sup> *Amorosa visione*, XXIII.25-26.

<sup>61</sup> *Amorosa visione*, III.35-36.

<sup>62</sup> *Amorosa visione*, XXX.7-9.



in brieve in doloroso pianto.”<sup>63</sup> She ends her monologue with a new urgency to move forward with the journey, noting that the dreamer has only a limited time to complete the trajectory of vision:

*Ma oltre andiamo,  
perché già 'l luminoso e gran topazio  
in sulla seconda ora esser veggiamo  
di sopra l'orizzonte, ed il camino  
è lungo al tempo brieve che noi abbiamo.*

But let us go on, because we can already see that the glowing and great topaz of the second hour is above the horizon, and the way is far for the brief time that we have.<sup>64</sup>

Time, now, is of the essence, and the solar metaphor of these verses serves as a visual manifestation of the urgency the guide feels to move the dreamer along. The vision has hitherto been composed of the succession of images on the gallery walls, static and unmoving; this reference to the movement of the sun is a clear departure from the still, timeless nature of the narration up until this point. The guide's words recall the beginning of Dante's *Purgatorio*, in which the pilgrim and his guide Virgil, finding themselves above ground for the first time since entering *Inferno*, become aware of the passage of time:

*Già era 'l sole a l'orizzonte giunto  
lo cui meridian cerchio coverchia  
Ierusalèm col suo più alto punto;  
e la notte, che opposita a lui cerchia,  
uscita di Gange fuor con le Bilance,  
che le caggion di man quando soverchia;  
sì che le bianche e le vermiglie guance,  
là dov' i' era, de la bella Aurora  
per troppa etate divenivan rance.  
Noi eravam lunghesso mare ancora,  
come gente che pensa a suo cammino,  
che va col cuore e col corpo dimora.*

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<sup>63</sup> *Amorosa visione*, XXX.47-48.

<sup>64</sup> *Amorosa visione*, XXX.65-69.

The sun was nearly joined to that horizon  
 where the meridian circle at its zenith  
 stands straight above Jerusalem,  
 and night, circling on the other side,  
 was rising from the Ganges with the Scales  
 she drops when she is longer than the day,  
 so that, where I was,  
 the white and rosy cheeks of fair Aurora  
 were turning golden with time's ripening.  
 As yet we tarried by the seashore, like those  
 who think about the way and in their hearts go on.<sup>65</sup>

The travelers from this point forward will be paying close attention to the position not only of the sun but also of the various constellations that inform them as to where they are in relation to the heavens. The urgency that this new dimension brings to their journey is further underscored by Dante's awareness that he needs guidance as he moves forward.<sup>66</sup> In the early cantos of *Purgatorio*, however, Dante is still heavily reliant on Virgil: he clings closely to his companion: "i' mi ristrinsi a la fida compagna: e come sare' io senza lui corso?"<sup>67</sup>

Though somewhat more reluctantly than Dante, Boccaccio's dreamer complies with the guide's newest exhortation, having heard her long monologue about the wicked turns of Fortune in the lives of the earthly lovers he so loved to look at and having seen the images of their sad destinies fulfilled. He promises that his desire to follow her has returned: "il mio voler, che fu ritroso, ora è tornato fermo...giamo omai dove volete" [my desire, which was rebellious, is now returned to firmness ... let us turn

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<sup>65</sup> *Purgatorio*, II.1-12.

<sup>66</sup> Though Virgil will be less and less well-equipped to aid the pilgrim, the sense of loss that Dante will feel when the great Latin poet leaves him later in the *Purgatorio* is no less acute: "Ma Virgilio n'avea lasciati scemi di sé, Virgilio dolcissimo patre, Virgilio a cui per mia salute die'mi" (*Purgatorio*, XXX.49-51) and it is then that Beatrice steps in, becoming an even more powerful and authoritative guiding force, to whom Dante devotes himself immediately.

<sup>67</sup> *Purgatorio*, III.4-5.

now to where you wish to go].<sup>68</sup> They continue on, but in the very same canto, the dreamer is ready to go back on his word as soon as he sees a different path to follow:

*Ognor seguendo lei, così mirando  
intorno a me per veder ciò che vi era  
e nella mente ogni cosa recando,  
sì vi vid'io, per una porta ch'era  
alla sinistra mano, un bel giardino  
fiorito e verde qual di primavera.*

Now following her, looking around me so that I would see everything that was there and keep it all in my memory, thus I saw a door there to the left, a beautiful garden, flowering and green as though in spring.<sup>69</sup>

Once again tempted away from his guide, he stops a moment, wondering how he will manage without her: “infra me già dicendo: ‘se tu lassi/costei per colà entro voler gire,/s’ella non vien, chi guiderà i tuoi passi?’” [saying to myself, “if you leave her for your desire to enter there, and she does not follow, who will guide your steps?]<sup>70</sup> The momentary wavering echoes Dante’s clinging closely to Virgil in *Purgatorio* with the words “e come sare’ io senza lui corso?/chi mi avria tratto su per la montagna?” [How would I have come this far without him? Who would have led me up the mountain?].<sup>71</sup> But while there was never a question of Dante’s turning away from Virgil, Boccaccio’s dreamer does not take long to decide that he will forge his own path and explore the forbidden garden despite the guide’s ominous warnings. She rails, “Quando forse tu in più perigliosa angoscia ti vedrai, vorrai redire con meco adietro e non esser forse ito,” [“When you perhaps find yourself in danger and anguish, you will wish to return

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<sup>68</sup> *Amorosa visione*, XXXVII.30-42.

<sup>69</sup> *Amorosa visione*, XXXVII.61-66.

<sup>70</sup> *Amorosa visione*, XXXVII.76-78.

<sup>71</sup> *Purgatorio*, III.5-6.

to me, as if you had never gone”]<sup>72</sup> she says, almost disdainful, but the dreamer barely hears her, his mind too absorbed by the green and flowering garden he is about to enter: “Non fu il parlar suo allora da me udito per poco, tanto perché avea la mente pur al giardin verdeggiante e fiorito”.<sup>73</sup>

In this set of cantos, between the dreamer’s exploration of the galleries and their images and the culmination of the dream in the garden, where he meets the woman he loves, Boccaccio insists that the reader think about the relationship between dreamer and guide. With the reminder of time pressing upon them, as in the *Commedia*, and with so much weighty material to contemplate, does this dreamer require guidance? He allows it for a brief time, but he ultimately rejects it, and he does so almost casually, without much caring about what it might imply. When the beautiful women in the garden call to him, the guide once again tries to tell him that he is only following transitory delights, that he is his own worst enemy in refusing her guidance, but he stands before her, his eyes and his ears elsewhere, and “con l’occhio andava pure ove ‘l disio mi tenea fitto, non so che ascoltando.”<sup>74</sup>

What Boccaccio’s dreamer really wants, if we recall these opening verses to Canto XL with which we began, is to follow his own desires, which routinely summon him away from the path he has been following. His struggle with his guide over his wishes to pursue that which delights him has been established from the very start of the journey. Amidst the vivid, detailed and quite beautiful poetic vision that recalls Dante’s *Commedia* so effectively, Boccaccio chooses the interspersed moments of interaction

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<sup>72</sup> *Amorosa visione*, XXXVIII.7-12.

<sup>73</sup> *Amorosa visione*, XXXVIII.13-15.

<sup>74</sup> *Amorosa visione*, XL.1-3. See *supra*, 38.

between dreamer and guide to create a subversion of the expectations so artfully created in the poem: after declaring openly that he has been neither looking at nor really listening to his lady guide, he hastily promises to put the virtue she is teaching him into practice, at some point, but that just now he really wants to go over there with those women, and she can come with him or not: “o tu vienci,/o tu m’aspetta infin ch’io torni un poco.”<sup>75</sup> Not wholly without shame, he notes that she is not pleased: “costei quasi sdegnata mi teneva mente/con intento sguardo” [she held me with a deliberate gaze, as if angry].<sup>76</sup> He assesses her gaze and his own sense of duty, and finally he manages to shrug both off as he goes on to join the ladies who beckon. Where readers of Dante expect enthusiastic and unquestioning obedience, Boccaccio gives us something resembling stubborn and childish willfulness.

Two words in this little sequence give us an idea of Boccaccio’s transposition of an amorous vision: the first is *ascoltando* in verse 3, and the second is the *sguardo* of the lady in verse 19. Both the verb meaning “to listen” and the substantive “gaze” are important elements of the *Divina Commedia*, particularly in the establishment of the relationship between Dante and Beatrice. Both occur frequently in the *Commedia*, particularly in the *Paradiso*, and yet they are never used in the context in which Boccaccio uses them here.

Whereas Boccaccio’s protagonist listens to “non so che” [I know not what] as his lady speaks – invoking the verb to demonstrate that he is doing the opposite of listening, in fact – Dante’s pilgrim listens intently, always, and to a specific interlocutor, often Beatrice or Virgil; in fact, the very presence of the verb *ascoltare* seems to be in itself a

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<sup>75</sup> *Amorosa visione*, XL.11-12.

<sup>76</sup> *Amorosa visione*, XL.17-19.

sign of his attentiveness. The *sguardo*, more relevant to the present analysis of a *visione*, is a continuing trope throughout the *Commedia*, one which has been written on at great length particularly with regard to the character of Beatrice. Her gaze is the vehicle of her great power over Dante: he melts in its presence and must work to keep himself focused and attentive:

*Beatrice mi guardò con li occhi pieni  
di faville d'amor così divini,  
che, vinta, mia virtute diè le reni,  
e quasi mi perdei con li occhi chini.*<sup>77</sup>

Beatrice looked at me with eyes so full  
of the radiance of love and so divine  
that, overcome, my power of sight faded and fled,  
and, eyes cast down, I almost lost my senses.

This gaze transmits all of Beatrice's beauty and love, and in it, Dante sees the reflection of God, so bright that only gradually is he actually able to look her in the eyes. The disapproving *sguardo* of Boccaccio's lady is different indeed; rather than loving and all-powerful, it is ineffectual and pouty ("*quasi sdegnata*," mitigated even in her anger).

As it happens, the progression of the word *sguardo* in the *Commedia* gives us an excellent sense of how vision operates and what it is capable of in Dante's world. The word "visione" itself is rather mutable, but the noun "sguardo" is one that Dante always uses quite intentionally, giving it both subject and object (the gazer and the gazed-upon) but also agency of its own: as we will see, the *sguardo* often being the actor rather than the figure whose *sguardo* it is. Additionally, the singular consideration of the *sguardo* provides a manageable swath of the *Commedia* with which to provide a context for Boccaccio's 'pilfering' of the word, as Hollander might say, but also to invoke a sense of

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<sup>77</sup> *Paradiso*, IV.139-142.

the atmosphere created in Dante's final canticle. This, I believe, is precisely what Boccaccio both seeks to recreate reverently and to make light of playfully in his own text.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the *sguardo* specifically is a major factor only in the canticle of *Paradiso*. Prior to Dante's entry into the heavens, the word occurs only twice each in *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*. Already in the first half of *Paradiso*, it appears twice, and in the second half it appears six times, three of which occur in the last three cantos. The *sguardo*, in all of these cases, is an act, a force, communicating the utmost focus, the utmost striving for knowledge and understanding, the primary goal of the pilgrim in paradise. The first *sguardo* occurs in *Paradiso* III.127-130, in the first of the heavenly spheres, where Dante's ability to see is still struggling greatly:

*La vista mia, che tanto lei seguio  
quanto possibil fu, poi che la perse,  
volsesi al segno di maggior disio,  
e a Beatrice tutta si converse;  
ma quella folgorò nel mio sguardo  
sì che da prima il viso non sofferse;*

My eyes, which watched her as long as they could,  
turned, once she was lost to view,  
to the goal of their greater desire  
and were wholly bent on Beatrice.  
But she so blazed upon my sight  
at first my gaze could not sustain her light[.]<sup>78</sup>

Dante's *sguardo* fixes Beatrice, trying with all its might to focus, having lost sight of Piccarda, one of the blessed souls who speaks to Dante as he struggles to focus on her. This is a canto that spends a great deal of time talking about the difficulty of seeing; the figures Dante meets in the sphere of the Moon are translucent, faint outlines, and Dante, believing they are but reflections of souls ("quelle stimando specchiati sembianti"),<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> *Paradiso*, III.124-129.

<sup>79</sup> *Paradiso*, III.20.

turns around, looking for whoever is casting the reflection. Seeing nothing, in his confusion, he turns his eyes back to the smiling and radiant Beatrice, who returns his gaze and reassures him that the souls he sees are real: “vere sustanze son ciò che tu vedi”.<sup>80</sup> The canto underscores Dante’s great need for a guide, if he is to see the qualities of Paradise, and his *sguardo* signals his equally great effort to focus on her and to follow her. Similarly, in the eighteenth canto of *Paradiso*, the *sguardo* reappears with renewed intensity:

*Così per Carlo Magno e per Orlando  
due ne seguì lo mio attento sguardo,  
com' occhio segue suo falcon volando.*

My watchful gaze was fastened  
on Charlemagne and Roland there, as well,  
just as the eye pursues the falcon in its flight.<sup>81</sup>

Once again, the *sguardo* is characterized as sharp, attentive, like the hunter’s eye. This canto (XVIII, just past *Paradiso*’s mid-point) focuses in particular on the eyes, right from its opening sequence in which Beatrice catches Dante gazing at her, seeing “I piacere eterno, che diretto raggiava” in her eyes – she chides him gently saying “Volgiti e ascolta: ché non pur ne’ miei occhi è paradiso” [“Turn now and listen: not in my eyes alone is Paradise”].<sup>82</sup> Dante receives a rebuke for being *too* adoring and attentive towards his guide, and he thus immediately switches focus at Beatrice’s request and fixates on Cacciaguida, who will direct his “attento sguardo” appropriately. The occurrences of *sguardo* increase in frequency as Dante moves ever nearer to the final vision, indicating its importance as a signal of devout and unfailing attention, a mark of

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<sup>80</sup> III.29.

<sup>81</sup> XVIII.43-45.

<sup>82</sup> XVIII.13-21.



Dante's readiness to see the light of God, which grows with every step he takes in the path of his guide.

*Sguardo* is on the other hand a rare word in the *Amorosa visione*: only at the turning point of sorts presented in Canto XL does Boccaccio deploy it, precisely at the moment when the dreamer and his spiritual guide part company under less than desirable circumstances. A word so powerful in the *Commedia* is here stripped of its divine power to compel attention, for Boccaccio's guide is a human woman against whom the would-be disciple struggles from the outset. The pilgrim Dante of *Paradiso* is on a journey fraught with exhausting effort, as he submits to the *sguardo* of his lady and trains his own at the same time, all in preparation for the ultimate vision of God. The *sguardo*, too, is a sharp indicator of just how much Dante needs to be guided in order to see correctly, in fact to see at all, though his eyes grow progressively more capable as he ascends. This well-known relationship between Dante and vision sets up certain expectations within the *Amorosa visione* based on its very resemblance to its predecessor. Yet, Boccaccio's dreamer operates under no such tension, subverting those expectations with aplomb; he is moved by what he sees, yes, but he also asserts his freedom to seek what he wants and he succeeds in seeing and in interpreting his vision with no help from anyone. In the moments when the lady guide tries to interfere with his experience of the *Visione*, he balks, claiming that particular control for himself, though not necessarily because she and he want different things. More than once, he concedes that he is very open and eager to hear her counsel, and that it does him good, in fact, but he resists nonetheless because on principle he must be the one to choose them. As he gazes upon the marvelous image of Charles of Anjou, in Canto XII, he pauses in his adoring description to tell the reader how even as he admires the great monarch of Boccaccio's

beloved Naples, his eager mind and hungry eyes itch to see more of the gallery beyond him. Just at that moment, as if perceiving his impatience, the lady urges him to hurry, to which he instantly snaps at her to wait: “un poco aspetta”.<sup>83</sup> Although his hurry matches hers, as he admits, he actively resists any attempt on her part to direct his gaze.

This, ultimately, is where Boccaccio draws a clear line between himself and Dante: the latter is perfectly willing to give over his eyes, and indeed, his autonomy as a pilgrim, to the guidance and authority first of Virgil and then of Beatrice. As such, he as author demands the same rapt attention and scrupulous following from his readers, as he exclaims directly to them at the beginning of *Paradiso* canto II:

*O voi che siete in piccioletta barca  
desiderosi d'ascoltar, seguiti  
dietro al mio legno che cantando varca,  
tornate a riveder i vostri liti:  
non vi mettete in pelago, ché forse,  
perdendo me, rimarreste smarriti.  
L'acqua ch'io prendo mai non si corse;*

...

*voialtri pochi che drizzaste il collo  
per tempo al pan de li angeli ...  
metter potete ben per l'alto sale  
vostro navigio, servando mio solco  
dinanzi a l'acqua che ritorna eguale.*

O you, eager to hear more,  
who have followed in your little bark  
my ship that singing makes its way,  
turn back if you would see your shores again.  
Do not set forth upon the deep,  
for, losing sight of me, you would be lost.  
The seas I sail were never sailed before.

...

You other few who craned your necks in time  
to reach for angels' bread, ...  
you may indeed set out, your ship afloat  
upon the salty deep, keeping to the furrow  
I have made, before the sea goes smooth again.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> *Amorosa visione*, XII.49

<sup>84</sup> *Paradiso*, II.1-15.

An extended maritime metaphor (and one of the most often quoted passages of the *Paradiso*), this passage commands readers to go home, to take their little boat that's been bobbing along behind Dante's *legno* for two whole canticles and return to their own shores. The poet explains that these intellectual "waters" he's entering now have never been explored, and that if these middling readers should lose sight of him they would be lost, possibly to the point of no return. Those "altri pochi", the worthy few who have craned their necks, strained themselves enough to receive the "pan degli angeli," bread of angels, food of knowledge, are the ones whom Dante trusts to continue following him. Not that they would be capable of this journey on their own; they must follow behind him so closely that their boat remains in the wake left by his own, "dinanzi a l'acqua che ritorna equale". To Dante, being a good reader means following without straying for a moment.

Boccaccio's approach to the experience of reading is quite different. One of his chief defenses of what he writes, as we saw in the *Genealogia*, is grounded in a belief in the agency of the reader. Confronted with a multitude of things, a reader can choose what to read and what to overlook, as he muses in his conclusion to the *Decameron*, one needs to discover their positive qualities for oneself. He goes on to say that it would be silly of him to try to "prune" his writing in an effort to weed out all possible imperfection, and it would be especially futile to predict which words might be interpreted harmfully by corrupt minds. How could he think it possible to control such things? Even words so holy and indisputable as those of divine scripture are subject to corruption, as there have been those who, by "perversamente" interpreting the Bible, "sé

e altrui a perdizione hanno tratto" [have brought themselves and others to ruin].<sup>85</sup> Thus, he goes on to say, every thing that is good in itself, when badly "adoperata" can be harmful to many, and his writing is no exception: "e così dico delle mie novelle." He as author does not have the power to dictate how his words will be read; indeed, how could he claim to? So to those who would object to any of the *Decameron's* novelle, whether for their lax morality or for their explicit references to male genitalia, he suggests that whoever is reading "lasci star quelle [cose] che pungono, e quelle che diletta legga" [may s/he leave be those things that sting, and may she read those that delight].<sup>86</sup>

Hardly could an author be more concessional, and hardly could a reader have more liberty bestowed by the author himself, to make the experience of reading an independent one, characterized by delight and by a sound knowledge of one's own personal desires and tastes. In the end, the sequence that opens Canto XL is pivotal. Though eventually the dreamer ends up seeing all the images that the lady wanted him to see as well, learning the lesson she hoped he would learn, he uses that moment to make a point of standing by his insistence upon following his own path to get there, saying, "Donna mia, [...] o tu vienci, o tu m'aspetta [...]. In qual parte vorrai poi insieme andrenci." The dreamer has no compunction in staking his claim to free will rather baldly: she can either come with him or wait for him. Eventually they will end up in the place she wants them to go, but he will not be dissuaded from going where he wishes to go along the way. With this pronouncement, as she stands glaring at him, he's off without another word, consciously throwing caution to the wind with his disobedience:

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<sup>85</sup> Giovanni BOCCACCIO and Vittore BRANCA, ed. (1998), *Decameron*, "Conclusione dell'autore." Translation mine.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibidem*.

“sanza dir nulla la vi pur lasciai, o bene o mal non so qual io mi fei” [without saying a word I left her there, for better or worse I know not].

The bickering that recurs in this way between dreamer and guide over free will reads in a comic register, precisely because of the subversion of expectations in the context of an outwardly very Dante-feeling poem. The rebellious attitude and staunchly contrarian protagonist that we get is a surprise in the context of the deeply Dantean elements that have been examined here, and one that causes us to laugh, but stops short of becoming a parody of Dante. Rather, the seriousness of this work is palpable, and the appropriation of Dante is quite un-ironic in its adoration – indeed, Dante himself appears at one point, a figure rising above all the others, such that the dreamer is at a loss for words, “tanto che ‘l dire alla vista vien meno”,<sup>87</sup> the most ineffable of all the characters in the *Visione*. Boccaccio pauses in his panoramic narrative, contemplating the great poet in hushed tones, a rare display of reverence interrupted only by the guide trying to hurry him up, saying: “Che più miri? ...tu hai costì veduto, volgi omai gli occhi!” [“What are you still looking at? ... You’ve seen this one now, turn your eyes away!"].<sup>88</sup> Virgil speaks in a similar way to Dante at one point, in the lowest circles of the *Inferno*: “Or pur mira, che per poco che teco non mi risso!” [“Go right on looking/and it is I who'll quarrel with you”],<sup>89</sup> chastising the pilgrim for gazing too long upon the damned souls frozen in ice. Dante reacts with immediate humility and shame, such that the emotion still swirls around his memory: “tal vergogna ch’ancora per la memoria mi

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<sup>87</sup> *Amorosa visione*, V.74-75.

<sup>88</sup> *Amorosa visione*, VI.23-27.

<sup>89</sup> *Inferno*, XXX.131-132.

si gira".<sup>90</sup> Unable to speak, he longs to ask forgiveness, and in his speechless state, "non possendo parlare, che disiava scusarmi", Virgil sees his repentance and pardons him, noting that his shame is even a little excessive: "Maggior difetto men vergogna lava...che 'l tuo non è stato" ["Less shame would cleanse a greater fault than yours"].<sup>91</sup> In the face of disapproval from his guide, Dante overcorrects, his rapt attention to Virgil once more restored.

In Boccaccio's text, the dreamer's reaction to the guide's reproach is hardly one of repentance. Maintaining control for himself, he snaps back with:

*"Donna, tu non sai  
neente perché tal mirar m'aggrata  
costui cui miro; se tu 'l ben sapessi  
non parleresti forse sì turbata."*

"Lady, you know nothing of why it pleases me so much to gaze upon the one at whom I gaze; if you knew, you perhaps would not speak in such a disturbed way."<sup>92</sup>

The outburst brings us abruptly out of the momentary solemnity inspired by Dante, back to the irreverent dreamer who just wants to do it his own way. Deep, close reading, the sort of reading that the *Genealogia* will later promote above all, is something that the reader must control him or herself. Quite appropriately, Boccaccio chooses to convey this with the sort of *umorismo* that requires attentive reading to uncover. Yet, for all its complexity, the lightness of the *Amorosa visione* is far from inaccessible: Dante's *Commedia* shines a light into it that truly brings out the expert style imitation with the subtle reversals that make it humorous. We are reading a very Boccaccian lesson about reading, which is dressed in a very Dantean story, to return to Pirandello's "wardrobe of

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<sup>90</sup> *Inferno*, XXX 134-135.

<sup>91</sup> *Inferno*, XXX.139-143.

<sup>92</sup> *Amorosa visione*, VI.30-33.

Rhetoric” metaphor analyzed in the previous chapter.<sup>93</sup> The deft juxtaposition of the two, the *scomponimento* of established order, is what creates humor in this context. Poetry is quite a serious matter for Boccaccio, so serious that his entire text is painstakingly constructed around the structure of a sonnet, but the idea that this seriousness cannot be pronounced with lightness and humor in certain moments is too narrow. The moments of comedy are the ones that cause the reader to pause, reflecting on what makes this particular moment funny and to what end, reading *sub cortice fabularum* and uncovering the meaning beneath.<sup>94</sup>

To what end does Boccaccio ultimately create his text in this way? The question of how to read, interpret, and extrapolate will return under quite a different guise in the *Teseida*, which I discuss in Chapter 3: the role of the *Amorosa visione*’s guide, the would-be dictator of the reading experience, passes instead to a meta-textual figure that Boccaccio sets up as editor and glossator alongside the text itself. Echoes of the *Amorosa visione*’s contrived pedantry will similarly beg to be challenged by the reader who is truly paying attention. In the case of the *Amorosa visione*, I believe Boccaccio sets out to demonstrate a dexterity with Dante’s poetic language, paying it tribute and also manipulating it, using it to say something quite different and challenging readers to see it for what it is, on their own terms. What Boccaccio wants to say about poetry and about reading comes back to the reading experience that his protagonist insists on claiming as his own: one guided by the reader himself, one made possible by the presence of a physical text out in the world, one that the reader chooses to see as “mirabile...forse” or not. Such a book, if indeed deemed “mirabile” by the reader who is granted this sort of

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<sup>93</sup> See *supra*, Chapter 1, 17-18.

<sup>94</sup> See *supra*, Chapter 1, 30.

liberty, is the work of a great author, a true master who does not need to insist on seriousness or on devotion to make his authority resonate.



## CHAPTER 3

### The stories, genres and writers of the *Teseida delle nozze d'Emilia*: 'Colui il sa...che sono io'

*E' m'è venuto in voglia con pietosa  
rima di scrivere una istoria antica  
tanto negli anni riposte e nascosa  
che latino autor non par ne dica,  
per quel ch'io senta, in libro alcuna cosa;  
dunque sí fate che la mia fatica  
sia graziosa a chi ne fia lettore  
o in altra maniera ascoltatore.*

And the desire came to me to write an age-old story in pious verses, so hidden over the years that it does not seem to me any Latin author has written anything in any book about it, according to what I hear; therefore, make it so that my effort is pleasing to whomever might play the part of its reader, or listener.<sup>1</sup>

In his *Teseida delle nozze di Emilia*, on both a narrative and a textual level, Boccaccio playfully lays claim to more than one canon of material, demonstrating himself to be its master even as he maintains all outward appearances of being extremely deferential to the traditions behind it. A sense of duality pervades the experience of reading the *Teseida*; in nearly every moment, Boccaccio is trying to play multiple roles at once. He is both author and commentator, both excessive and withholding, both straight-faced and winking, both authoritative and deferential. As he invokes the muses in the opening to *Teseida*, Book I, cited above, he humbly prays their favorable influence on his "pietosa rima," his lowly rhymes. He even excludes himself as subject of the sentence: "scrivere", to write, "E' m'è venuto in voglia," or, this came to him as a wish. He then asks the muses to aid not him, but his "fatica" in pleasing his audience. He both distances himself from authority and claims it at the same time. There

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<sup>1</sup> Giovanni BOCCACCIO and Aurelio RONCAGLIA, ed. (1941), *Teseida delle nozze d'Emilia*, I.2. I will refer throughout the chapter to this edition. Translations mine unless noted.

is unmistakably a proclamation of greatness hidden behind these trappings of humbleness. This story, he goes on to say, is one that no “latino autor par ne dica,” no Latin author seems to have spoken of, in any book, and thus here he is bringing this long-hidden tale to light. Well aware of the newness of this endeavor, he wishes it to be evident to the reader as well, but without proclaiming his own greatness explicitly. The claims are nonetheless palpable: the twelve-book format of the *Aeneid* and the *Thebaid*, complete with introductory sonnets preceding each book and explicative introductory sentences preceding those, not to mention the opening sonnet that presents the work in its entirety, preceded of course by the preface, are all the signposts that tell the reader to get ready for something really serious and important, even epic. So what kind of book is the *Teseida delle nozze d’Emilia* going to be? Evidently, both *istoria antica* and *pietosa rima*. Nor will Boccaccio limit himself to being just one sort of author, as this chapter will demonstrate.

That most critics have chosen to analyze and evaluate the *Teseida* on the basis of its relationship with classical epic is quite understandable, given the very clear emphasis on the epic structure previously discussed, but it is when compared to medieval romance that the experimental, synthesizing, and at times humorous nature of the *Teseida* becomes most apparent. There are many candidates for fruitful comparison to this poem, chief among them being the works of the 12<sup>th</sup>-century Chrétien de Troyes. This chapter will examine Chrétien’s medieval adaptation of the ancient Greek Alexander the Great in *Cligès* in dialogue with the *Teseida*, in an effort to demonstrate more thoroughly the ways in which Boccaccio innovates through his text. Like Boccaccio’s Teseo, Chrétien’s Alexandre is a transposition of a figure from ancient lore, taken from his original context and injected into King Arthur’s court in England, where

he falls in love, weds the lady of his dreams, and has a son, Cligès, in whose love story is rooted the main plot of the poem. The parallels that unite *Cligès* with the *Teseida* are many, though this is not to suggest that Boccaccio himself was directly influenced by Chrétien; however likely it may seem, there is no material proof that he ever read Chrétien's works.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, *Cligès* provides a lot of interesting material to accompany an analysis of the *Teseida*, both in its content and in its exploration of what authority means and how it can be asserted. Chrétien, too, deploys humor by subverting traditional *roman*-based expectations, demonstrating how much Boccaccio has in common with this particular tradition in addition to that of epic. Furthermore, the kind of story Chrétien seeks to tell is an important part of the tradition that Boccaccio is actively playing upon, and the presence of *Cligès* in this chapter of my work is meant to draw attention to Boccaccio's choices in crafting the *Teseida*.

Critics of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries have tended to argue that the *Teseida delle nozze di Emilia* is somewhat of a failed enterprise, an attempt at epic in the style of Statius's *Thebaid* and Virgil's *Aeneid* that unintentionally became a chivalric romance somewhere along the way, and not a very good one at that. The work is attributed to Boccaccio's "youthful" period, and even such scholars as Erich Auerbach who have the utmost respect for Boccaccio tend to characterize it as broad, naïve, exaggerated and excessive with respect to his masterpiece the *Decameron*, an attempt at a higher style than

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<sup>2</sup> This is a problem that many scholars have sought and are still seeking to solve, because there is much in Boccaccio's Italian to indicate a familiarity with French, not to mention the strong French political presence in Naples, where the author spent about a decade of his early life. There is much to suggest that a number of *ancien français* codices of various types originated in 13<sup>th</sup>- and 14<sup>th</sup>-century Naples, making it possible that Boccaccio may have had access to them. However, there is no clear material evidence that this is the case. See D'URSO Teresa in *Boccaccio e Napoli*, (forthcoming in 2015), in her contribution to the conference proceedings from "Boccaccio Angioino," October 2013.

Boccaccio isn't really cut out for.<sup>3</sup> Auerbach interrupts his otherwise extremely high praise of Boccaccio's talent as *novellatore* to label the *Teseida* as one of several "occasional attempts ... to reach out for something more...[than] the intermediate style", attempts which generally result in "what might be termed a chronic exaggeration of the stylistic level and an inordinate use of erudite embellishment" in an attempt to recreate the "elevated" style of the ancients. In other words, embellishing for embellishment's sake, reaching to imitate an ancient standard for "decorative and oratorical purposes" and creating as a result a kind of writing which "could not come close to its object".<sup>4</sup>

That Boccaccio's invocations of ancient epic amount to nothing more than straight imitation for the purposes of showy embellishment seems improbable, and fortunately for Boccaccio, scholars working on the *opere minori* have begun to revise some of these views. As David Anderson points out in *Before the Knight's Tale*, one of very few monographs written exclusively on the *Teseida*, this body of criticism, spanning the 19<sup>th</sup> and earlier 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, seems to "[rush] to the conclusion that Boccaccio ... intended to write a poem ... just like the classical epics ... talis qualis."<sup>5</sup> That Boccaccio had an agenda other than what appears on the very surface, as he himself reminds us in the *Genealogia*, should be assumed by anyone who undertakes to read the *Teseida*. Anderson goes on to argue that, in fact, there is much to indicate that Boccaccio intended to write precisely the book he wrote; there is proof that he worked on it for many years,

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<sup>3</sup> Erich AUERBACH (2013), 217.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> David ANDERSON (1988), 15. I am extremely lucky to have the benefit of Anderson's *Before the Knight's Tale: Imitation of Classical Epic in Boccaccio's Teseida*. His introduction contains a thorough and thoughtful study of *Teseida* reception, with particular attention paid to the divergence of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century assessments from earlier ones.

for one thing, and revised it more than once.<sup>6</sup> His autograph manuscript is composed in a very regular and practiced book hand, with margins wide enough to support a robust commentary and other formal elements to indicate a codex destined for much reading and in-depth study.<sup>7</sup> Consulting the *Teseida*'s reception history prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Anderson concludes eventually that the rather pejorative take on its poor imitation of classical epic did not show up in the critical literature until the later 1800s.<sup>8</sup> One of the earliest detractors of the *Teseida* was Francesco De Sanctis, who wrote that the commingling of romance and epic in the poem constituted "'more a parody' of the [epic] form than a reproduction of its 'seriousness and weight.'"<sup>9</sup> In the Counter-Reformation period and the 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, the poem was widely praised, particularly for having premiered the *ottava rima*, thereafter the characteristic verse form of such Italian chivalric epics as Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* and Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*. The key assertion that Anderson makes is that yes, by all accounts throughout the centuries, "Boccaccio did to some extent imitate classical epic," but the 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century scholars so scornful of the poem "[assume] that Boccaccio was attempting to do just that, while the earlier writers did not."<sup>10</sup>

It should not be such a stretch to credit Boccaccio with having composed the *Teseida* the way he wanted to, whether conforming with the expectations of a given

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<sup>6</sup> See Giuseppe VANDELLI (1929).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*. Vandelli's exhaustive essay contains a highly detailed exploration of the autograph manuscript's features, and despite some small revisions in Marco CURSI (2013), it (the Vandelli essay) remains more or less the authoritative treatise on this particular codex.

<sup>8</sup> ANDERSON (1988), 15.

<sup>9</sup> Francesco DE SANCTIS (1870), op. cit. in ANDERSON, 11.

