A SINGULAR BOCCACCIO:
DEFENDING POETRY IN THE *DECAMERON* AND THE
GENEALOGIE

MARTIN EISNER

Abstract: This essay reconsiders the conventional division of Boccaccio's career into two parts that is usually associated with his first meeting with Petrarch. Beginning with two fourteenth-century portraits of Boccaccio, it challenges this traditional account by calling attention to the continuities between the defences of poetry in the *Decameron* and the *Genealogie*. It argues that the persistence of Boccaccio's claims for the freedom and authority of literature constitutes a singular feature of Boccaccio's thought that unites his works.

Two fourteenth-century portraits of Boccaccio convey the conventional division of Boccaccio's career into two stages. The first, from a Parisian manuscript of the *Decameron* (Figure 1), represents the author reading his book as Cupid shoots amorous arrows into a crowd of ladies, whose collective response seems reflected by the moved or wounded woman in the foreground with her hand on her chest. In the other image, which serves as the appended parchment frontispiece to a fourteenth-century paper copy of Boccaccio's *Buccolicum carmen* (Figure 2), Boccaccio reads to a group of tonsured friars and the mediating figure, identified as the Muse Calliope, brings the author the laurel crown.¹ In the juxtaposition of these portraits, many critics, despite their very different interpretations of Boccaccio's work, would see a division of Boccaccio's career into two stages: in the

¹ Both of these images have been attributed to Boccaccio (Ciardi Dupré Dal Poggetto), but these attributions have been questioned (Volpe). The complexity of the full pages that include these portraits, however, suggests that the iconographic program was likely designed, if not actually drawn, by Boccaccio himself, because both illustrate each work's textual metaphors (Galeotto for the *Decameron* and sheep for the *Buccolicum carmen*). For a thoughtful analysis of the full *Decameron* page, see Delcorno Branca. The friars in the *Buccolicum carmen* image are likely intended to be Augustinians, since the manuscript also contains Boccaccio's exegetical letter to Fra Martino da Signa, an Augustinian friar of Santo Spirito in Florence.

first, he is the author of vernacular love stories for ladies; in the second, the scholar who writes encyclopaedic works in Latin for men.

Critics have often explained this change in terms of what Francisco Rico calls the “conversion of Boccaccio” from vernacular poet to proto-Humanist under the influence of his encounter with Petrarch in 1350.² This story of conversion appears in the works of Boccaccio’s earliest biographers, such as Filippo Villani, who suggests that Boccaccio wanted to burn his youthful works but could not because they were too widely disseminated (436–440).³ The idea of this conversion derives from Boccaccio’s suggestions in the *Buccolicum carmen* itself, where Boccaccio intimates that he burned his vernacular poems after reading Petrarch and gives Petrarch the pastoral name Phylostropos, which Boccaccio glosses as meaning that Petrarch turned his love (*philos-tropos*) from terrestrial things to celestial ones.⁴

Boccaccio’s claims about a Petrarchan conversion need to be carefully evaluated, however, not only because of the commonplace narrative of conversion from

² There are various other formulations of this idea of the two Boccaccios (Scaglione 119; F. Bruni, *Boccaccio: L’invenzione* 263; Branca, *Giovanni Boccaccio: Profilo Biografico* 91; McLaughlin 614). On the possible link between the *Buccolicum carmen* image and Boccaccio’s transformation, see Kirkham 130.

³ Villani’s narrative seems to be inspired in part by Petrarch’s discussion of Boccaccio’s burning of his vernacular poems in *Seniles* 5.2, where Petrarch also mentions that he could not destroy his own poems because they were too widely disseminated.

⁴ In the twelfth eclogue, entitled *Sapho*, Boccaccio’s pastoral persona Aristeus encounters the same Muse from the illustration, Calliope, who asks him, “Non ego te vidi pridem vulgare canentem / in triviis carmen, misero plaudente popello?” (“Didn’t I see you before / singing a vulgar song beside the crossroads, / with the wretched rabble all applauding?”; *Buc.* 12). Boccaccio-Aristeus responds: “Vidisti, fateor. Non omnibus omnia semper / sunt animo, puero carmen vulgare placebat. / Illud Lemniadi claudio concessimus; ast nunc / altior est etas, alios que monstrat amores” (“You saw it, I confess. But everyone / does not always maintain the same intentions. A vulgar song did please me as a boy; I have granted it to the lame god of Lemnos. But now my greater age sees other loves”; Boccaccio, *Eclogues*). Later in the eclogue, Boccaccio attributes his transformation to hearing Silvanus-Petrarch and Minciades-Virgil sing of poetry in the shade of the laurel crown that Boccaccio hopes these eclogues will help him attain (*Buccolicum carmen* 12.67–81). It is not clear whether the pastoral scene of singing in *Sapho* should be understood as referring to Petrarch’s imitation of the pastoral Virgil in his own *Buccolicum carmen* or of the epic Virgil in the *Africa*. Critics usually connect this scene of burning with Boccaccio’s reading of Petrarch’s vernacular lyrics, which, according to Petrarch’s account in *Seniles* 5.2, led Boccaccio to burn his vernacular poems. For Boccaccio’s gloss of Phylostropos, see *Epistle* 23.29–30.

Fig. 1. Boccaccio, *Decameron*. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, ms It. 482, c. 5v.

