

Boccaccio's Decameron

by

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**DECLARATION**

I [full first names and surname here], declare that the following thesis has been made by me without any aid. Moreover, all the information and knowledge collected in this research study had been my individual efforts. I also want to declare that all the content present in the thesis has never been published before. Moreover, the following thesis will reflect my opinions and views, and this will not represent the opinions of any educational institute.

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**ABSTRACT**

In Boccaccio's Decameron, an unsettling split between the verbal universe of words and language and the physical one of facts and things threatens the logical structure of language. The linguistic split determines the progressive dissolution of the narrators' ideal microcosm, revealing its fundamental instability. Root of the narrators' conflict with their Author, the crisis of language governs the dynamic relationships between Author, the ten narrators of the Brigata, and the tales they tell. It is the basis of Boccaccio's distinct position within the literary tradition, and the crux of his contest with Dante, firm believer in the direct correspondence between words and things. Boccaccio lives the crisis of the Medieval outlook. The Scholastic logic that once governed the vision of the world is tottering. As he questions the great categories of Medieval thought, Boccaccio contests the authority of the cultural and literary models he has inherited. He defines his place in the literary tradition particularly by contrast to Dante, the greatest poet of the previous generation. Through the metaphor of the Plague of Language, Boccaccio expresses his idea of literature's changed function as hermeneutic instrument for interpreting the world. His struggle with Dante is emblematic of the battle between two clashing world-views.

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## CHAPTER # 1: AN INTRODUCTION TO BOCCACCIO'S DECAMERON

The Italian fourteenth century was a time of flourishing artistic activity. Indeed, there has been a long-standing debate over whether Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) is best understood as a medieval writer or a Renaissance one, and this kind of debate can easily be extended to include other fourteenth-century Italians, Giotto di Bondone among them. The world was being seen from new perspectives literally and figuratively—men like Masaccio and Filippo Brunelleschi would soon be wrestling with problems about representing space in two dimensions and figures like Boccaccio and his fellow writers were inaugurating new ways to speak to daily human experience. At this time in Italy, the teachings and power of the Church certainly held strong, but scholars now also see efforts of many trecento minds to carve new imaginative territories for understanding private and social experience that were not wholly dependent on religious assumptions (Vintila, 2010).

While today Boccaccio is best known for his Decameron (probably composed between 1349 and 1351), he wrote many influential and rather daring works, some in Latin and some in Italian. He was also a Dante scholar of considerable repute and a man whose experience in the world of finance and canon (church) law made him remarkably suited to interconnecting various facets of the world he saw around him, often illuminating one by means of the others. By the time the plague reached Boccaccio's native Florence in 1348, Boccaccio had already established his literary reputation and was friend to many influential figures, Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch) among them. Boccaccio's earlier work was surely innovative, but in the Decameron we see a new trajectory, undoubtedly occasioned by the terrible events in plague-ridden Florence.

The peste (plague) that ravaged the city is the focus of the introduction to the Decameron, which is a long work of one hundred novellas embedded into a fictional frame tale. In his introduction, Boccaccio presents us with ten young nobles, seven women and three men (customarily referred to as the brigata), who meet in the Florentine church of Santa Maria Novella and decide to temporarily take residence in their country villas to escape the plague in Florence. While in the country, the company decide to exchange stories, which they do for ten days, each telling one story every day (Tonozzi, 2010). The account of the Black Death that Boccaccio provides is extraordinary for its detailed accuracy and its vividness: Boccaccio captures the profound social chaos that must have prevailed not only in Florence but wherever the plague struck, and he paints a terrifying picture of the kinds of psychological as well as physical distress that undoubtedly pervaded the city. He begins by recounting the first appearance of the disease in the spring, saying that it manifested with unusual symptoms:

Its earliest symptom, in men and women alike, was the appearance of certain swellings in the groin or the armpit, some of which were egg-shaped, whilst others were roughly the size of the common apple. Sometimes the swellings were large, sometimes not so large, and they were referred to by the populace as *gavôccioli* (Swann, 2012). From the two areas already mentioned, this deadly *gavôcciolo* would begin to spread, and within a short time it would appear at random all over the body. Later on, the symptoms of the disease changed, and many people began to find dark blotches and bruises on their arms, thighs, and other parts of the body, sometimes large and little in number, at other times tiny and closely spaced. These, to anyone unfortunate enough to contract them, were just as infallible a sign that he would die as the *gavôcciolo* had been earlier, and as indeed it still was.

Boccaccio tells us that few who contracted the disease recovered and that medical intervention was ineffective. He also speaks to the fact that the disease was highly contagious, not only affecting people who had direct contact with those who were ill, but also seeming to spread through objects with which an infected person had come into contact. After this initial description, Boccaccio moves quickly to the effect the disease had on people's behaviour, saying that people fled from those afflicted by the disease, calling this a "single and very inhuman precaution" (Popescu, 2010, 10). Some Florentines, he tells us, opted for isolation and abstention, others sought to live extravagantly, while others were moderate in the behaviour—all hoping to find a mode of living through which they would be spared. Perhaps more significant, Boccaccio claims that in the face of this disaster, "all respect for the laws of God and man had virtually broken down and been extinguished . . ." (Popescu, 2010, 25).

According to this account, people died alone in the streets and were carried to mass graves into which they were placed without ceremony: "no more respect was accorded to dead people than would nowadays be shown toward dead goats" (Popescu, 2010, 25).

Indeed, the living were themselves disregarded out of panic that spread through the city; this scourge had implanted so great a terror in the hearts of men and women that brothers abandoned brothers, uncles their nephews, sisters their brothers, and in many cases wives deserted their husbands. But even worse, and almost incredible, was the fact that fathers and mothers refused to nurse and assist their own children, as though they did not belong to them (Popescu, 2010).

Boccaccio tells us that between March and July some 100,000 people perished, but historians have long understood that this number is hyperbolic—it simply signifies many deaths, and we know that there were not even this many inhabitants of Florence before the plague.



Modern estimates place the death toll in Florence between around 45,000 and 65,000 people; it is believed that between one-third and one-half the European population succumbed to the disease, with cities generally harder hit than rural areas.

After providing his readers with this picture of the plague's devastation, Boccaccio introduces his storytellers, and the tales begin, broken up into groups of ten stories told over ten days, with each member of the brigata telling a story related to a chosen topic for each day. Boccaccio coined a term, *novella*, for these tales, signalling to his audience the newness of his fictional project (the word *novella* means "little new thing"). Indeed, these *novella* are fascinating narrative constructs; they bear some resemblance to short stories, but they are in fact their own genre of short narrative prose fiction, and they represent a major step in the use of prose fiction in the west (Otero, 2010).

Within the tales themselves we see a vast landscape of trecento Italian life. Boccaccio's raconteurs have distinctive personalities and narrative voices, and they present us with characters from all walks of life. The *novelle* contain brilliant characterization, fascinating use of direct discourse, and wonderfully economical narrative construction. They are, in other words, miniature portraits of the world (both Italian and beyond) apart from the plague with its variety, energy, joys, sorrows, and intrigues. They are thus in part a way of reconstituting, reordering, and re-imagining a world destroyed by the Black Death. One aspect of the *Decameron* for which it has always been criticized is its sexual explicitness and even license. There are many references to extra-marital sex, and, indeed, adultery is sometimes seen as the deserved reward for cunning and daring. Petrarch early on objected to the text, telling Boccaccio that it was an abuse of his talent to have written it, and the text was condemned by the Church (O'Conner, 2011). Boccaccio himself refers to criticism of the work (which he addressed to women) in the

epilogue, in which he defends the collection on various grounds. He says, for example, that any story told decorously is worthy of being told, and he further states that interpretation and even usefulness of written material rests with the audience, so those who misinterpret his meaning are themselves culpable. Perhaps more interesting, he claims for literature the same kind of expressive freedom granted to the visual arts; no less latitude should be granted to my pen than to the brush of the painter, who without incurring censure, of a justified kind at least, depicts St Michael striking the serpent with his sword or his lance, and St. George transfixing the dragon wherever he pleases; but that is not all, for he makes Christ male and Eve female, and fixes to the cross, sometimes with a single nail, sometimes with two, the feet of Him who resolved to die thereon for the salvation of mankind (Swann, 2012).

