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Boccaccio and Philosophy: An Introduction

Giovanni Boccaccio lived at a time in which a great number of cultural and intellectual trends were coming to fruition, especially in terms of innovations in religious, artistic, and literary practices, as well as philosophical developments such as the early humanists' recovery of and enthusiasm for classical thought. This collection of essays asks the questions: What was Boccaccio's perspective on these changes? What texts did he read? What theoretical texts can help us understand his works? Does he have a place in the history of philosophy?

Recent decades have witnessed increasing interest in Boccaccio's intellectual profile as a thinker and early humanist author. The old paradigm of a Boccaccio subordinate to his friend Petrarch in terms of depth of thought and philosophical interests has begun to be revised, if not challenged. This paradigm was in vogue starting with Francesco De Sanctis (1817-1883), who saw Boccaccio as an interpreter of the crisis in medieval spirituality, paving the way for "il naturalismo e il realismo nella vita pratica" (naturalism and realism in practical life, DS 317)[*]. For De Sanctis, as a representative and interpreter of this crisis in the medieval spirit of transcendence, Boccaccio's work emerged as the natural result of an intellectual attitude that focused on practical rather than theoretical life, and that was interested only in what is knowable within the reach of the human intellect. Against this cultural background, Boccaccio became a primary interpreter of the loss of the spirit of transcendence that characterized the Middle Ages until the age of Dante, the narrator who revealed the erosion of the sense of a reliable relationship between "things" and "words", as witnessed by the debates on the crisis of nominalism. For De

Sanctis, "il mondo dello spirito rimane perfettamente estraneo alla sua intelligenza e al suo cuore" (the world of the spirit remains completely alien to his intelligence and his heart, DS 324). Boccaccio, in his view, only "scrive per sollazzarsi e sollazzare" (writes to amuse himself and to give pleasure to others, DS 327) because "le rughe del pensiero non hanno mai attraversata quella fronte, e nessun'ombra è mai calata sulla sua coscienza" (wrinkles of thought never crossed that forehead, and no shadow ever fell on his consciousness, DS 354). Even his intention to teach virtue or defend poetry with philosophical arguments is not the product of intellect but of erudite memory, as in the case of the *Trattatello*, in which, De Sanctis affirms, there is "nessuna originalità e profondità di pensiero, nessuna sottigliezza di argomentazione" (no originality and depth of thought, no subtlety of argumentation, DS 320). Boccaccio's genius appears to the critic to reside in his representation of the multiformity of practical life, in his sense of the comic, and in his art: "Boccaccio concepisce come Plauto e scrive come Cicerone […] L'arte è la sola serietà del Boccaccio" (Boccaccio conceives like Plautus and writes like Cicero […] Art is Boccaccio's only seriousness, DS 379). In De Sanctis's long-lasting and influential judgment, Boccaccio is also devoid of civic engagement and Christian vision ("Spento è in lui il cristiano ed anche il cittadino"; both the Christian and the citizen are extinct in him, DS 327)[1]. De Sanctis's ungenerous judgment of Boccaccio's intellectual profile had a long and far-reaching influence that survives in some contemporary scholarship. In a relatively recent article, even a sophisticated scholar like Claudio Giunta confesses: "ho sempre pensato al *Decameron* […] come a un'opera priva di profondi significati e di finalità didattico-morali […] all'insegna di un sostanziale agnosticismo e relativismo etico-religioso'; un'opera insomma, in mezzo a tanti visionari e a tanti moralisti, salutarmente scevra di 'visione del mondo'" (I've always thought of the *Decameron* … as a "work without profound significance or moral-didactic purpose", as a work, in short, among that of so many visionaries and moralists, beneficially without a "vision of the world")[2].

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[1] Boccaccio's political engagement has been recently re-evaluated by historians who have demonstrated his involvement in the city and by scholars who have shown the relevance of the political aspect in Boccaccio's works. See, among many others: R. Farneti, *Naturalizing Humanity: Genealogy and the Politics of Storytelling in Boccaccio's Decameron*, "The Review of Politics" 71, 2009, pp. 363-88; J. Hankins, *Virtue Politics. Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy,* Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2019; David Lummus, *The City of Poetry. Imagining the Civic Role of the Poet in Fourteenth-Century Italy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2020; S. Barsella, "Boccaccio, i tiranni e la ragione naturale", *Heliotropia*, vols. 12-13, 2015-2016, (131-163).

[2] Giunta's comments refer to Francesco Bausi's book on Boccaccio, which among other qualities also offers a reading of the Certaldese that makes Giunta reflect on and perhaps re-evaluate this well-established opinion. C. Giunta, *Il mondo è quel che è. Una nuova*

