

Laura De Luisa

"Rei publice utilitatis addere": On Boccaccio's Moral Reflections in the *De casibus virorum illustrium*

The *De casibus virorum illustrium* represents a unique instance within Boccaccio's corpus, because it is his only work in which moral considerations are separated from the narrative sections, within dedicated chapters. It is precisely these chapters – devoted entirely to the development of a wider moral reflection, based on the narrative but structurally autonomous – that will be examined here¹.

In particular, Boccaccio's considerations are addressed to all men, as citizens or rulers, and aim to "quid [...] rei publice utilitatis addere" (*De cas. prob.* 1), i.e., to provide his own contribution as a writer to the moral constitution of citizens. Thus, in the proem, the author announces his pedagogical intention², which is to educate men of power and, more generally, to spur the citizens of the *res publica* to virtuous conduct in life. To do so, Boccaccio presents and comments on the stories of those in power, who are mostly proud and immoral, and who are struck down by Fortune, interpreted as divine retribution³. He writes in Latin, the language of erudition, which more than any other, allowed him to reach all those who "hac tempestate president regnis" – who are rejected as the dedicatees of the text but, as we shall see, are the first addressees of its moral message – and so as to certify the historical accuracy of his narratives⁴. Hence, as in the medieval historical sources of the *De casibus*, the

¹ The text of Boccaccio's work will be cited from G. Boccaccio, *De casibus virorum illustrium*, a cura di P. G. Ricci, V. Zaccaria, Mondadori, Milano 1983. English translations are mine.

² Cfr. J. Hankins, *Boccaccio and the Political Thought of Renaissance Humanism*, in M. Eisner, D. Lummus (a cura di), *A Boccaccian Renaissance. Essays on the Early Modern Impact of Giovanni Boccaccio and His Works*, University of Notre-Dame Press, Notre Dame 2019, pp. 3-35, in particular pp. 6-9.

³ *De cas. prob.* 6: "I therefore convinced myself that it was convenient to use examples and to describe to them what God Almighty (or Fortune, to use their language) could and did do against those who had power and fame".

⁴ See *De cas. da cura di* 8; on Boccaccio's Latin as the language of objectivity and accuracy, Cfr. E. Filosa, *Tre studi sul "De mulieribus claris"*, LED, Milano 2012, p. 107 and

prologue explains the method and the aims of the work. In addition, the theme of the contribution that literature can provide to the *res publica* is already present in Petrarch's thought, and it also anticipates the humanist philosophy, which sees in pedagogy the highest contribution that the intellectual can make to the state⁵.

The following sections will examine the ways in which Boccaccio intends to be *utilis* to citizens, rulers, and to the *res publica* as a whole. This analysis will examine the themes and characteristics, both literary and moral, of his reflections, which are divided into over thirty chapters dedicated to the condemnation of vice and the exaltation of virtue, with recurring polemical objectives.

1. Contributing to the morality of the city: The proem of the *De casibus* between classical and medieval heritage and humanist innovation

Following the model of medieval historiography, Boccaccio explains in the proem not only the intent of his own literary work, but also the nature of its teaching and how it is to be achieved. The author intends to act in favour of the *res publica* by influencing its rulers, whose corrupt actions negatively affect the entire community⁶. To educate them, he uses negative examples of men of power struck down by Fortune (*"exemplis agendum ratus sum"*) rather than rational arguments. So, in the proem, Boccaccio presents his pedagogical programme in detail. He will provide a series of examples of behaviours to be avoided and place the sufferings of the great figures of history before readers' eyes. Thus, the reader will be dissuaded from performing similar actions for his own *utilitas*⁷.

The concept of *utilitas*, which is mentioned twice in the proem, may require closer examination. In light of Fosca Mariani Zini's observation that the conceptual framework of the *Decameron* was shaped by Roman Stoic philosophy, Boccaccio's mention of *utilitas* in the *De*

P. Ganio Vecchiolino, *Due modi di narrare: Boccaccio latino e il "Decameron"*, in "Critica letteraria", 20, 1992, pp. 655-677.

⁵ On Petrarch's political reflections see E. Fenzi, *Pratica politica e pensieri sul potere in Francesco Petrarca: linee per un nuovo approccio*, in G. C. Garfagnini (a cura di), *La politica in Toscana da Dante a Guicciardini*, Leonardo Libri, Firenze 2017, pp. 47-76.

⁶ Cfr. *De cas. prob.* 2: "And when I saw that these, at the instigation of immoral men, were spreading everywhere without restraint, and that all public honesty was being corrupted, the sacred laws of justice were being violated, all virtue was being shaken, and the minds of the ignorant masses were being led by abominable examples to impious habits, I perceived that chance had brought me exactly where I wanted to be, and I immediately took up my pen to write against them".

⁷ *De cas. prob.* 9: "learn to limit their pleasure, and may they use the bad luck of others to their advantage [*utilitati*]".

casibus may also be seen as having their roots in that philosophical heritage. In her work, Mariani Zini has identified how, in the *Decameron*, Boccaccio attempts to reconcile the desire for secondary goods, such as wealth or power, with the search for a truly virtuous life, an idea of Stoic derivation. For Cicero, these goods are to be pursued on the basis of their degree of *utilitas* for practical life⁸. This appears to be precisely the meaning conveyed by Boccaccio in the second occurrence of the concept⁹.

However, given man's natural tendency towards social relations, the *utilitas* of secondary goods shifts from the individual to the collective, since the virtuous society would be based on the exchange of things useful for the preservation of individual life¹⁰. Similarly, according to Robert Hollander and, more recently, Roberta Morosini, the notion of *utilitas* in the *Decameron* is "a gain for the individual and [...] society"¹¹. Much as in the *Decameron*, *utilitas* in the proem of the *De casibus* becomes something that, by contributing to the physical and moral preservation of the individual citizen, contributes to the 'virtuous' preservation of the *res publica* itself. It is in this sense that the concept of *utilitas* will enter humanistic speculation. According to this, the literary work and the intellectual's labour can be truly *utiles* in the moral construction of society¹². To achieve this goal, Boccaccio chooses to collect an impressive array of negative examples.