This is itself a fascinating defence of literary license that may only have been possible in the context of the chaotic social climate occasioned by the plague. In fact, Boccaccio himself adopted a new position regarding the Decameron, much closer to Petrarch's, toward the end of his life, during which time he returned to writing Latin texts on religious subjects. What accounts for this reversal? Probably, at least in part, a re-establishment of social order in the years following the plague (Popescu, 2010). One can argue that the Decameron is a record of a deep crisis in Italian life in the largest sense and, simultaneously, Boccaccio's personal crisis of faith. The text repeatedly and courageously questions received assumptions about religion and social organization and offers views of trecento Italy that are diverse, often destabilized and destabilizing, and sometimes devoid of an overarching religious faith that would customarily have been assumed.

One of the most important aspects of the text is its insistence on the importance of individual agency. Characters in apparently impossible situations shape make their own fates

through the exercise of wit, and resourcefulness is almost always rewarded in the novella. Moreover, many of the tales portray women whose intelligence allows them to successfully transgress social mores. This striking fact suggests that Boccaccio may have intended his work to serve as a practical handbook for life, serving the general populace in ways analogous to how Machiavelli's *Prince* or Castiglione's *Courtier* provide practical advice about ruling. This kind of transgressive stance was undoubtedly the result of the ravages of the plague, and it may even have been possible only because a calamity of such colossal proportions as the Black Death must have disturbed to the core Italian social and religious assumptions and conventions (Amsel, 2011).

The Decameron, then, is simultaneously an innovative artistic product of the plague, a critique of contemporary social and religious life, and a remarkable polysemous record of fourteenth-century Italian life. Boccaccio utilizes the historical occasion of the Black Death to create a fictional landscape through which he can re-create for the purpose of re-building and recreation, through which he can both renovate and innovate, through which he can re-establish order even as he calls order into question. For the fourteenth century, such a profound critical evaluation of the meaning of man's experience might have been not only unacceptable but unthinkable had it not been for the advent of an epidemic horror of enormous proportion.

## CHAPTER # 2: INFLUENCE OF DECAMERON

### The Language of Knowledge in the Decameron

In the Decameron, as in other minor works of Boccaccio, the protagonists of the stories undergo epistemological experiences that may reflect those of their author. In the Filocolo, for instance, Idalogo narrates that he followed the teaching of his master Calmeta with the intent to build his astronomical knowledge and eventually become an expert in his field. Calmeta's teaching, however, did not exhaust his pupil's scientific thirst (Andrei, 2012).

As in Calmeta can be hidden, through an enigmatic language, the historical figure of Andalò del Negro, in the character of Idalogo can be the author himself, Boccaccio, who was really Andalò's pupil in Naples and benefitted from his astronomical teaching. According to Idalogo's words, astronomical knowledge can be transmitted via the reading of erudite treatises or through devoted listening to a master's teaching, while the process of apprehension, which is also a path toward change, from ignorance to knowledge, from pastoral life to the cultivation of knowledge and Wisdom, is made of individual determination, exercise of the mind, and personal fulfilment. In Boccaccio's fervid literary imagination, his own epistemological longings can intermingle with those of his characters and create invented and fascinating figures such as that of Idalogo.

Although Boccaccio is generally considered neither a philosopher nor a poet with manifest philosophical interests, this dissertation aims at ascertaining his attitudes towards philosophy in his literary works. Specifically, attention will be given to those works which deal mostly with allegorical aspects of life and poetry in order to both understand the philosophical ideas that eventually emerge in the Decameron and evaluate how a theoretical reflection on the

nature of rhetoric and poetic imagination can ultimately elicit a theory of knowledge. Boccaccio is not a philosopher; or, at least, is not a philosopher at first glance. One hardly finds his name in manuals of philosophy, and both American and Italian scholarship, starting with De Sanctis, has been skeptical in identifying Boccaccio as a philosopher—at least, as much as Dante and Petrarch.

This study will not attempt to demonstrate that Boccaccio is a philosopher in the traditional sense. Rather, what will it try to do is evaluate the status of philosophy in Boccaccio's Decameron as well as its capacity to pose epistemological questions through the imaginative power of its language. Without attempting to present an exhaustive analysis, this study will try to identify the philosophical ideas of the Decameron from its literary aspects in relation to both Boccaccio's contemporary philosophical landscape and his literary sources (Breitenstein, 2009). In particular, it will try to explain the undercurrent philosophical discourse that emerges from the tales and that can also be compared with Boccaccio's speculation on the art of making literature (prose and poetry). This is certainly a hard task; especially when a reader (specialized or not) expects to interpret Boccaccio from the perspective of the traditional representation of a philosopher. However, an attempt to better understand the mechanisms of Boccaccio's language in all its manifold connotations, allusiveness, metaphors and word puns, is a task worthwhile to be undertaken, not only with the aim of providing a further and possible reading of the Decameron, but also with the hope of reconsidering Boccaccio's masterpiece within the context of Italian literature, a context that embraces, not incidentally, the philosophical and epistemological traditions.

Philosophy is undoubtedly a vast subject matter, and so is epistemology. What I mean with philosophy and how I intend to use it in interpreting the Decameron is not far from how it is

nowadays understood. With ‘philosophy,’ I mostly intend to consider its product, namely, the knowledge that comes out of philosophical speculations. Accordingly, in the case of Boccaccio, I intend to study the knowledge that comes out of the language through an almost unknown and undefined mechanism of the mind; essentially, the author’s mind. Modern epistemology is certainly helpful in studying the language of literature, in identifying some of the subjects of the literary analysis, and in defining its key concepts.

Yet modern epistemology is not enough, and sometimes can be deceiving, to explain the manifold implications, terminologies, and historical developments that a work like the Decameron can convey in its own historical and literary context. Boccaccio showed no clear intention to emphasize that what he was doing was philosophy in the sense we now understand it. Indeed, his primary intent, as a writer and poet, was to compete with philosophers and theologians, as is shown by his defence of poetry in the *Genealogies*. Nevertheless, Boccaccio was certainly aware that his literary creations produced knowledge—in the same way philosophy does without using the powerful means of language and rhetoric (Buia, 2012).

Likewise, Dante and Petrarch never called themselves philosophers but only poets, yet they dealt with philosophical problems in their works, as critics have often emphasized in tracing the lines of their thought and poetical production. Therefore, since this dissertation deals mostly with both the philosophical aspects of the Decameron and its philosophical sources, and copes with the theoretical awareness that separating literature from philosophy is not always possible, or, at least, it was not within Boccaccio’s intentions, I opted for “Boccaccio the Philosopher” as the first part of the title. This may simply have the advantage of both emphasizing the philosophical content of the Decameron and, at the same time, adding more information about one of the most important authors of the Italian literary tradition as an eclectic figure. In other

words, Boccaccio could best be seen, then, not just as a moralist, mythographer, or poet, but also as a philosopher.

### **Boccaccio as Philosopher**

In drawing Boccaccio's profile as a philosopher, it is inevitably necessary to deal with his biography. His philosophical formation was shaped by a variety of life experiences and travels. However, it is not simply the philosophical readings, or the famous people he was acquainted with, that influenced him and contributed a unique value to his literary profile, but it is precisely the way he was able to make himself independent from those experiences that created an original philosophical attitude which inevitably emerges in his works. Several events in Boccaccio's life and the influence of different literary figures, such as Petrarch and Dante, marked his progressive career as a philosopher. The study of Dante's work was certainly an experience that introduced him to many aspects of the philosophical scope, from metaphysics to ethics (Candido, 2011).

Boccaccio himself wrote to Petrarch that Dante was his "primus studiorum dux et prima fax" in his first literary steps in Florence. Yet, the most fruitful period of Boccaccio's philosophical training, and the time of his first epistemological 'discoveries,' was probably during his stay in Naples where he moved with his family around 1327. In Naples, besides working as an apprentice in his family trading business, Boccaccio started to attend the fashionable and noble circles of the Angevin court and befriended very important figures of the Regno. In this milieu, Boccaccio developed both his profound cultural engagement, as shown in the many autobiographical sections of the *Genealogies*, and his passion for poetry as an epistemological means; later, he conceived of poetry even as a "sacred philosophy" (*sacra filosofia*), as it is subsequently praised in the *Corbaccio*.