De Sanctis, already a celebrated academic, triumphantly accepted a position as professor of comparative literature at the university in Naples in 1871, the same year in which a young Attilio Hortis received his degrees in law and literature at Padua. Both men, one at the twilight of his career and the other just starting out, dedicated their professional lives to Italian literature but had very different views on Boccaccio's intellectual talents. Hortis, a Triestine patriot, used his position as the city librarian (beginning in 1873 and lasting half a century) to explore Boccaccio's contributions as a philologist, historian, and literary moralist. In 1879, the same year in which he delivered a rousing speech at the unveiling of Certaldo's monument to Boccaccio, Hortis also published the seminal work entitled *Studj sulle opere latine del Boccaccio*, which carried the important but often overlooked subtitle *con particolare riguardo alla storia della erudizione nel Medio Evo e alle letterature straniere*. A monumental volume of nearly 1000 pages in length, the work begins with an observation that has become in time a truism: "Il Boccaccio scrittore del *Decameron* ha fatto dimenticare il Boccaccio erudito, come fece dimenticare, e quasi dispregiare, a gran torto, il Boccaccio poeta e cittadino" (The Boccaccio who wrote the *Decameron* has made us forget the erudite Boccaccio, just as he made us forget, and even scorn, quite wrongly, Boccaccio the poet and citizen). He adds to this quip a sentiment with which we, and many of our own contemporaries, would agree: "I filologi moderni non gli resero la debita giustizia" (Modern scholars have not done him proper justice). Hortis's studies provided a wealth of information for future research, including transcriptions of archival documents and other data in the appendices, and even what was once a remarkably up-to-date bibliography. Hortis published several other works on Boccaccio, and their titles give us an idea of what he, a lifelong Petrarchist and scholar of humanism, believed to be especially important: e.g., *Accenni alle scienze naturali nelle opere di G. Boccacci* (1877), *Cenni di G. Boccacci intorno a Tito Livio* (1877), *M.T. Cicerone nelle opere del Petrarca e del Boccaccio* (1877), *La corografia di Pomponio Mela attribuita falsamente al Boccaccio* (1879). These are all humanistic subjects that lay mostly unaddressed until they were revived a century later by another renowned Petrarchist, Giuseppe Billanovich.

Benedetto Croce (1866-1952), esteemed politician, historian, philosopher and self-proclaimed aestheticist, looked at Boccaccio from an extra-literary point of view, appreciating him as a writer who was neither "moral" nor "immoral", but a great interpreter of his time, ac-

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lettura del Decameron*,* review article on Francesco Bausi's, *Leggere il "Decameron"*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2017. The review appeared in *Il Sole 24 Ore – Domenica*, with the title "Un paradiso per il *Decameron*" 5/27/2017. Available on Giunta's blog at https://claudiogiunta.it/2017/05/il-mondo-e-quel-che-e-una-nuova-lettura-del-decameron/.

cepting life as it was, in all its possible aspects and variety[3]. For Croce, Boccaccio was far more than a raconteur who aimed to entertain the rich leisure class of the mercantile bourgeoisie. He was, in fact, a "complex" author whose works were worthy of serious study. Around the same time, the idea of Boccaccio as an important intellectual of the early Renaissance resonated in North America with early proponents of what would later become known as interdisciplinary studies in the humanities. One of these was Charles Grosvenor Osgood (1871-1964), a Yale-trained professor of English at Princeton who also taught Vergil and Boccaccio as part of his signature course "English Literature and the Classics". Osgood is best known among Boccaccio scholars for his 1930 English translation of the final two books of the *Genealogia*, a project he undertook on account of their immense value to the study of humanism and "because they lead to intimacy with that very engaging person, the author"[4]. In the very first pages, he addressed quite directly the obvious dichotomy that had plagued Boccaccio's reception for generations:

> There are, then, two Boccaccios – poet and scholar – one famous, the other obscure. It is easy to dwell upon an imagined antinomy between poet and scholar, but in Boccaccio at least, if not in general, such antinomy is quite fictitious. One cannot remind oneself too often that Boccaccio's scholarship and his art were but projections of the same powers of his mind, and that his humanistic Latin prose works come unmistakably from the hand of a poet. To conceive them otherwise is to miss their meaning.[5]

This seemingly crisp distinction between poet and scholar, though somewhat attenuated after nearly a hundred years, still exists in the public imagination, inasmuch as Boccaccio the "famous" storyteller has continually increased in popularity. Consequently, the corresponding "obscure" poet has often been eclipsed.

It was not until the second half of the twentieth century that Boccaccio's scholarly reputation began to receive the wider attention that had been lacking. The two main drivers of this renewed interest in his historical and humanistic contributions were Giuseppe Billanovich (1913-2000) and Vittore Branca (1913-2004)[6]. Interestingly, it may have been Billanovich's lengthy

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[3] He did not, however, go as far as to make Boccaccio into a lay author. B. Croce, *La novella di Andreuccio da Perugia*, Laterza, Bari 1911.
[4] C. G. Osgood, *Boccaccio on Poetry*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1930, p. v.
[5] Idem, p. xi.
[6] See in particular G. Billanovich, *Restauri boccacceschi*, Edizioni Storia e Letteratura, Roma 1947; V. Branca, *Boccaccio medievale e nuovi studi sul* Decameron, Sansoni, Firenze 1992 (1956).