Fig. 2. Boccaccio, *Buccolicum carmen*. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, 34.49, “Frontispiece.”

youthful lust to mature wisdom that one finds articulated throughout medieval literature, but also because he had expressed a desire to be converted and transformed by Petrarch in one of his earliest *ars dictaminis* exercises, *Mavortis miles* (*Ep.* 2), written over a decade before he ever met Petrarch.⁵ These binaries of vernacular/Latin and love/scholarship can distort interpretations of Boccaccio's works by establishing an impermeability between them. The power of this separation is particularly evident in discussions of the relationship between the *Decameron* and the *Genealogies of the Gentile Gods*. Francesco Bruni, for example, argues that Boccaccio's early works through the *Decameron* are excluded from the literary theory that Boccaccio develops first in his *Vita di Dante* and then most fully in the last two books of the *Genealogies*.⁶ Other critics, however, have suggested that the *Decameron* could be accommodated into the literary theory of the treatise.⁷

In this essay, I argue that the *Decameron* not only fits the literary theory of the *Genealogie*, but also informs the matrix of ideas and images that Boccaccio develops most fully in the *Genealogie*. In both works, Boccaccio pursues a defence

⁵ The narrative of maturity can be found in works from Dante's *Convivio* to Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, and, *e contrario*, in the Introduction to Day Four of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, where Boccaccio aligns himself with vernacular poets, like Dante, Cino, and Cavalcanti, who have continued to love in old age.

⁶ F. Bruni argues: "All'interpretazione allegorica, sulla quale Boccaccio si soffermerà a lungo nelle *Genealogie deorum gentilium*, quando proporrà un parallelismo tra poesia e teologia, il *Decameron* resta completamente estraneo" ("Comunicazione" 92). F. Bruni develops this argument at greater length in *Boccaccio: L'invenzione della letteratura mezzana*. For a similar view, see Wallace 49. Following Zaccaria's edition, I refer to the work by a plural title as the *Genealogies*. Boccaccio refers to it in *Ep.* 20.9 as "*opus meum De genologiis deorum*" and the *Genealogie* (itself/themselves) "*sub titulo [...] scilicet Genologie deorum*." For a discussion of this usage of the plural *Genealogie*, which occurs through the Quattro and Cinquecento, see Zaccaria 109n64.

⁷ For the possibility of categorizing the *Decameron* among the stories told by old ladies around the campfire that have some deeper meaning, which Boccaccio mentions in *Genealogie* 14.10, see Marcus, *An Allegory of Form* 4; Kriesel 223; Eisner, "The Tale of Ferondo's Purgatory (III.8)." For similar but more limited claims, see Marino; Forni 303, and Menetti. Despite his attention to the metaliterary dimension of the *Decameron*, Giuseppe Mazzotta emphasizes the connections between those reflections to the *Decameron* as a whole among particular stories within the collection, not to the *Genealogie* (47–74). For some vague thematic connections between the defences in the *Decameron* and the *Genealogie* in that they figure their textual development as a journey and deal with the wind of envy, and in that their shared enemies include the envious, ignorant, avaricious, and deceitful, see Tronci 18.

of poetry in two parts: one dedicated to a personal justification of the pursuit of poetry; the other, to a more general defence of poetry. Boccaccio himself articulates this distinction when he describes the difference between books 14 and 15 of the *Genealogie*: “In the first I will respond to certain objections that have been made against poetry and poets; in the second, which concludes the entire work, I will attempt to dismiss any potential criticism against me” (23, Book 1, Preface 1). The same distinction between the general and personal appears in the *Decameron*’s two defences of poetry, which chronologically inaugurate the pattern: in the authorial intervention in the Introduction to Day Four, Boccaccio addresses the problematic nature of his desires by aligning himself with Filippo’s son and a small group of vernacular poets—Guido Cavalcanti, Dante, and Cino da Pistoia—who continued to love in old age, while in the Author’s Conclusion, he offers a more general defence of literature.⁸ In this essay, I explore the connections between Boccaccio’s arguments in the Author’s Conclusion and Book 14 of the *Genealogie*, particularly in his appeal to painting to defend the representational range of literature and his claims about the legitimacy of literature as an institution that is parallel to philosophy and theology.

By reading these two works together, this study emphasizes continuity, instead of contrast, between the two images and contributes to the construction of a more integrated portrait of the poet that is more in keeping with the material record. The chronology of Boccaccio’s compositions would seem to confirm this narrative of conversion; the chronology of Boccaccio’s transcriptions suggests a more complicated story, since he does indeed turn away from producing vernacular fiction except for the *Corbaccio* after his meeting with Petrarch, but these distinct spheres continue to overlap. Elsewhere, I have challenged the direction of this relationship by arguing that Boccaccio’s transcriptions of the vernacular works of Dante, Petrarch, and Cavalcanti in Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Chigi L V 176 show his resistance to Petrarch, particularly on the issue of Dante and the status of the vernacular, as Boccaccio explicitly states in the manuscript’s dedicatory Latin poem, *Ytalie iam certus honos*.⁹ Boccaccio also continued to copy his own vernacular works, such as the transcription of the *Decameron* in Hamilton

⁸ A similar complementary relationship pattern can be found in the *Buccolicum carmen* between eclogue XII (*Sapho*), where Boccaccio deals with his personal pursuit of poetry, and eclogue XIII (*Laurea*), where he defends poetry as a profession, as noted in Perini.

⁹ See Eisner, *Boccaccio and the Invention*.

90 from the early 1370s.¹⁰ Armando Petrucci has noted, moreover, that Boccaccio transcribed the *Genealogie* in Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana 52.9 and the *Decameron* in Hamilton 90 according to similar material models, which further suggests the importance of searching for continuities between the two works.¹¹