When Boccaccio temporarily moved to Paris, in 1332, he intensified his humanistic studies, presumably by first getting in touch with the cultural and academic scene of the University of Paris. Back in Naples, then, Boccaccio attended Cino da Pistoia's lessons. Cino influenced Boccaccio remarkably, as is shown by his rime, and possibly introduced him to a deeper knowledge of Dante, Cavalcanti and Guittone. Most importantly, Boccaccio frequented the Studium of the Biblioteca Reale, where he met Paolo da Perugia, librarian and erudite scholar, and the monk Barlaam, who probably introduced him to Greek texts and Byzantine literature for the first time. At the Studium of the Biblioteca Reale, Boccaccio also became familiar with scientific, astrological, medical, and physical studies which extended his philosophical knowledge. Among the most famous scholars that frequented the Biblioteca, it is worth mentioning Paolo dell'Abaco, Andalò dal Negro, Graziolo de' Bambaglioli (Dante's commentator), and Paolino Minorita (Cleaver, 2012).

Last but not least, the Augustinian Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolcro, who taught theology in Paris and was an expert in classics, rhetoric, and philosophy, introduced Boccaccio to an extensive study of Seneca, Augustine, and Petrarch. Indeed, the acquaintance with Dionigi was paramount in Boccaccio's literary career in so far as it marked an evolution toward the representation, in literature, of the powerful link between poetry and philosophy. According to Michelangelo Picone, who commented Boccaccio's letter *Mavortis miles extrenue* (1339), the encounter with Dionigi marked the passage from the emulation of Dante to a reconsideration of poetry and philosophy as embodied in the figure of Petrarch and reflected in allegorical poetry. Finally, when Boccaccio later moved to Florence, although he was always nostalgic about his beautiful and carefree stay in Naples, he quickly got acquainted with the cultural context of the city, and deepened his knowledge of Dante's works, and possibly of the didactical and



allegorical literature that was current in Florence at that time as witnessed by the texts transcribed in his Zibaldone Laurenziano.

### **The Manuscript Tradition**

To properly reassess Boccaccio's biography *sub specie philosophiae*, it is paramount to consider the manuscript tradition of his works and readings. According to what we know about manuscripts and books that Boccaccio read and/or possessed, and despite the old and traditional image of Boccaccio as not being a philosopher, the number of his philosophical readings is impressive. The study of the manuscript tradition, especially Boccaccio's autographs in Italy, is very important in order to characterize the Author's thought. Boccaccio's philosophical background had a great part in the making of the Decameron and also in structuring the rhetorical bases of his vernacular prose (Essary, 2009). The study of Boccaccio's autographs and library catalogues turns out to be illuminating in assessing the author's medieval and early modern readings.

First of all, three manuscripts written by the author and held in the Florentine Laurenziana Library attest to the author's interests in philosophy and his study of medieval poetical-philosophical texts. The so-called Zibaldone Laurenziano (Cod. XXIX 8, famous for the documents collected by Boccaccio on Dante's biography) contains materials on Petrarch and the *Liber de dictis philosophorum antiquorum*. The Biblioteca Laurenziana, Cod. XXXIII 31, contains, among other works, the *De mundi universitate* (*Microcosmus et Megacosmus*) by Bernard Silvestris. We should also mention a manuscript held in Florence in the Biblioteca Nazionale, the so-called Zibaldone Magliabechiano (Bibl. Naz. B. R. 50), a folio-sized manuscript written by Boccaccio, where he also copied a speech on poetry delivered by Zanobi

da Strada in 1355, and reported a collection of quotations from Seneca as well as ethical-philosophical sentences on poverty and love. Additionally, another fundamental source, specifically for the making of the Decameron, is the ms. Paris, BNF, Ms. Ital. 482, which Vittore Branca identified as an early authorial redaction (years 1349-1351) of the collection before the definitive version transmitted by the codex Hamilton 90 of the Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz of Berlin; this manuscript, now held in Paris, was written by Giovanni d'Agnolo Capponi sometime during 1365-1369 (Essary, 2012).

To understand the reasons and modalities of Boccaccio's interest in this kind of philosophical culture, the history of his manuscripts is enlightening. Antonia Mazza has reconstructed the story of Boccaccio's library. When Boccaccio died, he bequeathed his manuscripts to Friar Martino da Signa. Although we do not know exactly what these manuscripts were and to which of the extant manuscripts they corresponded, Boccaccio's biographers insisted on emphasizing his indefatigable activity as a scribe. After Friar Martino da Signa's death (1387), according to an inventory dating from 1451, Boccaccio's manuscripts entered the library of Santo Spirito. The inventory includes items from various sources, among which manuscripts may well be attributed to Boccaccio. Although a number of Boccaccio's books was not considered in the bequest, and maybe a handful were taken out, neither Boccaccio's nor other authors' vernacular works (including Boccaccio's transcriptions of Dante's works) were included in the bequest (Farina, 2009).

Moreover, Boccaccio's *De montibus*, the Latin Miscellany, the *Aeneid*, Cassiodorus' *Institutiones*, Columella, the manuscripts of Tacitus and Apuleius, Varro, Euripides (translated by Leonzio Pilato), the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and Aristotle's *Ethics* are not included in the inventory, yet we know that they were known by the certaldese. Not surprisingly, for its

importance and the number of items, among Boccaccio's books we find a big collection of Petrarch's writings. Eventually, in the 1500s, the gradual dispersal of Santo Spirito books, and Boccaccio's library, begun. Studies on Boccaccio's manuscripts thrived during the 1960s and 1970s. Today, we can say that we know a lot about Boccaccio's readings and about the way that his books have moved from the author's personal library to their later and different locations. We also know a lot about how the author read and glossed his primary sources, and how these texts were rewritten and elaborated into the original synthesis that is Boccaccio's literary works (Harper, 2009).

After the interest for the study of the "human comedy" of the Decameron, which flourished in the 1930s-50s, it is with the 'new philology' (nuova filologia) and the critica degli scartafacci (Gianfranco Contini, Cesare Segre, and others) that the study of Boccaccio's manuscripts was recuperated, and some canonical perspectives that influenced later studies were imposed: new manuscripts were attributed to the author (even those that do not appear in the famous inventory) through the observation of Boccaccio's writing. These manuscripts were also studied as collections of erudite and varied materials, and for the intrinsic amount of intertextuality that they showed; or they were analyzed and studied as rewritings of Boccaccio's (or other authors') texts. More recently, critical attention has been given to the 'structures' as decisive elements of the literary works in so far as they constitute a "system of writing" (the study of Boccaccio's anthologies, notes and glosses). Furthermore, the importance of knowing Boccaccio's manuscripts and their history is emphasized by Manlio Pastore Stocchi. First, he proves wrong the legend of Boccaccio impoverished and personally compelled to copy his books due to a lack of monetary resources. During his mature years, Boccaccio was a well respected and influential citizen: in taking on the burden of transcribing his books, Boccaccio was not

trying to resolve individual needs by saving money, but was undertaking a voluntary and conscious cultural and artistic effort. Under this perspective, even the copying of classical texts takes the form of a critical-philological reconstructive operation, certainly comparable to the activity of the later humanists.

Particularly, according to Pastore Stocchi, the large size of the Hamilton 90 containing the Decameron is the most prominent indicator of the prestige and the literary value that Boccaccio attributed to his novelle in comparison to other Latin and vernacular texts. Judging from the books that belonged to Boccaccio's library, and from those that we know he read and transcribed, Boccaccio had an extraordinary philosophical culture in addition to literary interests (Kudish, 2012). According to the information contained in the inventory commented by Antonia Mazza, Boccaccio owned numerous works of philosophical and, particularly, ethical interest, including authors such as Aristotle (*Politics*, *De animalibus* in the translation by Michael Scot), Algazel (*Metaphysics*), Plato (*Timaeus* in the translation by Calcidius), Seneca (*Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*, *Naturales quaestiones*, *Hercules Furens* and *Hercules Oetaeus*), Horace (*Ars poetica*), Cicero (*De officiis*, *De senectute*, *De finibus* and *De inventione*), Macrobius (*Commentariorum in Somnium Scipionis*), Augustine (*De civitate Dei*, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*), Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (*De ecclesiastica hierarchia* in the translation by Johannes Scotus Eriugena), Boethius (*De consolatione philosophiae*), the *Liber de causis* (in the translation by Gerardo da Cremona), the *Liber de dictis philosophorum*, the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Alain de Lille (*De planctu naturae* and *Anticlaudianus*), Iohannes Folsham (*De naturis rerum*), Hermes Trismegistus (*Corpus Hermeticum*), William of Auxerre (*Summa Theologica*).