The practice of teaching by *exempla*, which has its roots in both the classical tradition of the *De viris illustribus* (from Suetonius to Jerome) and the exemplary literature of preachers, is widely recognized to have

⁸ See F. Mariani Zini, *L'économie des passions. Essai sur le Décaméron de Boccace*, Septentrion, Villeneuve d'Ascq 2012, pp. 18-19.

⁹ On Boccaccio's knowledge of Cicero's works Cfr. V. Branca, *Cicerone e Boccaccio fra Dante e Petrarca*, in A. Paolella, V. Placella, G. Turco (a cura di), *Miscellanea di studi danteschi in memoria di Silvio Pasquazi*, vol. I, Federico & Ardia, Napoli 1993, pp. 167-171 and A. Hortis, *Cicerone nelle opere del Petrarca e del Boccaccio*, Hermanstorfer, Trieste 1878.

¹⁰ See Cic. *Off.* II, 5, 16. On the natural tendency towards human sociality, see also Sen. *Ep.* XCV, 52. In the inventory of the *parva libraria* of Santo Spirito, there are three copies of Cicero's *De officiis*. For an analysis of Cicero's influence on the *Decameron*, see M. Fiorilla, *Decameron*, in T. De Robertis, C. M. Monti, M. Petoletti, G. Tanturli, S. Zamponi (a cura di), *Boccaccio autore e copista*, Sansoni, Firenze 2013, pp. 129-136, in particular pp. 130-131.

¹¹ R. Morosini, *From the Garden to the Liquid City: Notes on 2.10, 3.4 and 10, 4.6-7, or a Decameron Poetics of the Erotico-Political Based on Useful Work (civanza)*, in "Heliotropia", 12-13, 2015-2016, pp. 5-49 and R. Hollander, *Boccaccio's Dante and the Shaping Force of Satire*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 1997, pp. 74-78.

¹² Cfr. P. Viti, *Boccaccio e le fonti classiche nel "De casibus virorum illustrium"*, in H. Casanova-Robin, S. Gambino Longo, F. La Brasca (a cura di), *Boccaccio humaniste latin*, Classiques Garnier, Paris 2016, pp. 25-50, in particular pp. 36-43.

influenced Boccaccio, who relies on this literary genre in the *Decameron* as well¹³. It is also worth emphasizing that the use of exemplary narratives as pedagogical tools will be a distinctive feature of humanistic education, an approach that takes its starting point, positively, from Petrarch's *De viris illustribus* and, negatively, from the *De casibus*¹⁴.

The function of historical narratives, both during Boccaccio's era and since classical antiquity, is inextricably linked to the moral guidance that can be derived from them. The renowned Ciceronian locution, which characterises history as "magistra vitae" (*De orat.* II, 9), continues to resonate in medieval universal chronicles, where history is interpreted within the context of Christian salvation¹⁵. All these works were well-known to Boccaccio, who drew upon them as sources for his own biographies¹⁶. Consequently, from the proem onwards, the *De casibus* re-proposes and testifies to this indissoluble link between history and morality.

In order to fulfil his pedagogical purpose, Boccaccio structures the *De casibus* in a distinctive manner. The work comprises nine books, which are themselves divided into a total of 174 chapters. In particular, there are 126 biographical narratives, centred on powerful individuals who experienced misfortune throughout history, and 37 chapters focused on moral considerations, starting from the characters in question. Chapters of this type distinguish the *De casibus* from the almost coeval *De mulieribus claris*, in which moral considerations are brief and not separated from biographical narratives¹⁷. In the *De casibus*, therefore, moral reflection assumes its own autonomy and prominent importance.

¹³ On these prologues see I. Heullant Donat, *Les prologues des chroniques universelles à la fin du Moyen Âge*, in J. Hamesse (a cura di), *Les prologues médiévaux*, Brepols, Turnhout 2000, pp. 573-591. On the practice of teaching by example in Boccaccio's production see C. Delcorno, *Exemplum e letteratura. Tra Medioevo e Rinascimento*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1989, pp. 265-294 and, more recently, O. Holmes, *Boccaccio and Exemplary Literature. Ethics and Mischief in the "Decameron"* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2023. For the relationship between preachers' literature and Boccaccio's literary production see C. Delcorno, *Boccaccio and the Literature of Friars*, in F. Ciabattini, E. Filosa, K. Olson (a cura di), *Boccaccio 1313-2013*, Ravenna, Longo 2015, pp. 161-185.

¹⁴ Cf J. Hankins, *Boccaccio and the Political Thought of Renaissance Humanism*, cit., pp. 6-9.

¹⁵ For further information see P. Brezzi, *Cronache universali e storia della salvezza*, in *Fonti medioevali e problematica storiografica*, vol. I, Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo, Roma 1976, pp. 317-336.

¹⁶ For a fairly complete list of sources see V. Zaccaria, *Introduzione al "De casibus"*, in Id., *Boccaccio narratore, storico, moralista e mitografo*, Olschki, Firenze 2001, pp. 35-59, in particular pp. 41-43.

¹⁷ On this difference see also C. M. Monti, *Luoghi liminari e conclusivi di "De mulieribus claris" e "De casibus virorum illustrium"*, in "Studi sul Boccaccio", 48, 2020, pp. 77-98.

2. Moral teaching as a structural element: Presence, distribution and features of the moral chapters

Since the biographical chapters have always been considered the most interesting parts of the *De casibus*, it is perhaps unsurprising that the moral ones have been somewhat overlooked in previous studies. While the pedagogical function of the work has been the subject of some considerable research, the vices and virtues in question have not always been subjected to the same degree of analysis¹⁸. A comprehensive study of Boccaccio's "tirades" has yet to be undertaken¹⁹.