1. From the Author's Conclusion of the *Decameron* to Book 14 of the *Genealogie*

Boccaccio begins the Conclusion of the *Decameron* by connecting it to his earlier personal defence in the Introduction to Day Four, but he expands his arguments here to address the figurative nature of language and the possibility that the same word may mean more than one thing. He asserts that “piú 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 ‘salciccia’ e ‘mortadello’, e tutto pien di simiglianti cose” (Conc.5; “it is no more improper for me to have written these words than for men and women at large to fill their everyday speech with such words as ‘hole’, ‘peg’, ‘mortar’, ‘pestle’, ‘wiener’, and ‘fat sausage’, and other similar expressions,” 803]. Luciano Rossi (“Il Paratesto decameroniano” 52–54; “Il *Decameron* e il *Roman de la Rose*” 201–219) proposes that Boccaccio’s source here may be the episode in the *Roman de la Rose*, where Reason defends her use of the word *coilles*: “Saturnus [...] Cui Jupiter coupa les coilles, / Ausi com se fussent andoilles, / —Mout ot cil dur fill et amer— / Puis les gita dedenz la mer / Dont Venus la deesse issi / (Car li livres le dit issi)” (vv. 5533–5538; “Saturn, whose testicles Jupiter, his hard and bitter son, cut off as though they were sausages and threw into the sea, thus giving birth to Venus, as the book tells,” Loris and Meun 113). Reason explains that it is fitting for her to “nommer [...] apertement par

¹⁰ On the transcription of the *Decameron* in Hamilton 90, see Branca and Ricci; Branca and Vitale; Cursi 19–45. For a facsimile, see Branca, *Decameron: Facsimile*. Branca argues that Boccaccio’s transcription of the *Decameron* in the 1370s shows that the *Decameron* had been scholastic all along (*Boccaccio medievale* xi–xii).

¹¹ “Particolarmente notevole, dal punto di vista codicologico, oltre che grafico, appare l’analogia fra il *Decameron* berlinese e il Laur. 52.9, che è un codice anch’esso di grande formato (mm. 355 ca. x 240 ca.), con la scrittura, disposta su due colonne, di modulo e forme quasi identici a quelli della semigotica del *Decameron*” (Petrucci 7). For a different interpretation of the codicological dimension of the *Decameron* in Hamilton 90 that relates it to copies of Quintilian’s *Declamationes*, see Marchesi 27–30.

propre non / Chose qui n'est se bonne non" (vv. 6943–6944; "name openly and by its own name a thing which is nothing if not good," 133). Boccaccio may well pick up on the metaphor of the sausages that Reason had used, but whereas in the *Roman* the question is whether it is proper for a woman like Reason to say *coilles*, for Boccaccio the question is not style or propriety but signification, that is, in the relationship between the sausage and those balls.¹² Boccaccio underlines the figurative potentiality of language that is the source of much of the work's humour and the primary vehicle in which its treatment of the erotic occurs.¹³

After showing how the everyday language of the *salsiccia* and *mortadello* may encode suggestive meanings, Boccaccio appeals to the other art of painting and deploys a similar catalogue that tends to contaminate the terms with each other. Just as the list of everyday words not only catalogues terms but enacts erotic interpretations of them by associating them in the list, his appeal to religious paintings suggests a reinterpretation through an erotic lens. He writes,

Sanza che alla mia penna non dee essere meno d'autorità conceduta
che sia al pennello del dipintore, il quale senza alcuna riprensione,
o almen giusta, lasciamo stare che egli faccia a san Michele ferire il
serpente con la spada o con la lancia, e a san Giorgio il dragone dove
gli piace; ma egli fa Cristo maschio ed Eva femina, e a Lui medesimo
che volle per la salute della umana generazione sopra la croce morire,
quando con un chiovo e quando con due i piè gli conficca in quella.
(Conc.6)

Moreover, my pen should be granted no less freedom [*autorità*] than the brush of a painter who, without incurring censure or, at least, any which is justified, depicts Saint Michael wounding the serpent with a sword or a lance and Saint George slaying the dragon wherever he pleases, not to mention the fact that he shows Christ as a man and Eve as a woman, and nails to the cross, sometimes with one nail, sometimes with two, the feet of Him who wished to die there for the salvation of mankind. (Bondanella and Musa, *Decameron* 803)

¹² For a lucid discussion of Jean in comparison with Alan of Lille, who has Nature argue that she will use pretty words to talk about bad things, see Minnis 122–128.

¹³ On the importance of metaphors for sex in the *Decameron*, see Barolini.

Having proposed the erotic potential of quotidian speech, Boccaccio now indicates the possibility that the swords, lances, and nails of religious paintings could be interpreted erotically. Like the wieners and fat sausages of everyday discourse—and partly because of his association of both classes of objects—the swords and nails take on an erotic resonance.¹⁴ Far from diminishing the presence of erotic themes, Boccaccio's appeal to religious art suggests their ambiguity. Boccaccio makes this claim not through explicit argument but by the indirect means of associating fat sausages and wieners with swords and nails. This kind of associative logic also inflects Boccaccio's invocation of "il ramarichio della Magdalena" at the end of the Author's Conclusion, which he proposes women might read instead of his novella. As Branca notes in his edition, this text may recall the same as the "lamento della Magdalena" mentioned in *Decameron* III.4, the tale of Dom Felice and Frate Puccio, in which Boccaccio erases the contrast between religious prayer and sexual intercourse to achieve a contamination of erotic and theological that culminates in the final story of Day Three, where Alibech learns how to put the devil back in hell.¹⁵

In the *Genealogie*, Boccaccio also appeals to painting in defence of the treatment of erotic subjects. He writes,

[S]i Praxitiles aut Phydias, sculptura doctissimi, inpudicum sculperint Priapum in Yolem nocte tendentem potius quam spectabilem honestate Dianam, aut si pingat Apelles, seu noster Ioctus, quo suo evo non fuit Apelles superior, Martem seu Veneri inmiscentem potius quam Iovem diis ex throno iura prebentem, has artes damnandas fore dicemus? Stolidissimum esset fateri! (14.6)

[I]f Praxiteles or Phidias, both experts in their art, should choose for a statue the immodest subject of Priapus on his way to Iole by night, instead of Diana glorified in her chastity; or if Apelles, or our own Giotto—whom Apelles in his time did not excel—should

¹⁴ Creighton Gilbert (57) suggests that Boccaccio may be thinking of actual frescoes, such as the one by Nardo di Cione in the Strozzi Chapel in Santa Maria Novella. Also see Watson. Watson and Gilbert seem to have been more sensitive to the implications of Boccaccio's moves here than many literary scholars have been. Watson notes that the mention of Christ was sometimes changed to Adam and that the number of nails did constitute a change.