Thus, particularly, Boccaccio read Aristotle and, during the years of the composition of the Decameron, even copied the commentary to the *Nicomachean Ethics* written by Thomas

Aquinas. The manuscript of the Nicomachean Ethics studied by Boccaccio is now held in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan.

### **CHAPTER # 3: THE RELATIONSHIP OF BOCCACCIO'S DECAMERON WITH DANTE'S DIVINE COMEDY**

#### **Knowledge and Interpretation**

Overall, we can reconstruct Boccaccio's historical and philological relationship with philosophy by studying his readings and looking at his biographical data; yet the image of Boccaccio as philosopher that comes out of this operation does not entirely fit any of the traditional doctrines that Boccaccio could have possibly assimilated, and does not provide us with an unified vision of his thought. Apparently, Boccaccio's intent was not that of creating a new and completely different philosophical system, and this could explain why elements of Aristotelianism and Thomism are combined with NeoPlatonism, Averroism and Epicureanism all over his production and among the eclectic interests of his readings (O'Conner, 2011).

Besides, we could also say that the manifold philosophical system that comes out from the language of the Decameron is, in turn, reflected into the heterogeneity and manifold nature of the collection of tales. The meanings of the Decameron should then be found independently from a supposed unifying idea of Boccaccio's philosophical discourse. While modern philosophy always looks like an effort after another to be, on the one hand, original or different, and on the other, to provide the reader with a unified system—and so did, and probably should actually do, literary critics in finding common patterns and coherent ideas that can explain an author's thought—in my opinion Boccaccio's thought cannot be entirely circumscribed within the canons of a well-defined doctrine.

If I were to find a unifying vision of the Decameron, I would then emphasize the creation of knowledge in all its possible manifestations as an open process; namely, a creative process, as

we shall see, that becomes explicit both from studying Boccaccio's poetics and from the reading of the tales. As the multiplicity of the storytellers' reactions to the tales shows, the reading of the tales, indeed, is intended by the author as a way to exercise the capacity of interpreting the text in order to provide a philosophical or moral knowledge. Although it is likely that the effort to define a unifying epistemology may be vain—especially because Boccaccio never explicitly elaborated a theory of knowledge—I intend to search for a coherent philosophical vision reflected in the Decameron and at the same time to analyze Boccaccio's discourse. I believe that it is precisely Boccaccio's language that is able to both create knowledge and facilitate the interpretation of the text (Kudish, 2012).

The idea of considering Boccaccio's theory of knowledge stems from reading the Sixth Day of the Decameron, the Day of the motto, but then extends to the entire collection. In the Sixth Day, in particular, the general interest for the philosophical aspects of the Decameron is coupled with the fascinating mechanisms of the language that emerges when attempting to explain the mysterious and peculiar features of the motto. The literal interpretation of some of the witty remarks with which the characters escape from difficult situations does not appear satisfactory enough to explain their usage in the context and to understand the tales in which they were used. When Madonna Oretta is offered a ride by a knight who also attempts to tell a story yet tells it poorly, Oretta's remark begging the knight to put her down ("Messere, questo vostro cavallo ha troppo duro trotto; per che io vi priego che vi piaccia di pormi a piè" [VI.1.11] [Sir, this horse of yours has too rough a trot, so I beg you, please, to set me down]) evokes meanings that go beyond the literal sense of the story to involve metaliterary reflections on the art of narration and the philosophical tradition. Or when Guido Cavalcanti rebukes with a witty remark a Florentine brigata who comes upon him by surprise ("Signori, voi mi potete dire a casa vostra

ciò che vi piace” [Gentlemen, in your own house you may say to me whatever you wish]), the presence of the characters among the tombs in front of the Florentine Baptistery, and the fact that Cavalcanti is also a philosopher, invite to reflect on the significance of the story beyond the pure entertainment of the narration. The enigmatic aspect of these motti, along with the peculiar and powerful usage of the language involved, tells us that something else is at stake and stimulates us to explore both their nature as signs (bearers of hidden meanings) and their philosophical implications (Otero, 2010).

Epistemology is admittedly the theory of knowledge. Knowledge is the central organizing principle and focus of this dissertation. Knowledge, here, is intended both as a philosophical experience (the capacity of understanding, the goal of human comprehension) and as a poetical structure (the language of literature). Additionally, knowledge can be considered the product of an ‘activity:’ the activity of the mind and the act of reading the text. Accordingly, I intend to analyze how knowledge is produced, how it is concealed through peculiar figurative mechanisms of the language, and what the means of this production (and concealment) consists of. To this purpose, the features of the motto should be analyzed in connection with one of the main powers operating in the Decameron, Ingegno. As the critical scholarship has so far convincingly established, Love, Fortune, and Ingegno are the most relevant and recognizable of these powers. Indirectly represented by the people who are affected by their sway, they organize, and operate in, this most famous collection of tales in Italian Literature, the Decameron.

Without denying the import of the potent forces of Love and Fortune, it aims to explore an aspect specifically connected to the so-called Ingegno; more precisely, one of its products: human knowledge. Thus, considering an epistemological perspective, the production of



knowledge may constitute another actor/power operating in the Decameron through the mechanisms of the language and in connection with the philosophical background of the author. Besides being inspired by the language of poetry and its strict connection with philosophy in the Italian tradition, Boccaccio's speculation on the nature of poetry—which, in short, is the means conceived by the author to convey philosophical contents—is paramount for the understanding of how knowledge is produced by the text (Popescu, 2010).

The myth of the birth of Minerva, the goddess generated from the head of Jove, wonderfully narrated in the *Genealogies*, can be interpreted as a symbolic representation of the birth of knowledge and beautifully epitomize the author's thought. Considering the manifold literary representations of the Decameron, Boccaccio's text has the power to generate from itself 'something' else, like in the myth of Minerva; in other words, the narratives of the Decameron are able to create further meaning, or knowledge, in addition to the literal by simply stimulating the reader's imagination. In this respect, and to explain it better, it is interesting to see how Boccaccio interprets the meaning of Minerva's myth in the *Genealogies*. Minerva represents wisdom, as she is born from Jove's head (*Genealogies* II, 3, 5); she is also represented as a virgin, in so far as wisdom/knowledge is never contaminated by earthly things, but is always pure, bright and perfect (*Genealogies* II, 3, 6).

Most importantly, Minerva is covered with three veils, meaning that the words of wise men—especially the poets—who transmit Minerva's knowledge, can convey several different meanings through poetry (II, 3, 7). Thus, the nature of the myth itself is polysemous (*Genealogies* I, 3),<sup>40</sup> as Boccaccio emphasizes it with regard to the meanings which he explains throughout the *Genealogies*. Therefore, knowledge is not only linked to the cognitive

mechanisms of the wise men/poets, but it is also something that must be interpreted as well as something that can have various interpretations.

More generally, as Boccaccio had recently undergone a painful and difficult period of life due to love sufferings, but he had fortunately recovered from it, he appears now ready to share his wisdom with other lovers in need for help. Particularly, the message that the Decameron tries to convey is meant to edify female readers (the *lettrici*) and to have them acquire a better worldview, to have them understand the dangers of life in order to overcome that “*vizio di fortuna*” that makes them unable to enjoy existence as much as men do. The peculiar relationship established by the author with the readers at the very beginning of the Decameron is indicative of a ‘cognitive’ attitude on the part of the author to expand the possibilities of production of meaning. It is the reader himself that must be able to produce more knowledge, a knowledge which is different than that contained in the poetic, and literal, understanding of the text, knowledge, then, which can have practical implications (Swann, 2012).