<sup>10</sup> ANDERSON, 20.

genre or not. Indeed, the great relish with which Boccaccio stretched the norms of genre in other works of his has been well established. In the field of *Decameron* studies, for instance, it is a commonplace to attribute to him the invention of an unprecedented kind of narrative prose.<sup>11</sup> Yet, the fact that the *Teseida*'s autograph manuscript predates the earliest editions of the *Decameron* makes it easy to map the former onto an upward trajectory towards the latter, which, as was discussed in the introduction to this work, is widely agreed to be his single greatest contribution to literature. Without disputing the absolute genius of the *Decameron* or its importance in establishing new traditions, it is still possible to imagine that Boccaccio had enough dexterity to have accomplished what he set out to accomplish in the *Teseida* as well, which at the very least merits closer and more earnest examination before dismissing it out of hand.

Finally, the critical reception of *Teseida* has paid little, if any, attention to the implications of a humorous touch in the composition of the poem and its marginal glosses, both of which have been critically established as originally Boccaccio's, although the marginalia are written in a disguised hand.<sup>12</sup> Boccaccio goes to rather extraordinary lengths in pretending that another scribe has glossed the text, a façade further sustained by continual reference to "l'autore" in the third person. In my view, this suggests that his intentions may not be as straightforward and one-directional as they might appear if

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<sup>11</sup> See for example CAPORELLO-SZYKMAN (1990). The volume declares this straight from its title, *The Boccaccian novella: creation and waning of a genre*, and it posits in plain, unqualified language that "with the *Decameron*, Boccaccio created a new genre in short narrative" (162). See also EISNER (2013), with the equally declarative title *Boccaccio and the Invention of Italian Literature*. The book's preface declares that "To argue that Boccaccio invents Italian literature is ... to emphasize the pivotal role Boccaccio's texts, arguments, and narratives play in the formation of this tradition that has a persistent place in reflections on Italian literary identity" (4). Further examples of this sort of language is abundant and often, as in CAPORELLO-SZYKMAN, unqualified; it no longer needs to be argued that Boccaccio was an inventor of new genres.

<sup>12</sup> As established by Giuseppe VANDELLI and confirmed by CURSI.

one took everything in the text at face value, as so many seem to have done. In the context of the whole, nearly every individual characteristic of the *Teseida* seems to beg to be read more deeply than what is on its surface, not inconsistently with Boccaccio's exhortations to readers of *fabulae* in the *Genealogia*. This text is something other than pure epic or pure romance, its composer something beyond just author or just glossator. It is a linear narrative, and it is also a thematically organized glossary of mythical and allegorical references, which include, somewhat appropriately, practically every existing story of the all-powerful god Giove (Jupiter) shifting his outward appearance to seduce unsuspecting women in classical mythology. Boccaccio's glossator visits this trope over and over again in his marginal commentary, taking even a passing reference in the main text to Leda and the swan, Europa and the bull, and other Giove shape-shifting stories as an opportunity to expound on the power of outward transformation at will, almost as if reminding his readers that it *is* possible in the world he inhabits to take more than one form from moment to moment.

Boccaccio is far from the first to synthesize stories of war with stories of love; medieval romantic tales featuring warriors who are as beholden to love as they are to their kingdoms abound in the centuries preceding the composition of the *Teseida*. What separates Boccaccio's tale from all others preceding it is the very conscious synthesis of the Latin epic tradition with the medieval romantic tradition above and beyond the content of the poem itself. Its title is the first key to its multiple alliances: Boccaccio calls it *Teseida delle nozze di Emilia*, that is, the book of Teseo, echoing Statius and Virgil's respective epic titles, of the nuptials of Emilia. The first part of the title, by which the story is best known, suggests the centrality of war, while the second invokes a wedding. The reader will then note immediately that the poem is written in twelve books, which

Boccaccio painstakingly emphasizes over and over, beginning with an introductory sonnet that enumerates each book's plot, likely a didactic device intended as a sort of reader's guide to a hitherto-unseen synthesis of stories. Subsequently, every one of the twelve books will begin with its own introductory sonnet, along with a helpful note in the margin indicating that this is a "sonetto nel quale si contiene l'argomento particolare del [presente] libro", a sonnet in which is contained the subject of the present book. Another note in the margin will then tell us, after the sonnet, that the first/second/third etc. book of the *Teseida delle nozze d'Emilia* is beginning. In other words, even the rather dim reader cannot possibly overlook, at any point, how this poem is organized; all signs indicate the vital importance of its structure, even to excess.

Naturally, this emphasis on the structure that mirrors that of classical epic has invited critics to evaluate the *Teseida's* literary merit based on its ability to match the *Thebaid* and the *Aeneid* in all ways, but this type of analysis rather limits the potential for exploration of the various missions that Boccaccio sets out to accomplish. The poem's structure, its content and its editorial apparatus all figure into this project, and as in the *Amorosa visione*, Boccaccio plays with the expectations that come along with the multiple genres and practices he experiments with, often to comic effect.

While the previous chapter explored Boccaccio's use of the form already established in Dante's *Commedia* to say something very much his own, this chapter will delve into his more explicit consideration of genre in the creation of the *Teseida*, which synthesizes epic and romance to engage the reader in a different kind of experience than either genre could deliver on its own. Rather than turning to the work's evident epic source-texts, as many critics have already done, I choose to read the *Teseida* alongside Chrétien de Troyes's *Cligès*, a *roman* in *ancien français* that dips its own toes into epic in



ways that often parallel Boccaccio's text. Both the *Teseida* and *Cligès* are composed with Pirandellian *umorismo*, but they diverge in key ways that, in my view, call attention to Boccaccio's particular brand of humorous genre-bending.

As Giancarlo Alfano and others have pointed out, in the *Teseida*'s final verses in declaring the novelty of recounting a tale of war in the *volgare*, Boccaccio is paraphrasing and translating the second chapter of the second book of Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*, a work that for Boccaccio constitutes perhaps *the* definitive treatise on what *alta poesia* consists of and what the Italian *volgare* should speak of. The *De vulgari* is also a text that explicitly relegates the comic to the lowest status of all genres. With the *Teseida*, to paraphrase Alfano,<sup>13</sup> Boccaccio was looking to situate himself in the recent but already important "tradizione poetica volgare." Rather than make this sort of claim outright, however, Boccaccio merely wishes it to be strongly implied and felt, refusing too obvious a claim to authority. Part of the irony and amusement that the reader experiences with the *Teseida* comes from exactly this: the humble outer trappings of what is really quite sweeping in truth, perhaps what Massimo Forni would call the presence of the "real Boccaccio,"<sup>14</sup> the Boccaccio that dissembles his great skill while showing it off at the same time.

In addition to subverting genre-based expectations within the poem itself, the *Teseida* is clearly playing with the role of paratextual elements by way of the running commentary on the text itself provided by Boccaccio's glossator. Chrétien's humor, on the other hand, is less rooted in the forms he employs; his authorial voice comments on

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<sup>13</sup> Giancarlo ALFANO (2011), 29-30.

<sup>14</sup> I'm referring to Pier Massimo FORNI's keynote address given at a conference titled *Boccaccio e la finzione narrativa* at the University of Toronto in March 2013, titled "Sprezzatura in the *Decameron*". Conference proceedings forthcoming.

the events of the story and the misadventures of his characters at several points, but there is something like a stepping outside of the narrative that has to happen for this to have its comic effect. The *Teseida*'s creation of a separate figure from the author allows Boccaccio to inhabit two voices, that of author and that of commentator, with a completely straight face, both at the same time. The first comment glosses the first verse of the first book, explaining that the author, in the beginning of his book, following the ancient custom of composers, invokes the muses and asks their help in composing his work,<sup>15</sup> the voice of the critic pretending to be a different one from that of the author. Established norms defining the relationship between critic and author, then, provide ample space for Boccaccio to explore the little meta-fiction he has created of himself as both author and editor. The tone of the glossator with respect to the author, to the body of the poem and to the imagined readers is rather fascinating, and the paratext should thus be read as a vital part of the text itself and the experiment it constitutes.<sup>16</sup>

Once again, as in the *Amorosa visione*, laughter in itself is far from being the ultimate goal of the text. The exploration of how genre can be stretched and joined with other established genres, and the further exploration of how reading and writing can be commented upon simultaneously with the main text is, in fact, quite a serious endeavor. However, the light sense of play in engaging both literary and critical traditions,

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<sup>15</sup> *Teseida*, I.1.1, note: "O sorelle etc.":

<sup>16</sup> Both the editions of RONCAGLIA and of BATTAGLIA include the *chiose*, or marginalia, but Roncaglia has relegated them to the back of the book, forcing the reader to either ignore them or go through the tedious exercise of flipping back and forth between main text and apparatus. Battaglia has included them as footnotes, which is better but still not indicative of Boccaccio's original orientation of the page. In the autograph manuscript, fully profiled in VANDELLI, the *chiose* are found either in the margins, right next to the verses they refer to, or, in the cases of shorter and explicative notes, within the main text itself, between lines of verse. They are written in a different hand from the main text, but still a very uniform hand, with only a few exceptions (see CURSI, 131).

particularly in the moments when Boccaccio assumes the roles of both author and reader simultaneously, is in fact vital to the foundational nature of the work in question. The presence of Boccaccio on multiple levels in the *Teseida* and his execution of this with a straight face and a very occasional wink is a highly intentional claim to authority, one which will be explored further in later, more explicitly theoretical works, particularly the *Genealogia*, but the *Teseida* offers a window into how Boccaccio saw himself contributing to both literature and its reception.

As its title suggests, the *Teseida* begins with an account of Teseo (Theseus) and his campaign against the hitherto unbeatable Hippolyta and her Amazon army. The first two books, which can rightly be called *Teseida*, or Book of Teseo, set the stage for the *nozze d'Emilia*, the story of the Theban knights Arcita and Palemone and the rivalry that brews over their love for Emilia, which takes hold of them as soon as they arrive in Athens and catch a glimpse of the young woman from the depths of their prison cell. Emilia's origin story, however, is precisely the story of the Athenian men's war against the Amazons, laid out in Book I. At first, the men run into trouble, beaten back from their beach landing by the Amazons, but a speech from Teseo about how shameful it would be if they lost to a bunch of women gives them a second wind: "E sì gli aveva vergogna spronati/con le parole del fiero Teseo,/ch'egli eran presti e arditi tornati" (So much had shame spurred them on, with the words of the proud Teseo, that they had become bold and quick once again). This, naturally, spells the end for the Amazons. The men lay siege to their fortress, prompting an exchange of letters between Teseo and Hippolyta that establishes peace and, with it, a series of weddings between the Athenians and the Amazons, most prominently Teseo and Hippolyta. The women are

all too happy to abandon their warring lifestyle, and they transform instantly into courtly ladies:

*Le donne avevan cambiati sembianti,  
ponendo in terra l'arme rugginose,  
e tornate eran quali eran davanti,  
belle, leggiadre, fresche e graziose;  
e ora in lieti motti e dolci canti  
mutate avean le voci rigogliose,  
e' passi avevan piccioli tornati,  
che pria nell'armi grandi erano stati.*

The women had changed their countenance, leaving their rusty weapons on the ground, and returning to what they had once been, beautiful, lovely, fresh and graceful; and now into happy words and sweet songs they had transformed their luxuriant voices, and their steps had become little once more, where their arms had made them big before.<sup>17</sup>

This restoration of the true order of things with respect to women and their behavior will resound throughout the poem and the marginalia; in many ways, this first book establishes the various structures that the rest of the story will rely upon: war giving way to love and marriage, women taking their place alongside the men who desire them, women ceasing to imitate men and instead embracing their traditionally imposed roles.

The poem continues with the origin story of Arcita and Palemone, with Book II describing the war in Thebes that Teseo wages against Creon, having heard of his cruelty towards the Greeks. Once he rights the wrongs of the pitiless ruler, who among other things would not allow the bodies of the dead to be buried, condemning them to eternity in hell with no chance of passing through to Elysium, Teseo comes upon Creon's nephews Arcita and Palemone, who had fought with him until the bitter end. Seeing the valor of the two and hearing them tell of how they'd defended their uncle,

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<sup>17</sup> *Teseida*, I.132.

Teseo's rage falters, and "verso lor più ne divenne pio"<sup>18</sup> [towards them he became more charitable], treating their wounds and bringing them to Athens to serve out a life sentence in prison rather than executing them.

This is the moment when *Teseida*, the Book of Teseo, becomes the *nozze d'Emilia*, the nuptials of Emilia. Both Boccaccio the author and Boccaccio the glossator seem excessively concerned about the narrative grace of switching focus from the *Teseida* to the *nozze d'Emilia* in this way; lest the reader question the validity of the shift in storylines, the extra-narrative structure that bolsters the poem itself explains why Teseo, who seems to be the story's central character based on his campaigns against the Amazons (Book I) and then against Creon and Thebes (Book II), essentially fades into the background with the onset of Book III. It is the *Teseida* that provides the background that allows us to understand the players in the *nozze d'Emilia* more fully. The story of war gives way to a story of love, as the introductory sonnet to Book III tells us: "Nel terzo a Marte dona alcuna posa l'Autore,"<sup>19</sup> [in the third book, the Author gives Mars, the god of war, a rest]. Now, dutifully, it befalls him to sing of Cupid and his battles: "omai con più pio sermone/sarà da me di Cupido cantato/e delle sue battaglie".<sup>20</sup> Book III shows the readers how hard Arcita and Palemone each fall in love with Emilia, watching her as she walks about "donnescamente" (in a womanly fashion, reinforcing the excellent, traditionally appropriate woman-like behavior of the character in contrast to the Amazons), singing with her delightful voice, giving pleasure to all who looked

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<sup>18</sup> *Teseida*, II.89.4

<sup>19</sup> *Teseida*, III, introductory sonnet.

<sup>20</sup> *Teseida*, III.1.4-6.

upon her.<sup>21</sup> Sweetness, of course, becomes agony as time passes for the Thebans; being in prison, they are kept from the object of their love, and it seems that nothing can release them from their pain:

*Grandi erano i sospiri e i tormenti  
di ciascheduno, e l'esser prigionati  
vie più che mai faceva discontento  
ciascun di loro, a tal punto recati;  
e ogni giorno lor pareva cento  
che fosser morti o quindi liberati;  
e per lor solo e unico conforto  
Emilia chiamavan, lor diporto.*

Great were the sighs and the torments of both, and being imprisoned made each one ever more discontent, and every day seemed to them a hundred days, wishing they were dead or liberated; and seeking their only comfort they called to Emilia, the one diversion they had.<sup>22</sup>

Thanks to Arcita's friend Peritoo's intervening on his behalf, Teseo decides to set him free, provided he cannot return to Athens. Palemone is left alone in prison, and Arcita, having changing his name to Penteo, sets off to wander the world mournfully, his heart back in Athens with the lady he loves. Book IV documents his travels and his eventual return to Athens in disguise, when he can no longer bear to be so far away. When his true identity is discovered in Book V, Palemone, still in prison, hears the news through his friend Panfilo and grows even more restless with the knowledge that Arcita walks free in Athens, probably wooing Emilia right under his nose. With help from Panfilo, Palemone escapes his prison cell and runs off to face his former friend, and the rivalry between the Thebans begins to play out. It is decided that they will fight for the hand of Emilia, in the presence of barons come from all across the land (Book VI) and thus the preparations for battle begin.

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<sup>21</sup> *Teseida*, III.29.

<sup>22</sup> *Teseida*, III.46.

Book VII serves as a moment a transition, both the mid-point of the poem and the longest in terms of overall number of verses. Therein, Arcita lights a fire in the temple of Mars, the god of war, praying to him for victory in battle: “Dunque m’aiuta per lo santo foco che t’arse già... e nel presente mio palestral gioco con le tue forze del pugnar m’onora...s’io son di questa pugna vincitore, io il diletto e tu ne abbi l’onore.”<sup>23</sup> [Help me then by the sacred fire that burns for you...and in this game honor me with your powers of fighting...if I am the winner of this battle, I shall have the delight and you the honor]. Palemone, on the other hand, directs his prayers to Venus, the goddess of love, asking her not for glory but only for Emilia: “Io cerco sola Emilia, la qual puoi donarmi, dea, se donar la mi vuoi.”<sup>24</sup>

Venus and Mars, having received the prayers of the two men and seen the elaborate shrines that have been built for them, each hope to grant what the men are asking for, and after some struggle, they figure out the only way in which both prayers can be answered: Arcita will win victory, but Palemone will have Emilia. Over the next five books, this is precisely what happens, the intervening action filled in with much of what we recognize as the stuff of epic poetry: brutal combat, elaborate shrines built for the rival gods of love and war, and equally elaborate funeral pyres for those not spared by said gods. In the end, though Arcita defeats Palemone, his wounds prove fatal, and shortly before drawing his last breath, he tells Teseo that Palemone should have Emilia once he’s gone. Thus, finally, the *nozze d’Emilia* are able to take place, and the story ends happily. Moments of gravity punctuate the story, but the end result is one of beauty,

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<sup>23</sup> *Teseida*, VII.27.

<sup>24</sup> *Teseida*, VII.46.7-8.

love and things working out just as they should. Thus, in concluding, the author reflects on what his book has accomplished:

*Poi che le Muse nude cominciare  
nel cospetto degli uomini ad andare,  
già fur di quelli i quai l'esercitaro  
con bello stilo in onesto parlare,  
e altri in amoroso l'operaro;  
ma tu, o libro, primo a lor cantare  
di Marte fai gli affanni sostenuti,  
nel volgar lazio più mai non veduti.*

Since the time that the bare Muses began to walk in view of mankind, they have already been possessed by some who exercised them in moral composition; others have worked them in love poetry; but you, my book, are the first to make them sing the long labors of Mars, never before seen in the vernacular of Italy.<sup>25</sup>

Emphasis on the dichotomy that once was, and now is no more: like the gods themselves who conspired so that they might both win the day, the author has found the language to have it both ways. His metaphorical undressing of the Muses can be interpreted in a number of ways. On the one hand, the literal image of naked women allowing mankind to see them as they provide 'knowledge' is not inconsistent with Boccaccio's at times intentionally explicit allusions.<sup>26</sup> With Pirandello in mind, however, we might also compare this metaphor to the "pensieri nudi" that go to La Retorica's wardrobe to be dressed.<sup>27</sup> These Muses have been *esercitate* in different sorts of compositions, whether moral composition or amorous verse; here is the first time they have been employed to sing the songs of Mars in Italy's vernacular, according to Boccaccio's claim. Their very bareness is what gives him, the author, the ability to use

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<sup>25</sup> *Teseida*, XII.84. Given the difficulty and the importance of this passage, I cite the translation of ANDERSON, 17.

<sup>26</sup> See Tobias Foster GITTES (2008), 158.

<sup>27</sup> Luigi PIRANDELLO (1986), 39. See *supra*, Chapter 1, 17-18.



their powers in unexpected ways. The *Teseida* is, in many ways, a *roman* in epic clothing. The twelve-book structure, the ancient players, and, on a material level, the highly curated manuscript complete with single-column text, and extensive apparatus: this is what the lofty epic looks and feels like.<sup>28</sup> Yet, within the poem itself, something very different happens; reading closely, one sees a very intentionally developed romance unfold.

Of course, Boccaccio is far from the first to play with existing ideas of genre, and certainly not in blending epic and romance. Chrétien de Troyes, writing two centuries earlier than Boccaccio, realizes fully that he has a choice to make when it comes to the story he wants to tell in *Cligès*, but rather than focus on the more military, political side of the King Arthur tradition in which he sets his tale, he defiantly and explicitly steers himself away from getting too caught up in such matters, choosing to focus on the troubled love affair between his two protagonists and the respective objects of their desire. After alluding in passing to a series of cruel punishments doled out to political prisoners, for example, treading lightly upon the details of their punishments, Chrétien then says:

*Dou roi Artu parler ne quier  
A ceste foiz plus longuement,  
einçois m'orroiz dire coment  
Amors les II amanz travaille  
Vers cui il a prise bataille.*

I don't wish to speak of King Arthur any longer for the moment; you will hear me say, instead, how Love torments the two lovers with whom it has engaged in battle.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See CURSI, 131.

<sup>29</sup> Chrétien DE TROYES and Charles MÉLA and Olivier COLLET, eds. (1994), *Cligès*, 570-574. All citations of *Cligès* are drawn from this edition. English translations are mine.

Indeed, Chrétien tends to gloss over any political action necessary to advance the plot while lavishing hundreds of verses at a time on fitful fretting and long and drawn-out inner monologues attributed to “les amoureux,” both in Alexandre’s love story with Soredamor and Cligès’s subsequent affair with Fénice. The author acknowledges the presence of epic in his story, relies on it to provide a foundation for the action and, at times, to move the plot forward, and he then promptly relegates it to the background.

There are a number of key parallels between the *Teseida* and Chrétien de Troyes’s *Cligès* that make them good companions for analysis. Both poems open with a character who does not turn out to be *the* character we are chiefly concerned with, but one who seems to serve as a historical grounding for the poem, allowing the authors to eventually direct their respective stories towards a different plot entirely. Chrétien opens with the story of Alexandre (Alixandre in the *ancien français*), the son of “un empereor / poissant de richece e d’ennor / Qui tint Grece et Costentinoble” [an emperor, mighty in his riches and his honor, who ruled Greece and Constantinople].<sup>30</sup> Alexandre’s Byzantine origins and his imperial blood invoke the memory of not only Alexander the Great,<sup>31</sup> but all of Byzantium, as it comes into contact with the Western world.<sup>32</sup> In Matilda Bruckner’s words, “[t]he historical trajectory described is linear, but in the romance plot, displacements between east and west multiply in the stories of father and son, as characters move back and forth, linking Greek imperial power and Arthurian chivalric glory to stories of love frustrated and fulfilled.”<sup>33</sup> The romance is embedded within the

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<sup>30</sup> *Cligès* 47-49.

<sup>31</sup> Sarah KAY in Roberta KRUEGER ed. (2000), 89, note 30.

<sup>32</sup> Matilda BRUCKNER in Simon GAUNT and Sarah KAY, eds. (2008), 83.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*.

trappings of epic in this text, but the latter is what shapes the poem's beginnings before the author turns to the love stories that will form the emotional core of the story.

Perhaps for this reason, Bruckner calls *Cligès* "Chrétien's most 'artificial' romance, an intense combination of historical allusion, realistic topography, and fiction."<sup>34</sup>

Alexandre leaves the empire, having secured his father's assurance that he will inherit the throne upon his return, and he travels West to become a knight in the service of King Arthur, as the story transposes itself into a *roman*; he immediately falls in love with Soredamor, one of the queen's attendants. After much difficulty and misunderstanding, he finally succeeds in marrying Soredamor, although the couple lives just long enough to produce one son, the eponymous *Cligès*, before they both die. *Cligès* then becomes the center of all the poem's action, roughly one-third of the way through the poem, and his own love story and fight for succession to his father's rightful throne in Byzantium dominate the narrative thereafter. In this way, the text's structure is not unlike that of the *Teseida*, in which Book I centers on the "buon Teseo" (frequently called the good Teseo rather than simply Teseo), who *despite* being the title character will instead recede into the background as the story of Emilia, and the Thebans, Arcite and Palemone takes over. In both works, we shift from one generation to the next, the plot remaining rooted in one family despite the geographical transitions that mark its component parts.

As Chrétien roots both his love stories in the greatness of Alexandre's imperial origin, so does Boccaccio found his own tale within the structure of the Latin epic, using it as a support system on which to hang his own romance, this obscure saga which no Latin author has yet translated. He echoes this claim to innovation that begins the

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*.

*Teseida* at the story's end in his apostrophe: "ma tu, o libro, primo a lor cantare / di Marte fai gli affanni sostenuti, / nel volgar Lazio più mai non veduti".<sup>35</sup> Once again, Boccaccio limits his own voice, diminishing himself, his writing, his "pietosa rima", and yet manages to claim a certain authorial stature at the same time. As in the opening verses, it is not the "io" that he credits with his accomplishments, but "tu, o libro." That the desire came to him to write this "antica storia" is a humble and muted declaration, a far cry from Chrétien's opening to *Cligès*: "Cil qui fist d'Erec et d'Énide et l'art d'amors en romanz mist...etc etc...cest romanz fist Crestiens."<sup>36</sup> Recalling a few of his own greatest hits, Chrétien leads into a defiant declaration of just whose *roman* this is, leaving no doubt as to his perception of his own greatness. Boccaccio intentionally removes himself from the words he says on the surface, and yet the claims he is making on behalf of his *libro* are sweeping indeed, allowing him to inhabit both the humble and the great at the same time.

The texts' mutual use of epic as the fabric of their characters' respective worlds further reinforces the genre expectations each creates at the outset. Material from the *Thebaid* serves as a sort of bridge from Teseo to the Arcita/Palemone/Emilia story that Boccaccio wants to tell: completing the love story's setup, the heroic Teseo defeats the evil Creonte, ruler of Thebes, which is how the poor Thebans Arcite and Palemone come to be captured and imprisoned in Athens, perfectly positioned to succumb to the beauty of Emilia. Strains of the *Thebaid* echo in the background of *Cligès* as well; the emperor Alexandre considers taking up arms against his brother Alis, who in Alexandre's absence serving King Arthur has deviously assumed sovereignty over the Greek empire

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<sup>35</sup> Translation *supra*, 93-94; see note 25.

<sup>36</sup> *Cligès*, 1-23.

and won't give it back. Alexandre's trusted counselors, however, urge the slighted emperor to stay his hand, reminding him of the terrible war between the Theban brothers Eteocles and Polyneices, whose rivalry once brought Thebes to its knees:

*Mais il n'en i trueve nes .I.  
Qui de la guerre a lui se tieigne,  
Einz li dient qu'il li sovieigne  
De la gerre qu'Etyoclés  
Prist encontre Polinicés  
Qui estoit ses frères germains,  
S'ocist li uns l'autre a ses mains.*

But he did not find even one man who would rally to him in favor of war; on the contrary, they begged him to remember the war that Polyneices undertook against Eteocles, who was his blood brother. Each one killed the other with his own hands.<sup>37</sup>

Alexandre makes a hasty peace with his brother Alis, one which dictates that Alis never marry or have any offspring, so that Cligès may later reclaim the imperial throne. This course of events is quite clearly a result of the wise words of the counselors who urge the emperor to use history as a lesson: “Autel puet de vos avenir/Se volez guerre meintendir,/Et confondue en iert la terre” [“Such could be your destiny, if you intend to make war, and in the end, the land will be destroyed”].<sup>38</sup> Similarly instructive references to classical myth and other stories are not uncommon in *Cligès*, often to demonstrate the nature of his characters' minds, and show how they use the examples of the past as a framework for their own actions. In a nod to the *Tristan* story, which many critics view as inspiration and foil for Chrétien's plot, a love affair develops between Cligès and his uncle's intended wife Fenice, and it is this conflict that turns out to be the *roman's* most prominent storyline. Naturally, the relationship is beset with challenges, principally the fact that Fenice is marrying Alis, Cligès's familial and political enemy. The *Tristan*

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<sup>37</sup> *Cligès*, 2492-2498.

<sup>38</sup> *Cligès*, 2499-2501.

represents the “antithesis” of what Cligès and Fenice strive for, in Sarah Kay’s words, “a constant threat of adultery and social breakdown.”<sup>39</sup> Ironically, Fenice, no matter how much she aches with love for Cligès and plots to be with him, claims with firm resolve that she does not want to be Isolde, who famously carried on an affair with her husband Marc’s nephew Tristan in a tale with a full, rich oral and written tradition in the twelfth century. Isolde, for Fenice, is a universal symbol for wrongdoing in affairs of love, not so much for having been unfaithful to her husband, but rather as one who shares herself with two men at the same time. It is the shame of being spoken of in the same breath, of evoking in the minds of others the story of Isolde, that holds her back from pursuing what she desires:

*Einz vodraie estre desmembree  
Que de nos .II. fut remembree  
L’amor d’Iseut et de Tristen,  
Dont tantes folies dist l’en  
Que hontes m’est a raconteur.*

I would rather be dismembered than have the two of us call to mind the love of Tristan and Isolde, whose folly is retold over and again, shameful as it is for me to say.<sup>40</sup>

Never, she goes on to say, will she share her love with two men, as Isolde does.

Luckily, the recounting of Isolde’s story allows Fenice to see her way out of the dilemma: her nurse offers to brew a potion that will make Alis, Fenice’s husband, believe that he is sleeping with his wife, allowing her to refrain from touching him and, thus, avoid having relations with any man but Cligès. Before the end of the story, she and Cligès will be united, Alis disposed of. It is not lost on Chrétien that Fenice is perhaps sealing her fate among the Isoldes of literature when she ultimately gives

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<sup>39</sup> KAY (2000), 90.

<sup>40</sup> *Cligès*, 3099-3103.

herself to Cligès; the way he slowly draws her train of thought from “It would be wrong to love my husband’s nephew” to “As long as I can trick my husband into letting his nephew have me all to himself, I’m doing no harm” provides the reader with an interesting model for interpreting the legacies of literary sources. These moments constitute a break in the narrative, an opportunity for Chrétien to showcase the thick, rich background of his characters and invite the audience to participate in their thoughts. The apparatus that decodes the characters’ references is embedded within the text itself, and this is what allows the readers to follow them and understand them.

Boccaccio accomplishes something similar in the *Teseida*, but in a very different way: without interrupting the narrative, he uses his *chiose* as a virtually unlimited space in which to expound upon the myths referred to only in passing, or even to give a long historical background for a character whose name appears only once in the entire poem, of which there are several. Boccaccio’s exhaustive research showcased in his critical apparatus bespeaks an exceedingly high level of erudition; in a way, he has made a breakthrough in medium that allows him to play on expectations of authorship and create for himself two roles, each of which is more sharply defined in contrast with the other. The author is allowed to remain withdrawn, understated, rarely having to spell anything out for the reader. The critic is the one charged with explaining, clarifying, connecting. When Chrétien explains, he is inhabiting his own position as author to the greatest possible extent, choosing his moments of personal intervention and exploiting them fully as he demonstrates his distance from the characters. Both modes of referencing provide amusement, in their ways, but while Chrétien’s voice is intermittent and openly his own, Boccaccio’s is both omnipresent and never completely in earnest.

Chrétien the narrator is indeed the one producing many of the laughs as he keeps a running commentary on the plight of his lovers, who torment themselves for ages as they love without knowing whether they are loved in return. In contrast to their prolific monologues, the voice of the author is pithy, reminding the reader that despite both characters' emotional turmoil, which is great indeed, the only obstacle in the path of their love is the inability of each one to let the other one know of these feelings: "S'est granz enuiz que il nel sevent,"<sup>41</sup> what a shame they don't know [they love each other]! This sort of *litotes*, understatement, is a prominent feature of Chrétien's voice as he comments with light amusement on the extent to which Love has made his characters fools, though not without compassion for their plight. The "granz enuiz" is translated in modern French as "grand malheur", truly great unhappiness, but the remedy for that unhappiness is nothing beyond the lovers' own shyness, which is in turn excessive to the point of being ridiculous. The "granz enuiz" comment from Chrétien refers to a scene in which Soredamor, with the help of the queen, has sent a single hair from her head to Alexandre, tucked into the chemise he is about to don on the eve of battle. This tiny gift, perhaps the most understated possible and potentially completely miss-able gesture of love, what a joy it would be if only Alexandre knew who it was from and with what care it had been selected and sent! "Et Dex! Com grant joie en eüst/ Alixandres se il seüst".<sup>42</sup> In the position of narrator, Chrétien underlines and emphasizes the excessively delicate treatment of this problem, yet he does not minimize the very real and just as excessively over-wrought and uncontrollable nature of the feelings of his protagonists in love. Peter Haidu calls Chrétien's narrator ironically

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<sup>41</sup> *Cligès*, 1177.

<sup>42</sup> *Cligès*, 1165-1166.



distant, arguing that “the chaos of [the characters’] emotions and their tentative, hesitant verbalization is especially gentle and sympathetic...without for a moment allowing us to move from sympathy to empathy.”<sup>43</sup> Whether we empathize with their plight or not, we do understand the gravity of what they feel. Chrétien’s microscopic treatment of the struggling lovers in concert with the restrained presence of the epic story behind them gives the reader permission to find the romance amusing without eschewing its seriousness.<sup>44</sup>

As a narrator, Boccaccio, too, has an affinity for understatement in treating his characters, somewhat in harmony with his show of humility as author. Perhaps the most memorable example comes from the twelfth book, in which poor Emilia finally gets her long overdue wedding, although not to the man she thought she’d be marrying at first. After some forecasting in earlier accounts of Emilia, in which there is an overt tendency towards the diminutive (Emilia “giovinetta, semplicitta, soletta” surrounded by so many “uccelletti”, adorned with a lovely little “ghirlandella”, etc.) Boccaccio lets loose with a *pre-nozze* description that lasts for twelve *ottave*, or ninety-six verses. He starts out rather modestly, with only a diminutive here and there, the rhymes echoing the delicacy of their subject. The “diligatezza” crescendoes and reaches its climax about midway through the sequence, with “la bocca piccioletta...più che grana vermiglietta...parea un angioletta ... e’ denti suoi ... bianche perle... spessi e ordinati e piccolini...oltre a questo il mento piccolino...nel mezzo ad esso aveva un forellino...era vermiglietto un

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<sup>43</sup> Peter HAIDU (1968), p. 44.

<sup>44</sup> HAIDU, 26. In Haidu’s words, it is “a compact in which both writer and reader agree to a large measure of gratuitous adventure which, without denying the possibility of serious concerns and implication, is directed primarily to aesthetic delight in the tools of literature themselves.”

pocolino...” and on and on.<sup>45</sup> At this point the reader can barely help but laugh – is he serious? It’s as though Boccaccio has taken hold of the notion of understatement and is deliberately standing it on its head, turning diminutives into excess as he pushes them past their logical working-point. The reversal is genuinely amusing, gently poking fun at the exaggerated descriptions of women’s beauty found both in epic and in romance, not to mention the *dolce stil novo* lyric immediately preceding Boccaccio’s time, and it becomes even more so in contrast with the straight-faced interpretation of the critic Boccaccio, who informs us, helpfully, that in this part, “disegna l’autore la forma e la bellezza di Emilia, e prima invoca l’aiuto delle Muse,” the author designs the form and the beauty of Emilia, first asking the help of the Muses. Boccaccio here is asking us to look with seriousness upon a moment that is undeniably over the top.