essay, entitled "Il più grande discepolo"[7] – an introduction to Boccaccio's Petrarchan humanism – that forever solidified (for certain colleagues past, and even present) a hierarchical conception of these two Crowns. Even so, Billanovich sincerely argued for an appreciation of Boccaccio's intellectual talents and a disciplined philological approach to his works. During these same years, Branca's work, in particular, was fundamental in reconstructing Boccaccio's historical and intellectual profile as an erudite man of his time. Countering the prevailing narrative of a "secularized" Boccaccio, Branca portrayed him not only as an author sensitive to pre-humanist sentiments, but also and, above all, the unchallenged bard of the medieval mercantile epic, the *epopea dei mercatanti*. For Branca, Boccaccio was an author who wrote from a Christian perspective, a scholar and poet who experimented in the vernacular as well as in the study of the classical tradition, and an author who was not afraid of intellectual speculation, especially about the philosophical meaning of poetry[8]. According to some, Branca's critical reappraisal may have given Boccaccio's reputation a somewhat overly medieval patina, but it certainly helped to establish a new perception of Boccaccio as the figure of an intellectual who, although still reverential toward Petrarch, showed an intellectual independence that is evident in both his major and his minor, often experimental, works, and especially in his philosophical and professional defense of poetry. Meanwhile, Boccaccio's scholarly legacy in North America was investigated principally by scholars who, in the main, thought of him as an essential, though ancillary, proponent of early humanism and Renaissance philosophy. This is true, for example, in the cases of Berthold Ullman (1911-1999), an expert on Salutati[9], Charles Trinkaus (1911-1999)[10] and Ronald Witt (1932-2017) who, also beginning with Salutati, contributed substantially to contextualizing Boccaccio's work in his 2000 history of humanism, entitled *In the Footsteps of the Ancients*[11]. Most clearly representative of Boccaccio's understanding

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[7] In G. Billanovich, *Petrarca letterato. Lo scrittoio del Petrarca*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma 1947, pp. 57-294.

[8] For Guglielmo Gorni's hypothesis of Boccaccio as 'inventor' of the epic octave see the relatively recent bibliography and discussion in B. Barbiellini Amidei, *"In pubblico": tra oralità e scrittura. La "vexata quaestio": sulla tradizione dell'ottava rima dei cantari "popolari" e del Boccaccio*, in "Carte Romanze", 10.2, 2022, pp. 231-252. For Boccaccio and the classics, see at least, among a vast literature, the seminal essays by G. Velli, *Petrarca e Boccaccio. Tradizione, memoria, scrittura*, Antenore, Padova 1979.

[9] Ullman, *The Humanism of Coluccio Salutati*, Antenore, Padova 1963.

[10] Especially in Trinkaus, *The Poet as Philosopher. Petrarch and the Formation of Renaissance Consciousness*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979, but also in *In Our Image and Likeness. Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*, Notre Dame University Press, Notre Dame 1995.

[11] R. G. Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients. The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni*, brill, Leiden 2000 (2003).

and use of philosophy must surely be his defense of poetry in the concluding books of the *Genealogy*, just as Osgood believed[12]. With the publication of Kurt Flasch's *Poesia dopo la peste*, translated into Italian in 1995, Boccaccio and philosophy became a field of extensive scholarly investigation in Italy[13]. As the German historian of medieval philosophy comments, in *Decameron* I 1, Boccaccio "ci insegna a riconoscere la differenza tra ciò che vediamo e ciò che sappiamo. Chi aveva inventato un simile narratore non poteva essere un mero autore d'intrattenimento" (teaches us to recognize the difference between what we see and what we know. Whoever invented such a narrator [that is, the main fictional one of the *Decameron*] could not have been a mere writer of entertainment)[14]. Like Dante and Petrarch, according to Flasch, Boccaccio is a poet-philosopher: "Boccaccio, in quanto poeta-pensatore deve essere collocato vicino a Dante e al suo progetto di unione di filosofia, teologia, politica, e poesia" (Boccaccio, as a poet-philosopher, must be placed close to Dante and his project of uniting philosophy, theology, politics, and poetry)[15].

Though Boccaccio's self-effacing description of Petrarch as "preceptor meus" has surely been uncritically and excessively repeated, there is no doubt that the elder poet was essential in the transmission of certain fundamental notions that appeared with early humanism. It is reasonable to assume that by 1353 Boccaccio had discussed a series of novel ideas with the elder poet (some perhaps for the first time), including Mussato's suggestion that poetry was "altera theologia"[16], or the idea that Aristotle himself had declared the first theologians to be *philomythoi* or poets, or even that poetry had been invented as an *exquisita locutio* for humankind's communication with the Godhead. The *fil rouge* that connected all of these ideas was preserved and promoted – almost paradoxically – by apologists like Lactantius Firmianus and later Augustine. Realizing

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[12] See F. Tateo, *Favola e poesia nella poetica del Boccaccio*, in "Filologia romanza", 5, 267-342; G. Ronconi, *Le origini delle dispute umanistiche sulla poesia (Mussato e Petrarca)*, Bulzoni, Roma 1976; C. C. Greenfield, *Humanist and Scholastic Poetrics, 1250-1500*, Bucknell University Press, Lewisburg 1981; C. Mésoniat, *"Poetica theologia". La "Lucula noctis" di Giovanni Dominici e le dispute letterarie tra '300 e '400*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma 1984; V. Zaccaria, *La difesa della poesia nelle 'Genealogie' del Boccaccio*, in "Lettere italiane", 38.3, 1986, 281-311; M. Veglia, *Il Petrarca, la genesi del* Decameron *e la "teologia poetica" del Boccaccio*, "Humanistica", 4.2, 2009, 61-78.
[13] K. Flasch, *Poesia dopo la peste. Saggio su Boccaccio*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1995 (Original title *Giovanni Boccaccio. Poesie nach der Pest. Der Anfang des "Decameron"*, Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, Mainz 1992). V. Branca, *Boccaccio: the Man and his Works*, New York University Press, New York 1976.
[14] Flasch 1995, p. 7.
[15] Ivi, p. 14.
[16] M. Papio, *Boccaccio between Mussato and the Neoplatonists*, in *Boccaccio 1313-2013,* F. Ciabattoni, E. Filosa and K. Olson, Longo, Ravenna 2015, pp. 275-86.