The chapters dedicated exclusively to the condemnation of vices or the praise of virtues represent 21% of the chapters in the work (37/174). The largest percentage of these sections is in the first four books (24/37). Moreover, from Book V onwards, there is a progressive reduction in the number of moral sections. As previously stated, the function of the moral chapters is to provide a commentary on the events described in the biographical ones. Consequently, in most cases, the moral section follows the narrative one to which it refers²⁰. Despite some rare exceptions, the name of the unfortunate character from the preceding chapter or the actions he performed are generally recalled in the moral section²¹. This explicit reference serves two purposes: better to frame the moral discourse and to draw inspiration from the events so as to broaden the field of investigation.

To illustrate the connection between biography and moral commentary, one might consider chapter I, 14 *Contra superbos*, which is related to the section on Priam and Hecuba (I, 13). The king and the queen of Troy suffer not only their own misfortunes, but also those of their children, who are listed by the author with the technique of *accumulatio*²². Boccaccio employs the tragic experiences of the Trojan kings and their families as a cautionary tale for the proud by illustrating the transience of material wealth:

Quid inquiet, queso, non formidabunt, hi quorum spes omnis caducis
in rebus affixa est? Quid stematibus robore et formositate superbus, si trahi

¹⁸ See for instance J. Hankins, *Boccaccio and the Political Thought of Renaissance Humanism*, cit., pp. 6-9.

¹⁹ For this definition see V. Kirkham, *Morals*, in P. M. Forni, R. Bragantini (a cura di), *The Decameron: a critical lexicon*, Arizona Center for Medieval & Renaissance studies, Tempe 2019, pp. 249-268, in particular p. 256.

²⁰ Exceptions to this scheme are ch. II, 9, which follows a moralistic section, and IV, 3, which is linked to the biography that follows it.

²¹ For the exceptions see *De cas.* I, 4; II, 9; II, 18; VIII, 17; VIII, 20.

²² On the rhetorical techniques in the *De casibus* see R. Gigliucci, *Evidenza e orrore nel "De casibus" di Boccaccio*, in R. Alhaique Pettinelli, S. Benedetti, P. Petteruti Pellegrino (a cura di), *Le parole "giudiziose". Indagini sul lessico della critica umanistico-rinascimentale*, Bulzoni, Roma 2008, pp. 31-59.

Hectorem et iacere Paridem viderit? [...] Quid elatus filiorum fratrum consanguineorum et affinium, atque necessariorum stipatus caterva, dum Priamum sua in regia proprio in sanguine palpitantem leget? Quis illo conspicua natorum numerositate fecundior? Quis affinitatum amplior? Quis amicorum aut servorum copiosior fuit in terris? Nemo equidem; et tamen victus est et orbatus occubuit. Quid dives ingenti pondere auri, suppellectili splendida atque latis arvis habundans, si Priamum, propria in arce confossum, inter ruinas tumulatum patrie sentiet? [...] Equidem nescio quid dicturus; sane tamen video, si saxeus non sit, supercilium ponere, inanem gloriam abicere, stultam fiduciam, labores et cogitationes damnare suas, et angulari lapidi inherere, in quo solo fortitudo certa et stabilitas inconcussa est et vita perpetua. (*De cas.* I, 14)

What will be said by people who put all their hope in things that have fallen? Will they not feel fear? What would those who take pride in their heritage, power, and beauty say when they witness Paris on the ground and Hector being pulled down? [...] What would they say when one reads about Priam dying in his palace and in his own blood, surrounded by a horde of servants, and proud of his sons, brothers, relatives, and all his kinsmen? With so many offspring, who is more prolific? Who is better blessed with relatives? Who in the world has more servants and friends? But he was defeated and died without having got anything. What can a rich man say, with so much gold and precious stones, and a big estate, when he hears of Priam, killed in his own castle and buried in the ruins of his country? I don't know how he'd react. If he wasn't made of stone, I'd see him lowering pride, abandoning boastfulness, condemning his activities and plans, and leaning on that cornerstone which is surely strong, unshakably firm and eternal.

The intertextual connections between the narrative of Priam and Hecuba and these moral considerations are readily apparent from the outset, in reference to the characters' experiences. The events involving the Trojan rulers provide an opportunity for reflection, by presenting a series of dramatic situations to the reader. Moreover, the chapter has a specific addressee, declared as early as its title: the proud, the one who places "all hope in ephemeral things". A series of rhetorical questions, based on the contrast between his false beliefs and the vision of the tragedy of Priam and his family, is posed to him²³. In this case, the addressee can be identified as a particular type of reader who is unable to place the right value on things. In contrast, the majority of chapters make reference to the broader audience delineated in the proem.

²³ On the subject of the vision of violence see L. De Luisa, *Da Ecuba a Filippa di Catania. La rappresentazione della violenza in tre capitoli del "De casibus virorum illustrium" di Boccaccio*, in R. Bardi et al. (a cura di), *La violenza nella letteratura italiana. Forme, linguaggi e rappresentazioni*, SEF, Firenze 2023, pp. 3-23.

The parenthetic purpose underlying these chapters also gives rise to the construction of a relatively uniform structure, although the position or extent of the elements may vary. The chapters usually progress from a reference to the character and the vice of which he was guilty, to a long and concise apodictic section, to a final *sententia* of strong rhetorical impact²⁴. Moreover, this homogeneity is combined with a certain degree of authorial freedom in their presentation, which allows Boccaccio to compose a coherent framework of admonition or exhortation in each specific case.