A parallel moment in Chrétien’s text occurs when Alexandre excessively fawns over an inanimate object, the arrow of love, which is obviously a stand-in for Soredamor. He approaches the description of the arrow with all the trepidation of the love poet attempting to render his lady’s beauty in words, “je dout trop que je n’y faille,” [I am so afraid that I will fail at it], “et si metrai tout mon travail a dire ce que il m’en semble” [and so I will muster all my strength to tell what it resembles to me]:<sup>46</sup>

*La coche et li penon ensemble  
Sont si pres, qui bien les ravise,  
Que il n’i a c’une devise  
Ausi come d’une greve estroite  
Qui si est polie et droite,  
Qu’an la coche sanz demander  
N’a riens qui face a amender.  
Li penon sont si coloré  
Com s’il ierent d’or ou doré,  
Mais doreüre n’i fait rien,*

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<sup>45</sup> *Teseida*, XII.53-64.

<sup>46</sup> *Cligès*, 769-773.

*Car li penon, ce sai je bien,  
Estoient plus luisant encores.*

The nock and the tip are so close together, if one looks carefully, that nothing separates them but a straight line, so regular and so straight, there is not a single imperfection. The feathers are colored so that one would call them gold, or golden, but to talk of gold serves not at all, since the feathers, I know it will, were far more brilliant than that.<sup>47</sup>

The description of the arrow continues, its total ineffability just as exacting on Alexandre as any maiden's beauty: feathers aside, "C'est li darz qui me fait amer./Dex! Cum tres precious avoir!" [It is the point that makes me fall in love. Lord! How precious this thing is!]<sup>48</sup> As it continues, it transitions seamlessly into a description of the beauty in Soredamor herself, drawing an unmistakable line between the woman herself and the inanimate arrow, much like the line Chrétien draws for the reader ("une greve estroit") between each end of the arrow. The gold of the arrow's feathers calls to mind the gold of so many maidens' hair (not unlike the single hair that Soredamor sends to Alexandre as secret symbol of her love), raising the readers' eyebrows as we wonder what the other end of that straight line, the "tel tresor" that is the arrow's point, could possibly refer to. Chrétien, like Boccaccio, is pushing the trope of female beauty in romance to a laughable extent, leaving ample room for further interpretation of the arrow as sexual metaphor while staying just this side of making it explicit. "Bien fust ma doulors alegiée/Se tout le dart veü eüsse," Alexandre sighs; his pain would have been so much less had he been able to see the entire arrow, end to end.

Chrétien clearly mines his characters for humor, his "signature voice" (in Bruckner's words) rooted in his capacity for witty narration. Though he often lets them speak the most comical lines themselves, as in Alexandre's ode to the arrow, Chrétien's

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<sup>47</sup> *Cligès*, 774-785.

<sup>48</sup> *Cligès*, 788-789.

presence in the narrative is nonetheless one of the key elements to the text's sense of humor; the distance he establishes between himself and them within the verses themselves, as when he comments on their plight from his own narratorial point of view, is key to reading the humor in the story. Boccaccio, however, has found in his marginalia a way to distance himself from the amusement. His complete removal of his own voice from the verses of the poem themselves allows him to treat his own words with the utmost solemnity. The presence of the glossator, on the other hand, allows for an outside perspective offered from a distance, adding another layer to the composition of the poem and removing, especially for those readers who successfully pick up on his indications that the glossator is none other than himself, the impression of earnest, straightforward narrative. The apparatus, in other words, when viewed as part and parcel of the poem, is the key to Boccaccio's maintaining with even greater dexterity that delicate balance and *compresenza* of the funny and the serious.

The most striking part of the commentary is that Boccaccio uses it to give himself as critic unlimited voice not only to provide helpful reference material, but also to speak about himself, "l'autore," in the third person. This is a profound shift in the traditional role of commentary, in Jeffrey Schnapp's words: though commentary nominally acts as "ventriloquist" to reanimate an old text in need of revitalization for new readers, "insistently [placing] itself in a secondary, subservient role", it nonetheless "invariably supplants the very text whose primariness it attempts to stage ... [it] permits the present to assert its primacy over the past."<sup>49</sup> Boccaccio, however, within this tradition of commentary unintentionally overshadowing primary texts, deliberately subverts the process and short-circuits it by creating his own commentary, explicitly designed to

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<sup>49</sup> SCHNAPP (1992), 815-816.

protect the *Teseida*'s poetic legacy. As Schnapp argues, the apparatus "packages, frames, and embalms the poem; it attempts to fix and stabilize it forever; to shield it against misreading, criticism, and continuation; to forestall the effects of scribal corruption, emendation, and expansion."<sup>50</sup>

We have certainly noted many instances of the poem's excessive curation, particularly the structural props that accompany the main text, not only the lengthy *chiose* (the term with which Boccaccio refers to the marginalia), but also the poem's highly explanatory beginning and concluding verses, cited above. In addition, the guiding sonnet at the beginning of each book summarizes its contents for the reader's benefit, accompanied of course by margin notes that label the sonnets as such. In a word, quite beyond the content of the poem, even the curation of the *Teseida* is copious. This, in Schnapp's opinion, is all part of the inoculating the text against contamination.

While this is certainly the case, the marginalia serve another function as well: that of underlining the expansive genre-bending within the poem in a way that in itself approaches the kind of excess that creates humor. Excess seems to characterize the very way in which the glossator approaches the consumption and editing of the poem. For every reference to mythology, history, or a classical text, however passing and/or irrelevant to the story's plot, Boccaccio the commentator launches into a lengthy explanation of the source for the reference. This holds true for the obscure, but also for the painfully obvious; Boccaccio seems to be under the impression that he is dealing with a somewhat challenged reader when he feels the need to explain "siculo" as meaning "cioè della Cicilia," not just once but over and over again. We might think that this was all in earnest if not for two things. One, Boccaccio as a reader of Dante was

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<sup>50</sup> SCHNAPP, 829.

clearly familiar with at least some of the already circulating commentary on the *Commedia*; he later became famous as an editor for the *Esposizioni sopra la commedia* and the identity of glossator was clearly one he began experimenting with from an early point. The apparatus in this case, ranging from pedantic to highly erudite and obscure, seems to be showing off and playing upon the commentator's propensity to show off, both at the same time, and the overstated nature of the whole apparatus when read alongside the poem borders on the ridiculous. Though the margin notes offer explications of all sorts, from the poetic (deconstructing metaphors and similes) to the lexical (explaining the meanings of words, as in the many cases of *siculo*) to the mythological (narrating in detail the myths briefly alluded to in the text), their common ground is "that of 'explicating' the vernacular epic, bridging the gap between the poem and the readerly present, so as to produce, in the very process of explication, even further simulated differences."<sup>51</sup> Schnapp's use of the word "simulated" to describe the differences is, in my view, quite appropriate, for Boccaccio has to work to recreate the supposed distance between author and commentator, between the supposed past of the main text and the present of the glosses.

Boccaccio the critic whose voice sounds in the *chiose* is, at first glance, rather dry and no-nonsense; "their straightforward, schoolmasterly style contrasts, sometimes to amusing effect, with the challenging, allusive style of the poetic text."<sup>52</sup> The critic somehow breaks the solemnity of certain poetic moments that are full of dramatic pathos, for example the burial of Arcita. The unlucky knight, who for the purposes of love chose the wrong god to pray to, is burned on a funeral pyre and laid to rest in the

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<sup>51</sup> SCHNAPP, 829. Schnapp's article also contains a detailed classification of the seven types of glosses found within the text (827-828).

<sup>52</sup> ANDERSON, 145.

presence of a great many mourners, the urn containing his ashes placed upon a great marble column in a highly decorated temple. Arcita's epitaph has been inscribed upon the urn, "in guisa tal che ben legger potersi," in such a way that it could be easily read:

*«Io servo dentro a me le reverende  
del buono Arcita ceneri, per cui  
debito sacrificio qui si rende;  
e chiunque ama, per esempio lui  
pigli, s'amor di soverchio l'accende;  
perciò che dicer può: Qual se', io fui:  
e per Emilia usando il mio valore  
mori'; dunque ti guarda da amore».*

I keep inside me the sacred ashes of the good Arcita, for whom proper sacrifices are here made; and whoever should love, if overwhelming desire lights him up, heed Arcita's example, for if he could he would say: that which you are, I was; and for Emilia I perished, exhausting my valor: thus, guard yourself from love.<sup>53</sup>

In making the urn, with the ashes of Arcita inside, speak directly to its readers through an everlasting inscription, such that the knight's warning about the dangers of love might echo through time, the poet composes a mournful, haunting moment, a rare pause in the orations and battle scenes that have preceded it. The urn's inscription is a vehicle through which Arcita himself speaks, though silently, in the presence of the people that not so long ago had rejoiced in the wedding of Emilia with the victorious knight.

This silence, in which the words inscribed upon Arcita's remains radiate through the temple, concludes Book XI on a solemn note, one which seems to beg for further parsing in the didactic space of the margin notes. In this instance, however, Boccaccio the commentator seems to resist all interpretations of the final ottava that go beyond the most literal. Each pronoun is glossed, the subject of every verb defined (io = urna, lui =

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<sup>53</sup> *Teseida*, XI.91.

Arcita, può = Arcita, Qual se' = tu, amadore che qui leggi, "io fui": cioè io Arcita, "ti guarda": tu, amante). This is the sort of note that interrupts whatever allusivity the poetry had been trying to preserve, that points out the patently obvious, and that refuses to see beyond the most basic interpretation of each individual word in the text.

This and other similar moments, in which the commentator seems to miss the forest for the trees, has an amusing effect. It's a rupture, first of all, with the tone of the main text, a subversion once again of a certain expectation of interpretive depth. Furthermore, for the reader who knows that this is Boccaccio writing both as critic and as author, it only becomes more comical the more one thinks about it. He must be playing with this device, it seems to the reader, or as Janet Smarr puts it, pretending to miss the point of his own book.<sup>54</sup> In fact, his commentary proves not as popular as other, subsequent commentaries in the textual proliferation of the *Teseida*, particularly the one composed by the Ferrarese Pietro Andrea de' Bassi in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>55</sup>

At times, far from trying to appear dense, Boccaccio the critic is overly scrupulous in his documentation of each and every reference to classical myth; the most exaggerated samples of this critical voice are found in Book VII, wherein the knights visit the respective temples of the gods to which they've decided to pray before facing one another in battle. Arcita's prayer at the temple of Mars is accompanied by a note totaling just over 1,300 words, by far the longest single comment seen up until this point,

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<sup>54</sup> SMARR (1986), 82.

<sup>55</sup> This problem has been extensively researched by Francesco Marco ARESU in his doctoral dissertation, "The Author as Scribe: Materiality and Textuality in the *Trecento*" (forthcoming May 2015). Aresu posits that in fact, the explicit intention of Boccaccio's commentary was not to stand alone as a definitive literary guide to the text but rather to serve as an invitation to further, better commentary, which it successfully solicited from Pier Andrea de' Bassi. See also MONTAGNANI (2004).



which the editor begins by saying that while there would be many things to say on this subject, he's going to pass over them somewhat briefly:

*in questa parte descrive l'autore la casa di Marte, intorno alla quale sarebbero da considerare tritamente molte cose, chi ordinatamente volesse disporre; ma perciò che per innanzi assai leggiermente s'è proceduto, così qui spognendo sommariamente passiamo.*

In this part, the author describes the house of Mars, surrounding which there are in fact many things to consider, for whoever should wish to see them displayed in an orderly fashion, but since we have proceeded up until this point without dwelling too much, let us summarily pass over this without saying too much.<sup>56</sup>

This remark in the context of a note that surrounds the main text, dominating the page, is rather amusing in itself; an understatement if there ever was one. Yet, the note on Mars's temple shrinks before the one accompanying Venus's temple where Palemone goes to pray: here, the critic expends an astounding 5,100 words to describe the temple, beginning with the defensive assertion that the author is required to describe this temple, since he did so in Mars's case:

*E sì come davanti ha disegnata la casa di Marte, così qui intende di disegnare quella di Venere; e come che egli non si curi in porre e la qualità del luogo dove è la casa e le cose che sono pertinenti alla detta casa originatamente e successivamente, nondimeno di possono esse considerare ordinatamente per chi vuole, e discernersi qui posta la qualità del luogo, dove è la detta casa, chi sieno quelli che abitano in detta casa e che forme e che ufici abbiano, come sia fatta la casa e quali siano gli ornamenti della detta casa.*

And since earlier [the author] drew the house of Mars, so here he intends to draw that of Venus; and since he doesn't care to posit [in the text] both the quality of the place where the house is and the things that are pertinent to the aforementioned house both originally and subsequently, no less can these things be considered in an orderly fashion for the one who wishes to do so, and here will be listed the quality of the place where said house is, who lives in said house, and what they look like and what their roles are, how the house was made, and what the ornaments of said house are.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> *Teseida*, VII.30.1, note.

<sup>57</sup> *Teseida*, VII.50.1, note.

The note goes on to do just that, compensating for the 'brevity' of the author's twenty or so verses describing the temple with a note that must necessarily exhaust anyone's potential curiosity. Yet, he concludes all the same by saying "E questo basti avere detto del luogo e del tempio di Venere, e dell'altre cose circostanti ad esso" [may it suffice to have said this about the place and the temple of Venus, and the other things surrounding it]. Is it possible that it would *not* suffice? Both the note regarding Mars and that regarding Venus are wide-ranging in subject matter, beginning with physical descriptions of the temples, geographical indications of to where they're found, and what they contain on the inside. The most words, however, are spent in allegorizing the respective escapades of the two gods and the people who tend to pray to them. Perhaps tellingly, love and the different kinds of love (Venus herself has two different manifestations, according to the note, one of which is chaste love, the other lascivious) are given much more space for exploration than the warlike ambitions of Mars. The different provocations of love are present and personified in the temple, "in forma di persone," as the commentator says, and they include Longing (Vaghezza), Beauty, Youth, Loveliness (Leggiadria), Gentility, Pleasantness, "e simiglianti" [and so on]. In another surprising contradiction to the vastness of the margin note as seen on the page, Boccaccio then directs the reader to Guido Cavalcanti's famous *Donna me prega*, one of the cornerstone poems of the *dolce stil novo*, if they wish to see how these qualities can generate love in our hearts, because in the present context, however much it might be convenient to discuss the matter it would be too long for him to recount himself. The original is below:

*Il quale amore volere mostrare come per le sopradette cose si generi in noi,  
quantunque alla presente opera forse si converrebbe di dichiarare, non è mio  
intendimento di farlo, perciò che troppa sarebbe lunga la storia: chi desidera di*

*vederlo, legga la canzone di Guido Cavalcanti « Donna me priega etc. » e le chiose che sopra vi fece maestro Dino del Garbo.*<sup>58</sup>

Why the commentator saw the need to restrain himself in this instance (about 1000 words into a 5000-plus word treatise that aims precisely to discuss love and its effects on people) is not particularly clear, but the remark comes off as slightly facetious given the context.

This is only enhanced by the fact, borne out in the manuscript tradition, that Boccaccio was actively trying to make the hand of “Boccaccio glossator” look *different* from that of “Boccaccio autore”.<sup>59</sup> Why go to such lengths to disguise himself? We can surmise that the façade of critical endorsement would bespeak the sort of authority Boccaccio might derive from being so well known that other scholars were already reading and commenting on his work within his lifetime. Both Dante’s and Petrarch’s works feature moments of self-promotion that are thinly veiled or not at all, but Boccaccio is reluctant to place a figurative crown of laurel upon his own head, particularly in the self-diminutive passages of the *Teseida* that we’ve discussed. And yet, he certainly doesn’t want the imposed and fictional nature of the separation between himself and the text to go *wholly* unnoticed. Even without the ability to recognize the handwriting as Boccaccio’s, which it seems some early readers, such as Pietro Andrea de’ Bassi, for example, did not,<sup>60</sup> there is at least one key moment in which he seems to reveal the critic’s hand as his own. In Book III, in which the protagonists find themselves suffering the travails of love, the main text of the poem reads:

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<sup>58</sup> *Teseida*, VII.50.1, note.

<sup>59</sup> See *supra*, notes 12 and 16. The consensus is quite strong, at this point, that this is Boccaccio’s hand.

<sup>60</sup> See MONTAGNANI.

*E così sa Amore adoperare  
a cui più per servizio è obligato:  
colui il sa che tal volta fu preso  
da lui e da cota' dolori offeso.*

And in this way, Love knows how to use those who through favors are most obliged to him; he who has sometimes been taken by love and suffered such travails knows this well.<sup>61</sup>

In the margin, the glossator identifies this “colui”, this “he” who has from time to time been swept away by love: “che sono io” [it is I]. A tiny and isolated self-reference, easy to miss, but enough to remind the reader who is really holding court in this apparatus; the use of the subject pronoun “io” is quite rarely used by the commentator, and certainly never as a predicate nominative attached to a subject in the main text. There is something conspiratorial about the gloss; even as he conceals himself behind the third person throughout most of the text, adopting a separate hand in the margin meant to imply a different scribe,<sup>62</sup> he also wants the reader to figure out his little game, to be amused by it and at the same time to admire the skill required to execute it, though without explicitly claiming credit for it himself.

“Boccaccio commentator” and “Boccaccio author” operate side by side throughout the poem, though rarely intersecting one another so explicitly as in the above example. The former establishes his voice in relation to the author’s, at times as a supplement and at others as an apologist, quite early in the poem. During the first book, in which the author tells the story of Teseo’s war against the Amazons, the commentator takes a moment in the apparatus to assure the reader that the “author Boccaccio” has his reasons for expending so many verses on the story, even though it seems to have nothing to do with the *nozze di Emilia*; it is his (the author’s) moment to explain how the

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<sup>61</sup> *Teseida*, III.35.5-8.

<sup>62</sup> See CURSI and his discussion of Boccaccio’s *scrittura sottile* in this particular gloss (63).

beautiful Emilia, Teseo's sister previously allied with the Amazons, came to Athens, thus giving rise to the *vicenda* of the main characters. The tone of this gloss is very similar to the many other 'defenses' for which Boccaccio is known, such as the defense of the novella in the *Decameron*, the defense of poetry in the *Genealogia*. He validates his imagined critics, to begin with, allowing that indeed one *could* wonder about why he's doing what he's doing, and then proceeds to invalidate their position, "brievemente", in a few words. The passage is cited in its entirety, giving the readers of *this* work a more precise picture of the relationship Boccaccio is setting up between himself (the commentator), himself (the author), and the imagined readers for whom both critic and author are writing:

*[C]on ciò sia cosa che la principale intenzione dell'autore di questo libretto sia di trattare dell'amore e delle cose avvenute per quello, da due giovani tebani, cioè Arcita e Palemone, ad Emilia amazona, sì come nel suo proemio appare, potrebbe alcuno, e giustamente, adimandare che avesse qui a che fare la Guerra di Teseo con le donne amazone, della quale solamente parla il libro di questa opera. Dico, e brievemente, che l'autore a niuno altro fine queste cose scrisse, se non per mostrare onde Emilia fosse venuta ad Attene; e perciò che la materia, cioè li costume delle predette donne amazone, è alquanto pellegrina alle più genti, e perciò più piacevole, la volle alquanto più distesamente porre che per avventura non bisognava; e il simigliante fa della sconfitta data da Teseo a Creonte, re di Tebe, per dichiarare donde e come alle mani di Teseo pervenissero Arcita e Palemone. Le quali due cose mostrate, assai delle seguenti rimangono a' lettori molto più chiare.*

Given that the principal intention of the author of this little book is to speak of love and the things that happen because of it between two young Thebans, that is to say Arcita and Palemone, and Emilia the Amazon, as it appears in the proem, one could, and rightly, ask what the war between Teseo and the Amazons, which is told of only in the first book, has to do with anything. I say, and briefly, that the author wrote these things for no other reason than to show how Emilia had come to Athens; and given that the subject matter, which is to say the customs of the aforementioned Amazons, is rather foreign to most readers, and thus more pleasurable, he wished to put it before them in a more extended fashion than was strictly needed; and he does likewise with Teseo's defeat of Creon, king of Thebes, to declare whence and how Arcita and

Palemone fell into Teseo's hands. Having shown both events, many of the following ones are rendered much clearer to the readers.<sup>63</sup>

This gloss accompanies the tenth stanza of the first book, and it draws attention right away to the question of a reader's expectations and needs. The readers are meant to have read the proem, and this preparation should have conditioned them to anticipate a love story. Instead, they find themselves mired in this story of war, between Teseo and Hippolyta, and so they would be quite justified in having questions about how it will connect with the love story they have been promised. Here is an opportunity for the critic Boccaccio to raise the question of how love stories and war stories might relate to one another, and to then set that question to rest. Logistically, he points out, one cannot exist without the other; on a narrative level, it is this war that brings Emilia to Athens, enabling her to draw the loving eyes of Arcita and Palemone, and furthermore, the details of the war elucidated here will make the characters and actions involved in the love story clearer to the readers, which is both the author's and the critic's stated objective.

It also bears mentioning, however, that the reader who has read the proem (which is meant to form expectations about the poem's content) will have likely read its final paragraph, in which Boccaccio explicitly states both what the first book contains and why: he says that "dovendo narrare di due giovani nobilissimi tebani, Arcita e Palemone, come, innamorati d'Emilia amazona, per lei combattessero ... mi parve da dimostrare e donde la donna fosse e come ad Attene venisse, e chi fossero essi e come venissero similmente" [Having to tell how two young and very noble Thebans, Arcita and Palemone, being in love with the Amazon Emilia, fought for her... it seemed

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<sup>63</sup> *Teseida*, I.10, note.

necessary to me to demonstrate where the lady was from and how she came to Athens, and who the men were and, similarly, how they came].<sup>64</sup> Thus, he concludes, both prefaces are somewhat necessary to the main story. That the commentator Boccaccio rushes to the defense of the poem's beginning in the margin notes is important to note, because it characterizes quite well the nature of this writer: he is thorough, perhaps to excess, often repeating himself or belaboring a point. He is encyclopedic, extrapolating from every mythical reference to provide a full account of its background and then spelling out the reason for its use, even in cases where it is quite apparent. The end result is an apparatus that seems to have been written not for a scholar, but for a rather challenged reader whom he continually patronizes.

The vastness of the apparatus, though, is not without recurring themes and highly favored subject areas. In the course of the twelve books of *Teseida*, the misadventures of Jupiter and his love of women surface again and again, populating a large proportion of the margin notes. Typically, this will come about because of a reference in the primary text to some myth or other, as when Palemone goes looking for Arcita in the woods, having heard that his rival has returned from his exile. To help him in his quest, Palemone begs guidance through the night from Latona's silvery daughter: "O di Latona prole inargentata, che or meni i passi miei senza fallire con la tua luce meco accompagnata."<sup>65</sup> The critic supplies the necessary information about who Palemone is speaking to: "cioè la luna" (that is, the moon). He then digresses slightly, explaining that Latona was a beautiful woman with whom Jupiter fell in love and had two children, Apollo and Diana, who is the moon, often called silvery. Aside from being

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<sup>64</sup> *Teseida*, "A Fiammetta".

<sup>65</sup> *Teseida*, V.30.3-5.

a metonymical representation of the moon, the reference to Latona's daughter is quite apart from the poem's plot, but the marginal space gives the critic room to provide the full backstory without creating any narrative diversion. Some stories, like that of Jupiter transforming into a bull, kidnapping Europa and whisking her away, are in fact repeated (Book III and Book V) in the course of the story, allowing for the commentary to create a kind of refrain around these myths: the ability to transform, to be more than one thing at once, is the key to lasting power.

Throughout the poem, Boccaccio is playing with what epic is supposed to be and taking full advantage of what authors like Chrétien did before him in the tradition of romance: transposing the material of tragedy and infusing it with a style that makes it feel *umoristico*, and asking his readers to take it just as seriously. What he does that is new with respect to the *roman* has everything to do with the innovation in medium that he has introduced to the work: rather than personally commenting on the story and its importance as author *within* the poem, he has removed himself to the apparatus, stepped outside himself, so as to speak of "l'autore" in the third person. This device provides a new way to create ironic distance, as in the instances we've seen, and it also permits Boccaccio to inhabit multiple spaces and personalities: the lofty and the humble, the exaggerated and the diminutive, the removed and the ever-present.

In the *Amorosa visione*, we saw Boccaccio animating a character who rose up to take control of the genre that would direct him in one way when he wished to go in another. The *Teseida* shows us perhaps a more explicitly rebellious Boccaccio with regard to genre practices; it is as if he is dissatisfied with the existing traditions and the divisions they impose, and in fusing the epic and the *roman*, he is seeking a new structure within which to operate for the purposes of the *Teseida*. I argue that he



intended for the readers paying attention to surmise that the commentator was in fact he, and that the “che sono io” in the margins connected to the narrative of the story itself is meant to be a sort of clue, reminding readers to stay sharp and refrain from believing everything the narrator is saying without some critical thinking. Reading the text in this way, and in particular, reading the commentator as a willfully created fiction, allows us to experience the text as an exercise in *umorismo* as well as the many other things it clearly is. In his *Elegia di madonna Fiammetta*, the “io” narrating the Boccaccio text in question poses even more complicated questions about authorship and truth-telling, playing with understatement and self-effacement so as to create a text that subverts, challenges, and amuses.

## CHAPTER 4

### Bringing out his feminine side with 'lagrimevole stilo' in the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*

*Voi sole, le quali io per me medesima conosco pieghevoli e agl'infortunii  
pie, priego che leggate ...*

You ladies, whom I know to be compassionate and piteous  
towards misfortunes as I know myself to be, I pray you alone will  
read this.<sup>1</sup>

Boccaccio's voice transforms yet again, into that of "io per me medesima": I, myself,  
feminine. The "voi" to whom he is speaking is exclusively feminine, as well, and he gets  
right to the business of informing the reading audience as he defines it what this  
narrative will be:

*voi, leggendo, non troverete favole greche ornate di molte bugie, né  
troiane battaglie sozze per molto sangue, ma amorose, stimulate da molti  
disiri, nelle quali davanti agli occhi vostri appariranno le misere lagrime,  
gl'impetuosi sospiri e li tempestuosi pensieri, li quali, con istimolo  
continuo molestandomi, insieme il cibo, il sonno, i lieti tempi e l'amata  
bellezza hanno da me tolta via.*

as you read, you will not find Greek fables decorated with so  
many lies, nor Trojan battles soaked in so much blood, but battles  
of love, stimulated by so many desires, in which before your eyes  
will appear piteous tears, impetuous sighs and tempestuous  
thoughts, which, tormenting me without end, have taken away  
from me food, sleep, happy times and beloved beauty.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Giovanni BOCCACCIO and Francesco ERBANI, ed. (2010), *Elegia di madonna Fiammetta*, Prologo, 3-4. I will refer throughout the chapter to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine. Translations of this text tend to smooth over the very difficult language for the benefit of the reader, making the English version harder to reconcile with the Italian, and understanding what is at work in Boccaccio's original text is key to my analysis. My translations, therefore, err on the side of proximity to the Italian diction and sentence structure, even if they must sacrifice some degree of ease of reading. I have provided either direct or contextual English translations in-text for all citations, and where necessary, I have relegated to the footnotes some full citations of passages only briefly mentioned in-text.

In this passage full of pathos, as he establishes who is writing and of what, Boccaccio situates his present text in a place of humility, far removed from outward claims of authority. Whereas in the *Amorosa visione* we had a Boccaccio composing his dream in a Dantean key, and in the *Teseida* we saw his disguised hand writing as commentator alongside his author self, we now have a third mantle for Boccaccio to assume: that of a woman. The *Elegia di madonna Fiammetta* is a rare example of a male author writing from a woman's point of view in the first person, though it is located within the tradition of Ovid's *Heroides* and in some moments reflects female monologues delivered in such epics as the *Aeneid*. Boccaccio, however, stages his narrator a step further removed from the story itself, a step closer to the seat of author than the monologists in the classical works preceding his text. His prologue sets the tone immediately for the work as a whole, and Boccaccio defines his narrator in its second sentence as a feminine subject, "volonterosa più che altra a dolermi," perhaps even more willing than others to lament her condition, particularly in the service of other women who will read her words. She addresses them specifically as "O nobili donne, ne' cuori delle quali amore più che nel mio forse felicemente dimora" [Oh noble women, in the hearts of whom love dwells, perhaps more happily than in mine]. "Narrando i casi miei," in recounting her misfortunes to her audience, she hopes to "farvi, s'io posso, pietose", or inspire pity, if she is able, "con lagrimevole stilo," with a tearful plume. Ever a friend of the double-entendre, Boccaccio conjures up both the literal image of a pen (stilografica, or quill), full of tears, and with it, the style (stile) characterized by lament, the elegy.

The text intentionally distances itself from grandeur in calling itself elegy, invoking Dante's pronouncement in the *De vulgari eloquentia* that "per elegiam stilum

intellegimus miserorum.”<sup>3</sup> Announcing that the text will not speak of war, but of love, as in the sentences cited above, is another signal of the text’s prescribed status in the scheme of things; as convention would have it, the former is the stuff of epic poetry, while the latter occupies a lower status on the established scale of literary merit.

Yet, does Boccaccio implicitly accept these norms that he avows adherence to? This *elegia* is in fact quite far from an elegy vis-à-vis the strict categorization imposed by Dante and his predecessors; in outwardly claiming its status as lowly, *miserorum*, the text in fact sets itself up to subvert its own claims as it unfolds. The very act of writing that “*nowhere* will the readers find Greek myth, nor bloody Trojan battle” (italics mine) is a *de facto* invocation of “favole greche ornate ... troiane battaglie sozze per molto sangue” in the imagination nonetheless, a *recusatio* that does exactly what the author claims to refrain from doing. In declaring the absence of grandeur, as the *Elegia* will do over and over again, Boccaccio ensures that grandeur in fact is always perceptible, though without seeming to be self-appointed. Still, he goes on in making the case for a low-ranking type of text: love, which according to convention ranks lower than war as literary subject matter, is what his work will speak of, and it can only hope to inspire the very same pity in others that it accords itself.

It is in playing this game, relying on understatement and implication and indeed self-denunciation, that the text makes its own claims to power. Even as he places himself as far from explicit gestures of authority as possible, in the voice of his female narrator Boccaccio sets his sights on the emotions of his readers; it is here that the weight of his words will resonate. In his desire to harness this force, he, or rather, she, asks humbly for the compassion of any deity in heaven who might be moved to pity, and for

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<sup>3</sup> Dante ALIGHIERI and Vittorio COLETTI, ed. (2005), *De vulgari eloquentia*, 2.4.5-7: “by elegy, we mean the style of the miserable.” Translation mine.

assistance in supporting her long-suffering memory and her trembling hand as she works at her composition:

*“Ma primieramente, se de’ miseri sono li prieghi ascoltati, afflitta sì come io sono, bagnata delle mie lagrime, priego, se alcuna deità è nel cielo la cui santa mente per me sia da pietà tocca, che la dolente memoria aiuti, e sostenga la tremante mano alla presente opera, e così le faccia possenti, che quali nella mente io ho sentite e sento l’angoscie, cotali l’una profferi le parole, l’altra, più a tale oficio volonterosa che forte, le scriva.”*

But firstly, if the prayers of the lowly are heard, I pray, afflicted as I am, bathed in my own tears, that if there is any deity in the sky whose holy mind is touched with pity for me, that he might aid my pained memory, and support my trembling hand in its present task; and may this deity make [both memory and hand] so powerful, that just as I have felt the anguish in my mind and as I feel it still, I pray the one [my memory] might offer the necessary words, and the other [my hand], more willing than it is strong, might write them down.<sup>4</sup>

The elegance of the full sentence, its extensive parataxis and multi-layered hypotaxis, is one that hardly seems to match its own claims of lowliness. Without any explicit word on the subject, and indeed with a voice that is far from what we might consider his own, Boccaccio has deftly challenged the hierarchical notion of elegy as *miserorum* only, investing it with a power and a beauty that belies its supposed status. This kind of contradiction, which will repeat itself again and again throughout the text, is at the root of Pirandello’s brand of *umorismo*, a sense of humor that “per lo specialissimo contrasto in esso, inevitabilmente *scompone, disordina, discorda*” [by means of the very particular contrast it presents, inevitably upsets, disorders, discords].<sup>5</sup>

As with other examples that we’ve seen thus far of Boccaccio’s toying with relationships between style and content, this play is undertaken with the utmost seriousness. On the surface, not the slightest trace of humor can be found in his full

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<sup>4</sup> BOCCACCIO, *Elegia*, Prologo, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Luigi PIRANDELLO (1986), *L’umorismo*, 40.

assumption of a woman's persona; the pathos of the sentence we just visited above, its conviction and its fully realized elegance, professes complete intimacy and honesty. There is no trace of lightness in describing the trauma that the book will proceed to narrate, moment by moment, at least not on the surface. As the female narrator talks of her beloved beauty being taken from her, one does not doubt for a moment the emotional depth and integrity within the words, nor that of her intended audience.<sup>6</sup> Fiammetta's story is of a pain that is exclusively female: trapped in a marriage to a man who chose her (and not vice-versa), she falls deeply in love with another man and carries on an affair with him until one day he leaves her, alone, unable to change her circumstances, and with nothing but her burning love for someone who has taken himself away from her. Though he promises to come back, he never does, and later she learns that he has married, and further on, that he has taken a lover. This knowledge of betrayal drives Fiammetta to attempt suicide, eventually, and though she is unsuccessful, tripping and falling on her way to her intended flight from the roof of her house and allowing her handmaids to catch up with her and restrain her, she refuses to reclaim any kind of life that extends beyond tragic lament. Instead, she sets out to write her story, in the hopes that her book will go forth and offer comfort to women, and women only, who may be suffering in similar circumstances.