that their own religion was scientifically and philosophically quite impoverished (and that educated Gentiles would be unwilling to convert if that meant having to abandon any number of more refined cults), the apologists strove to demonstrate that Christianity was indeed compatible with, and in some cases a continuation of, a wide range of Aristotelian, Platonic and Stoic beliefs. It is in these contexts that we find Lactantius's full-throated praise of Cicero or Augustine's conviction that, among all others, the Neoplatonists came closest to Christians to the Truth. Several centuries later, and in the wake of the neo-Platonic revival of the so-called "Twelfth-Century Renaissance", Augustinians (including many of Boccaccio's friends) and others returned to these works and saw in them not Christian concessions to earlier philosophies, but a sort of permission structure that allowed them to inquire into ancient beliefs, and even to accept and assimilate those pre-Christian ideas that were compatible with doctrinal truth. Since God created the world, they concluded, His truth necessarily existed long before the advent of Christ. Those meritorious pagans (as in Dante's Limbo) who sought absolute truth could certainly be rehabilitated, if not spiritually saved, within our author's recognized belief structure. It is this historical inflection point, to continue the Dantean analogy, that allows for Statius's exclamation "per te poeta fui, per te cristiano" (Through you I became a poet, through you a Christian; *Pg* 22.73) or for Vergil to become the Pilgrim's guide "come quei che va di notte, / che porta il lume dietro e sé non giova" (like one who walks at night, who carries the light behind him and does not help himself; 67-68).

If Petrarch may rightly be recognized for having been the first, or even just among the first, to suggest this line of humanistic thought to Boccaccio, there are nonetheless numerous instances in which the latter pressed further than his 'teacher' to understand and, more importantly still, to categorize and explain the poetry, philosophy, mythology, history and even geography of the ancients. Of course, major figures of the twelfth century had already loosened the proverbial pickle jar in a variety of disciplines. For instance, the rediscovery of Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics* sparked a flurry of activity in natural philosophy, perhaps best personified in figures like William of Conches who gracefully dovetailed Platonic emanationism into the Ptolemaic system. The reappearance of *De anima*, or *On the Soul*, was fertile terrain for a new understanding of the nature of the soul and, indeed, of what would later be called psychology. The discovery of Livy's *Ab Urbe condita*, Tacitus's *Annals* and *Histories*, Suetonius and Caesar's commentaries in Gaul were boons to historians and scholars of the liberal arts like John of Salisbury who wrote the *Policraticus* and the *Metalogicon*, Bernard Silvester who wrote the *Cosmographia* and a commentary on the *Aeneid*, and Alexander Neckam who, among other works, also produced literary commentaries on Mar-

tianus Capella and Ovid. This "Twelfth-Century Renaissance" widened the horizons of numerous thinkers who enthusiastically engaged with "new" ideas, often from already authoritative authors. Boccaccio was familiar with these rediscovered texts and was genuinely convinced of the value of Truth, no matter its source or the tools used to scrutinize it. And he was also, of course, a poet. He neatly explains the relationship between philosophy and poetry in the *Genealogie*:

> Veritatis quippe optima indagatrix phylosophia est; comperte vero sub velamine servatrix fidissima est poesis; si minus recte sentiat illa, non potuit rectum ista servasse. Pedissequa est: domine vestigia imitetur necesse est; si deviet illa, et hec ut exorbitet a necessitate cogitur. (*Gen.* 14.18.12)[17]

> For while Philosophy is without question the keenest investigator of truth, Poetry is, obviously, its most faithful guardian, protecting it as she does beneath the veil of her art. If Philosophy errs, Poetry cannot keep in the right path. She is Philosophy's maidservant, and must follow in the steps of her mistress; so that necessarily the error of the one makes the other deviate. (Osgood, p. 84)

For Boccaccio, poetry, like philosophy, is an essential part of the quest for, and tutelage of, knowledge, because God's Truth – as Augustine and others remind us – could be found anywhere. This is the same strategy that Peter Abelard used so effectively to bring Plato and neo-Platonists into debates on Christian theology. Indeed, Abelard managed to integrate remarkable amounts of ancient philosophy into his work on logic and metaphysics, just as Boccaccio ruefully notes in the quotation above. Nonetheless, and despite Abelard's own high regard for Vergil, Horace, and Cicero, he left the battle to defend poetry for Boccaccio's generation. What most importantly links Abelard and Boccaccio, though, is Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which also reappeared in the twelfth century. The text was fundamental in Abelard's arguments regarding intentionality and consent in his own *Ethics*, or *Scito te ipsum*, which was a milestone of moral philosophy for centuries.