¹⁵ For the contamination of religious and erotic discourse in *Decameron* Day Three, see Eisner, "Eroticizing Theology."

represent Venus in the embrace of Mars instead of the enthroned Jove dispensing laws unto the gods, shall we therefore condemn these arts [*artes*]? Downright stupidity, I should call it! (Osgood 38)¹⁶

Just as in the *Decameron*, where Boccaccio had suggested that religious art may contain potentially erotic meanings, in the *Genealogie*, he appeals to the freedom of painters to illustrate themes explicitly to justify poets' treatment of similar topics. Boccaccio's mention of Giotto is revealing, because it evinces an important difference between Dante and Boccaccio. In *Purgatorio* XI (vv. 94–99), Dante invokes Giotto to construct an artistic genealogy as a parallel to a poetic one in which Dante triumphs. Boccaccio makes no similar self-aggrandizing claim; instead, he uses the painter to argue that subject matter does not condemn an art form.¹⁷ This comparison of the arts has a long history, of course, but Boccaccio modifies it in a significant way. Whereas Horace uses the comparison of poets and painters to emphasize style in terms of proper artistic proportion or decorum, Boccaccio shifts the discussion to issues of representation and subject matter instead of style, as he does in his definition of poetry in the subsequent chapter of the *Genealogie* (14.7), where he argues that poetry (his word for literature) need not be in Latin nor only in verse.¹⁸ Highlighting hermeneutics and interpretation instead of formal features, Boccaccio produces a definition of poetry that includes not only the vernacular but even vernacular prose.¹⁹

¹⁶ In *Gen.* 15.9, Boccaccio mentions Terence's Cherea, "who[,] by looking at a picture of Jove falling in a shower of gold from the roof to the lap of Danae, was inflamed to the desire of a similar misdeed" (Osgood 127). Boccaccio continues: "Any weak susceptibility of that sort, if it ever existed—and I am not at all sure that it did—left me with my youth."

¹⁷ In Day Six of the *Decameron*, Boccaccio also expands on Dante's analogy by telling two parallel stories of Giotto and Cavalcanti. For a discussion of the relationship between these stories and Dante, see Ascoli.

¹⁸ Watson (61) observes the Horatian origins of the painter and poet comparison, but he also notes that Boccaccio uses it in a different way by dealing with what Watson calls "iconography" instead of style: "The key point here is that Boccaccio refuses to defend the eloquence of the poets on the basis of style alone. For Boccaccio, eloquence is bound to the pursuit of truth" (Kallendorf 39). For fuller discussions of Boccaccio's ideas about poetry, see Tateo; Gilson; Greenfield; Usher. For a commentary on Book 14 of the *Genealogie*, see Hege.

¹⁹ Compare Leonardo Bruni's definition of poetry in his polemical rewriting of Boccaccio's Dante biography. L. Bruni corrects Boccaccio's etymology, insisting that "poet" does derive

Having associated literature's representational range with painting, Boccaccio then distinguishes literature from philosophy and theology through the image of the garden. Boccaccio writes,

Appresso assai ben si può cognoscere queste cose non nella chiesa, delle cui cose e con animi e con vocaboli onestissimi si convien dire, quantunque nelle sue istorie d'altramenti fatte, che le scritte da me, si truovino assai; né ancora nelle scuole de' filosofanti, dove l'onestà non meno che in altra parte è richiesta, dette sono; né tra' cherici né tra' filosofi in alcun luogo, ma ne' giardini, in luogo di sollazzo, tra persone giovani, benché mature e non pieghevoli per novelle, in tempo nel quale andar con le brache in capo per iscampo di sé era allí onesti non disdicevole, dette sono. (Conc.7)

What is more, one can see quite clearly that these tales were not told in a church, where things must be spoken of with the proper frame of mind and suitable words (despite the fact that even more outrageous stories are to be found in the church's annals than in my own writings). Nor were they held in the schools of the philosophers, where a sense of propriety is required no less than anywhere else, nor in any place among churchmen or philosophers. But they were told in gardens, in a place suited for pleasure, in the presence of young people who were, nevertheless, mature and not easily misled by stories, and at a time when going about with your trousers over your head was not considered improper if it helped to save your life. (Bondanella and Musa, *Decameron* 803)

In keeping with the views of many critics, Millicent Marcus observes that "the garden that Boccaccio cultivates here is a new literary space free from the didactic expectations of the schoolmen or the clergy" ("The Tale of Maestro Alberto" 238), but the relationship of the literary garden to these other disciplines is not, I would argue, wholly negative.²⁰ Like the claim to defuse the erotic by introducing erotic

from *poiolfingo* and simply means "making" or "writing." He then delimits the application of this "making" only to writers who make works of Latin verse (129).

²⁰ For an interpretation of the garden that is similar to Marcus's, see Thompson 156.

examples, these apparent denials are also attempts at association. Boccaccio's appeal to Scripture in the next paragraph confirms this goal. He writes,

Quali libri, quali parole, quali lettere son piú sante, piú degne, piú reverende, che quelle della divina Scrittura? E sí sono egli stati assai che, quelle perversamente intendendo, sé e altrui a perdizione hanno tratto. (Conc.12)

What books, what words, what letters are more holy, more worthy, and more revered than those of the Holy Scriptures? And yet there are many who have perversely interpreted them and have dragged themselves and others down to eternal damnation because of this. (Bondanella and Musa, *Decameron* 804)

Just as Scripture cannot be blamed for heretical ideas, Boccaccio argues that literary texts are free from blame, which lies with its readers.²¹ Boccaccio pays particular attention to the connection between poetry and Scripture, because their shared use of figurative language can lead to misinterpretation.