Men are explicitly the enemy in this story; as characters, they bring only pain, and as readers, they are unwelcome intruders who threaten the emotional integrity of the tale and the experience of reading it. Though the travails she will speak of are directly caused by men, she makes clear her desire to keep them from reading her

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<sup>6</sup> Pronouns will indeed pose a problem in this analysis; I have tried to use feminine pronouns when speaking of Fiammetta, the character, and masculine with speaking about Boccaccio, as I believe them to be two distinct figures with separate intentions. That the author is the creator of Fiammetta does not preclude that he has endowed her with an agenda all her own.

words: “niego loro [il mio parlare], però che sí miseramente in me l’acerbità d’alcuno si discuopre, che gli altri simili imaginando, piuttosto schernevole riso che pietose lagrime ne vedrei.” [I will deny [my words] to them, because I have been left so wretched by the cruelty of one of their kind, that I imagine others like him will read my words with scornful laughter rather than compassionate tears].<sup>7</sup> The implied maleness of scornful laughter contrasted with the femaleness of compassionate tears is a pat opposition that the narrative will return to time and again throughout; the reader must remember that both laughter and tears are being composed by a single (male) pen, one which meticulously carries out this seemingly innate male-female binary.

The lightness and humor in this emotional premise is to be found “insistendum vigilandumque atque interrogandum”, insistently standing vigil and poring over the text, interrogating it, as Boccaccio’s *Genealogia* prescribes to readers of poetry.<sup>8</sup> On the surface we read abject honesty and pathos, while “sub cortice fabularum”,<sup>9</sup> under the surface of the invention, in examining its structure, language, and levels of narration more deeply, we see the play at work. That Boccaccio’s feminine narrator so openly rejects the male presence is, despite its dramatic seriousness, curious, even amusing. Fiammetta is, as Virginie Greene might say, “at once a plausible and impossible character”.<sup>10</sup> Her impossibility lies in the unavoidable and undisguised fact that while she is a woman, calling herself “io” and baring her soul so as to emphasize her plausibility, the hand that wrote her story from the point of view of “io” is a man,

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<sup>7</sup> *Elegia*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Giovanni BOCCACCIO and Vittore BRANCA, ed. (1998). *Genealogia deorum gentilium*, XIV.xii.9.

<sup>9</sup> Giovanni BOCCACCIO, *Genealogia*, XIV.x.

<sup>10</sup> Virginie GREENE (2014), 134.

Giovanni Boccaccio. Greene's study on the nature of the fictional Lover in the *Roman de la Rose*<sup>11</sup> is instructive and illuminating in our consideration of Fiammetta as both plausible and impossible, both truthful and based on a fundamental lie. Elaborating upon the idea of this paradoxical "I", Greene notes that we as modern readers "tend to assimilate the plausible to the esthetic of realism associated with the modern novel," but "[i]f we step out of this cultural paradigm, we can identify elements of plausibility that allow readers to be seduced" by Fiammetta and characters like her, and persuade them to go along with a narrative that would posit her as "a particular, plausible individual."<sup>12</sup>

The critical literature on this work, searching for plausibility in the *Elegia's* existence as such, has rushed to point out that Fiammetta, also the name of one of Boccaccio's young women storytellers in the *Decameron*, must be a stand-in for his in-real-life lover who was in fact married to another man. Thus, we must conclude that the perpetrator of this woman's suffering, who goes by Panfilo, is none other than a stand-in for himself, playing the part that Boccaccio actually played in Fiammetta's life. This autobiographical slant seems to color even contemporary interpretations of the text, though it is not clear at all that Boccaccio intended its reading to be so straightforward; on the contrary. In fact, early on in the love affair between the two, we learn that Fiammetta and Panfilo are pseudonyms; the narrator does not reveal her real name to her readers, nor that of her lover, ostensibly to protect herself from condemnation for her extramarital affair (quite a plausible and acceptable reason for a woman to disguise

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<sup>11</sup> The Lover in the *Roman de la Rose*, whose role Greene explores in detail (Chapter 6, "The man who says no to reason"), narrates himself as "I" and establishes himself in the prologue as a truthful entity based on his dream, "a phenomenon usually associated with falsity", and in fact labeled as "nothing but fables and lies" elsewhere in the very same prologue (134-135).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.



her voice) but clearly for reasons that extend beyond the practical, as well. For all its claims to authenticity, professed in Fiammetta's words and in her elegiac, confessional style, this text is a fiction, at times subversive, playful, just as the very names of its protagonists are a fiction. This is to me a clear sign of intentional reflexivity embedded within the text, as Lucien Dallenbach would say, of *mise en abyme*.<sup>13</sup> In layering the narrative voices in this way, in constantly alluding to fiction while professing truth, Boccaccio fills his pages with "signals, instructions, ... orders for decoding"<sup>14</sup> that dictate a specific reading mode able to interpret several levels of invention at the same time. I will maintain throughout this chapter that to read the text as such actually elevates the reader's impression of Boccaccio's skill as author rather than denigrating the status of his text. In writing a first-person narrator full of claims to truth in a text that is, through and through, a masterful artifice.

Introducing his *Playing Games with Fiction*, Per Nykrog asserts that writing fiction is, in and of itself, a game, a variant of the joke, one which authors have played with readers and in which readers have willingly engaged for centuries. Some texts, according to Nykrog, present games within the game, generally of two kinds: one being "heightening the level of verisimilitude in the tale, by telling events that appear convincingly probable in themselves, and by suppressing the signals that could remind the reader that he is in a world of fiction," and the other "making the task of persuasion harder, stacking the cards against the storyteller by telling tales so improbable ('fantastic') that the reader would want to refuse them".<sup>15</sup> In my reading of the *Elegia*,

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<sup>13</sup> Lucien DALLENBACH and Ann TOMARKEN, trans. (1990), 9.

<sup>14</sup> DALLENBACH 10.

<sup>15</sup> NYKROG (1984), 425.

Boccaccio is actually playing both of these games-within-a-game. On the one hand, Fiammetta insists on divulging her every thought to her readers, and her deeply internal, lengthy account of her feelings rings true, especially when she portrays herself in a self-effacing, unflattering and unhappy light. Her willingness to be so honest is, as she claims, a service to these women, that those who have felt what she has felt might find solace and sympathy in reading of her experiences.

On the other hand, the text's verisimilitude is as improbable as it can be; the author is a man speaking as a woman, and one with an avowedly false name at that. The story itself hinges on Fiammetta's ability to lie, both in word and deed. The reasons to disbelieve are many, which gives Boccaccio the opportunity "[to show] the craftsmanship it takes to compel the reader to go along anyway and accept the unacceptable."<sup>16</sup> Once again: to claim that Boccaccio is playing such games is far from dismissive. Playing games, so to speak, and playing them well, is in fact quite a serious literary undertaking, one that displays an extraordinary level of skill and artifice when it is done well. In this case, it may have been done too well, to the point where even the more contemporary critical tradition seems unable to detach itself completely from the idea of the text's possessing some degree of autobiographical truthfulness. For Boccaccio, as storyteller, this might be construed as success, but it is a rather less fortunate outcome for generations of readers who tend to see it, as with so many medieval texts, as "earnest and transparent ... simpler and more straightforward than it is."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> PSAKI (2010), 129.

Regina Psaki, decrying the lack of nuance with which Boccaccio is often credited in his minor works, wrote those words in describing not the *Elegia* but another of Boccaccio's puzzling texts, the shrill and highly misogynistic *Corbaccio*. Like the *Elegia*, the *Corbaccio* demands that the reader question its author's relationship to its contents. Its voice is that of yet another narrating "io," another protagonist suffering the pain of unrequited love and seeking relief through textual catharsis, another presence that critics have hastened to identify with its creator, Boccaccio himself. Surprisingly, analyses of the *Elegia* do not often pick up the *Corbaccio*; the former can claim a great many source-texts, many of them classical, and the critical literature has largely chosen to focus on its relationship with other elegies, such as the *Heroides*, another text featuring the laments of women abandoned by their lovers. While there is a great deal of validity in such a reading, this chapter will insist on viewing the *Elegia* as a project that has just as much in common with the *Corbaccio* despite the obvious differences. The two texts certainly have plenty to say when placed in dialogue with one another, although such an approach considerably lessens the credibility of their narrators as stand-ins for the author's historical self.

The reasons for this sort of analysis are many. One arises immediately from a practical observation: these two texts are quite often published one alongside the other, as in the F. Erbani edition that has now been reprinted five times by Garzanti. Stemming from the rather common 19<sup>th</sup>-century critical tendency to map Boccaccio's works onto an autobiographical trajectory, the standard interpretation of the two books' relationship to one another seems to dictate that he wrote the *Elegia* during a time when he was still very much in love with Fiammetta, and that he subsequently wrote the *Corbaccio* once their relationship had ended for good. Boccaccio in love on the one hand, and Boccaccio

embittered on the other. This critical view tends to coincide with the one claiming that a fundamental change in Boccaccio's nature mid-life is responsible for his transition from writing in *volgare* (the 'immature', pre-*Decameron* Boccaccio) to writing in Latin (the 'mature', Petrarch-influenced Boccaccio). Such an interpretation would dictate, then, that in the space of a few short years Boccaccio went from a man able to identify with women on a profound level to one who despised them deeply, so much so that he spewed one of the most misogynistic and hateful pieces of prose ever to have been written, "an unswerving and unpartitioned autobiographical outburst against the female sex", in Robert Hollander's words.<sup>18</sup>

The problem lies in how one chooses to read these texts. In recent decades, critics have been more willing to call into question the sincerity of the *Corbaccio* than they have in the case of the *Elegia*, perhaps because the vitriol of the former is so highly provocative, even offensive to the friendly image of Boccaccio that the *Decameron* paints for us. Hollander calls it "an embarrassment, even to its admirers," one which led even him to change his critical view of its origin, dating and purpose after having previously published an argument in favor of the autobiographical interpretation. Nykrog argues that the "*picciola operetta* is not ...a serious treatise against women..., but a joke, a parody ... of sinister and embittered misogyny," and he cites as the first advantage of such an interpretation that "our dear Boccaccio is restored to us as we know him, playful, witty, intelligent, and mischievous."<sup>19</sup> He insists that "we *have* to look at the text [as a fiction] ... we never meet that abominable woman [against whom it is directed]; we merely get a

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<sup>18</sup> HOLLANDER (1988), 2.

<sup>19</sup> NYKROG, 439-440.

description of her as seen by two pairs of male eyes."<sup>20</sup> Not just any male eyes, either, but those of her rejected suitor and of her "embittered and defeated husband ... who is the actual, outspoken, militant hater." Everything the reader learns about the monstrous woman in question, and about women as a gender, is placed in the mouth of that militant hater and reported by the narrator, so that in effect, there are two masks between the author and the actual content of the text. Both of these masks, to continue to quote Nykrog, "have their motives for speaking and writing as they do, motives that are not necessarily those of the actual writer,"<sup>21</sup> a problem that the text in fact confronts explicitly.

Nevertheless, the *Corbaccio's* reception has been divided between critics who take it seriously squaring off against those who insist upon its irony, though trending more recently (and more convincingly) towards the latter. Regina Psaki's unapologetic stance on the *Corbaccio's* searing humor refers to the work as "a mighty, a monumental, piss-take," or in other words "a joke not on women, but rather on misogyny, and on the nexus of pseudo-intellectualism and masculine privilege that orients misogynous discourse in Boccaccio's time and in the centuries preceding."<sup>22</sup> Psaki's reading of the *Corbaccio* identifies a great number of "signs that shriek 'caveat lector'": the clash of genre-types, i.e. misogynist diatribe with dream-vision, and the "detailed and hyperbolic vituperation" in the form of "bitterness and bile" of its narrator.<sup>23</sup> The echoes of both Dante's *Inferno* and Petrarch's *Secretum* in the little treatise, argues Psaki,

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<sup>20</sup> NYKROG, 441

<sup>21</sup> NYKROG, 442

<sup>22</sup> PSAKI, 105

<sup>23</sup> PSAKI, 106

demonstrate the sort of “pretensions to high seriousness” that can be easily undermined with the ridiculous figure of the jilted narrator, who embodies the straight-faced and self-righteous misogynist viewpoint that Boccaccio seeks to subvert.

This is what makes the *Corbaccio* such an excellent companion to the *Elegia*; the two works seem, on the outside, to be completely opposite in their viewpoints and claims of importance. Yet, when read in Psaki’s terms, they each offer a different facet of a coherent and challenging literary project. The trap that critics have fallen into more than not is precisely the assumption that Boccaccio’s “io” and the author himself are one and the same. Echoing Hollander and others, Psaki reaffirms that “the Boccaccian narrator is never coextensive with the author: he is always a persona, whether differentiated only minimally from the historical author, or set up as a target of ridicule or condemnation on one basis or another.”<sup>24</sup> This should be obvious in the case of the *Elegia* in particular; the mere fact itself that the narrator is a woman should remind the reader constantly that she is a fiction merely by virtue of that claim. Perhaps even more clamorously than in the *Corbaccio*, Boccaccio has left “bright red flags ... that shriek ‘caveat lector’” throughout the *Elegia* as well. Yet the sweeping and deeply felt pathos that Boccaccio conjures through the words that come from Fiammetta’s pen, the *lagrimevole stilo*, if we like, seem to have convinced many critics of her (and by extension, Boccaccio’s) earnestness.

This chapter will consider the texts in dialogue with one another so as to challenge this idea that they display two contradictory accounts of Boccaccio’s feelings about women. I propose a reading of the two as complementary texts, which in each other’s presence demonstrate Boccaccio’s majestic capacity to give voice to multiplicity

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<sup>24</sup> PSAKI, 107, citing also HOLLANDER, 24–26 and CASSELL (1993), xii–xiii.

through fiction. The *Corbaccio* lends the *Elegia* a new shade of color, when read alongside it; the latter text problematizes the straightforward integrity of the former one, just as the *Elegia* calls into question the sincerity of the scalding hatred towards women in the *Corbaccio*. Viewed in the wider context of Boccaccio's 'minor works' as a whole, these two books provide even more insight into how Boccaccio composes his text with humor, invoking a known framework or style and undermining it within the very same sentence, as he does in Fiammetta's prologue. One imagines the two texts approaching Pirandello's "guardaroba della Retorica", and taking unexpected forms, challenging the standards set before them and soliciting reactions based on their subversion.<sup>25</sup> The texts are both part of a continuity in Boccaccio's career, one that is based not on an autobiographical timeline, but rather on an authorial project. Despite the *Elegia*'s outward claim of a *lagrimevole stilo* and the female voice that assumes it, this is the great and foundational Boccaccio at work, even if in disguise once again.

Looking back on her history as woman and lover, Fiammetta views the happiest moments of her life with chagrin, chastising herself for the naiveté that allowed her such bliss at one time. Alienated from her past self in that state of happiness, her present self channels instead the moments of fervent anguish, biting self-scorn, and deep, resounding pain that lurk in her past and characterize her present and chronic state. She calls out frequently to her readers, asking them, too, to put themselves in the role of protagonist, to relive along with her the agony of heartbreak. In fact, such anguish in one's personal history is almost a prerequisite for any reader of hers, as she establishes in her prologue; readers will find resonance in her words with their own inner grief and sorrow, the so-called "parole oneste" inspiring a deep and resounding empathy.

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<sup>25</sup> This Pirandellian metaphor and its relation to humor is explored in more detail *supra* in Chapter 1, 17-18.

Written between 1343 and 1344, the work is generally spoken of as having made its appearance on the heels of the *Decameron*, another text dedicated explicitly to women. As such, the *Elegia* suffers a similar critical fate to the other works discussed thus far in that it rarely escapes the shadow of the great masterpiece. Though perhaps not in scale, as its nine chapters come nowhere close to the *Decameron's* hundred *novelle*, one might consider the *Elegia* in many ways an even more ambitious project than its far more privileged predecessor. It relies for its pathos and its draw on the story of one character only, not the many featured in the *Decameron*, and from that one woman's soul it draws out a range of emotions, each one seeming equally earnest and deeply felt. It displays a level of self-exploration that no single *Decameron* protagonist could ever reach. If the masterwork provides to its readers a human comedy fleshed out in hundreds of different characters, as Vittore Branca famously declared, the *Elegia's* human comedy emerges from one person. Fiammetta bares herself, warts and all, sparing no detail of her physical and mental state from moment to moment. She seems, as writer looking back upon her emotional journey, to relish in this dramatic replay she has staged; as she puts herself in her readers' shoes and asks them to put themselves in hers, she exemplifies the salutary effects of reading, hoping that her audience might, too.

The pathos of the prologue carries into the story's beginning, even as it introduces Fiammetta at her happiest: "da parenti nobili procreata venni io nel mondo, da benigna fortuna e abondevole ricevuta...in altissime delizie, e in esse nutrita" [Born of noble blood I came into the world, received by benign and abundant fortune ... nourished and reared with the greatest delights].<sup>26</sup> But oh, how cursed is that day, abominable more than any other to the then-fortunate Fiammetta, how much happier it

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<sup>26</sup> *Elegia*, I.5.



would have been had she not been born, or perhaps born straight into her grave! In fact, despite her avowed material wealth and happy home, it is that very fortune that eventually breaks her, as she claims, and what she curses more than anything is her ignorance of that impending doom. Her beauty, “de’ miei mali speciale cagione” [most notable author of her demise], delights her so much in those carefree days that she cultivates it eagerly in her youth, “miserabile dono” though it may be. In these early times, Fortune already plots against Fiammetta, envious, as the narrative claims, of the gifts bestowed upon the young woman, “invidiosa de’ beni medesimi che essa avea prestatì” and wishing to take them back.<sup>27</sup> Despite a warning from the gods that comes in the form of an Ovidian dream, the young Fiammetta continues to live her life and take pleasure in her beauty.

The narrator’s scorn towards her young self is most evident in the book’s first scene of real narrative, the scene of Fiammetta’s appearance in the presence of her soon-to-be lover. Having dressed herself as appealingly as possible, “vestitami e con maestra mano di me ornata ciascuna parte,” she is fully aware of how desirable she is. She crafts a reader’s-eye-view of herself not only as others see her, but also as she sees herself, through the eyes of her youthful vanity: “simile alle dée vedute da Parìs nella valle d’Ida tenendomi”, judging herself to be as the goddesses seen by Paris on Mount Ida, she has decorated herself to appear before the public.<sup>28</sup> She refers, of course, to a moment of unflattering vanity as well as aesthetic judgment; each goddess appearing before Paris in the myth Fiammetta invokes believes herself to be the most beautiful of all, commanding

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<sup>27</sup> *Elegia*, I.6-7.

<sup>28</sup> *Elegia*, I.9.

the mortal Paris to decide who among them is most beautiful, each plying him with gifts in an effort to sway him.

Fiammetta, in a certain sense, is almost worse than the goddesses in the myth; she is already convinced that she is the most beautiful of all and has no need to measure herself against others, an attitude that her present, narrator-self recalls with scorn. In her youthful ignorance, she is Paris as well as Minerva, Juno and Venus, a role-player after the fashion of Boccaccio her creator. Indeed, she takes secret delight in the effect of her looks on others, needing no judge to confirm what she knows to be true. What strikes the reader about this scene, beyond the overt self-admiration mixed with self-loathing, is the narration of it as if from the outside. Fiammetta takes pleasure in looking upon herself and imagining how others see her: “E ... io tutta mi mirava, non altramente che il pavone le sue penne, imaginando di così piacere ad altrui come io a me piaceva” (I admired my whole self, not unlike the peacock with his feathers, imagining that I was just as pleasing to others as I was to myself). This self-gazing continues as she moves amongst the men who desire her and the women who envy her, taking pleasure in her effect on them:

*...non solamente gli uomini gli occhi torsero a riguardarmi, ma eziandio le donne, non altramente che se Venere o Minerva, mai più da loro non vedute, fossero in quel luogo, là dove io era. ... Oh, quante fiate tra me stessa ne risi, essendone meco contenta, e non meno che una deà gloriandomi di tale cosa!*

Not only did the men turn their eyes to look at me, but the women too, almost as if Venus or Minerva, never before seen in such company, had been there in my place...oh, how many times I smiled to myself, satisfied with myself, congratulating myself on such admiration no less than a goddess would!<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Elegia*, I.10

Fiammetta is all *sprezzatura* avant la lettre, “poco altrui rimirando, e molto da molti rimirata.”<sup>30</sup> Her pride is founded in her ability to appear to care little for what seems to affect others so much, despite her private admission to the reader of how acutely aware she is of how others feel, and her delight in the spell she casts.

It is here, during this very scene in which the eyes of the world seem to be trained upon Fiammetta, that she and Panfilo, the lover who will bring her to her present, piteous state, look upon each other for the first time. Fiammetta, of course, is already wed to a man whose name is never mentioned and whose presence is noted only in passing prior to the appearance of Panfilo. Fiammetta knows better than to stare too long at this young man, but once she has seen him, her judgment not yet clouded by love, as she claims, the effigy of his figure remains in her mind, wherein she is free to gaze at him all she wants. Even with her eyes turned away, she is fixated upon him, though she glances in his direction from time to time, delighting in the fact that he continues to look at her.

Much of what the reader now understands of Fiammetta comes from this ‘external’ gaze that the narrator is trying to recreate. The question of judgment looms behind this scene, setting a tone and an expectation for the entire saga; the reader, unlike Paris, is being asked to accept Fiammetta’s beauty as a given, but she herself models the kind of judgment of her character that the reader, too, must undertake. Indeed, Boccaccio’s ability to impersonate Fiammetta seems predicated upon the invocation of outside judgment. There is, however cleverly hidden, a kind of play here with the idea of creating a woman whose point of view is that of a man, and a highly impressive man, clearly capable of an unprecedented level of empathy. Boccaccio’s ability to feel on

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<sup>30</sup> *Elegia*, I.11

Fiammetta's behalf, then, is mirrored by her ability to judge herself on behalf of her male admirers, and the result is the highly introspective, microscopically descriptive account of how love takes hold of a person's senses.

Fiammetta and Panfilo, having mutually fallen for each other, begin their clandestine love affair under the nose of the lady's marriage vows. The various techniques for hiding secrets in plain sight are a revelation to Fiammetta, who learns from her lover that one can demonstrate one's affection not only by "favellando," using speech, and also with "atti diversi e delle mani e del viso"<sup>31</sup> different gestures with one's hands and one's face, privately significant to the lovers alone. It is he who teaches her, furthermore, to disguise the truth when speaking, using language as indecipherable code: "per figura parlando, e d'insegnarmi a tale modo parlare, e di farmi più certa de' suoi disii, me Fiammetta, e sé Panfilo nominando."<sup>32</sup> This is the first time the lovers are called by name; the female narrator has hitherto referred to herself only as "io". The lines between their fiction and what she claims as her truth become blurry: is Fiammetta only a name she has invented for herself in the context of the *Elegia*? Who is the "io", if Fiammetta is only a sign the narrator uses to displace the transgression of her love for Panfilo away from herself? "Ohimè," she sighs, "quante volte... fingendo Fiammetta e Panfilo essere stati greci, narrò egli come io di lui,"<sup>33</sup> how many times he told the story (as I tell of him), pretending Fiammetta and Panfilo were Greeks! Is Panfilo the true author of Fiammetta's story, then? The narrator seems to suggest that, indeed, the master of fiction is this man, her lover, the one capable of using language "per figura,"

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<sup>31</sup> *Elegia*, I.34

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*. "...speaking by way of signs, calling himself Panfilo and me Fiammetta, both to teach me how to speak in such a way, and to make me more certain of his desires."

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*.

and “fingendo,” creating a story in which she only learned to take part by following his instruction. She is once again on the outside of her own story, looking in, placing herself as receiver first, then creator.

By contrast, for all her perceptive capacities in seeing herself as others see her, Fiammetta is astonishingly lacking in empathy towards men, her lover in particular. Once her obsession with him takes hold, and his with her, their affair becomes physical very quickly, despite her attempts to put him out of her mind. They both must go to great lengths to hide their affections, but to hear Fiammetta tell it, they seem to find rather a lot of time and space to be together, until one day, Panfilo breaks the news that he must leave her for a time. His father is deathly ill, which he has known for some time, but he has delayed in visiting because of his passionate love for Fiammetta. Her reaction is, understandably, one of great sadness, but it quickly turns into anger and bitterness at the choice Panfilo has made in favoring his father over her. Ignoring his protests to the contrary, she launches into an argument against his logic, pointing out how irrational it is for him to prioritize his father, since he will surely die, and soon. She, on the other hand, might have many years left to live, but for the fact that Panfilo’s cruelty will surely be the death of her. “Do you wish to, or are you even able to, value your father’s few remaining years over the many yet reasonably owed to me?” she demands.<sup>34</sup> His presence will not cure his father, so why cost her such sadness in return for nothing? Panfilo, on the other hand, is measured, loving, and highly empathetic in his replies. “Conoscendo a te gravissima l’ accidente,” knowing how grave and terrible this will be for Fiammetta, he assures her that his absence will be temporary, allowing him to be with his father in his dying days and then return to Fiammetta and live the rest of his life

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<sup>34</sup> *Elegia*, II.45. “Deh, vorrai tu, o potrai fare, pur che io il consenta, i pochi anni al vecchio padre servati, a’ molti, che ancora a me ragionevolmente si debbono, anteporre?”

with her. For a narrator so intent upon laying out her feelings, making such claims to know the hearts of her young women readers, Fiammetta cannot come close to Panfilo's selflessness.

How then do we read Fiammetta? Where is Boccaccio's sympathy, and with whom does he identify? There is a great deal of emphasis on how Fiammetta sees herself, how she looks at others looking at her, a constant reminder that the narrative is mediated through her gaze and that she is also putting words in other characters' mouths. We are constantly reminded that this is fiction, because the care that Boccaccio takes to emphasize all these degrees of separation implicitly tells us that he, too, is creating a fictional character. It is at this point that we must remind ourselves, as readers, that the female narrator is a construct, a product of an author's "fingendo". She, too, is constructing, staging her character as afflicted with love-madness, and her symptomatic descriptions of her distress are highly referential, finding precedent in many romantic tales that a learned woman such as her has surely read, perhaps the most famous of which being the suicidal Dido in the *Aeneid*. We have been explicitly told that Fiammetta and Panfilo themselves are fabrications even within the framework of the narrative, brought into being by two lovers so as to allow them to carry on the affair which then generates the authorship of the book itself. *Caveat lector!*

Having learned from Panfilo, Fiammetta becomes a majestic and practiced weaver of fiction, by necessity: she sinks into a never-ending depression, seemingly without explanation, which only worsens with time. Unable to keep her feelings from manifesting themselves in body and spirit, she has no choice but to invent reasons for their unrelenting intensity. The remainder of the book is concerned with the crescendo of her misery in reaction to both outer and inner stimuli, making her capacity to pretend,

to falsify, the key to her continued existence. We are given to understand that she would be cast out of her present life altogether if she allowed the betrayal of her marriage vows to be revealed, and that this fiction is being perpetuated out of necessity. She vows to her readers that, as God knows, “se senza pericolo essere potesse, io con vera voce di me sgannerei ogni ingannata persona, né celerei la cagione che trista mi tiene.” She *would*, if it were without risk to her, tell everyone the truth, undo her deceit, “ma non si puote.”<sup>35</sup> It is just not possible. In examining several passages from Chapters V and VI, between Fiammetta’s learning that Panfilo will not return to her and her eventual attempt to throw herself out of a window to her death, we will visit her various ways of self-preservation through fiction.

As time passes, Fiammetta’s inner life consumes her, as she thinks of nothing but Panfilo, how he has wronged her by leaving her and how desperately she wants him back. In the meantime, only news of Panfilo can bring her outside of her thoughts into a dialogue with another character, and each instance of this causes a wave of emotional reaction that almost never brings any relief and plunges her right back into her own psyche. She speaks aloud to the gods, to Fortune, even to Panfilo himself, her monologues at times going on for pages and pages, begging for the return of the only person who she believes can make her well again. She hallucinates the sound of Panfilo knocking on her door. She begs Sonno (sleep) to visit her and bring her relief, but when it finally does, she finds herself in the midst of horrible visions, “piene d’infinite paure,” full of infinite fears, with all the furies of hell menacing her.<sup>36</sup> Only rarely does sleep give

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<sup>35</sup> *Elegia*, V.126.

<sup>36</sup> *Elegia*, V.94

her happy visions of Panfilo, though these hurt worst of all when she awakens and realizes that they were only dreams.

All of this physical and emotional distress cannot escape the notice of her husband, though he is never called by any other name than “caro marito,” or more often “ingannato marito” (deceived husband). He sees her pale face and the dark rings around her sunken eyes and tries everything he can think of to cure what he assumes is some kind of physical malady. Medicines are sent for, and when none of them work, the poor ingannato marito proposes a trip to the countryside, which Fiammetta suffers with great pain, thinking only at every seashore, every rock, every cliff: “Qui fui io con Panfilo, e così mi disse, e così quivi facemmo.”<sup>37</sup> The dramatic “fui io” calls to mind the damned speaking to Dante deep in hell of the places they went and the people they were in their lives on earth; there is a languorous quality to the *passato remoto* that Fiammetta surely invokes here for the benefit of her readers. There isn’t a place she can go that doesn’t scream Panfilo’s name, while at the same time reminding her that those days are long past.

Resigned to the fact that her illness isn’t improving, Fiammetta’s husband takes her back to the city, where the season of weddings and celebrations is nigh and Fiammetta is forced to dress up for each one, in the hopes that this will cheer her up. All this time, of course, though she cannot seem to keep her physical body from manifesting her emotional state, she maintains the secrecy of her love for Panfilo, the ingannato marito never the wiser. Nevertheless, once she is thrust back into the public eye, with other ladies scrutinizing her, she must begin to put more effort into the concealment of her condition. As she prepares to attend a wedding, she shifts her focus to her physical

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<sup>37</sup> *Elegia*, V.98



appearance, returning “al dimenticato officio,”<sup>38</sup> to the forgotten task of making herself beautiful. When she looks upon herself in the mirror, her words recall the very beginning of her tale, when she admired her looks whenever she caught a glimpse of a mirror, how she delighted in watching men watch her from all around. Now, she barely recognizes herself: “vedendomi ... orribile quale io era, avendo nella mente la forma perduta” [seeing myself, horrible as I was, having lost my form within my mind].<sup>39</sup> This newfound awareness of her physical state pushes her into the next phase of her *fiingere*. As she did at the beginning of the book in the scene when she and Panfilo first see one another, Fiammetta begins to narrate herself as seen by others: “non altramente in una sola maniera *mi videro*, cioè con viso *infinto*, qual io poteva, ad allegrezza” [they saw me in only one way, that is with my face assuming an expression of happiness, as much as I could muster].<sup>40</sup> She does not let her pain show, and yet “l’occhio disideroso”, her hungry eye, scans the room for Panfilo, blind to all the beauty of the wedding festivities. When the bride arrives, the dancing begins, and the house fills with joy, Fiammetta excuses herself politely, to cover her disdain for the couples dancing, uninterested in revisiting these rites of her once-happy life.<sup>41</sup>

As in any scene where Fiammetta is in the company of others, her voice becomes that of the omniscient narrator, concentrating on the gaze of others, on how they look at

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<sup>38</sup> *Elegia*, V.101.

<sup>39</sup> *Elegia*, V.101.

<sup>40</sup> *Elegia*, V.102. Emphasis added.

<sup>41</sup> *Elegia*, V.102: Full citation: “E poi che la nuova sposa era giunta, e la pompa grandissima delle mense celebrate si toglieva via, come le varie danze, ora alla voce d’alcuno cantante guidate e ora al suono di diversi strumenti menate, erano cominciate, risonando ogni parte della sposaesca casa di festa, io, acciò che non disdegnosa, ma urbana paressi, data alcuna volta in quelle, mi riponeva a sedere entrando in nuovi pensieri.”

her and what they say about her. This time, in contrast to those opening scenes, they are discussing how beautiful she once was and speculating (not without some evident glee at the prospect of potential scandal) what might be the cause of her haggardness and her pallor. There are those who immediately say that only a woman in love could be so distraught, while others, remembering Fiammetta's reputation as "donna onesta," defend her against such accusations. Fiammetta hears it all, noting privately and with some satisfaction "quanto sono costoro lontani alla verità, me innamorata non reputando!" [how far they are from the truth, those who think I'm not in love!].<sup>42</sup> Yet, proud though she is of the success of her deception, she still paints herself as fundamentally honest, forthright; she reiterates to her readers that she is telling *them* the truth of the scene. "Why should I hide from you, women, such things as would hurt not just me but anyone to hear?"<sup>43</sup> The suffering she undergoes from the words of others is put forth as the guarantor of truth, not for the first time. From its very beginning, this narrative's truth claims have stemmed from their origins in pain and suffering, from their adherence to elegy, the low style of the *tristi*, from the *lagrimevole stilo* that undertakes to write them down. Here, once again, Fiammetta reverts to these very claims even as she narrates herself in the act of deceiving others.

Of course, Fiammetta's suffering is not yet over; the slow burn of Chapter V builds her anguish slowly, in a measured crescendo taking her through this series of encounters unable to rip her from the torture of her emotional state. Forced to participate in celebrations of different kinds at the sacred temples in the city, she seats herself "ne' più bassi luoghi," dressed simply, and "con infinto viso," with her face as before assuming the appropriate expressions, she confronts the curiosity of the others,

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<sup>42</sup> *Elegia*, V.104.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*.

who cannot understand why such a young, beautiful woman as her has left behind that care for her appearance that she was once known for. “O Fiammetta,” says one, “senza fine di te me e l’altre donne fai meravigliare, ignorando qual sia stata sí súbita la cagione che le preziose robe hai lasciate e li cari ornamenti, e l’altre cose dicevoli alla tua giovine etade”<sup>44</sup> [Fiammetta, endlessly you cause me and the other women to marvel at you, as we do not know why you have left the precious robes and fine adornments fitting your young age]. Her interlocutor goes on to scold her for her non-conformity to the expectations of the others, reminding her that too soon she will be old, and there will be plenty of time to dress in this way in her later years. “Usa gli anni secondo la loro qualità,” she admonishes; “tu, ancora fanciulla in sí fatto abito andare non dovresti.”<sup>45</sup>

Fiammetta, cloaked as she is in what the other woman refers to as “questo abito di tanta *onestade*,”<sup>46</sup> replies to this challenge by not only lying but also claiming the moral high ground as she covers up her dishonesty, admonishing the attending women for their vanity. “Donne,” she says, “o per piacere di Dio o agli uomini si viene a questi templi. Se per piacere a Dio ci si viene, l’anima ornata di virtù basta”<sup>47</sup>. In other words, for anyone who comes to the temple for the sake of pleasing God, it is enough to present one’s soul adorned with virtue; only those interested in pleasing men need come “da falso parere adombrati,” concealed by a false appearance, dressed up to cover the truth

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<sup>44</sup> *Elegia*, V.125.