The exploration of Boccaccio's philosophical profile has moved in various directions since the explicit rehabilitation of the *certaldese* as a "thinker" in recent decades. Many different aspects of Boccaccio and philosophy have been studied, from the possible influence on him of Ockham (Flasch), Averroism (Gagliardi), Epicureanism (Veglia), and Scholasticism (Kablitz), to the study of the epistemological foundations

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[17] *Genealogie deorum gentilium*, ed. V. Zaccaria, in vols. VII-VIII di *Tutte le opere*, Mondadori, Milano 1998.

of his major work, the *Decameron*[18]. Since the last decade of the previous century, however, the most productive by far of philosophy's subdivisions in Boccaccio criticism has been that of Moral Philosophy, especially in terms of "ethical" readings of the *Decameron* as offering practical life lessons and useful examples for navigating the social arena, a function that may be equated with Aristotle's *phronesis* or practical wisdom. There are studies on this topic or closely related ones by Giovanni Getto, Giuseppe Mazzotta, Kurt Flasch, Gregory Stone, Tobias Gittes, Lucia Battaglia Ricci, Marilyn Migiel, and many other scholars[19]. Teodolinda Barolini, for instance, defines Boccaccio's implicit philosophy as an "accidental ethics", in the sense of a philosophical stance that is alive to the accidental and contingency-driven realities of life[20]. Indeed, most of the essays in this collection are also devoted to ethics.

Boccaccio's understanding of narrative fiction as ethical and didactic was influenced by that of medieval commentators on classical literature, who conventionally began their commentaries on poetic texts intended for the classroom by assigning the work under consideration to its proper part of philosophy. The category to which medieval critics usually assigned poems was that of ethics.[21] The Epistle to Cangrande, for instance, places Dante's *Paradiso* under this heading, "quia non ad speculandum, sed ad opus inventum est totum et pars (inasmuch as the whole and the part have been conceived for the sake of practical results, not for the sake

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[18] For Boccaccio's possible contacts with Averroism see esp. A. Gagliardi, *Giovanni Boccaccio. Poeta Filosofo Averroista*, Rubbettino, Catanzaro 1999 and Stone's essay in this volume. For Boccaccio and Epicureanism, see esp. M. Veglia, *"La vita lieta": Una lettura del "Decameron",* Longo, Ravenna 2000. On the influence of Scholasticism in the proem of the *Decameron* see A. Kablitz, *The Proemio of the Decameron: Boccaccio's Hidden Dialogue with Scholasticism*, in *Petrarch and Boccaccio: The Unity of Knowledge in the Premodern World*, ed. I. Candido, De de Gruyter, Berlin-Boston 2018, pp. 194-208. For the epistemological foundations of the *Decameron*, see F. Andrei, *Boccaccio the Philosopher: An Epistemology of the Decameron,* Springer International Publishing, Cham 2017.

[19] See G. Getto, *Vita di forme e forme di vita nel* Decameron, Petrini, Torino 1958; G. Mazzotta, *The World at Play in Boccaccio's* Decameron*,* Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1986, esp. pp. 241-69; K. Flasch, *Poesia dopo la peste*, Laterza, Roma 2007; G. Stone, *The Ethics of Nature in the Middle Ages: On Boccaccio's Poetaphysics*, St. Martin's, New York 1998; T. Gittes, *Boccaccio's Naked Muse*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2008, esp. pp. 220-42; L. Battaglia Ricci, *Scrivere un libro di novelle. Giovanni Boccaccio autore, lettore, editore*, Longo, Ravenna 2013, pp. 27-56; M. Migiel, *The Ethical Dimension of the* Decameron, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2015.

[20] T. Barolini, *The Essential Boccaccio, or an Accidental Ethics*, Afterword to G. Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, Eng. tr. by M. Musa and P. Bondanella, Signet Classics, New York 2010, pp. 809-21.

[21] See J. Boyce Allen, *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1982; P. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning 1300-1600*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1989; P. Gehl, *A Moral Art: Grammar, Society, and Culture in Trecento Florence*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1993.

of speculation)"²². Boccaccio would already have absorbed this idea of literature's practical purpose during his early schooling, and may indeed have sensed (in the perceived forced nature of imposing such a purpose on some the more risqué passages in texts like Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, for instance) that the schoolmen were at times mostly concerned with justifying the teaching of entertaining texts – a recognition that seems to make its way into Boccaccio's own authorial self-defenses. But his scholarly interest in ethics as a philosophical discipline was also sincere and profound. As Victoria Kirkham has pointed out, it is the Aristotle of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, "as commented upon and Christianized by Thomas Aquinas, who forms the moral bedrock of the *Decameron*", and the *Ethics*, once "recodified and integrated into the *Summa theologica*, provides a frame of reference for Boccaccio's ideas of virtue in the individual"²³. Numerous modern studies of the *Decameron* have developed along ethical lines, especially in terms of seeing Boccaccio's "favole o parabole o istorie" (fables or parables or stories; *Dec.* Proem. 13) as continuing the classical concept of exemplary narratives with instructional content. These studies have amply demonstrated Boccaccio's familiarity with both collections of anecdotes from Late Antiquity and medieval compilations of sermon *exempla*.²⁴

Recent ethical readings of Boccaccio may also be seen in the context of the late twentieth-century "ethical turn" in the larger arena of Anglo-American literary criticism. Ethical critics generally understand the practical purpose of literature as not only that of teaching moral lessons, but also as providing an encounter with "alterity" whereby we learn to identify with, and to develop compassion for, those unlike ourselves²⁵.