Despite this structural coherence, Marchesi has observed that the moral chapters in the second half of the work tend to be fewer and briefer²⁵. An illustrative example can be found in the two homonymous chapters *in mulieres* (*De cas.* I, 18; VIII, 23). The initial chapter is notably lengthy and presents a multitude of arguments. In contrast, the second chapter, at the end of the work, is characterised by a more concise style and it offers a short summary of the core points from the preceding biography. Internal narrative considerations can justify this progressive imbalance. In the second part of the work, Boccaccio is increasingly surrounded by his characters, who arrive in droves in his “camerula” to be told their stories. Consequently, it becomes more and more challenging for him to interrupt the series of biographies with the moral considerations he had previously indulged in.

From a stylistic standpoint, the use of rhetorical devices with a high impact on the reader – rhetorical questions, crude and expressionistic language, and phonic insistence on certain concepts – is a defining feature of Boccaccio’s moral reflections and contributes to the didactic intent of the work. By emphasising characters’ violence and misfortune, Boccaccio aims to prompt the readers to meditate on their own ethical conduct²⁶.

3. Against all vices and all immoral characters: Highlights and polemical objectives of Boccaccio’s moral reflection

The *De casibus*’s coherent framework is intended to transmit precise moral content. It is possible to divide the moral sections into two broad thematic groups. Most chapters have an invective nature. They can be directed a) against a specific vice or the categories of people who practice

²⁴ Cfr. M. Pastore Stocchi, *Il Boccaccio del “De casibus”*, in “Giornale Storico della Letteratura Italiana”, 515, 1984, pp. 421-430.

²⁵ Cfr. S. Marchesi, *Boccaccio on Fortune (“De casibus virorum illustrium”)*, in V. Kirkham, M. Sherberg, J. Levarie Smarr (a cura di), *Boccaccio. A Critical Guide to the Complete Works*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2013, pp. 245-254., in particular p. 246.

²⁶ See R. Gigliucci, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-37 and L. De Luisa, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5.

it, b) against social categories, c) against the characters themselves, or d) against specific events. There are fewer chapters of praise. They extol: a) certain virtues, manifested by the characters or exalted by antithesis, b) the characters themselves, or c) certain events.

An examination of the work's index reveals that Boccaccio condemns a range of vices, such as pride, lust, avarice, and gluttony. He also addresses more specific immoral situations, such as the tendency of *garruli* to oppose rhetoric, the lack of conviction among jurists, or the rebellion of sons against their loving fathers²⁷. Many virtues are praised, particularly those contrary to vices already blamed, such as poverty, obedience, nobility of spirit, paternal *pietas*, and patience²⁸. By drawing upon historical and mythological figures, Boccaccio offers insights into every nuance of moral transgression, even in unconventional circumstances.

Nevertheless, there are recurring themes that serve to define the overarching moral reasoning of the *De casibus*. Four chapters are dedicated to the topic of pride:²⁹ 11% of the moral chapters are dedicated to reproaching the proud, who give less consideration to the influence of Fortune (*De cas.* I, 4, 2). In several passages, pride is defined as man's blind reliance on material goods and on his own strength³⁰. It is precisely against this notion of pride that Boccaccio proposes on several occasions, as already in the *Decameron*, the remedy of humility. As early as chapter I, 4, 6, the advice given to rulers to maintain stable power is to seek humility, which is pleasing to God and impossible for Fortune to destroy.

One may affirm, on the basis of Boccaccio's words in *De cas.* I, 4; I, 14 and II, 5, that the whole work should be seen as a general exhortation to *humilitas* rather than pride. All the victims of Fortune whom Boccaccio describes have been too dependent on secondary goods, and have forgotten to be subject to God and His Providence. It is only the vision of such (and so many) sufferings that can lead the proud to choose the path of humility. Furthermore, the concept of humility as a remedy for pride is a recurring theme in medieval philosophical discourse, which is evident in the works of prominent figures such as Bernard of Clairvaux, Hugh of St. Victor, and St. Bonaventure³¹. Within this philosophical tradition, Boccaccio ascribes a crucial function to this virtue, by repeatedly extolling and opposing it against the influence of pride.

²⁷ *De cas.* VI, 13; III, 10; VIII, 20.

²⁸ *De cas.* I, 16; II, 2; VI, 3; IX, 17; IX, 22.

²⁹ *De cas.* I, 4; I, 14; II, 5; IV, 3.

³⁰ Cfr. *De cas.* II, 5, 1: here, the proud are defined as persons "who rely entirely on temporary circumstances as if they were the most constant".

³¹ See C. Casagrande, S. Vecchio, *I sette vizi capitali. Storia dei peccati nel Medioevo*, Einaudi, Torino 2000, p. 15.

The second vice that is a "protagonist" of the moral chapters in the *De casibus* is lust, which Boccaccio criticises in three chapters. It is considered as pure *luxuria* (*De cas.* III, 4), as *amor illecebris* (*De cas.* IV, 19) and as *cupido lasciva* (*De cas.* IX, 12)³². This vice is condemned as much in men of power (*De cas.* III, 4) as in ordinary men (*De cas.* IV, 19; IX, 12, 1). In the first case, which follows an account of the rape of Lucretia, the vice is expressed in a very physical sense and is related to the ability to rule. Boccaccio, whose attention is always on the community of citizens, questions the credibility of a ruler who does not respect the bodies of others (*De cas.* III, 4, 17). Starting from his reflection on the lust of princes, the author comes to question the community's need for a ruler who is not virtuous³³. Indeed, the stain of indecency renders the ruler unworthy and useless in the eyes of the citizens, who are often more capable than those in power of following virtue (*De cas.* III, 4, 19). Conversely, Boccaccio's statements on the dangers of "impetuosa Venus" (*De cas.* IV, 19) have a different tenor. This chapter is rather peculiar in the pedagogical context of the *De casibus*. Even though Boccaccio always tries to add a *pars costruens* at the end of each moral chapter, in the last part of this chapter he foresees the possibility that the powers of love and beauty cannot be resisted³⁴. The author then invites the reader at least to avoid the "vetita" (forbidden things), and to extinguish the amorous flames "in concessis".