<sup>45</sup> *Elegia*, V.125

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*. Italics mine. Boccaccio is certainly invoking more than one meaning of *onestade*: as Dante uses it, it often carries the more tangible meaning of “outer decorum” on the level of dress and self-presentation – see CONTINI (1976). Yet his frequent use of it to mean “honesty” (and lack thereof) tells us that we are meant to read that meaning into it, too, in a somewhat ironic reversal. The Dantean *onestade* is actually counter to the sort of “honesty” we are concerned with here; the “abito di tanta *onestade*”, in Fiammetta’s case, is meant to cloak what lies within. See also Paolo CHERCHI (2004).

<sup>47</sup> *Elegia*, V.126.

of their souls. She, on the contrary, does not care about her appearance; in fact, she goes on to claim, she is expressly hoping to make amends with God for her “passate vanità.”<sup>48</sup> Even as she says these patently false words, she repents for her deceit, crying “le lagrime dell’intrinseca verità”, the tears of her inner truth. Speaking only to herself and for the benefit of her readers, she asks God not to condemn her as a sinner for this, her lie that she only tells to save herself.<sup>49</sup> And yet, her words and her tears both cement Fiammetta’s status with the others as quasi-saint and ultimately martyr, so virtuous does she appear. To the reader, who sees both the ‘falso parere’ that she expressly denies and the truth behind it, her action and the people’s reaction are in fact not unlike the events leading to the false sainthood performed by Ser Ciappelletto in *Decameron* I.1. As Boccaccio’s other infamous sinner did, Fiammetta feeds and relishes in the zealous narrative thus created around her piety:

*Oh quante volte, o donne, ho io per questa iniquità pietose laude ricevute,  
dicendo le circostanti donne me divotissima giovine di vanissima ritornata!  
Certo, io intesi più volte di molte essere opinione, me di tanta amicizia essere  
congiunta con Dominedio, che niuna grazia a lui da me dimandata, negata  
sarebbe; e più volte ancora dalle sante persone per santa fui visitata, non  
conoscendo esse quel che nell’animo nascondea il tristo viso, e quanto li miei  
disiderii fossero lontani alle mie parole.”*

Oh, how many times, ladies, did I receive praise for these pious iniquities, the women around me saying that I was a most devout young woman transformed from one most vain! Certainly, I understood several times that many women held the view that I was joined with the Lord God, who would never have denied me anything I asked; and even more times

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*. “Ma io di ciò non ho cura, anzi, dolente delle passate vanità, volonterosa d’ammendare nel cospetto d’Iddio, mi rendo quanto posso dispetta agli occhi vostri.”

<sup>49</sup> *Elegia*, V.126. “E quindi le lagrime dall’intrinseca verità cacciate per forza fuori mi bagnano il mesto viso, e con tacita voce così con meco medesima dico: ‘O Iddio, veditore de’ nostri cuori, *le non vere parole* dette da me non m’imputare in peccato. Come tu vedi, non volontà d’ingannare, ma necessità di ricoprire le mie angosce a quelle mi strigne, anzi piuttosto merito me ne rendi, considerando che ‘l malvagio essempro levando, alle tue creature il do buono: egli m’è grandissima pena *il mentire*, e con faticoso animo la sostengo, ma più non posso’. Emphasis added.

I was visited by holy people who thought me a saint, not knowing what my sad face hid within my soul, and how far my desires lay from my words.<sup>50</sup>

Nowhere does Fiammetta claim to be unaware of the effects of her lie; though she is not openly congratulatory of herself, she doesn't hold back in telling her readers just how believable her tale turned out to be. Privately, however, knowing that God can see what is truly in her heart, she asks him not to condemn her for "le non vere parole", though she refrains from the word "mentire", to lie. Whether the remorse she claims to feel is from true regret or fear of repercussions is left ambiguous, but she makes it clear that she has no intention of changing her ways.

Deception, once again, hides in plain sight. The scene as told by Fiammetta resounds with various words that circle around concealment, ornament, decoration and beautification: "nascondere," "coprire," "ornare," "adombrare." The power of her lie, her cloaking of the truth, rests upon her pious claim that she is unadorned, baring her soul to God. An appearance of poverty and a lack of beauty are newly offered as proof of honesty, this time physically embodied in the character herself and as she discovers, her audience is immediately convinced. The complete willingness of others, even "le sante persone," to accept her words as true, demonstrates her skill as a creator of fiction, as ever calling into question the claims of honesty that she renews, once again, with her readers. It is not her, but the "ingannevole mondo," the deceitful world, that is truly to blame for how easily others believe her lies. "Quanto possono in te gl'infinti visi più che li giusti animi," she laments (how much more powerful are the falsely assumed faces

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem.*

when compared to just souls!), and yet she survives and indeed thrives by virtue of her own “infinto viso”.<sup>51</sup>

Chapter VI begins with a new event that briefly takes Fiammetta’s consciousness outside herself: the latest news of Panfilo, brought by a visitor from out of town. Fiammetta experiences a moment of brief, exhilarating happiness when she learns that Panfilo is not, in fact, married, but she is brought down lower than ever upon hearing that on the contrary, he is quite madly in love with another woman, at whose house he is seen quite frequently. The rapid pace of Fiammetta’s deterioration is renewed with a bout of pure rage, which brings the narrative to a sort of climax in intensity: her attempt to commit suicide. Such dramatic behavior, particularly the way she runs from her nurses so that they cannot prevent her from going through with the deed, leads her *ingannato marito* to finally ask what ails his wife: “io ora manifestamente conosco che angoscia d’animo t’ha condotta a quello in che io ti veggio; per che io ti priego che quello che di ciò t’è cagione mi scuopra” [I can clearly understand that some anguish in your soul has led you to the state I now see you in; and so I beg you to reveal to me what the reason is], he pleads.<sup>52</sup> His direct question, as opposed to his previous assumptions that Fiammetta just needed a vacation, will require a more deliberate response; he can see, he claims, and now he is asking her to “scoprire,” to uncover what lies beneath the scene he

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<sup>51</sup> *Elegia*, V.126. Full quote: “O ingannevole mondo, quanto possono in te gl’infinti visi più che li giusti animi, se l’opere sono *occulte!* Io, più peccatrice che altra, dolente per li miei *disonesti amori*, però che quelli velo sotto *oneste parole*, sono reputata santa; ma conoscelo Iddio, che, se senza pericolo essere potesse, io con *vera voce* di me *sgannerei* ogni ingannata persona, né *celerei* la cagione che trista mi tiene; ma non si puote.” Trans: “Oh deceitful world, in you, how much more powerful are contrived façades than just souls, if their works are *hidden!* I, sinner more than others, in pain over my *dishonest loves*, but because I veil them with *honest words* I am reputed a saint; but God knows that, were there not such potential danger, I would with my own *true voice* undo the deceit to every *deceived* person, nor would I hide the reason for my continued sadness, but it is impossible.” Emphasis added.

<sup>52</sup> *Elegia*, VI.138.

observes. She will have to actively deflect rather than passively suffer, and thus replies with what seems to be a weak lie, telling her husband that she has been dreaming of the untimely and horrible death of her brother (of whom readers have thus far heard nothing). Noting no logical problem, the *ingannato marito* swallows the story whole. As he comforts her, Fiammetta remarks in an aside on the naïveté of his soothing words, “quelle vere ragioni, che alle mie bugie si confaceano!”<sup>53</sup> A classic fool, he meets her lies with the earnestness and truth of his words, when in reality her brother’s death no longer troubles her in the slightest.<sup>54</sup> Loving and genuine, he is, but no less a fool.

Most interesting about this scene is the way Fiammetta chooses to frame her fabrication: she notes that “il mentire,” lying, comes to her at just that moment “con femminile subitezza,” with a female readiness, though she adds that it had never been an art of hers before. The reader who has been with her since the beginning knows that this, too, is a lie; since the moment she began to carry on with Panfilo she has been inventing stories to cover up her deeds, including the very name by which we call her. Her fundamental *onestà* and discomfort with lying is part of the story of herself that she is telling herself as well as us: she is wronged, persecuted, and truly innocent.<sup>55</sup> Both in lying to her husband and in her claims of piety in the earlier scene at the temple, Fiammetta is creating a character with a narrative completely separate from her actual

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<sup>53</sup> *Elegia*, VI.139.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*. Full quote: “Oh quante pietose parole egli allora mi porse, medicando la piaga, la quale assai davanti era guarita, e li miei pianti s’ingegnò di rattemperare con quelle vere ragioni, che alle mie bugie si confaceano!” Trans: “Oh, how many piteous words he bestowed upon me, treating a wound that had healed quite a long time before, and he took it upon himself to temper my sobs with those true words in response to my lies!”

<sup>55</sup> She goes on to argue this point more forcefully in Chapter VIII, comparing herself to all the mythical women condemned to hell by Dante for their amorous sins and maintaining that her own crimes are less egregious than theirs.

self, mirroring her own status as a creation of the real author, Boccaccio. For every context, there is a way of pretending, “fingere”, that fits and functions, and Fiammetta has become an excellent connoisseur of how to act when, what sort of narrative to craft for which audience. This reading of the *Elegia* directly confronts the question of authority and authorship, and it tells the reader a great deal about how fiction works in Boccaccio’s mind. Although we are constantly reminded of how central the act of “fingere” is to the story, there are extensive claims to truth that Fiammetta makes over and over again – she, the character, tells us constantly how honest she is, even though we know her to be capable of putting on an excellent show. Part and parcel of the spectacle is the work’s legitimacy that derives from this very honesty, this baring of her soul to us, the readers, though she gives us every reason to doubt her at every turn. Boccaccio has created a character who almost constantly says one thing as she does another, as does he in the act of writing her as such. The humor lies precisely in this opposition that we continually find as we read.

How does this relate to truth-telling in the other works we have looked at so far? As we noted in Chapter 3 in the *Teseida*, the commentator Boccaccio claims to be nothing other than exhaustively factual, and the exaggerated dryness of his prose accentuates his supposed academic credentials even more; and yet, he defines himself in contrast to the author, as a separate person, which we know to be false. And yet there Boccaccio is, writing as both author and editor, asking us when he writes in the margin “che sono io” whether we believe his construct to be truth or fiction.<sup>56</sup> Reading, however, means accounting for all, looking closely through all that is before us, and in the end deciding. The author with the greatest authority is the one who in the end renounces absolute

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<sup>56</sup> See *supra*, Chapter 3, 114.



power in determining a way of reading, at least on the surface. The illusion of a choice is part of the game he plays, and it gives us the ability to figure him out on our own by reading closely and paying attention. The greatest satisfaction comes to the reader who knows that the author is playing games, who sees the construct and reads within it, beneath it, until the moment comes to step outside it and marvel at the creation revealed.

It is at this point that it is relevant to bring in the *Corbaccio*, exactly because of this willed ambivalence about its fictionality. Though this chapter departs slightly from the previous two in using another work of Boccaccio's in dialogue with its primary text, the aim of the chapter is not to debate the *Corbaccio*'s own status as autobiographical or not. There has been a great deal of excellent scholarship on the subject to which I am highly indebted<sup>57</sup> in my claim that the *Elegia* is just as fictional as they have demonstrated the *Corbaccio* to be. The "cenni biografici" of the edition we are using, which includes both the *Elegia* and the *Corbaccio*, undertakes the task of reconciling the existence of the two works conceptually:

*I più recenti accertamenti critici...hanno diradato le nebbie che avvolgevano significato del titolo e datazione [del Corbaccio], ma non per questo annullato la fatica e anche gli imbarazzi di intere generazioni di critici che, affrontata di slancio la sicurezza ideologica e linguistica del Decameron o della Fiammetta, si sono trovati alle corde di fronte al sorprendente rovesciamento di un edificio teorico e letterario, ad un auto da fè che si supponeva potesse avere come sola spiegazione un trauma psicologico dovuto a vicende di vita vissuta.*

The most recent critical assertions ... have dispersed the clouds of fog that surrounded the meaning of the title and dating [of the *Corbaccio*], but they have not nullified the effort or the embarrassments of entire generations of critics who, having confronted with rapid movement the linguistic and ideological security of the *Decameron* or the *Fiammetta*, found themselves in difficulty before the surprising reversal of a theoretical and literary

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<sup>57</sup> In particular PSAKI (2010) and NYKROG (1984). See *supra*, 130-132.

edifice, an auto-da-fè that was thought to have only one possible explanation: psychological trauma owing to episodes of Boccaccio's life.<sup>58</sup>

In other words, it is the existence of the *Corbaccio* that problematizes the sympathetic and semi-autobiographical interpretation of the *Elegia*. The strident discord that the *Corbaccio* creates when positioned next to its companion demands some sort of explanation. For centuries, as Erbani explains, this "*lectio facilior* consistente nel cattivo uso dei suoi sentimenti in vita avanzata,"<sup>59</sup> the easy assumption that psychological trauma and the author's senile inability to control his sentiments as driving force behind the work, went unquestioned. Though Erbani does not subscribe to this view entirely, he nevertheless allows it to shape the discourse he builds around the two works, positioning them as he does in supposed autobiographical order and asserting that "*non si sbaglia, ma si banalizza se si considera il Corbaccio come una semplice rassegna di invettiva antifemminile*": one is not wrong, but oversimplifying in considering the *Corbaccio* to be simply a survey of anti-female invective.<sup>60</sup> This is putting it mildly, in my view, and to publish the two texts together without countering the autobiographical reading of their composition more forcefully seems to be a missed opportunity.

What I read in both texts is a discourse on fiction and the power of words and language to explore varied, excessive and even ridiculous projections of human emotion. Between one text and the other we have two instances of a narrative *io*, whom we are asked to trust as truth-tellers while they demonstrate again and again their proclivity for creating fiction. *Io* recounts dialogues and monologues, sometimes spoken by the very same narrator, sometimes spoken by someone else, but always through the

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<sup>58</sup> ERBANI (2010), *Cenni autobiografici*, xxv. Translation mine.

<sup>59</sup> ERBANI, xxii-xxiii.

<sup>60</sup> ERBANI, xxxiii. Emphasis added.

lens of *io*. We watch scenes unfold that call back to one another, we see character defects shown in the *Elegia* and then rehashed in the *Corbaccio*. Words like *infinto viso* and *parole finte* and *onesto* are repeated over and over, and we are shown all the ways in which both people and words themselves can deceive. Both texts end reminding the reader that they came into being because someone wrote them; they are entities in and of themselves, separate from the hand that created them. In other words, the texts standing together seem to constitute a testament, not to the fickleness of Boccaccio's disposition towards women, but rather to his capacity to use his craft to explore extremes of both men and women through fictional characters that play upon the *donna-schermo* and the man singularly devoted to her.

Without spending too many words reconstructing the *Corbaccio* and its status as fiction, we will visit the points in the text relevant to our exploration of the *Elegia*. Fiammetta as a character does share certain behaviors with the old widow who is so brutally vilified in the *Corbaccio*, but she is just as much in dialogue with the ghost of the widow's husband and the male *io* narrator in that text. The points of focus in working back and forth between both texts are those we have already visited with Fiammetta: the female fixation on appearance and the eye of the observer; the importance of pretending, or  *fingere*; and the keen awareness of words and their potential to create expectations of narrative, whether true or false. As we will learn, in both the widow and her ghost-husband, Fiammetta finds her match in self-curation, in pretending, and in playing games with words.

To classify the *Corbaccio* as one literary type or another presents a familiar challenge, similar to the ones we have faced thus far in dealing with the *Amorosa visione* and the *Teseida*: it represents a "blending of conventions and expectations associated

with two well-defined and authoritative literary types – the misogynous diatribe and the dream-vision.”<sup>61</sup> Many connect the hellish landscape of the *Corbaccio* with Dante’s *Commedia*, in fact, though few have considered it as a companion to the *Elegia* despite their being Boccaccio’s only two works composed wholly in first-person *volgare* narrative prose. The *Corbaccio* does display a significant thematic similarity to the *Commedia* in its physical setting and many of the images are clearly meant to recall scenes in *Purgatory* and *Inferno*, not least of which the descriptions of the widow herself, perhaps an iteration of Dante’s nightmarish vision of the “antica strega”.<sup>62</sup> The games it plays in juxtaposing autobiography and fiction are two sides of the same coin, though that coin is not, as so many think, Boccaccio’s own autobiography.

The text, which calls itself “umile trattato” [humble treatise],<sup>63</sup> sets readers up for a journey into the afterlife in the company of a guide who appears to show him the way: “Non dubitare,” he says, do not fear. “[P]arla sicuramente meco e della mia compagnia prendi fidanza, ché per certo io non sono venuto per nuocerti, ma per trarti di questo luogo, se fede intera presterai alle mie parole” [Speak to me in confidence, and have faith in my company, because I am certainly not come to harm you, but to take you from this place, if you put your entire faith in my words].<sup>64</sup> This guide as it turns out, is none other than the woman in question’s deceased husband, who is undergoing his penance in Purgatory and awaiting his release into Paradise. Of course, we do not learn this right

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<sup>61</sup> PSAKI, 107.

<sup>62</sup> Dante ALIGHIERI, *Purgatorio* XIX.26-33: the *antica strega* appears in a vision, at first enchanting Dante, then horrifying him by pulling aside her clothing to reveal her belly and unleash a stink that jolts him back to consciousness.

<sup>63</sup> Giovanni BOCCACCIO and Francesco ERBANI, ed. (2010), *Corbaccio*, 205. All citations are from this edition.

<sup>64</sup> BOCCACCIO, *Corbaccio*, 215.

away; it comes out gradually once he has demanded that dreamer *prendi fidanzata* in him no matter what.

The dreamer finds himself in this space between life and afterlife because of his distressed state over the love of a woman, so much so that prior to his dream he attempted to kill himself, unsuccessfully. Clearly out of his head, the message that he needs to receive is a cautionary one, regarding the dangers of trusting women in general and the object of his own desire in particular, a widow he saw in church one day. The guide claims to be warning the dreamer away from loving his widow for the dreamer's own good, not for any personal feelings of jealousy or vengeance, of course, as she is truly an abominable creature, whose physical appearance, behavior, and morals are, to say the least, subhuman and ghastly. Though she is a particularly deplorable example of womankind, her husband's ghost claims that women on the whole are innately just as bad, just as capable of corrupting men and leading them astray. At the end of the ghost's tales and lectures and exhortations, the dreamer promises to return to the world of the living and condemn the woman using his own personal tool, the written word, so that the truth of her depravity will be bared to the world at large. When he awakens from the dream, he feels a tremendous weight lift from his spirit, and he does his duty as promised and sends his little book forth to do its work.

The text is filled with logical problems that need to be confronted by anyone who would take it as a serious treatise against women. The spirit who begins by telling the dreamer and the readers to have complete faith in him, *intera fede*, is not very trustworthy at all, for a number of reasons that he is less than forthright in revealing. As the diatribe nears its end and the dreamer proclaims himself convinced that the woman he'd previously coveted is truly evil, he is still left with the question of why exactly the

message is being delivered by way of this particular figure, the ex-husband, and he is apparently too deferential to make any open accusations of corrupt motives.<sup>65</sup> The ghost, in an attempt to explain himself, claims first that no one besides himself would have such full knowledge of this woman; in fact, there was so much to say that he hasn't even said it all! "Alcuno non arebbe sì pienamente saputane ogni cosa raccontare sì come io, quantunque io n'abbia lasciate molte"<sup>66</sup>. More to the point, however, "ciascuno altro si sarebbe più vergognato di me di dirti quello delle mie cose, che era da dirne, che non sono io": anyone else would have had more shame than he in telling the narrator what there was to tell about his own affairs. With distinctly Fiammetta-like logic, the ghost points out that these stories about the widow are nothing if not embarrassing to him; why, then, would he tell them, if they were not true? The truth-claim of the narrative rests on its humbling qualities, a familiar argument to one acquainted with the intimacy of the *Elegia*.

The dreamer tacitly accepts this argument, asserting that he has seen the light and is ready to return to the world, and the ghost proceeds to extract a promise from him that he will send prayers to hasten the ghost's passage through Purgatory, once he has done the other promised deed, i.e. slandering the woman in writing and publishing it.

For all the two works have in common, the *Corbaccio's* blunt 'honesty' is more easily read as comical than that of the *Elegia*, owing perhaps to the vast stylistic divide between diatribe and elegy. Its language is expressively colloquial, even crass at times: when the ghost describes the old crone physically, she looks, smells and tastes worse

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<sup>65</sup> *Corbaccio*, 296.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*.

than the most undignified sort of animal. When he quotes her directly, she spews forth with irritating and inane garbage, all of which is ridiculous and bizarre on a level that calls to mind the Monty Python comedic troupe impersonating old women in so many of their sketches. When the widow discovers a fly in the house, she goes out of her mind, employing every servant in a singular, all-out campaign to kill it.<sup>67</sup> Her vigor in the pursuit – in the ghost’s estimation, she would have engaged it in a swordfight had she been properly equipped – is not unlike that of Monty Python’s Mosquito Hunters<sup>68</sup> who go after their tiny prey with machine guns and tanks. What we are reading feels more like a parody spun out of hate and utter contempt than an honest confessional, and nothing fuels that more than the gradual reveal that the ghost tearing this woman to shreds is her former husband. He is angry about her believed infidelity to him, angry about her having stripped away his power as the man of the house, angry that she doesn’t mourn him when he dies and only pretends to pray for him while secretly cruising other men at church. The narrator, her current suitor, is angry at her for not returning his love. They are embittered, and they are jilted; they are comic figures in their tragedy and their inability to deal with it. There is a darkness to the comedy, to be sure, much of which stems from the ridiculousness of how seriously the text takes itself. Like the *Elegia*, the *Corbaccio* proclaims its honesty while showing its fictionality at every opportunity.

Women, according to the *Corbaccio*, colossally ignorant though they might be, are quite capable storytellers. They are evidently stubborn and unwilling to be swayed by

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<sup>67</sup> *Corbaccio*, 257.

<sup>68</sup> CHAPMAN ET AL. (1969-1974). I’m referring to Season 2, Episode 8, “Archaeology Today” (aired 1970): “Some people like to use fly spray, but where’s the sport in that?” the mosquito hunters ask matter-of-factly.

reason: "...se esse diranno d'avere un asino veduto volare, dopo molti argomenti in contrario converrà che si conceda del tutto; se non, le inimicizie mortali, le 'nsidie e gli odi saranno di presente in campo" [if they say they've seen a donkey fly, after trying to argue with them one has no choice but to concede the point, otherwise they will immediately be beset with mortal enmity, harassment and hate].<sup>69</sup> Yet, though the ghost scorns any woman for thinking of herself as the "eleventh Sibyl,"<sup>70</sup> the title is not inconsistent with women's general success as liars. The task of describing their proclivities creates a need for a different sort of language, one which will adequately depict a woman's particular breed of 'wisdom'. One could call the widow in question *savissima*, exceedingly wise, but as the ghost explains, after listing the many reasons a man is called wise, "diverse ... cose per le quali gli uomini e ogn'altra persona generalmente sono 'savi' chiamati", including an understanding of Scripture, political know-how, and good instincts in matters of commerce, but only once it is understood that the word doesn't mean the same thing when you apply it to a woman.<sup>71</sup> However, he warns, do not think that this woman, described as *savia*, possesses any of these particular types of wisdom. Rather, "egli c'è un'altra maniera di savia gente, la quale forse tu non udisti mai in scuola" [there is another type of wisdom, of which you have probably not heard in school], and this type of *savia gente* comprises scheming, insatiable women: "tutte quelle donne, le quali hanno ardire e cuore e sanno modo trovare d'essere tante volte e con tanti uomini essere quante il loro appetito concupiscibile

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<sup>69</sup> *Corbaccio*, 243.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem*. Erbani points out in a footnote that Boccaccio's belief that there were ten Sibyls is consistent with some other medieval authors, though more commonly they were thought to be nine.

<sup>71</sup> *Corbaccio*, 264.



richiedea.”<sup>72</sup> So, he says to the narrator, “sgànnati”, literally, undo the deception that has been done to you.<sup>73</sup> This woman is *savia* indeed, but that word will deceive anyone who has not appropriately adjusted his understanding of it to fit the context. Ever the danger of using language to document truth is the capacity of language to lie to those not in the know.

The appetite of the *savia donna* for young, susceptible men like the narrator gives rise to another sermon on the ghost’s scorn for women’s preoccupation with the male gaze. Several times, he ridicules the widow for the amount of time she spends before the mirror, arranging herself so as to hide her true looks as much as possible:

“primieramente si mettea davanti un grande specchio e talor due, acciò che bene in quelli potesse di sé ogni parte vedere e conoscere qual di loro men che vera la sua forma mostrasse”.<sup>74</sup> Even in her advanced age, her fixation is comparable to that of the youthful, pre-Panfilo Fiammetta, scorned by her older and wiser self in the *Elegia*. Nor is it enough for the widow to consult the dual mirrors; she then employs a servant to drape her in veils to hide her signs of aging, adjusting over and over again. She browbeats the poor servant with command after command: “‘ manda questo altro [velo] più giù, fa stare più tirato quello che mi cuopre la fronte; lieva quello spilletto che m’hai sopra l’orecchio posto, e ponlo più in là un poco,’” and so on for several lines more the ghost imitates his wife. The picture he paints of her adorning herself is vivid, overstated, and ridiculous, and if the excessive primping weren’t sufficient in convincing his audience of

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>74</sup> *Corbaccio*, 258.

her vanity, the ghost continues, telling how she asks everyone around her to evaluate her appearance over and over again, exemplifying the vanity of all women:

*[S]i faceva alla sua buona donna riguardare; e con cautela esaminava se bene stesse, se niuna cosa mancasse, non altrimenti che se la sua fama o la sua vita da quel dipendesse. E, poi che molte volte avea udito ogni cosa star bene, alle compagne, che l'aspettavano, andava davanti, anche di ciò con loro riprendendo consiglio.*

She always made her servant look her over once more, and carefully she examined whether everything suited her, whether anything was missing, just as if her reputation and indeed her life depended on it. And then, having heard many times over that everything was just right, she went before her female companions, asking for their input as well.<sup>75</sup>

She would tell her husband, of course, that she was doing all this to please him, but in reality, he says, “mentia ella ben per la gola” [she was lying through her teeth]. In reality, he saw that whenever some young man walked by, she would fluff her feathers like a falcon, looking around her to see if anyone was admiring her, “così disiderosa d’essere guatata; e così si turbava in se medesima, se alcuno trapassato fosse che guatata non l’avesse.”<sup>76</sup> This is the primary concern of women, and the ghost wants to make sure the point gets across when later in the discourse he takes up the subject once again:

*Quanta sia la vanità delle femine ... gloriandosi sommamente d’essere tenute belle, e per essere facciano ogni cosa, e tanto più loro essere paia quanto più si veggiono riguardare, più fede al numero de’ vagheggiatori dando che al loro medesimo specchio. Compreso avresti a lei non essere discaro, ma carissimo il tuo riguardare...*

So great is the vanity of women...priding themselves so much on being regarded as beautiful, and to be so they would do anything, and they think themselves so much more so however much more they see that they are being looked at; they have more faith in the number of admirers they have than in their own mirrors. Your gaze, you understand, is not unimportant to her, but in fact quite valuable.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Corbaccio, 259.

<sup>76</sup> Corbaccio, 260.

<sup>77</sup> Corbaccio, 284.

As in the *Elegia*, the constant awareness of others looking is the driving force behind the constant maintenance of a certain façade. Fiammetta's consciousness of the way others look at her and her ability to narrate it from their point of view, however, is far from simply a proof of her vanity; it is the tool that gives her control of her own story.

The narrative of women as age-old masters of faking, Ovidian in its classical roots, extends from the *Elegia*; the ghost claims that their dishonesty is "divinamente in loro spirata" and the skills that go along with it taught to them from the cradle, "una ottima dottrina."<sup>78</sup> Mothers teach daughters to steal husbands, as well as to conduct extramarital affairs without detection. The widow in particular, by way of her wagging tongue that never ceases to chatter even when she sleeps, "la quale di ciarlare mai non ristà, mai non molla, mai non fina ... dal mattino insino alla sera; e la notte ancora, io dico, dormendo," would have others believe that she was a saint, and of royal blood, so much does she chatter about her heavenly qualities: "della sua onestà, della sua divozione, della sua santità".<sup>79</sup> Fiammetta, too, was once believed to be a saint under false pretenses, having spoken loftily of women's motives for attending religious ceremonies; it seems that the world is full of people willing to believe the lies that women tell.

That very scene from the *Elegia* surfaces in the *Corbaccio* when the ghost complains of his widow's behavior upon his death. She puts on a show of piety and devotion, "con parole piene di compassione" expressing her wish to move to a modest house near a church and monastery so that she might live out the rest of her widowhood by going to church habitually to pray. So convincing is she in her lie, "fu tanta la forza di

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<sup>78</sup> *Corbaccio*, 242.

<sup>79</sup> *Corbaccio*, 267.

questo suo infinto parlare e sì maestrevolmente il seppe dire,"<sup>80</sup> that the simple people around her fall into line and immediately give her what she wants. She covers her face with a hood, "con onestà molto davanti agli occhi tirato," though she cannot resist showing off what little she can against the contrast of her black cloak, even if it is only her hand, which she believes to be so beautiful. Thus, she presents herself in church, but the ghost is quick to correct any mistaken assumptions the narrator might be deriving from this show of piety. "Ma non vorrei che tu credessi che ella per udire divino ufficio o per adorare v'entrasse, ma per tirare l'aiuolo" – she is not there to listen or to pray, but rather to tend to her nets, a hunting metaphor upon which the ghost is eager to elaborate: *ha fatto uno escato, come per pigliare i colombi fanno gli uccellatori; e, per ciò che ciascuno non vede la serpe che sta sotto l'erba nascosa, spesso vi piglia de' grossi*. She is the bird-hunter out to catch unsuspecting doves, the snake hiding in the grass that no one sees. In other words, this solemn church-going façade is all in service of the widow's plot to immediately ensnare unsuspecting men, who like doves to the hunter, walk right into the trap. Another would-be Ser Ciappelletto like Fiammetta, the widow profits from her successful deception of her true desires as she puts on a show of devotion and penitence.

Furthermore, the ghost continues to suffer in Purgatory precisely because his widow, shockingly, is not actually praying for him as she should, to speed along his passage to Paradise. Once she is in church, tending her nets as he claims, she only pretends to pray on the rosary, fiddling with the beads in her hands without saying a word: "incomincia, senza ristare mai, a faticare una dolente filza di paternostri, or

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<sup>80</sup> *Corbaccio*, 277.

dell'una mano nell'altra, e dell'altra nell'una trasmutandoli, senza mai dirne niuna"<sup>81</sup>  
 [she begins to labor through a dolorous dirge of 'Our Fathers', shifting her rosary from one hand to the other, and back again, without ever saying even one]. Although, he allows, it may be that she really is praying, just for another man and not for him; he doesn't seem to know for sure. Yet, to top it all off, the ghost claims to know for a fact that her prayers and her *paternostri* are in fact *romanzi franceschi* and *canzoni latine*, which she murmurs while everyone thinks she is steeped in scriptural passages. This is the real disgrace, and the real comedy; everyone watches this woman, distraught in her widowhood and spending every day in church clutching her rosary beads, while inside her head, unbeknownst to them all, it's all "di Lancelotto e di Ginevra e di Tristano e di Isotta; e le loro prodezze e i loro amori e le giostre e i torneamenti e le semblee,"<sup>82</sup> and if that weren't enough, she even gets sexually excited imagining these knights and their women:

*E tutta si stritola quando legge Lancelotto e Tristano o alcuno altro colle loro donne nelle camere, segretamente e soli, ragunarsi, sí come colei alla quale pare vedere ciò che fanno e che, volentieri, come di loro imagina, così farebbe; avvegna che ella faccia sí che di ciò corta voglia sostiene.*

And she gets all excited when she reads about Lancelot and Tristan or some other guy, being together with their women, alone and in secret, in their chambers; just as the woman to whom it seems she can see what they are doing and who, willingly, as she imagines they do, would do likewise; it happens that she does that which she cannot resist the urge to do.<sup>83</sup>

Here, paradoxically, in the widow we have the ultimate Boccaccian projection: a character who outwardly shows one thing while doing another, a more flagrantly

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<sup>81</sup> *Corbaccio*, 278.

<sup>82</sup> *Corbaccio*, 279.

<sup>83</sup> *Corbaccio*, *Ibidem*.

inappropriate manifestation of Fiammetta's false piety in the temple. Clearly vulgar though the passage is, the ghost, perhaps to show his own modesty in comparison with his widow's, holds back with his language in depicting this scene of hidden pleasure, somewhat at odds with the explicit and blunt nature of his commentary on female genitalia elsewhere. The widow follows in the footsteps of Dante's Francesca da Rimini, who also finds herself and her lover moved to action (and therefore, condemned to hell) by reading exciting love stories. Unlike Francesca, however, the widow experiences no consequences from her actions, aside from frustrating her deceased husband, whose ghost can do nothing to her but talk about her to one of the men she has ensnared in her show of fake reverence. It certainly doesn't sound like she is sorry to lose the narrator as a potential suitor, nor will she lack for a replacement, as the ghost makes abundantly clear. Meanwhile, her ability to so immerse herself in exciting fictional tales while giving the impression of prayer gives her nothing but pleasure, and it allows her to spite her husband by prolonging his punishment in Purgatory.