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²² D. Alighieri, *Epistola* XIII 16, in A. Frugoni and G. Brugnoli (ed.), *Opere minori* III 2, Ricciardi, Milano 1979; Eng. tr. R. Haller (ed.), *Literary Criticism of Dante Alighieri*, University of Nebraska, Lincoln 1977, p. 102. The attribution of this epistle to Dante is disputed and the subject of heated critical debate.
²³ V. Kirkham, *Morals*, in P.M. Forni et al. (eds.), *The Decameron: A Critical Lexicon*, tr. M. Papio, ACMRS, Tempe 2019, 222 (orig. *Lessico critico decameroniano*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 1995, pp. 259-60; see also S. Barsella, *I marginalia di Boccaccio all'* Etica nicomachea *di Aristotele*, in E. Filosa and M. Papio (eds.), *Boccaccio in America*, Longo, Ravenna 2012, pp. 143-55.
²⁴ See C. Delcorno, *Exemplum e letteratura. Tra Medioevo e Rinascimento*, Mulino, Bologna 1989; K. Stierle, *Story as Exemplum – Exemplum as Story: On the Pragmatics and Poetics of Narrative Texts*, in C. May (ed.), *The New Short Story Theories*, Ohio University Press, Athens OH 1994, pp. 15-43; O. Holmes, *Boccaccio and Exemplary Literature: Ethics and Mischief in the* Decameron, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2023. Citations of the *Decameron* are from G. Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ed. V. Branca, Einaudi, Torino 1992, I Intro. 4; translations are ours.
²⁵ See, e.g., W. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1988; M. Nussbaum, *Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism*, in "Philosophy and Literature" XXII, n. 2, 1998, pp. 343-65; T. Davis and K.

Comparable ideas have been put forward in recent decades by cognitive critics as well, who find the evolutionary advantage of storytelling in its promotion of both communicative abilities and mental flexibility or "Theory of Mind", whereby we learn to see things from other people's points of view – skills that foster social cooperation, humanity's specific evolutionary niche[26]. Ethical and cognitive attempts to explain the benefits of literature in terms of identification with the Other, even across lines of gender and class, seem especially applicable to Boccaccio's *magnum opus*, a text that of course opens its *Proemio* by exhorting the reader to compassion for young women in love. Boccaccio also arguably begins the *Decameron*'s general introduction with a philosophical exhortation to virtue by comparing its "orrido cominciamento", the description of the Black Death in Florence, to "una montagna aspra e erta, presso alla quale un bellissimo piano e dilettevole sia reposto (a rough, steep mountain, behind which lies a beautiful and enchanting plain)". The passage opens the work up to being interpreted along universal lines, as referring not only to victims of the plague, but to all those who suffer pain, including the lovesick women of the Proem. For an Italian medieval reader steeped in classical learning, however, this image would also have called up the Pythagorean topos, picked up by early Christian writers such as St. Jerome and Lactantius, of comparing human existence to the letter "Y", in which the fork represents the choice in life between virtue and vice, and the road to virtue is said to be steep and rough-going at first, but to level off and become a beautiful trail after one's initial efforts[27]. Even at the opening of his collection of apparently frivolous and at times lascivious tales, Boccaccio implicitly urges his readers to pursue the more difficult path of moral virtue.

Womack (eds.), *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*, Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 2001; D. Hale*, Aesthetics and the New Ethics: Theorizing the Novel in the Twenty-first Century*, in "PMLA", CXXIV, n. 3, 2009, 896-905.
[26] See E. Sober and D. Wilson, *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1998; L. Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*, Ohio State University Press, Columbus 2006; B. Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories*, Belknap, Cambridge 2009; P. Armstrong, *How Literature Plays with the Brain*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2013. It may be useful here to contextualize ethical readings of Boccaccio also in the recent critical turn towards affect theory and the history of the emotions: e.g. M. Nussbaum, *Compassion: The Basic Social Emotion*, in "Social Philosophy and Policy", XIII, n. 1, 1996; S. Keen, *Empathy and the Novel,* Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007; B. Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling: A History of the Emotions, 600-1700*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015. For Boccaccio specifically, see G. Zak, *Boccaccio and the Consolation of Literature*, PIMS, Toronto 2022, and the cluster of articles on "Boccaccio and Compassion" by G. Zak, O. Holmes, and F. R. Psaki in "I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance", XXII, n. 1, 2019.
[27] Another version of the Pythagorean Y can be found in the story of Hercules at the Crossroads, a topos that Boccaccio refers to in *Amorosa visione* XXVI.

Although the recognition that Boccaccio does indeed have a place in the history of philosophy is well established by now, this collection of essays is the first, to our knowledge, that broadly explores the theme of "Boccaccio and Philosophy" across the spectrum of its manifold meanings and implications, including Boccaccio's relationship to and breaks with the philosophical traditions of his day, as well as interpretations of Boccaccio's works that are informed by more recent developments in critical theory. The topic has three main aspects: 1) how the historical author responded to the ancient and medieval philosophical traditions that he inherited; 2) his own philosophical stance either as explicitly stated or as implied by his literary fiction; and 3) how the philosophical developments of Boccaccio's own age or subsequent centuries help us to understand his writings. We have therefore divided the essays in this volume into three sections, in reference to these three primary orientations, either toward the past (Classical and Christian philosophical traditions); the present (Boccaccio's own philosophy); or the future (coeval or subsequent perspectives on Boccaccio's writings).