Boccaccio makes the same point in the Proem to the *Genealogie*, where he emphasizes that ancient myth, like Scripture, has been subject to a variety of interpretations.²² He writes,

They would cease to wonder that the poets call Jove, now god of heaven, now lightning, now an eagle, or a man, or whatever, if they had only reminded themselves that Holy Writ itself from time to time represents the one true God as sun, fire, lion, serpent, lamb, worm,

²¹ The first story of the *Decameron*, of course, provides the opposite narrative of the supposedly worst man in the world leading others to salvation. Boccaccio's story draws on the hagiographical narratives in the Heaven of the Sun and the discussion of heresy and human judgment by Dante's Aquinas at the end of the episode (*Par.* XIII.109–142).

²² "The Ancients departed in the way of all flesh, leaving behind them their literature and their famous names for posterity to interpret according to their own judgment. But as many minds, so many opinions. What wonder? There are the words of Holy Writ, clear, definite, charged with unalterable truth, though often thinly veiled in figurative language. Yet they are frequently distorted into as many meanings as there are readers. This makes me approach my own task with less misgiving" (Osgood 11).

or even a stone. Likewise, our most venerable mother the Church is prefigured in the sacred books, sometimes as a woman clothed with the sun, or arrayed in varied garb, sometimes as a chariot, or a ship, or an ark, a house, a temple, and the like. (14.14; Osgood 71)

In this passage, as in the *Vita di Dante* and *Esposizioni*, Boccaccio argues by analogy that if it is acceptable for Scripture to use figurative language to convey truth, it is allowed for poets to do the same.²³ The consequence of this connection is that, like Scripture, literature can have two audiences, as Boccaccio claims in *Genealogie* 14.9 (Osgood 51): “Such then is the power of fiction that it pleases the unlearned by its external appearance, and exercises the minds of the learned with its hidden truth; and thus both are edified and delighted with one and the same perusal.”²⁴ While the unlearned can deal with the external, the learned grapple with the hidden truth.

By defining the literary space not only in contrast to philosophy and theology but also as analogous to Scripture, Boccaccio urges the kind of comparison between these disciplines that he will undertake in the *Genealogie* (14.4), where he

²³ Later in the Author’s Conclusion, Boccaccio reiterates the distinction of literature from philosophy: “per ciò che né a Atene né a Bologna o a Parigi alcuna di voi non va a studiare, più distesamente parlar vi si conviene che a quegli che hanno negli studii gl’ingegni assottigliati,” Conc.21); but in the *Esposizioni* (4.all.64), he will argue that women are philosophers in their everyday lives: “What more is taught by philosophers in schools than what she teaches in ethics, politics, and economics? Nothing at all. Women who have acted and who act worthily according to their station in life, therefore, shall be seated alongside philosophers, for they will have earned praise and enduring fame” (*Expositions* 251). The figure of the woman in the *Esposizioni* could be seen as parallel to the old ladies telling stories in the *Genealogie* and the audience of women in the *Decameron*. Just as women can be sophisticated storytellers in the *Genealogie* (14.10), in the *Esposizioni*, they can be philosophers in their daily lives.

²⁴ This idea leads to the examples of 14.10, who are Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, and, finally, the old ladies. Boccaccio underlines the novelty of this idea in the *Vita di Dante* where it first appears through his quotation of Gregory the Great’s *Moralia in Job*, a work which seems to have informed the *Genealogie*, as Osgood notes, and which Boccaccio uses to define allegory in the *Esposizioni* (1.all.22–24; Papio 83), emphasizing the dual nature of Scripture through the metaphor of the river that accommodates both the lamb and the elephant: “In this way, wise men may investigate its allegories while simple men (those who still do not perceive enough to be able to get to the allegorical meanings) nourish themselves on the sweetness of the text” (*Esp.* 1.all.23). In *Gen.* 14.8 (Osgood 46), Boccaccio uses the same image of the Gentiles following the footsteps of the Holy Spirit that one finds in the *Vita di Dante*.

situates literature with philosophy and theology as a *scientia* in contrast to being just a *facultas*. He writes,

poetry, mindful of its high origin, utterly abhors and rejects such a practice, and if it is to be condemned and despised for this, then Philosophy, mistress of things, who teaches us the causes of all that exists, must sink into low price, or to none at all. The same is true of Theology, by which we attain to a true knowledge of God. I never have heard that these sciences implied zeal for the acquisition of wealth. (Osgood 24)

In the *Genealogie*, as Alastair Minnis observes, Boccaccio argues that “as a science, the place of poetry is with theology and philosophy” (388).²⁵ In other words, Boccaccio’s location of literature in contrast to philosophy and theology also suggests what Boccaccio sees literature as sharing with those disciplines, even if he sees it as distinct from them. Boccaccio’s literary garden is thus both distinct from and associated with philosophy and theology.

There are several other connections between the two works that could be added to this list, but Boccaccio’s comparisons of literature to painting, philosophy, and theology in both works show that the codicological correlation between the two works is also an ideological one. In both works, Boccaccio aims to define literature as an institution and this continuity in Boccaccio’s thoughts between the *Decameron* and the *Genealogie* shows a significant connection across both putative stages of his career.