In the Middle Ages as well as in the Renaissance, independently from the biblical exegesis which was practiced by professional theologians, it was common opinion that a text may contain various degrees of truth, namely, that even an apparently simple narrative can convey symbolic, metaphorical, or even ethical contents at the same time. Besides imposing limits to the inter-subjectivity of interpretation on the level of the encyclopaedic culture and the practice of allegory, medieval thinking used to recognize a criterion of multi-interpretability whereby a text can be interpreted in different ways yet according to well-defined rules, and not indefinitely.

The process of building on the tales, as Texts, or ‘open’ texts, is enacted by the storytellers of the Decameron who tell each other stories and, then, manifest and share their

different reactions and interpretations on various subjects. (This dialogic representation of the process of narrating, however, does not prevent the reader from extracting a unifying interpretation of the tales, of a single Day, or of a specific subject.) Interpretation, therefore, depends on understanding the dialogic narrative of the Decameron in which different perspectives and interpretations are intertwined. Furthermore, the modality of interpretation is also identified in the modality of the commentary. As is well known, the medieval exegetical tradition developed the modality of the commentary of literary and religious works, and the Italian tradition developed the same modality applied to literary works that comment themselves (for instance, Dante's *Vita nova*, the *Convivio*, etc.).

Boccaccio's Decameron recreates the same attitude of commenting (and interpreting) the tales narrated within the cornice through the dialogues and the different interpretations of the storytellers, even through the mechanisms of commentary and interpretation of the characters emphasizing the various voices of the tales (Tonozzi, 2010). In a sense, in the Decameron, Boccaccio epitomizes his experience as both commentator of vulgar poetry (see, for instance, his *Esposizioni sopra la Commedia di Dante*) and compiler of historical and mythological narratives. In turn, the perspectival interplay of several voices and narratological layers of the Decameron, a kind of construction en abîme, multiplies, for the discourse, the possibilities of begetting narratives, and, for the narrative, of stimulating its commentary.

The mechanism of having the stories told by one storyteller after another, and the consequent phenomenon of the storytellers' reactions to the narration, enacts a cognitive process in which the information provided by the narrator is submitted to the attention of the listeners, and ends up feeding into the production of knowledge through the dialogic confrontation. The

Decameron's epistemology is thus achieved precisely in this process of sharing and interpreting the information.

### **Rhetoric and Epistemology: Knowledge as Philosophy of Language**

In connection with the study of Boccaccio's philosophical background, it is worthwhile to analyze the rhetorical devices of the Decameron and the many ways in which Boccaccio establishes a meaningful connection between rhetoric and knowledge. Rhetoric can be epistemic, and in this regard, the characteristics and formal features of the motto, or witty reply, in the Sixth Day of the Decameron show how this metaphorical tool can be considered not only as a structuring device of Boccaccio's discourse, but also a 'veil,' a poetical strategy which is able to both conceal and reveal philosophical knowledge. Boccaccio meditated at length on the relationship between philosophical and literary discourse, and not only in the Genealogies. His oeuvre engages with several aspects of this relationship as they come to him from contemporary debates about literature (Vintila, 2010).

Particularly, the possibilities offered by epistemology in medieval thought and the role of allegory and mythology as poetical devices of a latent philosophical discourse are critical means to understanding Boccaccio's innovative theory of the nexus between rhetoric and knowledge. Through the narration of the stories and the joyful conversations of the storytellers, the Decameron can illustrate how and why rhetoric is related to knowledge as a sort of philosophy of language. The verbal media most represented in the collection is primarily the enjoyable conversation of the story-tellers. Through conversation, the story-tellers develop and deepen their understanding; through the dialogical form, they involve the participation of their

companions and reinforce their knowledge of the world by debate, revealing a progressive spiritual growth among the interlocutors themselves.

In this respect, the parallel with Augustine's personal and literary experience, with which certainly Boccaccio was familiar (starting from his Neapolitan studies), and specifically with Augustine's idea of conversation can be enlightening. According to Augustine, the believer's knowledge of God may be deepened by meditation as well as by conversation. Meditation, too, has a social function within the community of believers, in which the contemplative must serve others with his voice and pen; he must share his words with others so that all may share the same knowledge and joy (Vintila, 2010). Furthermore, Augustine defines meditation as interior speech; since it is a way of knowing God involving the structures of language, meditation is a form of verbal expression too. Likewise, in the Decameron, conversation, which can be seen as a form of meditation of the storytellers in their countryside retreat, embodies the mechanism of knowledge and embraces all the epistemological variety of Boccaccio's philosophical discourse? In the Decameron, language assumes many forms, each one expressing a variety of possible ways to communicate knowledge to readers.

### **The Object of Knowledge and 'How' it can be produced**

According to modern epistemology, the object of cognition, which by definition is an act, is knowledge. Knowledge can be also defined as the abstract and exterior representation of the content of cognition, a content that can also be unnecessary. But there can also be another object produced by cognition, which is not simply an exterior description of the content still remaining in general terms and whose character is necessary. That object is the truth. The act of knowing, or cognition, illustrates how human knowledge can be achieved. Boccaccio's most frequent

metaphor for the act of cognition in the Decameron and in his minor literary production is the activity of the “eye of the mind.” The protagonists of the Decameron understand the world around them through the eye of the mind that is through their intellects or intellectual vision. The origins of this trope stem from the Neoplatonic intellection and the Augustinian ‘illumination’ of the mind which had a great philosophical currency throughout the centuries, and especially in the fourteenth century (Popescu, 2010).

By using this metaphor, what Boccaccio probably meant to emphasize is, first, the fact that truth, as the necessary product of cognition, is not what appears; second, it is not what the actual and physical eyes can see. Truth hides behind reality, material existence, and is produced by the mind through the mechanisms of language. Obviously, truth cannot do without sensitive cognition, but eventually has to be produced by the mind according to the power of intelligence. In fact, it is not difficult to find in the collection many stories in which the characters have to cope with other characters’ deceitful intentions. In many instances, the reader wonders what the truth is; then, he easily realizes that the truth that comes out of the tale—any kind of truth, actually, be it practical, related to a challenge, or one that deals with the fulfilment of a hidden love—is always counterfeited by someone who wants to trick, or by someone who wants to deceive. Truth and deception are often the two sides of the same coin. Yet, while the latter—deception—is often a negative one, the former—truth—always produces a positive outcome in the story.

The Neoplatonic metaphor of intellection (the ‘eye of the mind’) may also have been mediated by its recent reinterpretation in the doctrine of the direct intellectual cognition of material singulars, which was officially adopted by Franciscan theologian philosophers

starting from the 1280s. Strictly related, and of some import for the Decameron, is the relationship between cognition of particulars/individuals and the concept of science—i.e., demonstrative science, which is capable of producing necessary knowledge. If the content of science is only universal and necessary, the knowledge produced by human beings in their acts of cognition of particulars is not. Under this perspective, the Decameron could be reflective of the interests of medieval philosophers in how we are able to define scientific premises but also to acquire the knowledge of contingent facts about individuals and their existence (Popescu, 2010).

The fourteenth century was particularly rich in controversies about knowledge; but the problem of knowledge of existents, in fact, emerged as one of the main concerns of the major theories of intuition. Specifically, as for the fundamental distinction between intuitive and abstract cognition, which is the difference between knowing what is actual and knowing what is merely possible or necessary, Boccaccio's poetics seems to be more interested in placing the emphasis on the experience of the real—as the world of the Decameron clearly illustrates. If, though, an abstractive cognition is possible, there also exists an independent intuitive cognition. Abstract cognition involves no claims about existence:

what is possible can be non-actual, and what is actual cannot be impossible. Whereas intuitive cognition involves a judgment of existence with an admixture of what is possible. The Decameron's fictional world does not care for the actual; what it really concerns itself with, instead, is the possible. Another important issue at stake in medieval and early modern epistemological debates is the difference between the concepts of *visio* and *imaginatio*. The perception of real things is differentiated from a form, or representation of them, that can take place in their absence: the memory of experience. The literary representation of the difference between vision and imagination is exemplarily illustrated in Boccaccio's works. For a complete

rhetoric of vision, we should consider Boccaccio's allegorical works, the *Amorosa visione* and the *Commedia delle ninfe fiorentine*. As for the imagination, one should simply read that masterpiece of imagination and psychological discourse which is the *Elegia di madonna Fiammetta*.