In light of aforementioned awareness of love's power, Boccaccio also denounces those who exploit it for malevolent purposes. His vehement opposition to women, which appears in two polemical sections, is particularly remarkable. The female sex is the subject of satire in the extended chapter I, 18, in which woman is designated as "a sweet and deadly evil", and as "wrathful, unstable, unfaithful, libidinous, truculent, greedy for vanity rather than certain things" (I, 18, 18)³⁵. The chapter is directed primarily towards young people, who may still be influenced by Boccaccio's arguments and examples (*De cas.* I, 18, 17). These arguments represent a synthesis of those of his misogynistic masterpiece the *Corbaccio*, composed shortly before or even at the same time as the first draft of the

³² On the distinction between the different types of lust in medieval speculation, see *ivi*, 168-178.

³³ Cfr. *De cas.* III, 4, 17-19.

³⁴ On the power of love in Boccaccio's works, particularly in the *Decameron*, see L. Marcozzi, "Passio" e "ratio" tra Andrea Cappellano e Boccaccio. La novella dello scolare e della vedova (*Dec.* VIII, 7) e i castighi del "De Amore", in "Italianistica", 30, 2001, pp. 9-32, and M. Panarelli, *Per cacciare la malinconia delle femine. Immaginazione e malattia d'amore nel "Decameron" di Boccaccio*, in "Noctua", 10, 2023, pp. 135-160.

³⁵ On the representation of women in Boccaccio's works, see C. Cazalé Bérard, *Philogyny Misogyny*, in P. M. Forni, R. Bragantini (a cura di), *op. cit.*, pp. 116-141 and O. Holmes, *Pedagogia boccacesca: dall'"exemplum" misogino alla compassione per le afflitte*, in S. Ferrara, M. T. Ricci, E. Boillet (a cura di), *Boccaccio, entre Moyen Âge et Renaissance. Les tensions d'un écrivain*, Honoré Champion, Paris 2015, pp. 135-149.

*De casibus*³⁶. Chapter I, 18 begins with an examination of the potential dangers of female beauty and the arts to enhance it. This section seems to be an amplification of paragraphs 136-138 of the *Corbaccio*, where the stratagems for improving one's appearance correspond to those listed in the *De casibus*³⁷. In the *Corbaccio*, however, there is a lack of reference to historical-mythical examples, but the paradigmatic and negative function is assumed by the woman loved by the protagonist.

Boccaccio concludes his reflections in *De casibus* I, 18 by urging young men to control their libido and to seek women only for procreation. The author does not rule out the possibility that virtuous women exist. In fact, there are illustrious examples among Christians as well as pagans. However, he acknowledges the challenge of identifying these women without being seduced by the immoral ones. These virtuous women are the addressees of the second invective (*De cas.* VIII, 23) directed at their entire sex. In this instance, Boccaccio's discourse takes the form of a brief but effective invitation to women not to fall into the same miserable condition as the preceding character, the Lombard queen Rosmunda. Boccaccio suggests a solution to women's deficiencies: "laudandus pudor", which restrains them from pursuing endeavours beyond the scope of their gender. Consequently, while the discourse in I, 18 concludes on an ostensibly optimistic note – regarding the capacity of men for discernment and domination – the chapter directed towards women culminates in a compromise resolution: modesty is the unique quality capable of enabling women to remain within the limits of their social roles.

If it is possible for some women to maintain virtue, this is not the case for another frequent polemical target of the *De casibus*, namely the Jews. On the one hand, as Petrocchi observes, in the *Decameron* Boccaccio demonstrates no discernible bias against the Jewish people. Furthermore, in the account of Abraham (*Dec.* I, 2), he employs a series of respectful epithets. "Boccaccio's admirable lack of prejudice, especially encouraging given the cultural climate and the considerable effect of the plague on the Tuscan countryside, was the exception to the rule" even within his literary production³⁸. On the other hand, in *De cas.* II, 9, the

³⁶ On the relationship between ch. I, 18 and the *Corbaccio* see V. Zaccaria, *op. cit.*, pp. 42-43. The text is edited by G. Padoan in G. Boccaccio, *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta. Corbaccio. Consolatoria a Pino de' Rossi. Bucolicum Carmen. Allegoria Mitologica*, Mondadori, Milano 1994, pp. 413-614.

³⁷ Both works, for example, mention the stratagems used by women to lighten their hair (*De cas.* I, 18, 5; *Corb.* 137) or the way they style and decorate it (*De cas.* I, 18, 6; *Corb.* 139). Even some terms in *De cas.* I, 18 correspond to those in the *Corbaccio* ("animali tam indomito", *De cas.* I, 18, 17; "indomito animale" *Corb.* 205).

³⁸ M. Papio, G. Melloni, *Antisemitism*, in *Decameron Web* (https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/religion/culture/antisemitism.php, accessed on 31/08/2024).

author offers insights into the general features of the Jewish people, who are "perverse, malicious, and unaware of themselves" (II, 9, 1). A further polemical attack on the Jews is to be found in *De cas.* VII, 9. Boccaccio justifies the ruinous end of Jerusalem with the cruelties committed by the Jews, first and foremost the deicide. The Jewish people are not afforded the opportunity for redemption; instead, they are subjected to the punishment they drew upon themselves at the moment of deicide. In contrast to women, who are offered warnings and the chance for improvement, Jews are only regarded as polemical targets. One might then inquire as to why, in comparison to the *Decameron*, Boccaccio's perspective on the Jews is so condemnatory in the *De casibus*. Once more, the most likely explanation is that the destination and purpose of the work are the key factors to consider. The close correlation between moral unworthiness and the retribution of Fortune inevitably compels the author to depict those who are most deserving of divine wrath³⁹.