2. Boccaccio and Petrarch

Boccaccio’s ideas about poetry are certainly informed by his reading of Petrarch’s letter to his brother Gherardo on the relationship between poetry and theology (*Fam.* 10.4) and his *Invective contra medicum*, but Boccaccio adapts these arguments to his own purposes, integrating them into his earlier accounts and

²⁵ Boccaccio’s choice of the garden could also be read as a challenge to philosophy, since “the mosaic in the sweat room of a bath in Africa (fifth century) has the inscription *filosofi locus* over a representation of a garden” (Curtius 209). This image suggests the literary and philosophical nexus that Boccaccio proposes in both the Author’s Conclusion to the *Decameron* and *Esposizioni*.

substantially transforming the ideas he takes from Petrarch.²⁶ For example, Boccaccio's discussions of poetry after his meeting with Petrarch in the *Vita di Dante*, *Genealogie*, and *Esposizioni* all borrow Petrarch's etymology of poetry but also expand on it by emphasizing the socio-historical dimension of poetic production that is missing from Petrarch's more structural account.²⁷ Boccaccio's attention to the socio-historical dimension of poetry brings us back to the two images with which I began, both of which show the poet reading in very specific situations. He is not recording what he overhears in the garden of the storytellers or receiving inspiration from an angelic being but is reading his work to an audience. While the representation of the learned author reading from a lectern is traditional, this representation of a literary author and his work is relatively novel and suggests that literature has achieved institutional parity with philosophy and theology, so that the literary author may speak *ex cathedra*.²⁸

Boccaccio would briefly enjoy the opportunity to speak of poetry from a lectern, when he delivered his public lectures on Dante before his death. In one of his last fragments of those lectures in his commentary on *Inferno* XV, Boccaccio makes some remarks about Dante that could very well apply to himself. Contrasting Petrarch and Dante, Boccaccio writes that while Petrarch had achieved fame through Latin, Dante has only "begun to be sought out and held dear by the greatest scholars," because "the light of his genius was hidden under the fog of the maternal vernacular [*per alquanto tempo stata nascosa sotto la caligine del volgar materno*]" (*Esp.* 15.litt.97). In this formulation, the vernacular itself is a covering that conceals Dante's real value from those who believe that such learning can be accomplished only in Latin. In other words, Dante's use of the vernacular adds a further layer of allegory, because the vernacular conceals the fact that his text conceals hidden meanings. In this formulation, the vernacular itself becomes a kind of allegory of allegory.²⁹ With this singular and unexpected argument, Boccaccio

²⁶ Some argue that Boccaccio simply continues Petrarch's views on poetry (Ronconi), but others have offered more complex treatments of the differences between them; see Bárberi Squarotti 304–312.

²⁷ For a discussion of Boccaccio's emphasis on social context in his treatments of poetry, see Eisner, *Boccaccio and the Invention* 39–45.

²⁸ In the *Coronation Oration*, Petrarch had made the same link between literary profession and theology when he related the exegesis of Scripture to his decision to gloss the verses of Virgil.

²⁹ For a discussion of allegories of allegory in Dante, see Martinez.

goes beyond what he had argued in the *Genealogie*: not only are vernacular works no different from other forms of literary discourse, like Scripture, whose figurative language conceals hidden truths, but vernacular works actually add another layer of allegorical difficulty.

At least one fourteenth-century reader did discern an allegorical dimension in Boccaccio's novella collection: Petrarch. Petrarch himself was also changed by his contact with Boccaccio—indeed, the strongest historical argument for the allegorical potential of Boccaccio's stories occurs in Petrarch's translation of Griselda. Far from finding the *Decameron* irreconcilable with the allegorical hermeneutics of the *Genealogie*, Petrarch's translation of Boccaccio's Griselda story suggests that it does have a hidden meaning. At the end of the *Seniles*—indeed, as its final letter—Petrarch translates from vernacular prose, which he had not even acknowledged as a possible genre in the preface to the *Familiars* (1.1). Petrarch's translation from the *Decameron* not only reveals that vernacular prose may have a deeper meaning but also suggests that the work could have an audience that consists of both the women one finds in the *Decameron* illustration and learned men.³⁰ In a certain sense, he continues the logic that one already finds in the frame, where Dioneo transforms the meaning of tales to his own end. Teodolinda Barolini has demonstrated how Dioneo accomplishes this distortion in the case of the story of Zinevra, with Dioneo apparently aligning himself with misogynists to make a proto-feminist point, while in the case of Griselda, he transforms the significance of his own story, making it into an example of how a woman should not behave (Barolini 288–289). Petrarch's Griselda not only re-allegorizes the work but also serves as evidence of how, for at least one contemporary reader, the *Decameron* could fit into the allegorical poetics of the *Genealogie*.

In both the *Genealogie* and the *Decameron*, Boccaccio's argument places responsibility on the reader, not the poet. Boccaccio's formulation echoes his claim in the Author's Conclusion of the *Decameron* that “Niuna corrotta mente intese mai sanamente parola” (Conc.11; “A corrupt mind never understands a word in a healthy way,” Bondanella and Musa, *Decameron* 804). Boccaccio makes the same claim in his discussion of Ovid, where instead of impugning Ovid, Boccaccio locates the fault in readers: “poets are not, as they claim, corruptors of morals. Rather, if the reader is prompted by a healthy mind, not a diseased one [*si sana mente et non livore insano perciti eorum legantur volumina*], they will prove actual

³⁰ Petrarch's description of the translation's reception makes clear that the learned audience is itself multiple, as well.

stimulators to virtue, either subtle or poignant, as occasion requires” (*Gen.* 14.15; Osgood 74). In the next chapter, Boccaccio continues his argument:

Wherefore they [opponents of poetry] search the pages of Catullus, Propertius, and Ovid, and from the foolish suasion of such, expressed in sweet-sounding verses, and in easy but ornate style, with whole-hearted inclination they surrender to its influence, are deluded, seduced, and enthralled. Thus it is they have discovered the allurements of the poets, thus they ungratefully turn and accuse their teachers, and thus they call them seducers of the mind, whom they have followed uninvited and of their own free will. (*Gen.* 14.16; Osgood 77)³¹

This final remark echoes Boccaccio’s amusing recasting of Francesca’s idea of the literary work as an independent character (“Galeotto fu ’l libro,” *Inf.* V.137) when he writes in the Author’s Conclusion that his *novelle* “non correranno di dietro a niuna a farsi leggere; benché e le pinzochere altresí dicono e anche fanno delle cosette otta per vicenda!” (Conc.15; “My stories run after no one asking to be read, though there is many a bigot out there who whenever the occasion arises will say and even do the kinds of things found in my stories!” Bondanella and Musa, *Decameron* 804). Those who are seduced by love poets and accuse them of being seducers, Boccaccio adds, reveal more about themselves than those poets: “Thus, I think, do the great poets most frequently lure the credulous to their improvement, while these unjust judges are lured and deluded into an evil course more by their own wickedness than by that of even the less honorable poets, and they try their utmost to show it” (*Gen.* 14.16; Osgood 78).