In the *Decameron*, the possible different cases representing the dichotomy of vision and imagination multiply. Fiammetta's psychological training in imagination is exemplary reinterpreted in various characters of the *Decameron*, from Ghismonda's monologues to the laments of Beritola abandoned on an island. In the *Decameron*, the representation of vision encompasses an entire gamut of literary tones: from the serious infernal hallucinations of the otherworld, such as those of *Nastagio degli Onesti* (V, 8), to the parodic visions in Ferondo's tale where the Abbot makes him believe that he is in Purgatory (III, 8), or the tale of Talano d'Imola who dreams that a wolf rips apart his wife's throat and face (IX, 7). Boccaccio offers different stories in which individuals struggle for knowledge and experience different ways of reaching an understanding of the world (Popescu, 2010).

The vision intended as the observation of the cosmos is at the very origin of philosophy. According to Plato's *Timaeus* (47a-b), sight is the first and fundamental moment of observation of the cosmos. In Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (I, 1, 980a), sight is the most refined sense and the best means to acquire knowledge. Intellectual knowledge is always bound to the semantics of the vision. One of the most influential treatise on optics in the fourteenth century, Witelo's *Perspectiva*, which is, not surprisingly, among the number of Boccaccio's readings (Mazza, 1966: 24, n. II, 13), still tends to link the new optical discoveries with a philosophical reflection on the nature of vision. The active role of the senses in producing knowledge is unavoidable, as



much as the role of sight in the cognitive process. Through the ‘visual’ features of apprehension we can assign a degree of certitude superior to that of discursive, logical-deductive knowledge.

Furthermore, the concept of vision sets itself as the organizational center of the aesthetical speculation on art, in particular within the Franciscan Order. The image becomes the technical foundation of verisimilitude, as the ‘reality’ of art. This has certainly influenced the composition of a few tales featuring famous, or less-famous, painters. The tale of Giotto and Forese Donati plays on the meaning of exterior appearances and on how a person can be deceived by false impressions. Interestingly, Calandrino’s cycle begins with a scene in which the character, absorbed in his own thoughts, is portrayed in front of a fresco, and, in the same famous tale, one possible interpretation of the heliotrope concerns invisibility and deception. By and large, the narration of a tale in the Decameron has the function of stimulating the understanding of a certain truth (O’Conner, 2011). All this is realized within the epistemological functions of the novella. Through the interpretation of a short tale narrated by a character, another character of the story understands the entire thing at stake, be it a trick, a moral teaching, or a certain philosophical idea. Therefore, the narration of a tale, even through the mechanism of the *mise-en-abîme*, has a cognitive function, which is emphasized many times by Boccaccio through the very attitude of the characters who come to a full comprehension after a significant narration or a witty answer. Consider, for instance, Melchisedech, a Jew who escapes from a trap set for him by Saladin by narrating the tale of the three rings (I, 3); or, in the First Day, the story about Primasso and the Abbot of Cluny addressed to Can Grande in which Bergamino rebukes an unusual fit of avarice (I, 7).

It is precisely in the exemplum tradition that Boccaccio finds this peculiar power of the narrative to stimulate cognitive capacities in the reader, yet he eventually reinterprets it in his

novelle. As the exemplum was typically considered both a passive means to convey popular or pedagogical wisdom, and an active literary tool to instruct and communicate philosophical knowledge through easy, mediated, understanding, and through the power of entertainment, the totally renewed concept of the novella in the Decameron is now able to bring this natural process of expansion to a nobler and more meditated literary form. By exploring the possibilities offered by the tradition of short narratives and reflecting on the many aspects of the epistemological power inherent to the exemplum, Boccaccio reshapes the novella through an extraordinary knowledge and understanding of the philosophical tradition. From a tool of persuasion—such as the exemplum—in the hands of rhetoricians and preachers, the Decameron's novella becomes a laboratory of auto-disciplined and original understanding of the world, a tool in the hands of the readers to develop their own cognitive experiences (O'Conner, 2011).

Ultimately, Boccaccio is able to create a complex organism of tales regulated by a significant exterior, macrotextual, structure—the cornice—which defines the overall understanding of the Decameron as well as regulates the internal, microtextual, and peculiar relations among the tales.

**CHAPTER # 4: DECAMERON'S THEMES ANALYSIS AND HUMAN PERCEPTION****DEBATE****Deified Men and Humanized Gods: The Genealogies and the Hermetic Veil of the Fabula**

A hermetic vein of thinking and creating meanings seems to permeate the modern intellectual tradition and to have relevant repercussions in the humanities. According to Antoine Faivre, hermetic writings have always been present, openly or secretly, in Western culture and brought a significant contribution to the development of modern science ever since the Renaissance, especially but not exclusively, with the Latin translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* by Marsilio Ficino. By setting the hermetic writings within a historical framework, Mirko Sladek has noted that some sort of dissociation between western dialectical thought and symbolic modern thinking incarnated by hermetism bore witness to the disappearance of the latter only with the establishment of a scientific and mechanistic view of the world (Harper, 2009).

Furthermore, according to Paul Colilli, who developed a semiotic theory to reconstruct the origins of modern thought, the hermetic way of thinking has never been defeated by Cartesian rationalism, and through its association with other doctrines, beliefs and practices—such as the Christian Kabbalah and modern esotericism—has become a living element of contemporary thought thanks to an epistemology mediated by the thinking-by-images and mnemonics of Giambattista Vico. But when we take a small step backward, chronologically, as Umberto Eco manages to do, we realize that even Antiquity—dissatisfied with the rationalistic principles established, above all, by Aristotelianism, with the law of identity, the principles of non-contradiction and the excluded middle—had experimented with the idea of a continuous metamorphosis of language and philosophy symbolized by the god Hermes, an ambiguous god

whose development of logical chains denies any finite causality. And if we move forward, and look at the patristic period until at least the Middle Ages, one could also say that hermetic thought has never disappeared. Thus, in addition to the systematic doubt that questions rationalism, which, as we have seen, pervades Antiquity, Middle Ages, and moreover, all modern and contemporary science, hermetism also establishes as its key feature the concealment of the truth (a rational or irrational truth) under the veil of a compelling narrative. In other words, hermetism intends to conceal and reveal a philosophical secret only to a selected audience (Kudish, 2012).

### **Poetry, Conviviality and Secrecy: Hermes and the Storytellers**

If we want to know what form hermetism took in the fourteenth century, that is, at the beginning of its full deployment throughout Europe, we must also think of Boccaccio. Specifically, in order to know what Boccaccio means by wisdom, what his philosophy of language is, and how he tries to represent it in the literary discourse of the Decameron through various forms of poetic imagination, we must turn our attention to the *Genealogie deorum gentilium*. But before getting into the core issue of knowledge in the *Genealogies*, a brief introduction to this text will not only provide the historical background of the composition and its narrative framework but will also clarify the strict parallelism with the Decameron.

In the *Genealogies*, a long text of unparalleled scholarship and knowledge of the ancient Latin and Greek world, composed in different periods between 1305 and 1375 (almost simultaneously with the Decameron), Boccaccio aims to expound, first to the commissioner of the work, Hugh IV, King of Cyprus, and then to his readers, the history of the descendants of the pagan gods and heroes of Antiquity as recounted by ancient poets and authors. At the same time,

he intends to uncover the meaning that these authors wanted to communicate under the veil of poetry (Genealogie, I, Proemio, i, 1) (Otero, 2010).