The first section, *Boccaccio and the Philosophers*, includes articles that address Boccaccio's response to the philosophical traditions (both classical and biblical) that preceded him. Giulia Cipriani's essay, "L'etica del piacere nelle novelle erotiche di Dioneo", focuses on the *Decameron*'s multiplicity of ethical perspectives, beginning with a comparison between the wide range of human behavior depicted in the work and the nearly endless permutations of all life's contradictions. She turns to Aristotelian ethics (mediated by Thomistic thought) to examine the narrator's intentional inversions of Aristotelian precepts in Dioneo's erotic tales. If the highest pleasure is wisdom, for example, his stories of vice challenge the reader's own notions of virtue. Dioneo's *novelle* go against rigid theological and philosophical dogmas regarding desire, pleasure, and moderation, which is tantamount to advocating for a sort of 'situational ethics' that acknowledges human physiological needs and questions the usefulness of asceticism.

Starting from the observation that Boccaccio presents the *Decameron* as a remedial book aimed at consoling women who have no means to contain the possibly disrupting effects of erotic passion, Maria Pia Ellero's essay "Leggere per passione, ovvero la consolazione della letteratura" focuses on the development of Boccaccio's idea of a literature of consolation. She examines the relationship between the consolation of literature and that of philosophy in Boccaccio's narrative works prior to the *Decameron*, and particularly in the *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine* and the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*. In particular, she explores Boccaccio's dialogue with two major subtexts in which the opposition between the *consolatio philosophiae* and a negatively connoted *consolatio poesis*

had been elaborated: Cicero's *Tusculanae disputationes*, Book III, and Boethius's *De consolatione Philosophiae*, the latter a source for both the *Comedia* and the *Fiammetta*. Her article presents a compelling analysis of how Boccaccio reworks the theme of the *consolatio* in relation to these two ancient models.

Maggie Ann Fritz-Morkin's article "Res humiles: Boccaccio and Biblical Allegory" examines the topic of lies and fraud in the *Decameron* in the light of Augustine's moral treatises *De mendacio* and *Contra mendacio*, which catalogue and analyze different types of deception. Augustine dwells on the challenge presented by Biblical accounts of people lying with apparent divine approbation. As Fritz-Morkin demonstrates, Augustine's two treatises articulate theological and metaliterary positions that address the *Decameron*'s central moral questions. Despite his absolute condemnation of all lies, Augustine takes care to exonerate false statements made in sincere belief, assuring God's mercy in the case of honest mistakes. This is also Panfilo's moral in the tale of Cepparello (*Dec.* I 1) and a fundamental premise of the *Decameron* itself. Fritz-Morkin shows that Boccaccio incorporates narrative elements from Augustine's major examples of Biblical deception into his stories, offering such examples as Abraham's lies that raise the specter of sibling incest (echoed in *Dec.* II 5 and VII 10); the tricks that Joseph plays on his brothers (echoed in III 7); Lot's offering his virginal daughters to the men of Sodom (echoed in X 6); Tamar's seduction of her father-in-law (echoed in III 9 and VIII 2); Jacob's deception of his father (echoed in I 3); and – more generally – the Bible's use of figurative, non-literal language (echoed especially in X 10).

Laura De Luisa also uses an approach based on ethical philosophy in "'Rei publice utilitatis addere': On Boccaccio's Moral Reflections in the *De casibus*". Central to Boccaccio's moral discourse is the concept of *utilitas*, influenced by Roman Stoic philosophy, which reconciles the pursuit of secondary goods with a virtuous life for collective benefit. In *De casibus virorum illustrium*, Boccaccio notably separates moral considerations from historical and biographical narratives so as to educate rulers and citizens on virtuous conduct through negative examples of powerful individuals struck down by Fortune, seen as divine retribution. Among the specific moral targets are pride and lust, but De Luisa also looks at the work's misogyny and antisemitism. The *De casibus* anticipates aspects of moral and political Humanism, particularly its celebration of virtuous leadership and civic stability, that will take fuller shape in later generations.

The second section, *Boccaccio's Philosophy of Literature*, explores the author's own philosophical positions as articulated in his literary corpus. Simona Lorenzini's essay "*Et, ben che spesso semplice paura / solare eclypse or squarciar nuvolette / faccia*: Giovanni Boccaccio as Natural Thinker", addresses the question of natural determinism in Boccaccio

through an analysis of a sonnet that he sent to Checco di Meletto Rossi in 1348, during the catastrophic pestilence that frames the *Decameron*. This study is concerned with a particular aspect of Boccaccio's "naturalism", that is, the relationship between natural phenomena and their causes. It asks whether natural phenomena such as floods, eclipses, thunderstorms, and the like can be read as signs to be interpreted in the light of a divine will to punish humanity for its sins, or whether they are the product of a celestial mechanics that responds to the laws of divine providence, and are not simply instrumental to a logic of reward and punishment.

Eleonora Buonocore's article, "The Thread of Memory in the *Decameron*: From the Pleasures and Dangers of Narration to Lessons for the Future", explores another aspect of Boccaccio's philosophical interests: the meaning of memory in relation to imagination and deliberation. Boccaccio intentionally uses memory as part of a literary strategy for constructing the *Decameron*'s didactic purpose. Drawing on the philosophical tradition found in Aristotle's *De memoria* and Thomas Aquinas's commentary on it, Buonocore examines references to memory that bind the *Decameron*'s tales into a network that helps to define the narrators' ability to recollect as a fundamental moment in the tales' formative enterprise. Memory constitutes a narrative thread that connects not only the different *novelle* together, but also the *novelle* to the frame story about the ten Florentine narrators.