What enables women to mask their impiety in holy places, both in the *Corbaccio* and in the *Elegia*, is fiction itself, *arte*. Fiammetta, though perhaps taking less pleasure in her own show of devotion during religious ceremonies – she doesn't seem to feel happiness of any kind, at all, if we believe her account of things – but as she looks around her at the other women, she certainly isn't deep in redemptive prayer as she claims. Rather, she is consumed by the impulse to physically assess her companions, comparing each of them to legendary, famous women. Watching the female citizens of her city out and about, she notes that they are no less lovely and impressive to look upon than Priam's daughters-in-law and the other Phrygian women when they were dressed for ceremony:

*... ciascuna quanto il suo potere si stende dimostrandosi bella, non dubito che qualunque forestiere intendente sopravvenisse ... non giudicasse noi non donne moderne, ma di quelle antiche, magnifiche, essere al mondo tornate.*

...each one of them showing her beauty to the utmost of her ability, so much that I doubt that any knowing stranger who came upon us would think we were not modern women, but rather of those magnificent, ancient female figures, returned to the world.<sup>84</sup>

The only language that allows Fiammetta to describe what she sees, the women in her company, indeed the only words that can exemplify what the hypothetical stranger's gaze tells him, are those of "quelle antiche, magnifiche." These women are adorned with 'ornaments' which are more regal than convenient or comfortable for practical purposes. "Piuttosto reali che convenevoli" characterizes this sort of language, the words she uses to dress the women, just as much as the ornaments themselves. The garb does not fit the context, nor does the language it requires to describe it fully. Fiammetta is no longer a woman striving for this sort of otherworldly appearance before the eyes of men; in her sorrow over Panfilo and, more importantly, her role as writer, she notes the difficulty in matching form with content.

The question of language and its deliberate application to the accomplishment of a task is central to Fiammetta, a reminder to her audience that each word is carefully chosen to craft the narrative she wishes to create. "Quale lingua sí d'eloquenza splendida, o sí di vocaboli eccellenti facunda sarebbe quella che interamente potesse li nobili abiti e di varietà pieni interamente narrare?" she asks, presumably of her readers [what language is so eloquent and splendid that it might narrate such noble clothing full of variety?]. "Non il greco Omero, non il latino Virgilio, li quali tanti riti di Greci, di Troiani e d'Italici già ne' loro versi discrissero." Greek and Latin, as she declared in the

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<sup>84</sup> *Elegia*, 112.

book's opening sentence, are not the languages fit for this particular saga. Fiammetta has always processed others' opinions on her own appearance through the lens of classical precedent: early in the Panfilo affair, she would hear young men arguing about whether she looked more like Priam's daughter Polyxena, who drove Achilles mad with desire, or like the "Ciprigna" (Cyprian) Venus, the name for the goddess coined by Dante in *Paradiso* VIII.2. The language that implicitly drives the scene of Fiammetta's observing her companions, in fact, is that of Dante. Fiammetta lists the women that her companions resemble, "quella ... dicendo Semiramís simigliare; quella ... Cleopatràs si crederebbe; l'altra ... sarebbe creduta Elena; e alcuna ... in niente si direbbe dissimigliare a Didone"; following in order the sequence of women Dante sees in *Inferno* V suffering for their sins of amorous excess. The hypothetical "forestiere intendente" who observes the scene and draws these connections could well be Dante himself, the master of words who preceded Boccaccio and his Fiammetta in taking possession of these famous women's tales and reconfiguring them to fit within his own narrative and accomplish his own ends.

This passage, further cementing the connections between the *Elegia* and the *Corbaccio*, is Fiammetta's opportunity to remind us that hers is a process of writing, one which continues to unfold, and that crafting her story is a deliberate act. She is identifying the challenge of applying the correct language to a certain scene, reminding us that the words have to fit the context, that they are specifically chosen for that reason. She echoes the book's opening words, "non troverete favole greche ... né troiane battaglie," when she answers her "quale lingua?" with "non il greco Omero ... non il latino Virgilio". In that opening paragraph, she is qualifying the material that her story will include, here she is qualifying its style. Just as she did in that opening passage, her



*recusatio* of these epic tongues invokes the presence of a certain kind of writing by explicitly declaring its non-presence, saying one thing as she does another. In declaring that this is *not* the place for Homer's and for Virgil's words, she ensures that those words linger in the air all the same.

In the end, however, Fiammetta separates from her "libretto" and sends it off into the world; as an entity now created, finished, and separated from herself, the work of transmission is now for the book to do. "Just as you are," she says, "composed by my hand, present yourself before 'le innamorate donne', that they might willingly look upon you.<sup>85</sup> In so doing, she reaffirms the poverty of the book, its *lagrimevole stilo* now bleeding into its physical manifestation as object as well as its subject matter:

*Tu dei essere contento di mostrarti simigliante al tempo mio, il quale, essendo infelicissimo, te di miseria veste, come fa me; e però non ti sia cura d'alcuno ornamento, sì come gli altri sogliono avere, cioè di nobili coverte di colori varii tinte e ornate, o di pulita tonditura, o di leggiadri minii, o di gran titoli; queste cose non si convengono a' gravi pianti, li quali tu porti; lascia e queste e li larghi spazii e li lieti inchiostri e l'impomciate carte a' libri felici; a te si conviene d'andare rabbuffato con isparte chiome, e macchiato e di squallore pieno, là ove io ti mando, e co' miei infortunii negli animi di quelle che ti leggeranno destare la santa pietà.*

You must content yourself to appear similar to my own condition, which, as unhappy as it is, clothes you in misery just as it does me. Therefore, you must not have a care for any sort of ornament like other books tend to have, such as their noble bindings, decorated and tinged with many colors, or with the clean, round script, lovely miniatures, great titles; these things do not catch with the heavy laments that you carry. Leave these things, along with wide spaces and happily colored inks and pumiced paper to luckier books. It is fitting for you to go where I would send you, unkempt, with messy hair, stained and full of squalor, and thus with my misfortunes you shall arouse saintly compassion in the souls of those women who read you.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> *Elegia*, IX.199. Full citation: "O piccolo mio libretto...tale quale tu se' dalle mie mani scritto, e in più parti dalle mie lagrime offeso, dinanzi dalle innamorate donne ti presenta: esse ... ti vedranno volentieri" [Oh little book of mine, just as much as you are written by my hand, and in several parts damaged by my tears, present yourself before women in love: they will gladly look upon you].

<sup>86</sup> *Elegia*, IX.199-200.

The material being of Fiammetta's book, so acutely defined, serves in these last pages as a literal bookend, encapsulating the narrative that sprang forth from the prologue as an abstract concept. "I casi miei", Fiammetta's misfortunes, have actualized in the course of the narrative and become a physical entity that can go forth on its own and spread its words. The narrative contained in this object now belongs to it alone, which becomes clear as Fiammetta begins to address it in the second person. The experiences, the "mali" and the "angoscie", are still referred to as "nostri" or "nostre", ours, shared between writer and written. The words, however, the pages, belong to this book. *You* will find *your* audience, she says, and that audience will read *your* words. "Le tue parole" is repeated over and over again in this final send-off. The tears that have fallen on the pages in the course of their composition are Fiammetta's tears, but the stains they have left on the pages are "le tue macchie." The material traces of her grief, impossible to control, are now part of what the book possesses and offers up to the tearful eyes of its future readers: if you should find someone, she says, whose eyes cannot stay dry as she reads you, collect her tears with my own, letting your tearstains multiply, that you might appear even more humble and piteous.<sup>87</sup>

Down to its minute details, quite precisely delineated in this passage, the book is meant to embody that very lowliness it contains within its pages. Yet, the appearance of poverty and the absence of grandeur are far from a guarantee of truth, as both Fiammetta and the *Corbaccio's* infamous widow demonstrate over and over again. The

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<sup>87</sup> *Elegia*, IX.200. Full citation: "E se tu alcuna troverai che, leggendoti, li suoi occhi asciutti non tenga, ma ... con le sue lagrime multiplichino le tue macchie, quelle in te, sì come santissime, con le mie raccogli, e più pietoso e afflitto mostrandoti..." [And if you should find any woman who, reading you, cannot keep her eyes dry, multiplying your stains with her tears, collect them in yourself as you do mine, for they are most holy, and thus show yourself even more pitiful and afflicted].

two texts share the awareness of the act that brought them into being – the act of writing – and they both go to great lengths to emphasize how susceptible writing is to misinterpretation by those not sufficiently adept at reading. The *Decameron* counterpart to both Fiammetta and the widow, in this respect, would be Ser Ciappelletto precisely because of his key position in the text's opening novella and the lesson that all readers should learn from him: a compelling story can mask the most egregious sins, and amuse its audience in so doing. There is no question that in the traditional Christian view, Ciappelletto's leading others to believe that he is a saint is reprehensible, as is Fiammetta pretending to be at the right hand of God or the widow faking her 'Our Father's while daydreaming about Lancelot. Nonetheless, for the privileged reader who watches from a distance as everyone falls for the ruse, the moral implications of playing games with fiction hardly matter. Francesca da Rimini may have wound up in Inferno for getting too absorbed in fiction and forgetting herself, but this is not the *Commedia*.

I have refrained until this point from speculating about Boccaccio's true intentions with both of these books: my analysis certainly begs the question of whether indeed there is a moral bent to the way Fiammetta and the *Corbaccio's* interlocutors are written. Both texts provide an interesting play on the 'Liar Paradox':<sup>88</sup> Boccaccio writes the characters as narrators saying in every implicit way possible that none of what is contained in the narrative is true, including its constant claims of untruth. I think that this kind of game and the close, deliberate kind of reading it requires in order to be properly understood is of more interest to Boccaccio than a moral lesson about truth, in both cases. His exhortations in the *Genealogia* to read below the surface, to stretch beyond assumptions of earnestness and to delve into poets' inventions and what they

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<sup>88</sup> For an explanation of the Liar Paradox and a sampling of sources on its origins and prevalence in medieval logic, see GREENE, 118-119 and 245 (notes 4-6).

can tell us about human nature seem to speak directly to readers of the *Elegia* and the *Corbaccio*. They might learn something about themselves and their fellow humans, or perhaps they will simply be challenged, and thus, amused and fulfilled; after all, the characters in question are hardly to be held as models of comportment.

Boccaccio's men and women in these books play games in part to mask their imperfections without having to address them; Fiammetta makes no effort at rekindling her marriage and forgetting Panfilo, and the widow has no inclination to start praying for her deceased husband so that he can get to Paradise faster. Both of them pursue a life that forces them to continue to hide the truth, and both are aware of the capacity of language to hide what they want to hide. The final and most satisfying comedy of the *Corbaccio* is that the would-be writer is not enough of an artist when it comes to fiction to understand the nuances of language; he is as incapable of reading what is truly behind the widow's words and deeds (her rejection of him as suitor), as she is capable of deceiving him without even really trying. Fiammetta, in the end, comes off as the supreme dissimulator of them all, one whose skill with language perpetuates the very story that her *lagrimevole stilo* tells.

## CHAPTER 5

### **'Lasciva comperias immixta sacris': Documenting and Editorializing in the *De mulieribus claris***

*Non equidem admiratione caret tam sublimem considerationem muliebri subintrasse cerebrum, sed longe mirabile fuit executioni mandasse.*

Certainly it is no small wonder that such a lofty design made its way into a woman's mind, but more wondrous still is the fact of its fulfillment.<sup>1</sup>

A contemporary reader might interpret this pronouncement upon the accomplishments of the praiseworthy Proba, and indeed the entire compendium *De mulieribus claris* (*On famous women*), as the ultimate backhanded compliment. To say that it is both impressive and surprising that a *woman* had a good idea and executed it successfully seems patently offensive, and yet exactly the sort of thing that rolls off the tongues of male politicians even now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Reader, be warned: the *De mulieribus* does not pass the modern-day gender equality smell test. At least, not if we are supposed to take it as earnest and straightforward historical testimony; we take on this Latin compendium as a window into a conception of history that plays on existing conventions and demands close, attentive reading to understand its inner machinations.

On its face, like the other books I have examined thus far in the context of this dissertation, the *De mulieribus* states its business up front, quite overtly: "ne merito fraudentur suo" [rather than let women be cheated of their just due], Boccaccio's book takes up the mission "memoria referet in glorie sue decus in unum deducere" [of honoring their glory by assembling

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<sup>1</sup> Giovanni BOCCACCIO and Virginia BROWN, ed. and trans. (2001), *De mulieribus claris/Famous Women*, XCVII. "De Proba Adelphi coniuge", 4. All citations are from this edition. Except in certain long-form citations where I will transcribe Brown's translation alongside the original, I will cite the Latin text only and provide my own translations in context to reflect the goal of this project, which at times must sacrifice ease and flow of reading in English for the sake of digging deeper into the original, sometimes difficult Latin.

in a single volume the biographies of women whose memory is still green].<sup>2</sup> Not only expository, but also prescriptive, the volume furthermore purports to “agitabitur lectio si, facinorum preteritarum mulierum emula, egregium animum tuum concitabis in melius” [spur the readers’ noble spirit to emulation of the deeds of women in the past].<sup>3</sup> The book is to be read in its entirety, the good examples and the bad examples together, if it is to fulfill this mission. The reader, having left aside offensive matters, “obscenis depositis,” should proceed “collige laudanda”, gathering what is to be praised from what the history presents to her.<sup>4</sup> These words appear in Boccaccio’s dedication of the work to Lady Andrea Acciajuoli, the reader representing readers at large. His wish for her is his wish for all readers: that they read the text carefully and that they take an active role in its interpretation, parsing the good and the bad with equal attention and choosing what to leave aside.

Andrea was selected as the dedicatee certainly in part to honor her brother, Niccolò Acciajuoli, who had invited Boccaccio to Naples while the work was still in progress. When the author composed his words to Andrea, after many of the biographies had been written already, he clearly hoped to honor his hosts, although he does so, in Boccaccian fashion, rather backhandedly, informing Andrea that he had first thought to dedicate it to Joanna, the Queen of Naples, but thinking it perhaps unworthy of her royalty, he moved on to his second choice, Andrea. “While such frankness seems clumsy to the modern reader,” as Virginia Brown writes in her introduction to the volume, “there is doubtless an intended compliment in Boccaccio’s ranking of Andrea as second only to the queen.”<sup>5</sup> Andrea is a much more appropriate choice for

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<sup>2</sup> BOCCACCIO, *De mulieribus claris*, Preface, 4.

<sup>3</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, Dedication, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Dedication, 9.

<sup>5</sup> BROWN (2001), Introduction, xv.

the volume's destination, in many respects; to dedicate it to a queen would come across as exclusive, which is clearly not Boccaccio's intention. His words to Andrea are also words to other women like her, words which do not limit themselves to royalty in their intended readership. Women are the primary audience for this work, as the preface and the dedication both make clear, and so the ultimate goal as Boccaccio characterizes it is to create a readable and even enjoyable document without sacrificing its historical credibility: lightness in the company of seriousness. The worthy join the shameful (or shameless, as the case may be), providing an opportunity for useful lessons in the midst of enjoyable diversion: "inmixta hystoriarum delectationi, sacra mente subintrabit utilitas."<sup>6</sup> This moment parallels his address to Lady Andrea in his dedication, wherein he warns of the "lasciva ... immixta sacris" contained within its pages:

*Et esto nonnunquam lasciva comperias immixta sacris – quod ut facerem recitandorum coegit oportunitas – ne omiseris vel horrescas; quin imo perseverans, uti viridarium intrans, eburneas manus, semotis spinarum aculeis, extendis in florem, sic, obscenis sepositis, collige laudanda.*

You will find, at times, that an appropriate recital of the facts has compelled me to mix the impure with the pure. Do not skip over these parts and do not shy away from them, but persevere in your reading. As on entering a garden you extend your ivory hands towards the flowers, leaving aside the thorns, so in this case relegate to one side offensive matters and gather what is praiseworthy.<sup>7</sup>

The *Decameron's* "Conclusione dell'autore", of course, is well known for its metaphor of the garden that cannot help but turn up weeds amidst the flowers ("Niun campo fu mai sì ben coltivato, che in esso o ortica o triboli o alcun pruno non si trovasse mescolato tra l'erbe migliori").<sup>8</sup> In the case of the centonovelle, however, Boccaccio uses the case of the delightful flowers mixed with the harmful spines to give readers permission to refrain from reading

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<sup>6</sup> Preface, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Dedication, 9, trans. BROWN.

<sup>8</sup> Giovanni BOCCACCIO and Vittore BRANCA, ed. (1998), *Decameron*, "Conclusione dell'autore."

stories that might offend them (“lasci star quelle che pungono, e quelle che dilettao legga”<sup>9</sup>), making use of the sentences that precede each novella with a summary of its contents so that they need not be exposed in any way to such stuff. His wish for readers of the *De mulieribus claris* is rather different, however; the lady Andrea, a proxy for all the work’s would-be female readers, is urged not to skip over any of these impure women’s stories, but rather to be *perseverans*, steadfast, in her reading. She and her fellow readers are implicitly trusted to know which of these women are examples to emulate and which are to inspire restraint.

Fame is the subject, and fame is the goal; the fame of those already famous is to be preserved and even increased where it is warranted, and the fame of those hitherto unknown is to be created and sustained by means of this book. Of Andrea herself, Boccaccio asks:

*... eidem procedendi in medium audaciam prebeas. Ibit quidem, ut reor, tuo emissus auspicio, ab insultibus malignantium tutus; nomenque tuum, cum ceteris illustrium mulierum, per ora virum splendidum deferet, teque tuis cum meritis – cum minime possis ubique efferris presentia – presentibus cognitam faciet, et posteritati servabit eternam. Vale.*

... give this book the boldness to appear in public. Under your auspices it will go forth, I believe, safe from malicious criticism, and it will make your name and the names of other illustrious women glorious on the lips of humankind. As you cannot be physically present everywhere, my book will make you and your merits known to those now alive and will preserve you forever for posterity.<sup>10</sup>

Documenting fame as well as creating it by the very fact of its publication: this is the aim of the *De mulieribus claris*, or one of them. The question of how fame happens, where it originates and by what means it persists, is one that Boccaccio strives to answer with his collection of biographies. That the book can preserve Andrea Acciajuoli “posteritati ... eternam” presupposes that the book itself will be preserved for as long. The book is the agent of present and future fame; once again, as in the story of Eve, its words establish its temporality. This

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, Dedication 6-7.



dedication is a send-off composed after the work has been mostly finished;<sup>11</sup> whereas the author used the future tense at the beginning of the biographies to portray himself as just starting the writing process, the future tense in the context of the dedication aims to situate the book at the beginning of its long life as purveyor of fame: “presentibus cognitam faciet, et posteritati servabit eternam.”<sup>12</sup>

Many critics eschew an integrated view of Boccaccio’s production between Latin and vernacular, and it was my intention at the outset to include a consideration of at least one work in Latin in this study. I am exploring questions of authorship, and clearly the authorship of a historical catalogue of entries is quite different from the authorship of a fictional and/or poetic narrative of any kind. Yet, I argue that while Boccaccio is putting on the mantle of the historian and researcher with this format and this language, he is still playing with the conventions that both entail. Very few monographs have been written that deal exclusively with *De mulieribus*, but the most recent in-depth study of this work, published in 2012, calls its cultural view of women “estremamente innovativo” and argues that it renews the image of women and extends it beyond merely a vehicle upon which to model virtue and vice.<sup>13</sup> Virginia Brown agrees, with reservations in her introduction to the text, which she maintains “deserves to be better known.”<sup>14</sup> Though less than enthusiastic about Boccaccio’s “heavy-handed moralizing”, she sees the project as paving the way for humanism’s “more modern views of the female sex and its potentialities.”<sup>15</sup> What he is doing in creating the *De mulieribus* is innovative, to be sure, and

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<sup>11</sup> BROWN, Introduction, xv. Most of the work was already written when Boccaccio was invited to Naples, where Andrea Acciajuoli was a member of the Queen’s court.

<sup>12</sup> Dedication, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Elsa FILOSA (2012), 44.

<sup>14</sup> BROWN, xi.

<sup>15</sup> BROWN, xxii.

he wishes that to be quite clear. But he's also not being completely earnest. There is a certain amount of honest experimentation at work in this volume, and there is also a degree of subversiveness to its composition. Boccaccio takes some edgy positions on the women he profiles; he features some who are easy to praise and others who are easy to condemn. He also praises those who have been almost universally condemned, on occasion, and he furthermore brings to light certain others who have scarcely been heard of or documented previously. This sort of composition allows Boccaccio to be all things as a writer: historian and researcher, diligent gatherer of source material, discerning judge of worthy versus unworthy sources, discoverer of hitherto unknown information, editor of the historical record able to correct wrongful impressions. Finally, of course, Boccaccio also gets to be a teacher of morals with the ability to be straight one minute and winking the next.

Given one hundred and six profiles to peruse, it makes sense here to narrow the scope of this chapter's study and work with a selection that is able to represent the work in the context of the present project. Before doing so, however, let us preface by explaining how the anthology as a whole relates to the previous chapters in this project. We are working with the *De mulieribus* because, like the *Amorosa visione*, the *Teseida* and the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*, Boccaccio has chosen a format that allows him to play with his perspective and his voice in a way that lights up the content and, when read in this key, is both humorous and serious, playful and exploratory. The profiles of famous women span several centuries, proceeding in chronological order and presenting as they go different facets of what it means to be a biographer.

In the first place, it means writing in Latin. Boccaccio's Latin works appear to have circulated widely and with a good reputation, at least in the fourteenth century; there is some evidence to suggest that later humanists found his (and Petrarch's, for that matter) Latin too

challenging.<sup>16</sup> His texts survived, nevertheless, in several manuscripts, though perhaps not without sacrificing their status as scholarly, scientific works. Vernacular translations seem to dominate the later print circulation of the work in Italy, often with woodcut illustrations and other new features that were not originally a part of the text's material presence. Rhiannon Daniels dedicates a chapter to the *De mulieribus* in *Boccaccio and the Book*, a detailed study of the author's manuscript output and successive print tradition, and in it she suggests that "the use of interchangeable printed images would have been a relatively cheap method of making the book seem more attractive ... suggesting perhaps that readers of the printed [vernacular] text needed more persuasion to read than the owners of Latin manuscripts, and also that the text was regarded more as an enjoyable narrative than a scholarly book."<sup>17</sup> The audience for the *De mulieribus*, therefore, seems to have shifted with the passage of time from readers of Latin primarily to readers of the vernacular, which suggests a change in what readers viewed as its most obvious merits: something to be read as entertainment first and historical reference second. Its mode of reproduction, Daniels argues, reflects this shift in readership and transmission a somewhat appropriate outcome given the multiplicity of voices and modes carried within the text itself. The *De mulieribus* as Latin text, therefore, seems to have survived thanks to its versatility, its multiplicity of voices and its relatability as material for vernacular readers as well.

In the second place, writing this book means acting as historian, and for Boccaccio the historian is one who parses existing accounts of historical events and makes judgments on their credibility or lack thereof. Boccaccio often mentions discrepancies between various sources of information, without trying to obfuscate its effect on his prose. Rather, he embraces the

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<sup>16</sup> Rhiannon DANIELS (2009), 154.

<sup>17</sup> DANIELS, 157.

certainty of the existence of uncertainty. There are times when he professes himself to be unsure of what he is writing, though even in the presence of doubt he generally opts to favor a version of events that he trusts to be as close to the truth as possible. This seems to represent an important quality of historical documentation, as far as he is concerned, and he professes a desire for honesty where the reader is concerned.

In the third place, being the author of the *De mulieribus* means acting as teacher and moralist; Boccaccio often takes the opportunity to stand on his proverbial soapbox and pontificate to his audience about the value of his biographies as crucial examples, either of excellent behavior that is emulated by too few or atrocious acts that he regards as all too common. He does not shy away from citing gender norms as reasons for one sort of action or another, though he seems altogether quite pleased when a woman's actions seem to defy the expectations of women as a gender, as expressed in the opening quote from Proba's biography. There is no shortage of references to great women as "mirabile" – surprising in their greatness – and yet Boccaccio is pleased to be the one to give them the credit they deserve.

Finally, writing such a compendium means acting as collector, compiler, and, ultimately, as vessel: Boccaccio searches for diversity and balance in his choice of women to anthologize. The very act of composing such a work is in and of itself a deliberate act of balancing out what he perceives to be the fundamentally unjust status quo; men always get plenty of attention for their deeds, so why not pay some to women, who after all accomplish great things *even though they're women*.

Much of the existing scholarship on the *De mulieribus* has aimed to either unpack its source material, look for consistency or lack thereof in Boccaccio's attitude towards women, and/or reconcile this rather contradictory compendium of women's stories with those that make up the *Decameron*. Readers, understandably, want to square the historian Boccaccio with

the defender of *novellare*, and there is a longstanding tradition of resolving this contradiction by simply bisecting Boccaccio's written output into vernacular and Latin, allowing these two linguistic formats to denote two different phases of the author's life and presumably two different attitudes towards the greater purpose in what he was doing. Filosa's *Tre studi sul De mulieribus claris*, to its author's credit, explores the intertextuality between the Latin compendium and the women of the *Decameron*,<sup>18</sup> and it succeeds in discussing the *De mulieribus* as part of Boccaccio's career as integral continuity. Yet, as ever, we are left with the same critical tendency to plot every one of Boccaccio's works on a trajectory leading towards or away from the *Decameron*. This chapter will argue that, while it is difficult to arrange all the biographies of *De mulieribus* in a neat schema that gives an answer to every seeming contradiction to be found with Boccaccio's other author personae, this does not make them irreconcilable as works of one Boccaccio. In exploring the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta* and the *Corbaccio*, I argued in favor of a viewpoint that allows contradictions to stand together, emphasize one another's presence, and ultimately reveal a literary game that enhances rather than detracts from the overall complexity and seriousness of the work. In a similar vein, in this chapter I will argue that the *De mulieribus* takes shape as a compendium that is about writing, or more precisely, about creating history in a durable way, just as much as it is about the women themselves. Despite its different trappings, on a material level as well as a linguistic and poetic one, this work stands together with Boccaccio's vernacular production rather than apart from it, demonstrating the potential for any established format to manifest itself in a way that defies expectations.

The challenge of the *De mulieribus* is that it is large; it contains multitudes. One could find within its pages a case for Boccaccio as an irrefutable misogynist as well as one for Boccaccio as a gentle lover of women. This is part of the joy of reading the work, at least for me;

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<sup>18</sup> See FILOSA (2012), 89-137.

prior to embarking upon this project I had only gone into the volume looking for something specific. This time, reading the book from cover to cover, I took in each biography in order, treating it more as a narrative than as an encyclopedia, consistent with Daniels's conclusions on its being read and transmitted as such once it was in print. I do not think that this kind of reading is at odds with Boccaccio's intentions; among other things, even as he puts forth his own version of these women's lives as the most accurate one available, he constantly reminds the reader that he, too, is working from sources that claim to be reliable but in fact conflict with one another more often than not. Saying one thing but doing another, he claims an authority in the very act of writing the sort of volume that purports to be a history of histories, while simultaneously undermining the credibility of any text that would make such a claim. It is the continual examination of the practice of history and how he is undertaking it that makes the *De mulieribus* capable of being more than just a product of its time.

I will examine this practice by focusing on certain tendencies at play throughout the volume. First of all, I will cite examples of Boccaccio narrating his own parsing of historical source material and analyze them more closely in their various contexts, which will take us through both biographies of very famous women with countless legends interspersed among their historical accounts and also biographies of virtually unknown women, whose history Boccaccio undertakes to resurrect. Both situations – a surfeit of information with varying levels of reliability on the one hand, and a total lack thereof on the other – challenge the biographer in their own ways, and Boccaccio affronts this challenge through his author persona with a didactic flair. Subsequently, I will consider selected biographies that credit the women they depict with an ability to use language themselves in a way that made their fame an inevitability. I will not set out to pin down Boccaccio's position on women in general, or to call him a feminist or an anti-feminist once and for all. What I will say is that amid instances of eye-rolling at his

moralizing or his condemning women's promiscuity (not infrequent) I personally felt gratified to read a work on women that indeed is large and contains multitudes. Boccaccio himself (or rather, the "ego" who claims to be the author in his work) seems to delight in discovering that, in fact, so many women are so much more than what men seem to think of them in general.

In selecting a dialogue text for this work, the choices were many, but in the end the most appropriate and illuminating accompaniment to this text proved to be Francesco Petrararch's *De viris illustribus*. As we have spoken of Boccaccio's literary relationship to Dante, so will this volume give us a chance to consider one of the facets of the literary relationship of him and his contemporary. As he did with Dante, Boccaccio set out to write a biography of Petrarch, as well; somewhat appropriately, and conveniently for the purposes of our analysis, the unfinished Petrarch biography is in Latin, setting it apart from the vernacular *Trattatello in laude di Dante*. Much can be and has been written about Petrarch's influence on Boccaccio in his later career, particularly his Latin output, and this is of course another excellent reason to consider Petrarch's compendium of biographies alongside Boccaccio's.

The *De mulieribus* was Boccaccio's answer to the early stages of the *De viris*, already in its second stage of production, but it is not my goal to prove any sort of causal relationship between the two works. Studies of source material and exemplars for the *De mulieribus* constitute the vast majority of what has been published on Boccaccio's Latin compendium, and it is not my intention to promote the *De viris* as a more likely model than any other. Even if we were to limit ourselves to Petrarch's influence alone, the *De viris* is one of several purported sources of inspiration; more than one scholar has made the argument that Boccaccio's biographies of women were inspired in part by one of Petrarch's epistles (*Familiars* 21:8), a collection of brief summaries of famous women's lives from all ages, collected in a letter he wrote congratulating and equally consoling Charles IV on the birth of his female offspring.

According to one study, the letter could be interpreted “quasi come una riscrittura al femminile del *De viris illustribus*,” noting that Charles’s wife Anna had in fact asked for a copy of that very text, which Petrarch had declined to give her since the work was unfinished. Thus, as a literal consolation prize, he composed *Familiars* 21:8.<sup>19</sup> The relationship between this text and the *De mulieribus* rests on the fact that Boccaccio included twenty-five of the thirty-one women of Petrarch’s epistle in his own 106 female biographies. The destination of the two works is vastly different, Petrarch’s being something of an *enumeratio*, as well as a nod to the fact that women would *not* be included in any published text of his, and Boccaccio’s a seminal volume that he hoped would endure throughout history. In congratulating and consoling Charles on his daughter’s birth, Petrarch expresses a widely held view of high-ranking women; they may indeed accomplish certain things as befits their station, but they will never be immortalized as great men; the *De viris illustribus* is a reserved space for those who can truly rise to the status of illustriousness. For this reason, the *De viris*, though less of a direct source for Boccaccio’s work, is the appropriate companion to the *De mulieribus* in this study: both works attempt to define what written history of great people should look like.

As in other dialogues I have set up in this dissertation, I intend to use the *De viris* to bring light to certain choices Boccaccio made in composing the *De mulieribus*, in holding one historian persona up to the other, similar though they are, the contrast becomes yet more evident. The extent to which *De mulieribus claris* is memorializing tribute, historical document, entertaining narrative, and manual of conduct, with all the contradictions that those titles create amongst themselves, is what makes it a provocative, playful, and yes, at times funny work. It is my belief that this play becomes more apparent when we read the *De mulieribus* alongside another text whose outer trappings match its own but whose details in execution make it quite a

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<sup>19</sup> FILOSA (2004), 382, note 4.



different read. Where Boccaccio is collaborative, transparent, and eager to show the multifaceted process of creating history, allowing that “*lasciva comperias immixta sacris*”, Petrarch is distant, opaque, and determined to present his own history, having weighed all the others exhaustively, with succinct conviction.

Even as his Latin distances the author of *De mulieribus* from the reader somewhat, his frequent intimations in the first person bridge that distance instantly. The “I” and “me” of the author stand together with the “we” he often uses to refer to the reading public, placing himself both with and apart from those for whom he writes. His position as author is rarefied; he does not shy from expressing his knowledge of his sources and his confidence in either concurring with or contradicting them. In his preface, he declares himself surprised (“*Sane miratus sum plurimum*”)<sup>20</sup> to learn how often women are overlooked in the biographical genre, hence his personal commitment to ensure women not be cheated of their just due (“*ne merito fraudentur suo*”).<sup>21</sup> Yet, even as he makes it clear that this volume is his own undertaking, he frequently positions himself alongside the readers in consuming, interpreting and enjoying these stories. “*Quid maius, quid splendidius potuit unquam contigisse,*” he muses as he tells the story of the creation of Eve: what greater or more wonderful thing could happen to someone at birth than happening into the exclusive company of the Maker and the first man? No longer the distant historian, he is right there with the eager reader: furthermore, he goes on, “[w]e can imagine ... how marvelously beautiful [Eve’s] body was” (“*arbitrari possumus corporea formositate mirabilem*”).<sup>22</sup> He eschews the careful withdrawal that the impersonal form would have

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<sup>20</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, Preface, 3. Full citation: “*Sane miratus sum plurimum adeo modicum apud huiusce viros potuisse mulieres, ut nullam memorie gratiam in speciali aliqua descriptione consecute sint.*”

<sup>21</sup> Preface, 4.

<sup>22</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, I.3.

afforded, as well as the teacher-student dynamic that the second person might lend, and instead unites writer and reader as we.

Boccaccio's first person plural also magnifies the effect of synchronicity between writing and reading in the text. The life of Eve is the first biography in the series, and Boccaccio certainly treats it as such, noting as he starts that "it will not seem inappropriate to begin with the mother of us all" as a way of initiating his writing project: "[s]cripturus igitur quibus fulgoribus mulieres claruerint insignes, a matre omnium sumpsisse exordium non apparebit indignum".<sup>23</sup> Male and female readers, both, were born of this mother and are included in this "omnium". As well as a writerly way of discouraging the transmission of individual biographies out of order or out of context, this phrase's use of the future participle "scripturus [sum]" conveys among other things the impression, whether factually accurate or not, that the author is writing the stories in order, moving through time from 'our' mother to those who followed in her footsteps. This mode allows Boccaccio to accompany his readers through each story, as if they and he are embarking as a united front on an intellectual journey.

Collaboration, then, is how the author presents the task facing readers: that of parsing history for signs of truth and fiction. The endgame is not merely that of getting the facts of the story, although he professes a deep commitment to historical accuracy. He goes further, however, in exploring why certain falsehoods have passed for truth in the centuries since many of these women lived. Not only what we should believe and what we shouldn't, but also why and why not. The way history is created seems to interest the author just as much as the history itself, and its process of becoming in time is a part of its value. Introducing Semiramis in the volume's second biography, he wishes to separate knowledge from legend immediately: while we should not believe that she was in fact the daughter of Neptune ("eam filiam fuisse Neptuni

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<sup>23</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, I.1.