On the one hand, the plot and structure of the Genealogies recall the biblical model of the book of Genesis, where the genealogies of Israel are exposed and intermingled with the stories of various characters; on the other hand, they may echo the Decameron itself and its ten-day structure, each Day containing, in turn, ten short stories. When considering the overall approach to the narration of the forgotten past of men and gods, a new rational attitude unknown to the most authoritative structural models (i.e. Herodotus, Lactantius, and possibly Hesiod) pervades the entire erudite discussion and clashes with the irrational presence of multiple interpretations of the myths. Boccaccio's scientific attitude appears already emphasized in the proem, where Boccaccio both belies the madness of the ancients who believed they descended from the blood of the gods (I, Proemio, i, 4) and mocks—later on he will de facto confute them—the ridiculous argument that, under the bark of narration, the ancients had only wanted to invent stories devoid of any further meaning and content (I, Proemio, i, 16). But that attitude, as we shall see later, never excludes any possibility of irrational alternatives (Swann, 2012).

Boccaccio is ready to write a work so daring and demystifying that, in many ways (including its difficulty), is similar to that of a theologian (I, Proemio, i, 18). He does so by setting the proper historical and rational background, even assuming the loss of many works and documents that could have recounted the facts of ancient history which time (I, Proemio, i, 32), or specifically, Christianity (I, Preface, i, 28), with the intention of proclaiming the truth of a single god, had destroyed or passed over silence. In fact, hidden under the language of poetry, and under the metaphors of navigation in the proems to the various books (that certainly emphasize the difficulty of the work), there is concealed a scholarly, historical, and rational work

of restoration which is meant to explain a vast material whose current condition is the scattered fragments of a large shipwreck, a daring work that required the skills of a divine personality like Prometheus, the only one able to reassemble them properly (I, Proemio, i, 40-42). Boccaccio does not aspire to be compared to a god, rather, more modestly, he puts himself only in the guise of a young doctor who wants to reassemble the *membra disiecta* of the body of the gods, as in the past the semigod Aesculapius (or Asclepius, the founder of medicine) rearranged that of Hippolytus (I, Proemio, i, 50). To the multiplicity of the scattered body parts of the myth is associated the multiplicity of interpretations that the ancients wanted to bequeath to their successors, just as one can see in the polysemy of the sacred Word that is hidden under the veil of allegory (I, Proemio, i, 43) (Swann, 2012).

The nautical image of the sea journey in the proem of the Genealogies, although typical of classical Greek-Roman poetry, echoes analogous metaphors of the journey also present in the *Filocolo*, in the Decameron (Proemio, 5), especially in the Second Day (see chap. 2), and the experience of the storytellers in the Florentine countryside. The metaphor of navigation, however, in the Genealogies as in the Decameron alike, sets itself as the cipher of the hermeneutic experience related to poetry; an experience made of ramifications and alternative cognitive directions. In addition to sailing the sea of the genealogies of the pagan gods, the author intends to find out their meanings in order to offer to the reader his personal interpretations. His is not only a scholarly exposition, it is also an existential journey of a person who observes and reflects on the condition of antiquity, on its current state of incomprehension on the part of the *litterati*, and on the abysmal failure to recall its lost values, as shown by the almost elegiac portrait of the decline of the ancient cities described directly by the panoramic view of the author.

Boccaccio's ability to organize his knowledge of the gods—and consequently to devise a system in the shape of an upside-down family tree which arranges neatly the genealogical relations—requires an ordered structure comparable to an encyclopedia. This structure implies the presence of a cognitive aptitude to arrange knowledge into a more easily recognizable and accessible system that privileges and facilitates memory. In other words, not only does Boccaccio aim to inform his readers, but he is also concerned with how to preserve more easily the memory of the knowledge he presents.

When providing the first explanation of a myth, there comes to Boccaccio the need to account for the conception of the fabula, which he refers to as objectively known by tradition, while it actually proved to be a fully original idea. The old fables are evidently reflective of that time of human history when a fervid imagination could see into nature's hidden meanings and catch signs of life and mysteriously divine presences in every aspect of the world, signs that the imagination was, then, able to represent by words and rhythm. Yet, a certain polysemy that is bound to the sense of the fable has to be added to the power of imagination. The meaning of the fable is fully conventional and can be traced, through the metaphor of the cortex and the medulla, back to the Medieval fourfold system of allegory, which was applied to the Bible, and in which a literal (or historical) sense is distinguished by the allegorical—and in turn divided into moral, allegorical and anagogical (I, iii, 7-9) (Vintila, 2010).

According to tradition, the purpose of the explanation of the fables of the ancients is to isolate the truth by removing it from the bark (the cortex) of fiction. This is something that Boccaccio is prepared to do with the stories of the gods. But before doing that, and that is where we can see a significant element of originality in Boccaccio's poetics, it is necessary to go one step further, namely, to understand why the ancient poets wanted to create and promote the

obscurity of poetry. In other words, it is not simply a matter of unveiling hidden meanings—a thing that everyone had tried to accomplish, even the late-Antique commentators of classical texts—but most importantly to question the reasons and purposes of so much obscurity in order to see if this was meant to convey other meanings. Poets do not just cover up the truth with the veil of allegory as if a natural inclination to poetry required them to delight themselves in creating fiction, but mostly because, as confirmed by Macrobius, it is the very essence of Nature, represented by the poets, to create mysteries by covering the truth and hiding it from human intelligence and comprehension.

The language of poetry is full of secret elements; the romance vernacular tradition is not excluded. The troubadours themselves, beyond the courtly elements that emerge in their poetry, bring forth a spiritual, symbolic, sapiential discourse that should not be overlooked and that was certainly influential among the *stilnovisti* as much as the writers of the fourteenth century. In the Latin Middle Ages, John of Salisbury, defining ancient allegorism, wrote that poetry contains secret wisdom and knowledge of universal things: Mercury symbolically joins in marriage with Philology in order to seek the truth, while the so-called ‘lies of the poets’ do not deceive because they are limited to the service of truth.

Alain de Lille further develops this same idea: “*Virgilio musa mendacia multa colorat / Et facie ueri contextit pallia falso.*” The same theory is also found in Carolingian times, in Theodulf of Orléans for instance. Poetry offers an indirect route to the “secrets of philosophy,” either by arousing the wonder, as Jean de Meun maintains, or by functioning as a fictional veil for philosophical truths, as in Albert the Great. Dante acknowledges this latter feature: “*O voi ch’avete li ‘ntelletti sani, / mirate la dottrina che s’asconde / sotto ‘l velame de li versi strani*” (Inferno, IX, 61-63). Moreover, Dante’s poetry contains mysteries and enigmas that have still to



be unraveled. The poetry of the so-called Fedeli d' Amore, whether real or invented, still gives rise to the desire to investigate the hidden secrets of the poetic text (Tonozzi, 2010).

However, the obscurity of poetry in the context of Genealogies seems to refer, as I would like to demonstrate, to the hermetic idea of obscure discourse; that is, to the kind of literature whose language hides its meanings and the truth without completely denying their knowledge and understanding. In other words, the author himself who hides the meaning in his poem would also be the first to reveal the truth in one way or another. In order to compare the two texts, it will be useful, first, to look at their epistemological language. According to several scholars, the Latin language of cognition, perception and intuition of the Asclepius is somewhat vague, yet one can recognize some trends that may help account for similar meanings in the Genealogies. (Analogous problems, however, existed in Greek for the same concepts.

In Greek, there is a large group of terms related to the word nous (mind), and to the noun gnosis (knowledge). In Latin, and particularly in the Asclepius, it is possible to connect the word sensus with the Greek nous, translating it mostly with 'intellect,' 'divine power of intuition; but the word sensus also has countless connotations which mean 'sense,' 'faculty,' 'meaning,' etc. Yet, if we focus on the first group of meanings of the term sensus, we realize that it acquires a peculiar emphasis in the Asclepius. In particular, the human ability of intuition (the sensus), according to the Asclepius, was given to man, and to him alone, so that he can understand the evil of the world and fight it. This multiplicity of meanings related to the Latin term sensus could partly account for the use that Boccaccio makes of it in the Genealogies to charge its discourse with hidden meanings and to link it to the scope and activities of the mind.