In "Figure dell'Amor Cortese nell'ultima giornata del *Decameron*", Giuseppe Fornari examines themes of courtly love and their religious and philosophical implications in the final day of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, particularly in relation to medieval literary traditions and Dante's *Commedia*. He delves into the spiritual and religious dimensions of Boccaccio's masterpiece, contrasting the hyperbolic and anti-realistic aspects of the last day with the rather less fantastic plots of the other *novelle*, and situates the *Decameron* both within a more nuanced historical and cultural context and against the backdrop of Franciscanism, medieval intellectual movements, and the broader European literary tradition. The essay provides philosophical and theological insights with particular attention to the nature of love, the role of the intellect, and the concept of divine providence.

Alessandro Raffi's essay "Dante poeta-teologo: Epistemologia ed ermeneutica nel *Trattatello* di Boccaccio" then explores the theme of the relationship between theology and poetry in Boccaccio's *Trattatello* as a key to understanding his reading of Dante's *Commedia*. Boccaccio interprets the language of the *Commedia* as "divine" and reads the *poema* in an allegorical, figural, soteriological, and even "symbolic" key, suggesting the possible influence of the Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's *De coelesti hierarchia.* In providing this ideological background in the *Trattatello*, Boccaccio seems to support Dante's thesis of the poet as a *scriba*

Dei who "takes notes" under the dictation of an Auctor to be identified in the *Deus Amor* of St. John's *First Epistle*. Raffi's analysis confirms Boccaccio's idea of a close connection between the formal, literal aspect of the narrative *fictio* and the doctrinal content it conveys. He also suggests how this idea of poetry is functional to the prophetic universalist vision of the *Commedia*, coherent with the ethical tension that pervades Dante's political reflections in the *Monarchia*.

The third and final section, *The Philosophers and Boccaccio*, contains articles that bring to bear, in their understanding of Boccaccio's texts, the insights and categories of philosophical thought contemporary to Boccaccio or later. In "Rational Desire and the Human Essence in Boccaccio's *Amorosa visione*: An Averrorist Perspective", Gregory B. Stone – relying on an interpretation of Dante as responding to the Radical Aristotelianism of some thirteenth-century Parisian academics and fourteenth-century Italians – reads the *Amorosa visione* as following its model the *Commedia* (as well as the works of Dante's friend Guido Cavalcanti) in rejecting contemporary Averroism's insistence that the authentic human essence is *intellectus*. The essay begins by showing how *Decameron* 6.9 is generated by a passage from the Avereroist Siger of Brabant that "to live without letters is death and is the grave of living men", and then goes on to elucidate the *Amorosa visione*'s revision of this Latin Averroist commonplace. According to Stone, Boccaccio uses key elements of Cavalcanti's and Dante's neo-Aristotelian ethics in the poem to argue that the highest human felicity is not intellect but love, which is in accord – rather than in conflict – with ethics and reason.

The collaborative essay "*Decameron* IV 9: Modifying a Source to Make Philosophical Claims", by Sandra Carapezza, Marco Stucchi, Damiano Bondi, and Matteo Bisoni, contextualizes this *novella* within the *Decameron* as a system while employing the thought of two twentieth-century authors, Denis de Rougemont and René Girard, who, despite being mainly known as literary critics, have exerted significant influence on contemporary philosophy. The authors examine how the story is introduced by the narrator, as well as some key differences between Boccaccio's text and its source in the troubadour *Vida* of Guilhem de Cabestaing. They highlight the story's lexical and cultural references to Provençal literature, as well as to Dante's work, especially the episode of Pia dei Tolomei (*Purg.* V). The article argues that Boccaccio's alterations of this source, in changing the relationship between the two male characters, for instance, imply specific theoretical claims about the correlation between desire, imitation, and violence. In conclusion, they briefly assess how Girard's notion of "mimetic desire" is manifested throughout the rest of the *Decameron*.

Finally, Timothy Kircher's contribution, "Closed Tombs, Open Books: The *Decameron*'s Tombs as Signs of Death and Resurrection", examines

the role of tombs in relation to Sigmund Freud's essay "The Theme of the Three Caskets". For Freud, the casket theme not only conveys the interplay between love and death, but also raises the topic of choice and necessity. Kircher uses psychoanalytic ideas to explore the symbolism and narrative place of tombs in 2.5 (Andreuccio), 3.8 (Ferondo), 6.9 (Cavalcanti), and 10.4 (Madonna Catalina). Reading these stories in sequence illuminates the transition from the episode of the plague, in which the dead lack proper burial, to the possibility of dialogue and consolation, in which corporality finds an at least literary transcendence. The stories foster the readers' meditation on human mortality, which as Cicero noted (*Tusculanae disputationes* 1.30) is the essence of philosophy, underscoring the *Decameron*'s function as memorial. The parallel between the female protagonists – recluses buried in their rooms – and the ten young people – buried in the plagued city of Florence – illustrates the dialectical play between death and resurrection, or destruction and reconstruction, revealing the *Decameron*'s intellectual and spiritual circularity.