The mention of poet as “seducer” or “allurer” in this passage once again recalls the surname of Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, Galeotto, and suggests that Boccaccio

³¹ Also see *Gen.* 15.6 (Osgood 117), where Boccaccio recasts this image in a positive light to describe the fact that books need someone to read them so that they do not stay on the shelf: “If these cavillers have not seen them or even heard their names, it is not the authors’ fault, but that of their own idleness. They should blame themselves, not find fault with me. The books cannot of their own accord take wing from the libraries into the hands of sluggards; and it is not the duty of those who are familiar with them to act as proxies for those who are not. Let them read and study for themselves. They will discover much that is new to them, and be at home where before they were strangers. They will find that these unfamiliar authors carry as much weight as they assign to those they have read before.”

may be explicitly saving his own work. The idea of seduction thus takes on an element of moral improvement. Ultimately, despite his claims that bad poets should be dismissed, Boccaccio condemns only the theatrical muses, whom he argues are the object of Boethius's and Plato's attacks, since both obviously loved the poets they included in their works. Some of these theatrical poets, like Terence, however, should evidently be saved as well since Christ quotes him.³² In the end, practically all poets are included, because all works may contain hidden truths.

The connections between the *Decameron* and the *Genealogie* thus suggest a singular Boccaccio, no longer divided in two but integrated by a dedication to certain arguments for literature's representational freedom and its institutional status. To describe Boccaccio as singular is not to deny the pluralities of Boccaccio, of course, as the creator of numerous innovative genres. As he "confesses" in the Author's Conclusion, "le cose di questo mondo non avere stabilità alcuna ma sempre essere in mutamento" (Conc.27; "the things of this world have no stability whatsoever—they are constantly changing," Bondanella and Musa, *Decameron* 806). Indeed, part of Boccaccio's singularity is this very multiplicity, in the ways that his defences of poetry cut across linguistic and generic boundaries, from the frame of the *Decameron* to the *Genealogie*.

Duke University

³² Petrarch makes the same argument using Terence in *Sen.* 2.1, which is addressed to Boccaccio.

WORKS CITED

- Ascoli, Albert Russell. "Auerbach fra gli Epicurei: Dal canto X dell'*Inferno* alla VI giornata del *Decameron*." *Moderna* 11 (2009): 135–152.
- Bárberi Squarotti, Giorgio. "Le poetiche del trecento in Italia." In *Momenti e problemi di storia dell'estetica*. Milan: Marzorati, 1959. 255–324.
- Barolini, Teodolinda. "*Le parole son femmine e i fatti sono maschi*: Toward a Sexual Poetics of the *Decameron*." In *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture*. New York: Fordham UP, 2006. 281–303.
- Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Boccaccio's Expositions on Dante's Comedy*. Trans. Michael Papio. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2009.
- . *Decameron*. Trans. Peter Bondanella and Mark Musa. New York: New American Library, 1982.
- . *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*. Trans. Jon Solomon. Vol. 1: Books 1–5. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 2011.
- Branca, Vittore. *Boccaccio medievale e nuovi studi sul Decameron*. Saggi Sansoni. 2nd ed. Milan: Sansoni, 1956.
- , ed. *Decameron: Facsimile dell'autografo conservato nel Codice Hamilton 90 della Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz di Berlino*. Florence: Alinari, 1975.
- . *Giovanni Boccaccio: Profilo biografico*. Florence: Sansoni, 1997.
- Branca, Vittore, and Pier Giorgio Ricci. *Un autografo del Decameron (Codice Hamiltoniano 90)*. Padua: CEDAM, 1962.
- Branca, Vittore, and Maurizio Vitale. *Il capolavoro del Boccaccio e due diverse redazioni*. 2 vols. Venice: Istituto veneto di scienze, lettere ed arti, 2002.
- Bruni, Francesco. *Boccaccio: L'invenzione della letteratura mezzana*. Bologna: Mulino, 1990.
- . "Comunicazione." In *Lessico critico Decameroniano*. Ed. Renzo Bragantini and Pier Massimo Forni. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1995. 73–92.
- Bruni, Leonardo. "The Lives of Dante and Petrarch." In *Images of Quattrocento Florence: Selected Writings in Literature, History, and Art*. Ed. Stefano Ugo Baldassarri and Arielle Saiber. New Haven: Yale UP, 2000. 125–138.
- Ciardi Dupré Dal Poggetto, Maria Grazia. "L'inconografia nei codici miniati boccacciani dell'Italia centrale e meridionale." In *Boccaccio visualizzato: Narrare per parole e per immagini fra Medioevo e Rinascimento*. Ed. Vittore Branca. Vol. 2: Opere d'arte d'origine italiana. Turin: Einaudi, 1999. 3–52.