... etsi credi non oporteat"), that it exists as legend indicates the probability that her parents were noble ("argumentum tamen est eam a nobilibus parentibus genitam").<sup>24</sup> Legend is not simply discarded; it remains part of the picture of Semiramis, a picture which readers are meant to view in its entirety. Her sins notwithstanding (they are many, and the text expounds upon them at length), her fame and notoriety make her a worthy subject for documentation. In recounting her life, the author is careful to single out deeds reported as fact as well as worthy of remembrance ("ex multitudine suorum gestorum unum memoratu dignissimum extollentes dicamus, certissimum asserunt"),<sup>25</sup> while those which he regards as hearsay or otherwise not necessarily true he qualifies as such ("creditum est", "ut quidam volunt", "[a]lii tamen scribunt", "argumentum tamen est", and so on).

To be clear, while Boccaccio's historian includes the legend along with what he considers to be the truth, he does not hold back in expressing his disregard for its credibility. In another early biography, he discusses the tales surrounding the birth of Minerva and his disregard for the intelligence of those brutish, insensible people ("stolidi") who believed her to be of godlike origin ("virgo tanta claritate conspicua fuit ut non illi fuisse mortalem originem stolidi arbitrati sint homines").<sup>26</sup> In fact, time has only served to increase the number of those who believe in this ridiculous error: "Cui ridiculo errori tanto plus fidei auctum est quanto occultior eius fuit origo."<sup>27</sup> The author goes on to ridicule the fictional stories that spring from Minerva's supposed origins, similarly discarding other popular stories about her as pure invention. In the end, he concludes with a sigh that antiquity itself is to blame for such false

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<sup>24</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, II.1-2.

<sup>25</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, II.9.

<sup>26</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, VI.1.

<sup>27</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, VI.2.

belief, being a “lavish dispenser of divinity”: “prodiga deitatum largitrix, antiquitas eidem sapientie numen attribuit”.<sup>28</sup> Women themselves are prone to lying about their deeds, and the compendium will provide several examples that bring to mind the deceitful old crone of the *Corbaccio*, but the greatest purveyor of fiction is “antiquitas”, the passage of time itself.

Is Boccaccio out to correct all the errors of history in creating this book? Certainly he intends to clarify certain distinctions in cases such as Minerva’s, where myth has obscured history past the point of recognition. His historian persona is not a translator of past legend into present, more readable legend, as his epic poet persona who created the *Teseida* purported to do. There is a clear and honest desire to get at fact even when he must go through fiction to get to it, and as such, he stops short of declaring his book an exhaustive historical record while at the same time going well beyond. He finds it “non solum utile, sed oportunum”, not only useful but also appropriate, to treat the stories at some length rather than simply cataloguing them, as he says in the preface,<sup>29</sup> so that women as well as men are able to delight in the stories (“laetantur”), the former being “generally unacquainted with history” (“hystoriarum ignare sint”) and thus in need of greater detail and a more extended account (“sermone prolixiori”)<sup>30</sup>.

Given the unusual nature of his mission, Boccaccio intends to make *De mulieribus claris* irreproachable in every way possible. Not unlike other introductory and concluding pieces in other works, the author speaking as author intends to address certain concerns and head them off before they can materialize. He carefully qualifies his definition of the *claris* part of his title; what he means by *claris*, he believes, is key to correctly interpreting his work.

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<sup>28</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, VI.7. “Antiquity, that lavish dispenser of divinity,” is BROWN’S much more elegant translation than any I could muster.

<sup>29</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, Preface, 8. Full citation: “E ne more prisco apices tantum rerum tetigisse videar, ex quibus a fide dignis potuero cognovisse amplius in longiusculam hystoriam protraxisse non solum utile, sed oportunum arbitror”.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

*Non enim est animum michi hoc claritatis nomen adeo strictim summere, ut semper in virtutem videatur exire; quin imo in ampliorem sensum – bona cum pace legentium – trahere et illas intelligere claras quas quocunque ex facinore orbi vulgate sermone notissimas novero.*

It is not in fact my intention to interpret the word ‘famous’ in such a strict sense that it will always appear to mean ‘virtuous.’ Instead, with the kind permission of my readers, I will adopt a wider meaning and consider as famous those women whom I know to have gained a reputation throughout the world for any deed whatsoever.<sup>31</sup>

*In ampliorem sensum*: that is how we are to interpret “claris” – for in fact, this is what fame has always meant for men. Boccaccio goes on to say that in the case of men, he has read about both the “illustr[os]” and the “seditiosissimos” in equal measure. He maintains his view that praising worthy figures and reproaching crimes will both encourage good behavior and discourage bad, and that the latter should not be repressed from memory. Remembering the fullness of humanity and documenting for the future it is not only right and balanced, but useful.

Having thus issued the necessary disclaimers, Boccaccio feels free to delve into his subjects’ lives, and his interest in doing so seems to lie most of all in his commitment to not only their deeds but also the legacy of those deeds; how they are in fact remembered and why.

In some cases, the role of the *De mulieribus* is quite straightforward: to bring to light that which is shrouded in darkness. A handful of Boccaccio’s famous women are anything but, or were prior to his composing the book. In the case of “De romana iuvenula,” the young and unnamed Roman woman, the author asserts that he will not count himself among those who have passed her over in writing history:

*[D]eperditum malignitate fortune nomen et parentum coniugisque notitia forsan aliquantulum meriti decoris surripuisse videbitur. Sed, ne per me subtractum videatur, si illi inter claras locum non dedero, apponere mens est et innominate mulieris pietatem inclitam referre.*

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<sup>31</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, Preface, 6, trans. BROWN.

Her name, as well as all knowledge of her ancestors and her husband, has been lost through the malice of Fortune. This may appear to have deprived her of some of the honor that is her due. Lest it seem, however, that it is I who have taken it away by not giving her a place among famous women, I intend to give an account of the renowned filial devotion of this anonymous woman.<sup>32</sup>

Like the young Roman woman, the wives of the Minyans, apparently, are among those deserving of recognition but virtually unknown. Whether because of “coevorum scribentium desidia,” the sloth of those writing in their time, or “annositatis vitio”, the defects imposed by the passage of time, the wives of the Minyans have thus far gone without any sort of glory.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the author declares it the task of himself and his readers to right the egregious wrong of their being all but forgotten. Using the first person plural once again: we shall try, he says (conabimur), “qua poterimus”, as much as we can, to adorn these “innominatas ... in memoriam posteritatis”, immortalize them for the benefit of future generations.<sup>34</sup>

The use of the plural as well as the future in this introduction underlines once more the importance of what Boccaccio is about with this volume: memorializing those who deserve fame is a conscious act, one that depends upon both writer and reader. When the author writes “ornabimus innominatas digno preconio”,<sup>35</sup> we shall adorn these unnamed women with a well-deserved proclamation, he reminds us that the creation of fame is one that unfolds in time: first, the writing of the words, followed by their transmission and dissemination, and finally their consumption. Introducing the wives of the Minyans’ story with this structure, Boccaccio ushers his readers into the process as actors, crediting them as well as himself for the noble deed of immortalizing these deserving women. Their story is indeed impressive: to save their husbands

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<sup>32</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, LXV.1-2, trans. BROWN.

<sup>33</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, XXXI.1.

<sup>34</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, XXXI.2.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*.

from execution, the women broke into the place where the men were imprisoned and switched clothes and identities with them, giving them life and safety and sacrificing themselves to the executioner. That the men should have accepted this gesture from their wives, allowing them to bear a punishment that would never have been intended for women, is curious, a sort of abdication of traditional manhood. Placing his historical seal of approval upon the story, the author concludes with the first person singular: “has asserere audeo veros certosque fuisse viros”, I dare to affirm that these women were proven true men.<sup>36</sup>

This story’s conclusion, as well as so many other places where the *De mulieribus* rewards brave women by calling them men, serves as a stiff reminder that Boccaccio is a man of his time, that in his eyes this probably did constitute the highest praise he could give to women who faced death without fear. It is a conservative statement, but it is an expression of respect, an acknowledgment of the fact that women can subvert the expectations of their own abilities, something he values very highly. He lives in a world where the idea that a whole group of women would release men into safety by sacrificing their own lives impresses him, particularly because it was right, expected, justified (“fas esset”), for them, to remain at home, but they demonstrated a willingness to transgress the rules their gender imposed upon them. In a way, this sort of behavior lines up nicely with what Boccaccio strives to do for them: he, too, in the composition of this volume, is attempting to create something beyond what women as a whole are so rarely afforded: their own place in history and memory. Generally, these qualities are expressed as something that women as a whole should not adopt, and here Boccaccio refrains from exhorting his readers to emulate the wives of the Minyans. Yet, his readers, if they are doing their jobs, should pick up on the note of true admiration that resounds in his words.

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<sup>36</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, XXXI.13

Particularly in the case of such women as these, worthy of remembrance because of some noble sacrifice in their early years but doomed to be forgotten because of their young age at death, Boccaccio feels compelled as historian to build a memorial. Satisfied with having told the story of Harmonia, a young Sicilian woman who sacrificed her life during a rebellion, he concludes her biography with the words, “Cui quod pietas evi abstulit, dignissimum literis restituisset fuit”:<sup>37</sup> that which her *pietas*, her loyalty and sense of duty, took away in the passage of years, was to be restored most deservedly by *literis*, records, books, or literature. Though there is some disagreement as to Harmonia’s marital status, a detail which several other biographies account for insistently, the author in this case dismisses its importance, because her strength and loyalty are noteworthy in either case: “nil ob diversitatem opinionum ex eius pia fortitudine subtrahatur”<sup>38</sup>, nothing should be taken away from her faithful courage on account of these differences of opinion. The importance of historical accuracy in this volume has been reiterated whenever possible, but it does not come at the expense of praising those who deserve praise. The author prefers to err on the side of transparent uncertainty rather than tying himself to ironclad statements that might take away from what he regards as the worth and importance of a certain woman’s contribution. In the case of Harmonia, the Roman woman and the wives of the Minyans, he seeks to create a historical account despite the little he has to work with in the way of source material, forging ahead in the face of discrepancies and lacunae with his *literis*.

In some cases, the *De mulieribus* is fully in agreement with what history has so far provided, uniting several accounts into one and summarizing what they have said, but in many others Boccaccio wishes to engage with the ongoing process of history being created in memory and challenge it if not outright correct it. We have just seen how he deals with gaps and the

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<sup>37</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, LXVIII.7.

<sup>38</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, LXVIII.2.



absence of satisfactory documentation, but in many instances he finds numerous discrepancies in the many existing accounts, many of which are just flat-out unbelievable stories. In such cases, he approaches the material with the following questions: where do these accounts come from, how reliable are those sources, and what has contributed to their endurance through time?

As he parses these problems, the author's Latin prose maintains a careful veneer of formality and distance while his words themselves, such as the frequent "I" and "we", create a familiarity with the reader that bespeaks a willingness to take risks and be wrong at times. "If I am right," he occasionally says, or "I believe the sense is as follows," or rather "it is difficult for me to believe"; he lets uncertainty hang, at certain moments, refraining from rounding it up to fact. And yet, at the same time, there is no shortage of derision for people willing to believe in "dedecorosum inventum," disgraceful invention, as he calls the story of Venus's birth to Jupiter.<sup>39</sup> When dealing with women who have mostly lived in public memory as pagan goddesses or otherwise magical beings, Boccaccio insists on sticking to what he knows to be fact: "Sane, ex quocunque sit patre genita," no matter which father she was born to, "eam inter claras mulieres potius ob illustres eius pulchritudinem quam ob dedecorosum inventum describendam censui" he has decided to place her among famous women for her extraordinary beauty rather than for this disgraceful invention.<sup>40</sup> Never mind that Boccaccio has peddled this very fiction about Venus's origins and her status as goddess at great length,<sup>41</sup> as well as defended his right to do so in a number of places.<sup>42</sup> In fact, in his vernacular works dealing with

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<sup>39</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, VII.2.

<sup>40</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, VII.1.

<sup>41</sup> See BOCCACCIO, *Teseida*, VII, both verses and glosses.

<sup>42</sup> See BOCCACCIO, *Decameron*, IV, and *Genealogia deorum gentilium*, XIV-XV.

love (which all of them do on some level) there always is either a casual reference to Venus as goddess of love and mother of Cupid or a drawn-out and wholly sincere invocation of her and prayer for her blessing. Here, however, those who believe her to be “celi sydus, quod Venerem nuncupamus” the star in the sky we call Venus, or “celestem feminam in terras ex Iovis gremio lapsam,” a celestial woman fallen to the earth out of Jupiter’s lap, are called “stult[i],” fools: “omnes tetra obfuscati caligine”, all of them blinded by a foul darkness.<sup>43</sup> By such a standard, every single character in the *Teseida* would have to be classified as a moron, and its author, having committed so wholeheartedly to Venus’s key role in Palemone’s ultimate success in wedding Emilia, either equally ignorant or just a very skilled pretender.

The logical explanation is that Boccaccio commits fully to every context in which he writes: the persona he assumes in composing the *De mulieribus* has no patience for anyone dimwitted enough to believe in fanciful stories. On the surface, it may seem like cognitive dissonance, and to those who insist on Boccaccio’s works being firmly planted along an autobiographical trajectory it may appear to be the confirmation that Boccaccio has eschewed fictional tales right along with the vernacular. In the context of this project, however, it reminds us, delightfully, that the *De mulieribus* is no more straight-faced in its composition than any of the vernacular works we have looked at so far. The “io” in this case is no more Boccaccio than it was when Fiammetta spoke it in the *Elegia*. This, too, is an intentionally crafted author-self, and one who manipulates genre expectations just as much as any of Boccaccio’s others. What this one claims to be above all else is, precisely, an authority on fact, fiction, and the potential of each to turn into the other.

One of the qualities that marks the *De mulieribus* is a commitment to transparency that sometimes feels at odds with its claims of historical truth-telling. In the very same biography of

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<sup>43</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, VII.3-4.

Venus where the author so boldly calls her adulators fools, he carefully professes less than total certainty about her marital history. The non-goddess “duobus nupsisse viris creditum est”, is believed to have married two men, though it isn’t clear which came first (“cui primo non satis certo”).<sup>44</sup> Two possible versions of the facts are offered, and the author’s choosing one over the other is an educated guess at best: “quod verisimilius michi videtur.”<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, he does not obscure the uncertainty; this type of history is where uncertainty lives, for him. Rather, he proceeds to explain his logic in deciding which version to favor, which advocates and exemplifies critical thinking with regard to stories claiming to be histories. It is the uncertainty itself that allows him to model this approach to reading, therefore it must be declared as such. That uncertainty exists is not a barrier to extracting knowledge, and being transparent about its presence in the context of history is what allows this book to carry any sort of weight whatsoever. What Boccaccio is able to show, given this kind of problem, is his unique ability to solve it.

In the presence of disagreement among reasonable historical accounts, similarly, the *De mulieribus* does not shy away from noting the lack of clarity and yet proceeding to settle upon what certainty it can. In the case of Isis, for example, both the time in which she lived and her parentage are disputed, even amongst worthy, “illustres” historians: “[q]uibus ... fuerit temporibus, aut ex quibus nata parentibus ... ambigitur.”<sup>46</sup> Yet, the differences of opinion among these celebrated men (inter celebres viros varietates) is not a barrier to gleaning some kind of reliable knowledge about Isis’s life; at the very least, one can plausibly argue that “inter feminas ... evo egregiam fuisse et memoratu dignissimam”, among women she was

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<sup>44</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, VII.7.

<sup>45</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, VII.8.

<sup>46</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, VIII.1.

distinguished and most deserving of remembrance.<sup>47</sup> If one sets aside the “scriptorum discordantiis,”<sup>48</sup> it is possible to learn even from the fanciful myths that have come to surround Isis, or Io, as she had previously been called. The story of her being transformed into a heifer because of her tryst with Jupiter actually aligns with existing historical accounts that place the young woman on a ship to Egypt whose flag bore the image of a cow. This seems to satisfy Boccaccio that the story has some merit, “etsi poete veteres fingant”,<sup>49</sup> even though it is the product of ancient poets’ contrivances, another fiction that other texts of Boccaccio’s transmit from the *Metamorphoses* without qualification.

It is worth noting that this model of narration, upon which Boccaccio relies in several accounts of reputed goddesses, allows him to transmit both the myth and the fact, allowing the two to coexist on the same page without one totally eclipsing the other. Unlike the English William of Newburgh, whose *Historia rerum anglicarum* took great offense at Geoffrey of Monmouth’s contaminating accounts of English kings with the “ridicula ... figmenta” of the legendary King Arthur,<sup>50</sup> Boccaccio seems to welcome the chance to examine the element of fame itself, even when it pertains to people who may not have been real. In cases where myths “ab hystorie veritate non discrepant,” the myth is instrumental in accenting the credibility of the “hystorie veritate,” and when it strays too far, it is shot down as “error.”<sup>51</sup> Yet, in either case, its presence on the page is a constant in practically every story, right alongside that of “veritate.” Similarly in the story of Niobe, we read both the documented fact of her sadness over the loss of

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<sup>47</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, VIII.2.

<sup>48</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, VIII.3.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>50</sup> William OF NEWBURGH and P.G. WALSH and M.J. KENNEDY, eds. (1988), *Historia rerum anglicarum*, 28.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*.

her children plunging her into a stonelike silence (“vidua mestaque in tam grandem atque obstinatam taciturnitatem devenit, ut potius immobile saxum videretur”)<sup>52</sup> and the “a poetis ... fictum” that she was transformed into a stone statue (“ubi sepulti fuerant filii, in lapideam statuam fuisse conversam”).<sup>53</sup> Myth in this case can actually provide a confirmation of history, and history can offer an explanation for myth.

Often, the continuity between history and myth is of necessity, for Boccaccio has few or no sources outside the words of the poets. In the case of Circe, for example, the Homeric enchanter of Ulysses, “nil preter poeticum legatur ex hac tam celebri muliere”: there are no sources other than poetic works that speak of Circe’s life. The author speculates that her origin story as proclaimed daughter of the Sun and the nymph Perse derives from both her knowledge of herbs (“circa notitiam herbarum fuerit eruditissima”) and her prudence in self-conduct (“prudentissima in agendis”), based on astrologers’ belief that these are qualities bestowed upon mortals by the Sun at birth: “omnia solem, variis habitis respectibus, dare nascentibus”.<sup>54</sup> Quite the educated guess, though not inconsistent with Boccaccio’s keen interest in astrology, as evidenced by its omnipresence in the glosses on the *Teseida* discussed in Chapter 3. Boccaccio is on uncertain ground here, historically speaking, given the exclusively poetic accounts of Circe, but as ever, he does not shy away from the difficulty and declares his intentions:

*... et cum nil preter poeticum legatur ex hac tam celebri muliere, recitatis succincte poeticis, quo prestabitur ingenio mentem excutiemus credentium.*<sup>55</sup>

The works of the poets are our only sources for this celebrated woman; after touching briefly on their reports I shall explain, to the best of my ability, the meaning of what they believe.

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<sup>52</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, XV.4.

<sup>53</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, XV.5.

<sup>54</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, XXXVIII.1.

<sup>55</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, XXXVIII.2, trans. Brown.

Boccaccio as creator of this volume very much benefits from placing his author persona in this role: he is in fact creating a niche for his project that rapidly turns expectations on their head. He has gone beyond compiling histories here; he is also raising questions about the process of mythologizing a figure and preserving her in a poetic context.

Helen (designated in his account as wife of King Menelaus, not of Troy) presents an even greater challenge in many ways, as historical accounts of her have been so conflated with poetic fiction, from her beauty to her lustfulness to the war it supposedly caused. The author refuses to declare allegiance with popular views regarding the latter, qualifying them with “ut multis visum est”.<sup>56</sup> He chooses to focus first of all on the difficulty that her great beauty presents; “satis convenienter describere carmine,” doing her justice in verse, “[f]atigavit enim ... divinii ingenii virum Homerum”, exhausted even the divinely skilled Homer.<sup>57</sup> To depict her visually proved just as difficult: he relates the travails of Zeuxis, “illius seculi famosissimus pictor,” who was called upon for the task of depicting Helen with his brush, “ad illam pinniculo formandam”.<sup>58</sup> Though it seems that Zeuxis’s attempt has not survived to the author’s day, he is doubtful about any success the man might have had: “vix creditum est,” it is hardly to be believed, that he really succeeded in capturing her likeness. Nonetheless, the author spends several lines examining the task that the artist was faced with, his sources and his process. “[P]reter Homeri carmen et magnam undique famam,” aside from Homer’s poem and Helen’s great and ubiquitous fame, he had no other model “nullum aliud haberet exemplum”. He then had no choice but to rely on the idea of her that he was able to recreate from such sources (“per hec duo de facie et cetero persone statu potuerat mente concipere”) and fill it out with live

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<sup>56</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, XXXVII.1.

<sup>57</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, XXXVII.3.

<sup>58</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, XXXVII.4.

models. Choosing the five most beautiful of these, the artist produced “ex pulchritudine omnium forma una,” one form from their combined beauty.<sup>59</sup> “Fecit ergo quod potuit,” according to the author; he did what he could. Still, the product of his efforts is “tanquam celeste simulacra decus,” as a simulacrum of her celestial splendor.<sup>60</sup>

Why spend the first paragraph of Helen’s biography discussing Zeuxis’s apparently unsuccessful project? On the surface, it seems like a typical nod to the ineffability of Helen; not only did her irreproducible loveliness exhaust the great Homer, but it also confounded this poor painter who was doomed to fail from the moment he received the commission. If we pause a little longer on Zeuxis, however, a profile of Helen’s biographer emerges as well: his declared task is the same as that of the artists of Zeuxis’s time: “ut tam eximii decoris saltem effigiem, si possent, posteritati relinquerent”, to leave to posterity, if possible, a likeness of Helen’s exceeding grace.<sup>61</sup> The conditions are not ideal; Homer’s poetry and Helen’s fame are his only aids, and beyond what they can provide, the artist must rely on his own ingenuity and what contemporary resources he has. The author clearly has some sympathy for the man; he does not call him incompetent or a fabulist, but a man who could not possibly accomplish what is “solius ... nature officium”, the office of Nature alone. What remains to posterity, rather than Zeuxis’s honest attempt, is the mythical tradition, the stories that cleverer (acutiores) authors “finxere,” invented: that Helen was descended from the gods. Such license with words allowed them to communicate a great deal more than Zeuxis could, most importantly the idea that Helen’s

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<sup>59</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, XXXVII.5.

<sup>60</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, XXXVII.6.

<sup>61</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, XXXVII.3.

beauty was not just earthly but “ex infuso numine”, from some divine source, a phenomenon that painters “imprimere nequibant”, could not represent.<sup>62</sup>

Without explicitly saying so, this biography makes a big claim on behalf of *De mulieribus*: Boccaccio, through his author persona, is employing the meticulousness and the honesty of the painter to set his words apart from the work of the fabulists. Not just in Helen’s biography, but throughout the volume, the author is offering something more potent than a still picture and more truthful than an invented myth. He does not resort to divine origin stories, for which he has already expressed his scorn (see Minerva, for example), nor does he stop short at transmitting only what he knows to be reliable: he lays it all out in front of us and tells us where to place it, how to read it. Circe’s and Helen’s respective mythical traditions instruct us on how great beauty and desirability affects people. “Ex quibus satis comprehendere possumus, hominum mulierumque conspectus moribus, multas ubique Cyrces esse”<sup>63</sup>: from [these stories] we are able to grasp, considering the morals of men and women, that there are many Circes all around, tempting figures who cause people to lose their capacity for reason. Directly following Helen, Circe’s biography stands as a lesson in interpretation that extends well beyond its pages.

There are many women among Boccaccio’s subjects who have in some way manipulated the process of creating historical memory, with varying levels of honesty in their intentions, and have in fact taken charge of how they will be remembered. Such women have successfully engineered their legacies so as to be remembered as they wish to be. Boccaccio intends to set the record straight in these cases: where fanciful stories have taken the place of fact, he means to restore factual accuracy. Yet, he devotes just as much ink to the documentation of how they shaped their respective histories. He does not condemn the women for falsifying their legacies

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<sup>62</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, XXXVII.6.

<sup>63</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, XXXVIII.6.



to some degree; rather, as in the case of Minerva and other goddess-figures, he blames the people who have senselessly devoured these accounts over the years without thinking critically about them. When people do not ask the critical questions he is asking (see p. 19) about the stories they hear, they are the ones who err, not the creators of those stories. Fiction and history can and do coexist, but it is vital to know which is which and how the two interact and influence one another.

Boccaccio expresses great admiration, through his author's voice, for women such as Erythraea and Carmenta, women who have been able to predict the future and write it so that it reads like history rather than prophecy ("ut hystoriam dictasse, non venturos predixisse actus appareat").<sup>64</sup> Carmenta, moreover, invented the Italic alphabet, according to the author's account, and thus left a legacy that by its very nature carries her memory with it, or so it should. Thanks to this great gift, Boccaccio must show gratitude on behalf of mankind ("Quam ob rem ne a quoquam, tanquam ingrate, iure redargui possimus") by documenting Carmenta's invention and securing her eternal fame: "ut illud pro viribus in eternam memoriam efferamus piissimum est."<sup>65</sup> Language is the conduit of these women's accomplishments, which live on by their very nature in the very texts that transmit them. Yet, their names are rarely attached to their deeds, and this is what the *De mulieribus* seeks to correct; though Carmenta's alphabet appears everywhere, she herself is obscured. Language is a tool in these women's hands, but they apparently need Boccaccio to wield it through the voice of his author.

Yet, more vital still is an accurate understanding of what it looks like when the women themselves manipulate fiction and turn it into history of their own accord. Such is the case with Flora, whom Boccaccio immediately sets out to expose for what she really was (a prostitute) and

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<sup>64</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, XXI.7.

<sup>65</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, XXVII.17.

how in the world she managed to secure such adoring fame for herself amongst the Romans. The narrative extends well beyond Flora's actual life, regarding her afterlife with much more scrutiny. The author could not be more dismissive of what she actually did, nor does he care about the historical differences of opinion about it:

*Hec autem, ut omnes asserunt, ditissima fuit mulier, sed de questu divitiarum discrepant. ... Sane huius discordantie ego non curo, dummodo constet Floram meretricem et divitem extitisse.*

Our sources state unanimously that she was very wealthy, but there is a difference of opinion as to how Flora acquired this wealth. ... This disagreement does not matter to me as long as it is clear that Flora was rich and a prostitute.<sup>66</sup>

Boccaccio instead spends the majority of his ink upon her death and her afterlife, describing how she used her wealth to secure the annual celebration of her birthday in perpetuity, with public games to entertain the populace. Naturally, the people became quite attached to these ritual celebrations of a prostitute's birthday, the inappropriateness of which the Roman Senate eventually had to address:

*Sane tractu temporis cum senatus, originis eorum conscius, erubesceret, urbem, iam rerum dominam, tam obscena maculari nota, ... adverteretque illam facile deleri non posse, ad ignominiam subtrahendam, turpitudini detestabilem atque ridiculum superiniunxit errorem. ... Finxit quippe in splendorem Flore, inclite testatricis, fabulam, et ignaro iam populo recitavit[.]*

In the course of time the Senate, aware of the origins of these games, was embarrassed to have their city, now mistress of the world, tarnished by so foul a blot. ... Realizing, however, that the obscenity could not easily be removed, it superimposed on the shameful spectacle a disgusting and laughable fiction with the aim of removing the disgrace. ... A story was invented in honor of Flora, the illustrious benefactor, and recited to the now ignorant populace.<sup>67</sup>

Dismissive though he is of Flora's actual life and profession, the real objects of scorn are of course the Senate and the "ignaro populo" of Rome. The latter are so easily won over by Flora's money providing them with entertainment, but it is the former who make the existing situation

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<sup>66</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, LXIV.2-6, trans. Brown.

<sup>67</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, LXIV.8-11, trans. Brown.

worse by adding a detestable, ridiculous lie to an already disgraceful situation: “turpitudini detestabilem atque ridiculum superiniunxit errorem.” In other words, a legend was born. The subtext to this story is quite interesting; to manipulate the truth seems significantly more detestable to Boccaccio than Flora’s profession itself.

The people having been seduced by this tale (“seducti fallacia”), Flora now has a seat among the goddesses in the public eye despite what she actually did for a living: “cum Iunone regina deabusque aliis sedere arbitrati sunt.”<sup>68</sup> From a prostitute, she is transformed into a nymph, thanks to her cunning and the fortune her money gave her: “[e]t sic ingenio Flora et fortune munere ex male quesita pecunia ... ex meretrice nynpha facta est”.<sup>69</sup> He, on the contrary, is undoing this process, deconstructing the deification of Flora and crediting her as a human woman who essentially built her own monument. She is remembered not because of the Senate inventing a story about her, or the people being credulous enough to believe it, but because of her cunning and her resources. Despite his disparagement of her character, the author is actually crediting Flora herself with the manipulation of people and politics and the successful attainment of her fame. Were he to really disapprove of her status as a famous woman, he might just as easily decline to include her in his volume, refuting the very notion that she is worthy of mention. Yet, here she is: the woman who made her own fame. Boccaccio’s incorporation of her into the project despite the disdain the author expresses towards her actual deeds in life is one of the few instances where a separation is glimpsed between Boccaccio and the author figure who supposedly commandeers the text. This allows him to be both properly scornful of her career choices and at the same time indulgent, giving her a stage and, in deed if

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<sup>68</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, LXIV.12. Full citation: “Qua seducti fallacia, eam, que vivens fornices coluerat, a quibuscunque etiam pro minima stipe prostrate, quasi suis alis Zephyrus illam in celum detulerit, cum Iunone regina deabusque aliis sedere arbitrate sunt”.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibidem*.

not in word, applauding her cleverness in securing eternal fame. Boccaccio's project is one that goes beyond discussing the facts of women's lives on their own, as we have noted elsewhere; the mouthpiece through which he does so, the author, is a character whose serious commitment to writing accurate history is both admirable and fulfilled while at the same time constantly undermined.

The humble work of distancing his own history from grandeur begins with Boccaccio's homage to Petrarch in his preface. Heaping praise on Petrarch's pre-existing "compendio de viris illustribus libros", he calls it a "latiori tamen volumine et accuratiori stilo", a volume still fuller, more meticulously done than those of the ancient authors ("veterum").<sup>70</sup> The Petrarchan approach to writing biography has much in common with Boccaccio's in its commitment to bringing order to sometimes confusing and misleading histories. Yet, the Petrarchan gloss on what shall be documented and what shall not is quite different. While Boccaccio often chooses to lay out confusion before sorting through it, Petrarch declares at the outset that his devotion to brevity in favor of minimizing confusion will lead him to omit quite a lot:

*Qua in re temerariam et inutilem diligentiam eorum fugiendam putavi, qui omnium historicorum verba relegentes, nequid omnino pretermisisse videantur, dum unus alteri adversatur, omnem historie sue textum nubiosis ambagibus et inenodabilibus laqueis involverunt.*

In so doing I decided that it was best to flee from that reckless and useless diligence of those who, in reprising the words of all historians without thinking it right to leave any of them behind even when one author is in conflict with another, have tied up the entire text of their history in unsolvable knots and obscure twists and turns.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, Preface, 1.

<sup>71</sup> Francesco PETRARCH, *De viris illustribus*, Prohemium 4. I will refer throughout to the Italian-Latin facing edition of Silvano FERRONE, ed. (2003), which transmits the text as emended by Guido MARTELOTTI (1964), in the *Edizione Nazionale delle Opere di Francesco Petrarca*, II. I will provide English translations of my own to the quoted sections of the Latin. This edition of *De viris illustribus* is comprised of four volumes, the first of which contains the "final" edition of the work as it stood at the end of Petrarch's life, twenty-three lives of Roman heroes from Romulus to Cato, having been commissioned by Francesco da Carrara. The other three volumes have other editors and contain the other sections of the work completed at other moments of the author's life but not considered part of its latest version: the

“*Temerariam et inutilem diligentiam*” is a curious contradiction; it is rare to speak of reckless diligence, yet what Petrarch means to say makes sense in the context of transmitting history. To devote oneself to a principle while entirely losing sight of why and for what purpose often ends up undermining one’s ultimate goal. In this case, historians who are so dedicated to showing that they have done all the research, read all the facts, and left no stone unturned are doing their readers a disservice in perpetuating murkiness and confusion, knots that cannot be untied. Petrarch promises his readers straightforwardness and brevity (“[b]revitati et notitie consulere propositum est”), having eliminated those things whose confusion outweighs their usefulness (“*multa resecando que plus confusionis ... quam commoditatis essent allatura*”).<sup>72</sup> Here, his preface doubles as a dedication to Francesco da Carrara, his patron; his words, however, are explicitly addressed to the reader. If readers should lose patience with him over his omissions, he beseeches them (“*hos hortor ac moneo*”) to pause before pronouncing judgment, which is a practice of the ignorant (“*quod est proprium pauca noscentium*”), and consider his plight in having to sort through all the discordant histories out there in the world.<sup>73</sup> In other words, rest assured that the author has done the work and has made the right choices on the reader’s behalf.

Why imagine that Boccaccio has created an author persona while Petrarch is earnestly himself? Of course, Petrarch is just as capable of creating different personalities as author; like Boccaccio, he wrote many different kinds of books over the course of his life. His personal

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Biblical lives that preceded the Roman lives in the second version (II, *Adam-Hercules*), the lengthy life of Julius Caesar (III, *De gestis Cesaris*), and the slim volume containing much shorter versions of fourteen of the original twenty-three Roman lives (IV, *Compendium*).

<sup>72</sup> PETRARCH, *De viris illustribus*, Prohemium 6. All quotes are from the later, shorter Prohemium, written to precede the exclusively Roman lives. However, all quotes can also be found, nearly verbatim, in the earlier and much longer Prohemium, as well.