In light of the preceding observations, it becomes evident that the high-frequency polemical targets of the *De casibus* encompass distinct roles within the work. Pride appears to be the vice that denotes most of the characters, although it is not always the subject of direct censure. Already in the Christian and biblical tradition, *Sirach* recognises pride as "the beginning of all sins" (10:13), and St. Augustine sees in every sin a form of distancing from eternal and divine realities, in order to turn to changeable and uncertain ones⁴⁰. The pride depicted by Boccaccio can be identified in this Augustinian definition – echoed, among others, by St. Thomas Aquinas and the early Franciscan theologians⁴¹ – as the root of all evil. For this reason, it can be regarded as a polemical 'thread' throughout the *De casibus*.

Conversely, lust is the defining vice of specific characters, and is therefore subjected to detailed analysis across its various manifestations. In particular, women are associated with this latter vice. They serve as both the polemical targets and addresses of moral instruction. Lastly, the sec-

³⁹ The fact that it is precisely the people who call themselves 'chosen' who most deserve divine wrath inscribes the criticism of the *De casibus* in the more general context of Boccaccio's polemic against men of faith, whether Jews or Christians. On his relationship with Jewish culture see J. Levarie Smarr, *Altre razze ed altri spazi nel "Decameron"*, in R. Morosini (a cura di), *Boccaccio geografo. Un viaggio nel Mediterraneo tra le città, i giardini e... il "mondo" di Giovanni Boccaccio*, Pagliai Polistampa, Firenze 2010, pp. 133-158; on Boccaccio's anticlericalism see I. Tufano, *Letteratura sacra e religiosi nel decameron: le prime tre giornate*, in A. A. Cabrini, A. D'Agostino (a cura di), *Boccaccio: gli antichi e i moderni*, Ledizioni, Milano 2018, pp. 139-159.

⁴⁰ See Augustine, *De libero arbitrio*, I, XVI, 35, a cura di W. M. Green, K.D. Daur, in *Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina*, vol. XXIX, Brepols, Turnhout 1970, p. 235.

⁴¹ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summae Theologiae*, II, II, q. 163, a. 2. For the discussion of pride in the early Franciscan tradition see C. Casagrande, S. Vecchio, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

ond most condemned human category is the Jews, who are held responsible for such a grave fault that they are regarded as negative *exempla* with no possibility of moral redemption. This concise examination of vice and virtue, of malevolent and benevolent characters, demonstrates how the *De casibus* strives to illustrate the path to virtue in all aspects of practical life, even those that are less common. In this multifaceted and fragmented scenario, nevertheless, Boccaccio's moral reflection has recurring polemical targets, chosen for the particular danger they pose to his citizen-readers.

4. For a positive conclusion: The decalogue proposed to the rulers by *De cas.* IX, 27

Boccaccio's moral reflection throughout the work is characterised by a negative approach, which may be defined as a kind of *pars destruens*. In contrast to the preceding chapters, the final chapter takes on a positive and exhortatory tone, directed towards those in positions of power. Even though they are initially rejected as worthy dedicatees (*De cas. ded.* 8-10), they are actually the addressees of the work's message because of this moral unworthiness.

In *De cas.* IX, 27, Boccaccio presents a series of heartfelt imperatives, which may be considered a veritable 'decalogue' to the sovereigns, and which, according to Carla Maria Monti, represent the culmination of his own path towards attributing an ethical function to literature⁴². Here, Boccaccio exhorts the powerful to adopt a more expansive perspective and to attend closely to the misfortunes depicted in the *De casibus*. After a comprehensive recollection of the preceding nine books, Boccaccio proceeds therefore to proactively offer guidance to those in positions of authority. In particular, he delineates a set of precise conditions under which they may be deemed worthy of their authority:

Deum summa veneratione colite et integro corde diligite, sequimini sapientiam et virtutes apprehendite, honorate dignos, amicos summa cum fide servate, prudentium consilia summite, et benignos vos minoribus exhibete; humanitate atque iustitia, dum datur, honores, laudes, gloriam famamque perquirite, ut vos dignos adepta sublimitate monstretis. (*De cas.* IX, 27, 10)

Honour God and love Him with all affection; follow wisdom and approach the virtues. Honour worthy men; keep friends with great fidelity; accept the advice of the wise. Show kindness to little ones; with humanity and justice,

⁴² See C. M. Monti, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

as far as you are allowed, seek honours, praise, glory and fame, and make yourselves worthy of the greatness you have acquired.

This advice reiterates the concept of Christian humility. Indeed, the worship of God replaces the worship of oneself and that of transient possessions, thereby compensating for pride. The maintenance of friendships, the practice of benevolence towards others, and the demonstration of respect for those of high moral standing, as well as the general pursuit of virtue and wisdom also contribute to this outcome.

Nevertheless, the final item in Boccaccio’s decalogue is that of seeking deserved glory. Priority is, of course, given to the path of humility. However, it is also necessary to demonstrate that one is worthy of the power achieved. The theme of seeking this kind of glory is a direct echo of the admonitions addressed to Boccaccio by Petrarch, who appears in a dream to the author in *De cas.* VIII, 1, 18. In Boccaccio’s portrayal of Petrarch, fame has to be sought “propter Deum”. While maintaining this same approach, Boccaccio’s advice to powerful figures is to pursue glory in accordance with the principles of *humanitas* and *iustitia*. As the concept of *utilitas* employed in the proem, both *humanitas* and *iustitia* can be seen to align precisely with Roman Stoicism. In the context of Ciceronian thought, the pursuit of secondary goods is limited by four principal dispositions of mind. These include justice, which is based on faith and is the primary objective to be achieved in human relations. *Humanitas* is characterised as a “social virtue” according to Cicero and Seneca. It represents the sentiment of connection between individuals, prompting the virtuous to recognise the nuances of every other person with clemency and understanding⁴³. The concept of *humanitas* remains a central tenet for some authors of late antiquity (such as Lactantius) and the Middle Ages, although it is more accurately associated with the question of the nature of Christ. Early Humanism recovered its classical meaning, which was of Stoic origin, probably through the mediation of authors such as Dante, Petrarch and, not least, Boccaccio⁴⁴. Indeed, it is quite clear – if one relates the concept of *humanitas* with that of *iustitia* and *utilitas* – that a non-secondary role in the constitution of Boccaccio’s moral reflections must have been played by Roman Stoicism. And it is precisely in the meaning given to these concepts by – among others – Boccaccio, that they seem to pass into humanist speculation⁴⁵.