- Cursi, Marco. *Il Decameron: Scritture, scriventi, lettori (Storia di un testo)*. Rome: Viella, 2007.
- Curtius, Ernst Robert. *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1953.
- Delcorno Branca, Daniela. “‘Cognominato prencipe Galeotto’. Il sottotitolo illustrato del Parigino it. 482.” *Studi sul Boccaccio* 23 (1995): 78–88.
- Eisner, Martin. *Boccaccio and the Invention of Italian Literature: Dante, Petrarch, Cavalcanti and the Authority of the Vernacular*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013.
- . “Eroticizing Theology in Day Three and the Poetics of the *Decameron*.” *Annali d’Italianistica* 31 (2013): 199–215.
- . “The Tale of Ferondo’s Purgatory (III.8).” In *The Decameron: Third Day in Perspective*. Ed. Pier Massimo Forni and Francesco Ciabattone. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2014. 150–169.
- Forni, Pier Massimo. “Realtà/verità.” In *Lessico critico decameroniano*. Ed. Renzo Bragantini and Pier Massimo Forni. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1995. 300–319.
- Gilbert, Creighton. *Poets Seeing Artists’ Work: Instances in the Italian Renaissance*. Florence: Olschki, 1991.
- Gilson, Etienne. “Poésie et vérité dans la Genealogia de Boccace.” *Studi sul Boccaccio* 2 (1964): 253–282.
- Greenfield, Concetta Carestia. *Humanist and Scholastic Poetics, 1250–1500*. Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: Bucknell UP, 1981.
- Hege, Brigitte. *Boccaccios Apologie der heidnischen Dichtung in den Genealogie deorum gentilium*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 1995.
- Kallendorf, Craig. “The Rhetorical Criticism of Literature in Early Italian Humanism from Boccaccio to Landino.” *Rhetorica* 1 (1983): 33–59.
- Kirkham, Victoria. “Giovanni Boccaccio.” In *The Classical Tradition*. Ed. Anthony Grafton, Glenn W. Most, and Salvatore Settis. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 2010. 130–131.
- Kriesel, James C. “The Genealogy of Boccaccio’s Theory of Allegory.” *Studi sul Boccaccio* 37 (2009): 197–226.
- Lorris, Guillaume de, and Jean de Meun. *The Romance of the Rose*. Translated by Charles Dahlberg. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971.
- Marchesi, Simone. *Stratigrafie decameroniane*. Florence: L.S. Olschki, 2004.
- Marcus, Millicent Joy. *An Allegory of Form: Literary Self-Consciousness in the Decameron*. Saratoga: Anma Libri, 1979.

-
- _____. "The Tale of Maestro Alberto." In *The Decameron First Day in Perspective*. Ed. Elissa Weaver. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2004. 222–240.
- Marino, Lucia. *The Decameron Cornice: Allusion, Allegory, and Iconology*. Ravenna: Longo, 1979.
- Martinez, Ronald L. "Allegory." In *The Dante Encyclopedia*. Ed. Richard Lansing. New York: Garland, 2000. 24–34.
- Mazzotta, Giuseppe. *The World at Play in Boccaccio's "Decameron."* Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986.
- McLaughlin, Martin. "Latin and Vernacular from Dante to the Age of Lorenzo (1321–c. 1500)." In *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, II*. Ed. Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005.
- Menetti, Elisabetta. "Boccaccio e la fictio." *Studi sul Boccaccio* 38 (2010): 69–87.
- Minnis, Alastair J. *Magister Amoris: The Roman de la Rose and Vernacular Hermeneutics*. New York: Oxford UP, 2001.
- Minnis, A. J., A. B. Scott, and David Wallace, eds. *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c.1100–c.1375: The Commentary Tradition*. Rev. ed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1991.
- Osgood, Charles G., ed. and trans. *Boccaccio on Poetry: Being the Preface and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Books of Boccaccio's Genealogia Deorum Gentilium*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1930.
- Perini, Giorgio Bernardi. *Buccolicum Carmen*. Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio. 5.2. Milan: Mondadori, 1994.
- Petrucci, Armando. "A proposito del MS berlinese Hamiltoniano 90. (Nota descrittiva)." *MLN* 85 (1970): 1–12.
- Rico, Francisco. "La 'conversione' di Boccaccio." In *Atlante della letteratura italiana*. Ed. Sergio Luzzatto and Gabriele Pedullà. 1: Dalle origini al Rinascimento. Turin: Einaudi, 2010. 224–228.
- Ronconi, Giorgio. *Le origini delle dispute umanistiche sulla poesia (Mussato e Petrarca)*. Rome: Bulzoni, 1976.
- Rossi, Luciano. "Il Decameron e il Roman de la Rose." In *Boccaccio e le letterature romanze tra medioevo e rinascimento*. Ed. Simonetta Mazzoni Peruzzi. Florence: Alinea, 2006. 201–219.
- _____. "Il Paratesto decameroniano: cimento d'armonia e d'invenzione." In *Lectura Boccacii Turicensis*. Ed. Michelangelo Picone. Florence: Cesati, 2003. 35–55.

- Scaglione, Aldo D. *Nature and Love in the Late Middle Ages: An Essay on the Cultural Context of the Decameron*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1963.
- Tateo, Francesco. *Retorica e poetica fra medioevo e rinascimento*. Bari: Adriatica, 1960.
- Thompson, Nicholas S. *Chaucer, Boccaccio, and the Debate of Love: A Comparative Study of The Decameron and The Canterbury Tales*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996.
- Tronci, Francesco. *La novella tra letteratura, ideologia e metaletteratura: Studi sul «Decameron»*. Cagliari: C.U.E.C., 2001.
- Usher, Jonathan. "Boccaccio on Readers and Reading." *Heliotropia* 1 (2003): n. pag.
- Villani, Filippo. *De Origine Civitatis Florentie et de Eiusdem Famosis Civibus*. Padua: Antenore, 1997.
- Volpe, Alessandro. "Boccaccio illustratore e illustrato." *Intersezioni* 31 (2011): 287–300.
- Wallace, David. *Giovanni Boccaccio: Decameron*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991.
- Watson, Paul F. "The Cement of Fiction: Giovanni Boccaccio and the Painters of Florence." *MLN* 99 (1984): 43–64.
- Zaccaria, Vittorio. *Boccaccio narratore, storico, moralista e mitografo*. Florence: Olschki, 2001.