<sup>73</sup> Prohemium, 5.

correspondence at the time, however, as well as the trajectory of his career as far as we are able to date his works, shows the keen interest he took in history and in becoming a recognized historian to rival Livy and Florus, as he more or less challenged them openly in his biography of Scipio. A look at his other activity at the time he wrote the *De viris* shows his deep and long-standing commitment to history as a discipline. His great admiration for Scipio as voiced in the *De viris illustribus* is given an epic form in his *Africa*, a heroic poem in nine books that he viewed as “a centerpiece of [his] project of fashioning himself as the leading intellectual and poet-historian of his age.”<sup>74</sup> Both works were in progress at the same time, and Scipio’s biography in the *De viris* grew longer with each successive edition of the compendium as his interest in and knowledge of the man grew. Julius Caesar, too, originally left out of the first version of the *De viris*, is the subject of a biography added later on that grew over the years until it reached a length to rival that of Scipio. This deepening of Petrarch’s work on Julius Caesar can be tracked alongside his discovery of new material on the emperor’s life, as well as a lifelong ambivalence on Petrarch’s part about the manner of Caesar’s career and his death.<sup>75</sup> In other words, the *De viris* is part of a highly consistent series of works focusing on a handful of Roman figures whose lives Petrarch clearly investigated as fully as he could, with nothing resembling play involved. The biographies, both individually and in their collective state, align themselves very well with his avowed goals and curiosities as a scholar, making it logical and appropriate to view the work within a certain continuum. Boccaccio’s *De mulieribus*, as I have argued, is equally coextensive with its author’s literary propensities; in his case, however, those propensities are less straightforward, more playful, and more interested in subverting convention rather than (or as well as) merely surpassing it.

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<sup>74</sup> Simone MARCHESI in KIRKHAM and MAGGI, eds. (2009), 114.

<sup>75</sup> Ronald WITT in KIRKHAM and MAGGI, eds. 110-111.

The version of Petrarch's volume I am referring to in this context is what scholars now agree to be the third iteration of the *De viris illustribus*, which changed in scope dramatically from one period to the next.<sup>76</sup> When he originally set out to write it, Petrarch meant it to be a compendium of Roman lives, beginning with Romulus, supposedly completed around 1342-1343, and most scholars agree that this first edition contained twenty-three total lives, including the quite extensive *Vita Scipionis*.<sup>77</sup> Around ten years later, in the period 1351-1353, he decided to include biblical heroes as well, starting from Adam. This expanded version features twelve lives of ancient figures, and it also includes an author's preface, which discusses the inclusion of both Roman and biblical lives. In the fifteen years or so between this edition and the composition of what is considered the final edition, Petrarch worked extensively on the *Africa*, and in so doing he lengthened his *Vita Scipionis* and composed the even longer *De gestis Cesaris*. Thus, in 1368, when Francesco da Carrara wanted to build a new room in his Padua palazzo depicting famous Roman heroes, he sought Petrarch's input and requested a new edition of the *De viris illustribus*. At this point, the Roman vision of the work resurfaced, and before he died Petrarch revised the twenty-three lives of the first edition, eschewing all the Biblical lives, including his newer and longer *Vita Scipionis* and adding *De gestis Cesaris*. He in fact planned to continue past Caesar and include all the emperors up until Trajan, but he ran out of time.<sup>78</sup> Now considered definitive is the Roman-only version of the work, with a new, highly condensed preface reflecting the exclusion of the Old Testament figures.

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<sup>76</sup> For the most recent full chronology of Petrarch's composition of the work, as well as the changes in scholarly consensus with regard to the dating of each of the three editions, see WITT (2009).

<sup>77</sup> This is the position of WITT (2009). Witt assesses and mostly agrees with Guido MARTELLOTTI and Carlo CALCATERRA, who established in the mid-twentieth century that the shorter *De viris illustribus* in fact did precede the longer and more expansive one. Witt, however, notes that the notion that the earliest edition definitely included all twenty-three of what are now considered the 'original' lives (Romulus through Cato) "cannot be securely established" despite Martellotti's insistence upon it.

<sup>78</sup> This is the timeline that both Benjamin KOHL (1974) and WITT favor.

Petrarch's return to the Roman *vir*i and his exclusion of the Old Testament ones may have arisen on orders from his patron, Carrara. Ronald Witt, however, writing for a critical guide to the complete works of Petrarch released in 2009, maintains that the author's decision to do so was precedent to and thus independent of Carrara's commission.<sup>79</sup> Benjamin Kohl, too, in a 1974 essay analyzing Petrarch's approach to history through his various plans for the *De viris*, sees the reversion to a purely Roman history of illustrious men as a sign of "the aged humanist ... returning to the more purely Roman classicism of his youth."<sup>80</sup> Yet, Kohl says, such a reversion does not reflect a change in Petrarch's view of history, which remains relatively unchanged throughout the long process of realizing different iterations of the *De viris*. Though Petrarch substantially edited his first preface, which he had composed for the Biblical heroes edition, condensing it considerably to reflect the renewed, narrower scope of his book, the revision reflects, in fact, a steadfast constancy in the author's aim. Though shorter, the later version of the preface now considered definitive transmits the same core convictions about the historian's function, almost word for word. "[C]ontent to mine the earlier longer preface for what he must have still considered an essential statement on the purposes of the work", Petrarch maintains the same structural approach to writing a history of illustrious men even as he reverts to the purely Roman model, and he insists upon the same clarity, brevity, and focus on virtue.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> WITT, 110. See also 384, note 56.

<sup>80</sup> KOHL, 134.

<sup>81</sup> Though it is about one-third the length of its predecessor, in defending Petrarch's methods the later Prohemium remains faithful to the earlier one, which is transmitted in the second volume of the 2003 edition of the work: MALTA, ed. (2006). All the passages I quote from the later Prohemium are nearly exact transcriptions from the earlier, longer Prohemium, supporting KOHL's argument that Petrarch's approach to history remained constant throughout the several decades that the composition of *De viris illustribus* spans.



Though this work is not among Petrarch's most famous or most studied, it does offer an illuminating glimpse into how he viewed his role as historian and, in this context, how Boccaccio viewed his own. "Brevitati et notitie consulere propositum est," as Petrarch makes clear in his preface: the goal is not only to inform, but also to create ease for the reader by eliminating unnecessary noise. Boccaccio, too, wishes to smooth the way for readers to access his material, but not with brevity. Rather, he judges ("arbitror") that "amplius in longiusculam hystoriam protraxisse," to have prolonged a story where possible will prove to be "non solum utile, sed oportunum", not only useful but suitable for his purposes, given his wish to please women as well as men, who both need and delight in a lengthier discussion, "sermone prolixiori indigent et letantur".<sup>82</sup>

It may be that this difference in approaches is practical in origin, owing to the relative availability of materials for illustrious men and illustrious women; Boccaccio had too few testimonials, Petrarch far too many, and therefore the former expanded while the latter condensed. Yet, the two authors have exceedingly different attitudes towards their respective relationships as historians to the material and to their readers. Boccaccio actively engages with the idea of who the reader is, how she will experience the text, and how (he hopes) she will behave when confronted with historical and mythological sources in the future: he is setting her up for a future in reading critically, and he crafts the experience of the *De mulieribus* with that idea squarely in mind. Petrarch does not speculate about who his audience might be or what they would require, probably because he assumes that they will be male, educated, scholarly, and well-versed in Latin; his concept of his task is clean, simple and straightforward. In fact, he openly rejects the idea of catering to any particular kind of reader:

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<sup>82</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, Preface, 8.

*Ego neque pacificator historicorum neque collector omnium, sed eorum imitator quibus vel verisimilitudo certior vel autoritas maior est; quamobrem siqui futuri sunt, qui huiusmodi lectioni versati aut aliud quicquam aut aliter dictum reperierint quam vel audire consueverint vel legere, hos hortor ac moneo ne confestim pronuntient, quod est proprium pauca noscentium, cogitentque historicorum discordiam, que tanto rebus propinquiorem Titum Livium dubium tenuit.*

I am neither a conciliator nor a collector of historians, but an imitator of those who have greater verisimilitude and more authority; therefore, if in the future there are those who, being used to a reading of a certain kind, manage to find something divergent or said in a way different from what they are used to reading or hearing, I urge them and advise them not to proclaim it immediately, which is the practice of those who know little, and instead to think about the disagreement among historians, which reduced even Titus Livius to doubt, even though he was so much closer to the facts.<sup>83</sup>

This is perhaps Petrarch's strongest statement as author; hitherto his preface is mostly written in the impersonal ("[h]ystoriam narrare propositum est"), but here the "ego" is right out front, signaling a pronouncement to be noted carefully. Compare it to Boccaccio's "venit in animum ... decus in unum deducere",<sup>84</sup> it came to mind to draw these women's deeds into a single book, or his "[a]ttamen visum est, ... nullas ex sacris mulieribus hebreis christianisque miscuisse",<sup>85</sup> it seemed advisable not to mix any Hebrew and Christian women with the (mostly) pagan women in the volume. Though he writes in the first person, he still manages to efface himself where possible; nowhere in the dedication or a preface does Boccaccio state his purpose with the pronoun "ego". By comparison, Petrarch uses more forthright, declarative language, particularly given the contrast of this sentence to the preceding impersonal constructions; he decides what is to be written and what is to be omitted, and he makes no apologies.

Similarly to the *De mulieribus*, the *De viris* aims squarely for its reader's moral compass: this work, according to Petrarch, consists of only "que ad virtutes vel virtutum contraria trahi

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<sup>83</sup> *De viris illustribus*, Prohemium, 5.

<sup>84</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, Preface, 4.

<sup>85</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, Preface, 9.

possunt,"<sup>86</sup> those things which can be drawn from either virtue or its opposite. Yet, there is no mention of pleasure on the level of Boccaccio's "suis quippe suffragiis tuis blandietur ociis, dum feminea virtute et historiarum lepiditate letaberis" addressed to Andrea Acciajuoli, the dedicatee. The *De mulieribus* promises its primary female reader that firstly, the book's judgments, or counsels, will make her leisure more pleasurable, and secondly, that she will delight in the feminine virtues and charming stories presented therein.<sup>87</sup> Only subsequently does he bring up the idea that the book might inspire its reader to be "facinorum preteritarum mulierum emula", an emulator of the deeds of past women. For Petrarch, amusement and delight are quite secondary. Any deviation from providing a moral example to be either followed or avoided by readers ("vel sectanda legentibus vel fugienda"), is dismissed as "errare", wandering, perhaps from some misguided attempt at "oblectandi gratia diversoria legentibus",<sup>88</sup> trying to divert readers, in the sense of both entertaining them and of taking them away from what should be their primary purpose. To Petrarch, this purpose is to emulate illustrious figures, while for Boccaccio, critical reading is a necessary antecedent to decisions about how to act.

The scholarly consensus that this preface to the *De viris* paints an accurate picture of Petrarch's views on history certainly derives from its "uncharacteristically constant ... views on the nature of history", as Kohl maintains.<sup>89</sup> Petrarch's ideal historian, as the prefaces each declare, should "sift and rework the material provided by earlier historians ... [giving] an

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<sup>86</sup> *De viris illustribus*, Prohemium, 6.

<sup>87</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, Dedication, 8.

<sup>88</sup> *De viris illustribus*, Prohemium, 6.

<sup>89</sup> KOHL, 134.

accurate verbal account of the events themselves.”<sup>90</sup> Petrarch as a historian shapes the reader’s experience with a firm hand, taking aesthetic, critical and didactic control of his prose, and in Kohl’s words, “shun[ning] all irrelevant, inaccurate and undignified transgressions”.<sup>91</sup> Boccaccio, too, crafts a highly specific reader experience, but his readers also participate in his process of critical thinking about how history works. He allows confusion, discrepancy and outright historical manipulation to coexist with what he views as factual truth in his biographies, opting to show readers how the latter can be found instead of extracting it and presenting it exclusively as Petrarch does. Paradoxically, though Boccaccio professes to frame his stories so as to make them more readable while Petrarch scorns such “errare”, the *De mulieribus* presents greater expectations for its readers’ abilities and intelligence in giving them so much material to parse and presenting it to them in its fullness.

Petrarch’s promises of straightforward narrative and limited transparency are generally honored in his text; he gives legends about his subjects a word or two in assembling his historical narrative, without dwelling on them or speculating about their relationship to fact. The birth and rearing of Remus and Romulus present him with an immediate challenge in writing the latter’s biography, and he dispenses with the issue swiftly in referring to both Mars, the purported father, and the she-wolf wet-nurse of lore as “either real or fictional” and wasting no further words on the “ficto/a”.<sup>92</sup> Further on, he takes a similar tack in speculating on Remus’s death and Romulus’s power grab: Remus meets his end climbing the walls, “seu hinc orto certamine, seu contempto fratris”, whether the result of a duel or of contempt from his brother, and the city is named for “Romuli soli,” Romulus alone. One of these deaths is

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<sup>90</sup> KOHL, 137.

<sup>91</sup> KOHL, 135.

<sup>92</sup> *De viris illustribus*, I.3-5.

legitimate while the other is not, but Petrarch again avoids speculating or pronouncing judgment.<sup>93</sup> “[S]ive imperii cupiditas, sive ille iustitie rigor fuit”, whether the cause was lust for power or rigidity in justice, Romulus assumed the king’s attire (“regiumque habitum ... assumpsit”) and the rule of the city he and his brother had founded.<sup>94</sup> Though he admits that the account of Romulus’s motives varies widely among sources (“variat enim in multis vetustissime rei fides”<sup>95</sup>), he persists in avoiding any discussion of what those sources are or how to parse them.

As restrained as he is in discussing Romulus, Petrarch is prolific in his depiction of Scipio, whose biography is nearly as long as all twenty-one of the volume’s other entries combined. So much for brevity; in a rare moment he asks for pardon from the readers at the *Vita Scipionis*’s conclusion, suggesting that the brevity of all the rest “multorum brevitatem” might compensate for the “prolixitatem unius.”<sup>96</sup> Scipio’s is one case in which Petrarch does cite specific sources, beginning the entry by visiting Livy’s account of the man. Here, Petrarch makes the case more strongly than ever for the supremacy of his own history of this great man over all preceding versions. He quotes Livy directly as calling Scipio “non suo modo etatis maximum ducem sed omnis ante se memorie omnium gentium cuilibet regum imperatorum ve parem”, not only the greatest commander of his time but equal in valor to any other king or leader of every people in every age preceding him.<sup>97</sup> As a side note, Petrarch adds that Livy was likely restraining himself when he wrote this so as not to offend Caesar Augustus, “dominum

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<sup>93</sup> *De viris illustribus*, I.13.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>96</sup> *De viris illustribus*, XXI.xii.45

<sup>97</sup> *De viris illustribus*, XXI.i.1.

suum." Florus, on the other hand, who evidently had nothing similar to fear, wrote unambiguously that Scipio was the greatest of all who preceded and followed him, "'omnium et ante et postea ducum'".<sup>98</sup>

Though both historians are figures to whom Petrarch is clearly indebted, when talking about Scipio they are straw men; Petrarch proceeds to criticize them for their willingness to even compare the conquests of Scipio with those of Hannibal, let alone to call them both "maximos ducum," the greatest among leaders. What seems to trouble him most is that both historians discuss the two leaders' conquest within the same text, "iuncta narratione permisceant," comparing two entities that are innately incomparable, in Petrarch's view. Hannibal won his conquests through "crudelitate ac perfidia", while Scipio was "iustissimus mitissimusque", operating with "suavitate clementiaque et fide".<sup>99</sup> Petrarch seizes the opportunity to take aim not just at the conclusions of historians who would equate two such men, no matter their reputation, but even at their very premise in comparing them. This is where he makes the case most clearly, explicitly and fervently for his own history above those preceding him: with the distance afforded him by time, he corrects the errors of his ancestors and gives us Scipio in the fullness of his grandeur. This biography represents a historical figure vitally important to Petrarch, and it is with his treatment of Scipio that we see Petrarch as he really sees himself: the historian to end all historians, to correct all mistakes of the past, calling them what they are, and to present his own account as definitive, unable to be challenged.

Boccaccio's invocation of Petrarch in the opening of his own volume indicates that the former has no argument with the latter's conception of himself as supreme historian; he calls his colleague's *De viris illustribus* "latiori" [fuller] and having "accuratiori stilo" [more precise

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<sup>98</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>99</sup> *De viris illustribus*, XXI.i.2.

style]. This, Boccaccio says, is “digne”, worthy, which presumably refers to Petrarch’s “volumine”, also in the ablative.<sup>100</sup> The next sentence elaborates on that worth, taking what is ostensibly praise for those deserving men memorialized in biography and applying it just as vehemently to the work of that “vir insignis et poeta egregius Franciscus Petrarca, preceptor noster”:

... et digne. Nam qui, ut ceteros anteirent claris facinoribus, studium omne, substantias, sanguinem et animam, exigente oportunitate, posuere, profecto ut eorum nomen in posteros perpetua deducatur memoria meruere.

This is fitting. For those who gave all their zeal, their fortunes, and (when the occasion required it) their blood and their lives in order to surpass other men in illustrious deeds have certainly earned the right to have their names remembered forever by posterity.<sup>101</sup>

The *lectio facilior* pins that “qui” to the men whose memory the volumes preserve, those who literally gave their blood and their lives, and yet both syntax and structure point towards the reading that I tend to favor: it is Petrarch, here, who “ceteros anteir[et] claris facinoribus”, who surpassed other men in illustrious deeds and has thus earned the right to have his name be spoken in “perpetua ... memoria.” Going forward, then, he presents his own plan for an unprecedented work of history, leaving the connection to the previous sentence for the reader to put together. One who reads critically as he instructs and models can easily understand whose fame he is talking about in this particular moment. In truth, what Boccaccio is doing with his history is far more unprecedented than what Petrarch accomplishes; he does not argue with historians such as Livy and Florus because there are no preceding historians who have undertaken to write such a compendium of lives of women as this. The *De mulieribus*, in my view, takes square aim at the culture of biography as male-dominated, erudite, and inaccessible to those with no prior knowledge, and there is certainly *umorismo* in the gesture; a desire to

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<sup>100</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, Preface, 1.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibidem*, trans. BROWN.

*scomporre* the existing order, subvert expectations, and deploy the traditional language of the Latin historian to achieve something new. Framing his history with a tribute to Petrarch's history, Boccaccio reinforces the element of play on genre and on convention.

Boccaccio inhabits the persona of the historian with curiosity and inspiration, despite his being very much a man of his time and his culture. Reading Boccaccio's compendium on its own is at times enjoyable, at times vexing. Reading it in the company of a contemporary volume like Petrarch's, however, highlights the great complexity of his way of writing as historian. This is not to denigrate the Petrarchan "ego" as historian; far from it. Petrarch was a meticulous and tireless researcher and it seems clear that he strove for much of his life to count himself among the documenters of Roman virtues and values. Such devotion to that cause certainly influenced Boccaccio's decision to contribute his own compendium of biographies depicting virtue and denouncing vice in the Roman sense. Yet, what Boccaccio ultimately created is something in many ways far more agile than simply a collection of data presented in the most factually consistent way possible. The *De mulieribus claris* is both entertaining and instructive, composed of both fact and legend, certainty and uncertainty. This begs the question of whether Boccaccio's act in composing a history of and for women in this way is a compliment to women's intelligence or its opposite; is Boccaccio saying that women are only capable of reading facts when they are mediated through stories, or is he crediting them with the ability to parse a great many kinds of sources, without being explicitly told which one is correct? I think the answer to both is clearly yes. To the first hypothesis, Boccaccio unambiguously states that women are generally "hystoriarum ignare",<sup>102</sup> leading him to provide more extended versions of his biographies so that readers might enjoy and understand them better. To acknowledge that women have less of a background in this subject area than men generally do, however, is more

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<sup>102</sup> *De mulieribus claris*, Preface, 12. Also cited *supra*, 186.



of a practical observation than a condescending remark. Boccaccio takes this as an opportunity to correct imbalances in how history is written and provide something for these readers so often overlooked. That he does so with an eye towards readability and enjoyment makes his book no less targeted to a population of readers that he clearly considers intelligent. His choice to write in Latin, the language of scholars, is one clear indication of the work's intended destination. More importantly, however, is his insistence on the readers' agency in processing the histories as he lays them out.

Like Boccaccio's dreamer in the *Amorosa visione* (Chapter 2), the readers of this volume are not meant to allow themselves to be fed a totalizing history that invites no critical reading, à la Petrarch. Just as the poem's character resists the Dantean guide who would restrict the freedom of his reading and his viewing experience, so should these women learn to read and interpret history rather than just emulate figures from the past. Consistent with his admonitions in the *Genealogia* that readers delve "sub cortice fabularum", below the surface of fables, this work demands that they should be equally exacting and inquiring when it comes to reading and interpreting historical accounts. The *De mulieribus claris* aims to ease the reading of history through stories *and* to challenge readers beyond a simple process of accepting the written word of the historian as absolute truth. This multiplicity, along the will on the author's part that "lasciva comperias immixta sacris," demonstrates how a reader who loves legends can deepen her understanding of how those legends have contributed to humanity's self-documentation, as well as how a scholar of history can approach fiction as a source, as an object to be studied and mined for what it can reveal about the past.

## CONCLUSIONS

*O piccolo mio libretto, tratto quasi della sepultura della tua donna, ecco, sì come a me piace, la tua fine è venuta con più sollecito piede che quella de' nostri danni.*

Oh little book of mine, as if drawn from the burial ground of your woman: here, as I will it, your end is come, and it steps with a more solicitous foot than that which hurt us so.<sup>1</sup>

Within the confines of this dissertation, the four books I have studied all emerge as distinct types: a secular dream-vision in *terza rima*, an epic romance in *ottava rima*, an extended, inward-looking elegy in first-person vernacular prose, and an encyclopedia of famous women in Latin. My choices of texts were meant to touch upon poetry and prose, Italian and Latin, early and late. The intention behind my selection is and was always to convey the extensive potential for this kind of approach to Boccaccio's text in general. In other words, Boccaccio's *umorismo* extends beyond prose, beyond vernacular and beyond fiction: it is a constant of his way of approaching the creation of literature.

Among the common threads that I have followed through these texts, foremost is Boccaccio's dedication to thoughtful critical reading; his insistence upon its centrality is vital to the understanding of the *umorismo* in each of our case studies. Chapter 1 explored his direct address to readers and would-be critics in Book XIV of the *Genealogia deorum gentilium*, his scorn for those who seek only a surface-level knowledge of philosophy and pursue only what is immediately obvious about poetry. The *Amorosa visione*, as analyzed in Chapter 2, transposes the reader into a dreamer who ultimately resists his would-be spiritual guide's attempts to direct his process of viewing, parsing and interpreting what he sees. Chapter 3 looked at the commentator's pen writing alongside the author's in the *Teseida* as visual depiction of the process of reading and

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<sup>1</sup> Giovanni BOCCACCIO and Francesco ERBANI, ed. (2010), *Elegia di madonna Fiammetta*, IX.

interpreting, as if documented contemporaneously alongside the process of writing. Chapter 4 focused on the reader's intended relationship to Madonna Fiammetta in the *Elegia*, her constant pleas to be believed as truthful and her contemporaneous gestures to indicate her mendaciousness demanding vigilance on the reader's part. Finally, Chapter 5 attempted to clinch Boccaccio's stance on critical reading by presenting the *De mulieribus claris* as a testament to the abilities of readers (particularly female readers) to parse, interpret, and distinguish fact from fiction, without eschewing the role of either in shaping history. Reading is more than taking in and emulating: reading necessarily means thinking, and thinking independently.

Writing as an educated man in the fourteenth century, Boccaccio occupies perhaps an enviable position from which to instruct others, particularly women, on reading, thinking, and approaching would-be models of behavior. There is ample reason to take issue with the games he plays as they relate to his female subjects, particularly in the *Elegia*, its companion the *Corbaccio*, and the *De mulieribus claris*, and it is not my intention to obscure or to minimize the problematic nature of some parts of these narratives, however knowing and however playful they may be. Yet, I still maintain that Boccaccio ultimately opens more doors than he obstructs when it comes to considering women as a serious and important reading and writing population.

An interesting coda to his works addressed to female readers emerges in Christine de Pizan's *Livre de la cité des dames*. Appearing in 1405, this book borrows extensively from the *De mulieribus claris*, and to a lesser extent the *Decameron*, and yet it takes shape as a work entirely unto itself, a reorganization of Boccaccio's women according to an entirely different agenda. The text is an allegory in prose "that depicts the construction of a walled city built to house and protect the mythical, historical and

religious women excluded from conventional structures of history," as Marilyn Desmond writes.<sup>2</sup> In a 1982 edition and translation of Christine's text, Earl Jeffrey Richards avows that, as the "pivotal expression of Christine's views on women",<sup>3</sup> the *Cité des dames* champions "an encompassing feminine ideal which uncompromisingly refuses to apologize for women against their detractors but rather seeks to demonstrate the indispensability of feminine contributions to the continuation of human civilization." Many of the featured women are those who have indeed been included in the *De mulieribus*; Christine thoroughly recasts the notorious ones (Medea, Sempronia), however, refusing to acknowledge the judgments of men upon women whose womanhood put them in impossible positions, and she thus "presents them in a wholly favorable light."<sup>4</sup> In Richards's view, Christine does not merely borrow or translate; rather, she executes a "thematic systemization" of Boccaccio's text that "constitutes simultaneously an implicit refutation" of it.<sup>5</sup> Looking at the two texts side by side, it is clear that Christine has created something entirely new that is nonetheless quite indebted to the *De mulieribus*. While I disagree with Richards's rather harsh views on Boccaccio's portraits of women as "negative, back-handed" and ultimately lazy,<sup>6</sup> he is

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<sup>2</sup> Marilyn Desmond in Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay, eds. (2008), 129.

<sup>3</sup> Earl Jeffrey Richards (1982), xxxiv.

<sup>4</sup> Richards, xvii.

<sup>5</sup> Richards, xxxviii.

<sup>6</sup> Richards, xxxv-xxxvi. Boccaccio's omission of contemporary women is attributed to their (obvious and necessary) absence in the Latin *auctores*: "Clearly Cicero, Vergil, Ovid, Servius, Flavius, Josephus, Valerius Maximus, Augustine, and Orosius were not in any position to discuss Boccaccio's contemporaries! Lacking their authority, Boccaccio seems to have simply concluded that the only illustrious women were those sanctioned and authorized by the received literary canon." This is an unnecessarily reductive and unfortunately superficial take on the *De mulieribus*, as I hope my fifth chapter made clear.

quite right in touting Christine's text as a thoroughly innovative transposition of a compendium of lives of women.

Of most interest to us, however, is Christine's unambiguous self-naming as creator of the work: "the *Cité des dames* opens with a scene of reading that emphasizes the bodily status of the author as a female," in Desmond's words, and henceforth takes solid ownership of femininity "in direct contradiction to the misogynist conflation of femininity with vice."<sup>7</sup> Maureen Quilligan adds that Christine "uniquely ... not only names herself as author, but makes her own personal experience, indicated by the signature, the fundamental authority subtending her text - which allows her to defend all women."<sup>8</sup> The way to this text, in my view, is paved in part by Boccaccio's opening of the historical field to a serious consideration of women and their contributions to history as subjects and as readers. I do not wish to credit him with the inspiration or the wherewithal for Christine's arduous and important work, to be sure. However, I see his unique dedication to women as readers and subjects as a necessary predecessor to the success of someone like Christine de Pizan.

Writing for the female reader emerges as a distinct objective of Boccaccio's only in Chapters 4 and 5, but both the *Elegia* and the *De mulieribus*, in my view, end up flattering women a great deal in terms of their intelligence and their capacity as storytellers and as readers. Fiammetta wields an uncanny power through Boccaccio: she successfully lays claim to both utter truthfulness and masterful lies, at the same time. Her assumption that her *libretto*, upon its publication, will meet with other women who recognize themselves in her implies that her mastery of language is something many

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<sup>7</sup> DESMOND, 130.

<sup>8</sup> Maureen QUILLIGAN (1992), 207.

women share with her. Though this could be interpreted as a moral stance against women as innate and harmful liars, as the *Corbaccio's* ridiculous narrator would have us believe, I rather think that we should look to Boccaccio's justification of poetic 'lying' in the *Genealogia*. Poets, he reminds us, composers of fiction, write things that are untrue, perhaps even contrary to fact, but they do so "non credentes neque firmantes, sed more suo fingentes scripsere" [not believing with conviction, but inventing, as is their custom].<sup>9</sup> These inventions are not ignorant, nor are they malicious; creators of fiction operate with "artificio", with a larger mission in mind, one which will not reveal itself to the reader who does not persist in interrogating the text. Fiammetta, by way of Boccaccio, joins the ranks of these poetic inventors. That she herself is fictional, a creation of the male author's mind, serves as the undeniable signal to readers to look deeper than the surface for the way this text works.

Fiction has its place as entertaining and instructive art as well as historical object to be examined and documented, as in the *De mulieribus claris*. In this case, fiction is frequently referenced as the source of people's beliefs. Boccaccio's historian clearly harbors some contempt for those unable to distinguish between fact and fiction, and he scorns even more those who intentionally wish to spread fiction masquerading as fact for the purposes of widespread deception (something he notes as an exception to his exoneration of liars in the *Genealogia*). The Roman Senate, in spreading the lie about Flora the prostitute's status as goddess in order to save face, and the people of Rome, in accepting this lie without critical inquiry, exemplify the lack of integrity and curiosity for which Boccaccio has no patience. "Stulte damnatur, quod minus sane intelligitur", as

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<sup>9</sup> Giovanni BOCCACCIO and Vittore BRANCA, ed. (1998), *Genealogia deorum gentilium*, XIV.xiii.7

he titles his fourteenth chapter of *Genealogia* XIV: Ignorantly, people condemn what they understand least well.

In what he must have viewed as a contribution to the perpetuation of critical reading, Boccaccio composed several commentaries on other authors' texts in the course of his career. His playful turn as glossator to his own *Teseida* gives him the opportunity to inhabit author and commentator at the same time, playing, as I have argued, with notions of what commentary can and should provide to a canonical text. His glosses both serve the reader in providing a virtually limitless encyclopedia of mythical backstory to the main text and challenge the reader to extend his or her poetic interpretation beyond the often dry, straightforward, earnest voice of the commentator, who, as we saw in a few examples in Chapter 3, often seemed to intentionally miss the deeper meaning of what was being invoked in the verses themselves. The tone of this figure and his attempts to commandeer the reading of the *Teseida*, in my view, is meant to contrast Boccaccio the author's insistence on readers doing their own work in interpreting. The commentary is a resource, but it is not the ultimate resource, and readers should not rely upon it exclusively.

The *Amorosa visione's* guide is a corollary to such commentary, in a certain sense; her initial intention in the narrative was to accompany the dreamer through the galleries and the images they displayed, choosing which ones he looked at and dictating how he interpret them. While the dreamer does, in the end, allow himself to be guided up to a point, he does not tolerate the limits of someone else's interpretation of the content of his dream. Looking at all four works, those would-be constraints upon the reader appear in a different form in each instance, and Boccaccio works every time to promote both the

autonomy and the tenacity of the reader. Male or female, all readers are capable of the kind of self-possession necessary to grasp the complexities at work in his books.

This brings us back, finally, to humor. One of the great obstacles to seeing humor and crediting humorists, as Pirandello writes, is the sort of literary criticism that insists on rigid standards unwilling to see outside themselves, not unlike the role that *Amorosa visione*'s guide embodies:

*[L]a critica, guidata nella maggior parte delle nostre storie letterarie da pregiudizi che non hanno nulla che vedere con l'estetica o, comunque, da criteri generali, non ha saputo a volta a volta adattarsi e piegarsi, e ha giudicato come errori, eccessi o difetti quelli che eran caratteri peculiari.*

[Literary] criticism, guided for the most part in our literary histories by prejudices that have nothing to do with aesthetics or, in any case, by general criteria, has not known how to adapt itself and bend itself from moment to moment, and it has judged as errors, excesses or defects things which were peculiar characteristics.<sup>10</sup>

The intention of this project is to propose a novel way to look at these texts, bending previously accepted notions about their validity and their complexity. Ultimately, I hope to have opened the door to a refreshing but no less plausible set of standards, perhaps more flexible than some of their predecessors, which might attract new readers to this wonderful canon of material. In the case of each of the books I've analyzed, the deliberate table-setting for one sort of text ultimately overturned by the text itself, among other things, is exactly the sort of craft that Pirandello exalts in *L'umorismo*. As Nietzsche might say, the fact that these works are composed with humor is anything but a denial of their weight: "the eternal comedy of existence ... must in the end overwhelm even the greatest of ... tragedies."<sup>11</sup> These texts are ultimately the most important kind of *arte*, the sort that gives us "a rest from ourselves by looking upon, by looking *down*

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<sup>10</sup> Luigi PIRANDELLO (1992), 102. Translation mine.

<sup>11</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm NIETZSCHE and Walter KAUFMANN, trans. (1974), I.1.



upon, ourselves and, from an artistic distance, laughing *over* ourselves".<sup>12</sup> Boccaccio's works do not claim to put a full stop to inquiries about the reader and his role, the commentator and his mediation of reading, the conventions imposed by genre, but by treating these subjects with curiosity and lightness, he poses "the real question mark".<sup>13</sup> While these questions continue to ignite fierce discussion among scholars of the *Decameron*, we should take the opportunity to explore them in texts that currently receive far less critical attention, despite the fact that they are openly, in some cases, explicitly, asking for it.

Of course, as I started out by saying in Chapter 1, I do not begrudge the *Decameron* all the attention and love it receives. It is undeniably funny, smart, captivating, and accessible, despite its incredible depth. I began to study Boccaccio because of the hours I spent, jetlagged in the middle of the night on the other side of the world, reading his *novelle* with a flashlight under a sleeping bag and having to stifle my laughter. Nonetheless, I would like for us to stop doing the rest of Boccaccio's corpus the disservice of insisting upon its relationship to the *Decameron* as its most important characteristic. My aim is to draw out the wealth of complexity, depth, humor, and ultimately, pleasure to be found by studying each of my primary texts closely, as its own entity, in dialogue with other relevant texts but never dependent upon them. As Boccaccio says in what I confess to be my favorite passage of his, "volentibus intelligere et nexus ambiguus enodare legendum est, insistendum vigilandumque atque interrogandum, et omni modo premende cerebri vires": for the one who wishes to understand, to dissolve the knots of ambiguity, it is necessary to read, to pore over the

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<sup>12</sup> NIETZSCHE, II.107.

<sup>13</sup> NIETZSCHE, V.382

text, to stay awake interrogating it, to push the capacities of the brain in every way, until “*lucidum illi appareat quod primo videbatur obscurum*”, that which was first obscure appears bright.<sup>14</sup> This kind of reading shines the necessary light into the great, if initially not easily understood, authorial play, the *umorismo* that illuminates the *peregrinas et inauditas inventiones* of poetic fervor.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> BOCCACCIO, *Genealogia deorum gentilium*, XIV.xii.17.

<sup>15</sup> See *supra*, Chapter 1, 31.

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