⁴³ See C. Högel, *The Human and the Humane. Humanity as Argument from Cicero to Erasmus*, V&R Unipress, Goettingen 2015, pp. 41-83.

⁴⁴ For *humanitas* in the Middle Ages and Humanism see *ivi*, pp. 85-107.

⁴⁵ See also J. Hankins, *The Italian Humanists and the Virtue of “Humanitas”*, in “Rinascimento”, s. 2, 60, 2020, pp. 3-20.

As Hankins has already observed for specific sections of this text, an analysis of Boccaccio's ideas reveals a clear anticipation of fundamental aspects of moral and political Humanism. Although his considerations are concerned with polemical objectives also characterising Christian moralism, the audience and the manner in which they are presented are distinctive. The author's commitment to the values set forth in the proem is evident throughout the work. His overarching objective is to benefit the community, and he directs his attention towards his fellow citizens and those in positions of authority. The virtue of the individual becomes the virtue of the community, and the sins of individuals are often assessed in relation to their impact on the community, in terms of reputation and stability of power. In the absence of virtuous leadership, it becomes the responsibility of citizens, as well as of Fortune, to challenge and remove those in power (*De cas.* II, 5). As a natural consequence, many of the depraved men of power depicted in the *De casibus* are deposed or killed by their *cives*⁴⁶.

This is the moral contribution that Boccaccio seeks to give to the *res publica* with his *De casibus*. Thus, in Boccaccio's works, the moral perspective – which leads to a pedagogical attitude – proves to be predominant⁴⁷. He exhorts individuals to enhance their own qualities in order to improve the community, a perspective that will later inform the political Humanism of the last decades of the fourteenth century and of the early *Quattrocento*. With the meaning he gives to the republic and its role, he becomes part of that tradition of thought that will involve thinkers such as Salutati and Bruni, who are aware of the Platonic notion of “*politeía*”⁴⁸.

In conclusion, Boccaccio's moral reflection is characterised by a certain complexity regarding its background, the concepts expressed, and its stylistic form, and it is a synthesis of different traditions of thought. In the first place, the theory of virtue, centred on the concept of *utilitas* – for the individual and the community – is clearly of Stoic origin. Secondly, the relationship that Boccaccio establishes in the proem between the behaviour of the individual and the divine providential will (which, for those who misjudge, is none other than Fortune) cannot but refer back to Christian morality as mediated by Scholasticism⁴⁹. Finally, Boccaccio's reflection proves to be a precursor of the civic humanism of the late fourteenth century. In the political field, everything can be traced back to

⁴⁶ Cfr. *De cas.* III, 3, 23; III, 15, 5; III, 16, 6; IV, 10, 8; IX, 11, 7-9.

⁴⁷ Cfr. also V. Fera, *Storia e filologia tra Petrarca e Boccaccio*, in D. Coppini, M. Feo (a cura di), *Petrarca, l'Umanesimo e la civiltà europea*, Le Lettere, Firenze 2012, pp. 369-389, in particular p. 376.

⁴⁸ Cfr. J. Hankins, *Virtue Politics. Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA-London 2019, pp. 63-102.

⁴⁹ On the relationship between Providence, divine will and Fortune in Scholasticism see M. Posti, *Medieval Theories of Divine Providence 1250-1350*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2020.

the moral dimension – both for the individual and the community, even in relation to the divine will. For this reason, Boccaccio is probably “the model that is most imposed in the construction of humanism”⁵⁰.

Bibliography

- Augustine, *De libero arbitrio*, a cura di W. M. Green, K.D. Daur, in *Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina*, vol. XXIX, Brepols, Turnhout 1970, pp. 205-321.
- Boccaccio G., *De casibus virorum illustrium*, a cura di P. G. Ricci, V. Zaccaria, Mondadori, Milano 1983.
- Id., *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta. Corbaccio. Consolatoria a Pino de' Rossi. Bucolicum Carmen. Allegoria Mitologica*, Mondadori, Milano 1994.
- Branca V., *Cicerone e Boccaccio fra Dante e Petrarca*, in A. Paoletta, V. Placella, G. Turco (a cura di), *Miscellanea di studi danteschi in memoria di Silvio Pasquazi*, vol. I, Federico & Ardia, Napoli 1993, pp. 167-171.
- Brezzi P., *Cronache universali e storia della salvezza*, in *Fonti medioevali e problematica storiografica*, vol. I, Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo, Roma 1976, pp. 317-336.
- Casagrande C., Vecchio S., *I sette vizi capitali. Storia dei peccati nel Medioevo*, Einaudi, Torino 2000.
- Cazalé Bérard C., *Philogyny Misogyny*, in P. M. Forni, R. Bragantini (a cura di), *The Decameron: a critical lexicon*, Arizona Center for Medieval & Renaissance studies, Tempe 2019, pp. 116-141.
- Delcorno C., *Exemplum e letteratura. Tra Medioevo e Rinascimento*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1989.
- Delcorno C., *Boccaccio and the Literature of Friars*, in F. Ciabattoni, E. Filosa, K. Olson (a cura di), *Boccaccio 1313-2013*, Ravenna, Longo 2015, pp. 161-185.
- De Luisa L., *Da Ecuba a Filippa di Catania. La rappresentazione della violenza in tre capitoli del “De casibus virorum illustrium” di Boccaccio*, in R. Bardi et al. (a cura di), *La violenza nella letteratura italiana. Forme, linguaggi e rappresentazioni*, SEF, Firenze 2023, pp. 3-23.
- Fenzi E., *Pratica politica e pensieri sul potere in Francesco Petrarca: linee per un nuovo approccio*, in G. C. Garfagnini (a cura di), *La politica in Toscana da Dante a Guicciardini*, Leonardo Libri, Firenze 2017, pp. 47-76.
- Fera V., *Storia e filologia tra Petrarca e Boccaccio*, in D. Coppini, M. Feo (a cura di), *Petrarca, l'Umanesimo e la civiltà europea*, Le Lettere, Firenze 2012, pp. 369-389.
- Filosa E., *Tre studi sul “De mulieribus claris”*, LED, Milano 2012.
- Fiorilla M., *Decameron*, in T. De Robertis, C. M. Monti, M. Petoletti, G. Tanturli, S. Zamponi (a cura di), *Boccaccio autore e copista*, Sansoni, Firenze 2013, pp. 129-136.
- Ganio Vecchiolino P., *Due modi di narrare: Boccaccio latino e il “Decameron”*, in “Critica letteraria”, 20, 1992, pp. 655-677.

⁵⁰ V. Fera, *op. cit.*, p. 388. See also J. Hankins, *Boccaccio and the Political Thought of Renaissance Humanism*, cit., pp. 15-16.

- Gigliucci R., *Evidenza e orrore nel "De casibus" di Boccaccio*, in R. Alhaique Pettinelli, S. Benedetti, P. Petteruti Pellegrino (a cura di), *Le parole "giudizio-se". Indagini sul lessico della critica umanistico-rinascimentale*, Bulzoni, Roma 2008, pp. 31-59.
- Hankins J., *Boccaccio and the Political Thought of Renaissance Humanism*, in M. Eisner, D. Lummus (a cura di), *A Boccaccian Renaissance. Essays on the Early Modern Impact of Giovanni Boccaccio and His Works*, University of Notre-Dame Press, Notre Dame 2019, pp. 3-35.
- Id., *Virtue Politics. Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA-London 2019.
- Id., *The Italian Humanists and the Virtue of "Humanitas"*, in "Rinascimento", s. 2, 60, 2020, pp. 3-20.
- Heullant Donat I., *Les prologues des chroniques universelles à la fin du Moyen Âge*, in J. Hamesse (a cura di), *Les prologues médiévaux*, Brepols, Turnhout 2000, pp. 573-591.
- Høgel C., *The Human and the Humane. Humanity as Argument from Cicero to Erasmus*, V&R Unipress, Goettingen 2015.
- Hollander R., *Boccaccio's Dante and the Shaping Force of Satire*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 1997.
- Holmes O., *Boccaccio and Exemplary Literature. Ethics and Mischief in the "Decameron"*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2023.
- Ead., *Pedagogia boccacesca: dall'"exemplum" misogino alla compassione per le afflitte*, in S. Ferrara, M. T. Ricci, E. Boillet (a cura di), *Boccace, entre Moyen Âge et Renaissance. Les tensions d'un écrivain*, Honoré Champion, Paris 2015, pp. 135-149.
- Hortis A., *Cicerone nelle opere del Petrarca e del Boccaccio*, Hermanstorfer, Trieste 1878.
- Kirkham V., *Morals*, in P. M. Forni, R. Bragantini (a cura di), *The Decameron: a critical lexicon*, Arizona Center for Medieval & Renaissance studies, Tempe 2019, pp. 249-268.
- Levarie Smarr J., *Altre razze ed altri spazi nel "Decameron"*, in R. Morosini (a cura di), *Boccaccio geografo. Un viaggio nel Mediterraneo tra le città, i giardini e... il "mondo" di Giovanni Boccaccio*, Pagliai Polistampa, Firenze 2010, pp. 133-158.
- Marchesi S., *Boccaccio on Fortune ("De casibus virorum illustrium")*, in V. Kirkham, M. Sherberg, J. Levarie Smarr (a cura di), *Boccaccio. A Critical Guide to the Complete Works*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2013, pp. 245-254.
- Marcozzi L., *"Passio" e "ratio" tra Andrea Cappellano e Boccaccio. La novella dello scolare e della vedova (Dec. VIII, 7) e i castighi del "De Amore"*, in "Italianistica", 30, 2001, pp. 9-32.
- Mariani Zini F., *L'économie des passions. Essai sur le Décaméron de Boccace*, Septentrion, Villeneuve d'Ascq 2012.
- Monti C. M., *Luoghi liminari e conclusivi di "De mulieribus claris" e "De casibus virorum illustrium"*, in "Studi sul Boccaccio", 48, 2020, pp. 77-98.
- Morosini R., *From the Garden to the Liquid City: Notes on 2.10, 3.4 and 10, 4.6-7, or a Decameron Poetics of the Erotico-Political Based on Useful Work (civanza)*, in "Heliotropia", 12-13, 2015-2016, pp. 5-49.

- Panarelli M., *Per cacciar la malinconia delle femine. Immaginazione e malattia d'amore nel “Decameron” di Boccaccio*, in “Noctua”, 10, 2023, pp. 135-160.
- Pastore Stocchi M., *Il Boccaccio del “De casibus”*, in “Giornale Storico della Letteratura Italiana”, 515, 1984, pp. 421-430.
- Tufano I., *Letteratura sacra e religiosi nel decameron: le prime tre giornate*, in A. A. Cabrini, A. D'Agostino (a cura di), *Boccaccio: gli antichi e i moderni*, Ledi-
zioni, Milano 2018, pp. 139-159.
- Viti P., *Boccaccio e le fonti classiche nel “De casibus virorum illustrium”*, in H. Casanova-Robin, S. Gambino Longo, F. La Brasca (a cura di), *Boccace humaniste latin*, Classiques Garnier, Paris 2016, pp. 25-50.
- Zaccaria V., *Introduzione al “De casibus”*, in Id., *Boccaccio narratore, storico, moralista e mitografo*, Olschki, Firenze 2001, pp. 35-59.