Directly related to the meaning of the term sensus is also the semantic scope of the fabula which, according to the quadripartite definition given by Boccaccio, also appears to imply

indirectly a distinction between ‘sense’ and ‘truth’. Poetry makes ‘sense,’ but what makes sense does not necessarily contain truth. Although it does not seem to have specific authoritative sources, the *divisio fabularum* that Boccaccio suggests defines the characteristics of each type of fable on the basis of its content of truth: the first kind of fable has no truth in its ‘bark;’ the second compounds imagination and truth on its surface; the third is more like history because it mainly relates events; and the fourth contains no truth at all in either its surface or inside of it and, not accidentally, consists of foolish old wives’ tales (XIV, ix, 5-7). The fourth type of fable, at first sight, seems to be excluded from the domain of poetry in so far as it is totally divorced from any content of truth. But if one looks at what Boccaccio will later say about the content of the old wives’ tales, we realize that these, too, are worth our attention since they are not totally outside the domain of poetry (XIV, x, 7). As Thomas Ricklin acutely observes, the fables of the *vetulae* are, at first, condemned (XIV, ix, 11) only for strategic purposes linked to promoting Boccaccio’s argument against hypothetical detractors (Tonozzi, 2010).

Soon afterward, in fact, Boccaccio enumerates the cases in which fables, even when devoid of meaning, demonstrate to have other relevant functions (consolatory, didactic, etc.) beyond the presence of a content of truth, so that the ignorant person would be delighted, while the learned one would practice the discovery of its hidden meanings. In this way, the appreciation of the various functions of the fables, beyond that of bearing the truth, can also be used to restore dignity to the fable of the fourth type (that one narrated by old wives) and bring it into the domain of poetry. This might also have some implications for the tales of the Decameron and the list of story types given in the Proemio (“*novelle, o favole o parabole o istorie*”). Indirectly, therefore, in addition to the tales drawn from Ovidian fables (see Decameron, V, 10 and VI, 2), even the tales of the Decameron that apparently do not convey a meaning are saved.

By doing so, the tales of the *vetulae* regain poetic dignity, but solely and exclusively in the domain of meaning, that is, the *sensus*, and not in that of the truth. In sum, Boccaccio refashions the domain of the fable first by distinguishing between the concept of truth and that of meaning, and secondly by privileging meaning as the basis of the conception of poetry. The criterion of truth that was central to Dante's vision is no longer paramount, now giving way to the *sensus*—an element inclined to be associated with the domain of language—so that even the tales of the *vetulae* are raised to the dignity of poetry.

### **Deified Men: The Power of the Mind**

The focus of the *Genealogies* is not only the gods. Humans also have an essential part in the harmony of the described cosmos; and, above all, they are the protagonists of the cognitive experience of philosophy. Although built on the image and likeness of gods' abodes, the house of philosophy is right here on earth (XIV, v, 1). Philosophy reigns over this house holding a scepter and a book; and to those who are willing to listen, she points out human morals, the forces of nature, the true good, and the heavenly secrets (*celestia docet arcana*). Anyone who enters this house is aware of being in a highly revered shrine (*sacrarium . . . dignissimum videas*), just like a shrine is the place where Hermes' interlocutors get together in the *Asclepius* (Otero, 2010).

Furthermore, if a person looks around in this house, one can see the greatness of human knowledge, the speculations of the great geniuses, and everything that the intellect can comprehend. Philosophy deals with rational things, yet is also a sacred thing in so far as it is a divine gift. One aspect not to be overlooked is the Christianpagan syncretism of the language

adopted by Boccaccio, or the neo-Platonic connotations of associating philosophy with the sacred representation of a deity to worship.

## CHAPTER # 5: CONCLUSIONS AND POSSIBLE DEVELOPMENTS

The study of literature produces knowledge in the same way science, philosophy, or history do without using the powerful means of language and rhetoric. As epistemologists concern themselves with determining the nature and the extent of human knowledge, writers and poets experience the world by representing it with images and metaphors that are distant from daily discourse, yet are able to unveil the imaginative and verbal power that lies concealed both in everyday things and in the historical past. Modern epistemology constitutes a helpful critical grid to study the language of literature and identify the subjects and key concepts of literary analysis, yet it alone cannot be enough to explain the manifold implications, terminologies, and historical developments that a literary work can convey.

The reciprocal influence of epistemology and literary theory ideally aims to explore both the nature of literary works as signs, bearers of hidden meanings, and their philosophical implications, in order to better comprehend the world outside us. Therefore, the study of literature is paramount to understand the interactions, dynamics, and nature of the world. Even when scholars do not agree on what knowledge, understands the cognitive and epistemic character of literature is key to increasing our ability to identify the necessary conditions which determine knowledge acquisition. This dissertation aimed to contribute to this endeavour by cantering on the epistemological implications of the Decameron and by exploring the unclear relationship between literary production and epistemological foundation.

Overall, this dissertation has explored a wide range of Boccaccio's readings and the extent to which he transformed what he read, whether in the philosophical, classical, and romance traditions. Boccaccio's exceptional independence vis-à-vis other authors is informed by

a deep knowledge of the epistemological tradition, which he amply display in both the Decameron and his minor works. I have explored the philosophical implications of the Decameron in connection with Boccaccio's minor works and attempted to ascertain his attitudes towards philosophy, in order to evaluate how a theoretical reflection on the nature of rhetoric and poetic imagination can ultimately elicit a theory of knowledge.

Besides re-establishing poetry among the intellectual and moral values of his times and raising it to the level of philosophy, Boccaccio theorized the myth used by poets as having a meaning which goes beyond the literal understanding and which the reader must discover. Ancient literature provides us with delight through fables, but this delight is a means of conveying a truth hidden beneath the allegorical fiction. If this is the right interpretation of the Genealogies, then, one can supposedly find a similar attitude in the Decameron on the part of its author. In other words, Boccaccio's collection of tales could be also understood beyond its literal sense and, consequently, each tale could hide a truth beneath the literary fiction.

To describe what kind of truth may be concealed by the Decameron and, specifically, what kind of philosophical truth, underlies the cortex of the literal sense of the tales has been the purpose of this work. This also explains the decision to start with the Genealogies in order to give a different interpretative perspective on the Decameron. Accordingly, as the interpretation of mythology in its own terms becomes a pivotal point in Boccaccio's defence of poetry, an interpretation that goes beyond the literal meaning (and that takes advantage of an epistemological perspective) has been the overall purpose of this dissertation.

In connection to the study of Boccaccio's philosophical background, I have analyzed the rhetorical devices of the Decameron and the many ways in which Boccaccio establishes a meaningful connection between rhetoric and knowledge. As the characteristics and formal

features of the motto in the Sixth Day of the Decameron have shown, rhetoric can be epistemic, and the language of the motto demonstrates how this metaphorical tool can be considered not only a structuring device of Boccaccio's discourse, but also a 'veil,' a poetical strategy which is able to simultaneously conceal and reveal philosophical knowledge. Boccaccio meditated at length on the relationship between philosophical and literary discourse. His oeuvre engages with several aspects of this relationship as they come to him from contemporary debates about literature.

In particular, the possibilities offered by epistemology in medieval thought and the role of allegory and mythology as poetical devices of a latent philosophical discourse are critical means to understanding Boccaccio's theory of the nexus between rhetoric and knowledge. The Decameron can be seen as a journey toward the acquisition of knowledge—be it moral, philosophical, or practical. In the Introduction to the Decameron, the famous simile comparing the interpretation of the text to the climbing of a mountain alludes to Dante's *Commedia* and justifies the necessity of the Black Death in eschatological terms, thereby defining the reader's experience as a sort of intellectual and spiritual progression and ascent.

A reflection on the ethical aspect of the frame texts of the Decameron along with a proper understanding of the concept of honesty suggests a well-defined model of life that can be traced back to the practical philosophy that Boccaccio—as a reader of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas—had long meditated. The guiding principle of Natural Law evoked in the Introduction to the Decameron is most properly understood in relation to the Thomistic ethical system in which Nature and its earthly manifestations in human instincts are counterbalanced by the action of reason and free will, with the aim of achieving a practical knowledge that eventually leads to a new vision of the world.

In the transition from scholastic philosophy to humanism, Boccaccio proves to be a precursor of the early modern speculations on knowledge and the power of the mind. Through its language of knowledge and the aid of imagination, the Decameron portrays an author, a philosopher, attentive to the problems of how men understand the world, and gives the reader the opportunity to experiment his/her own cognitive skills. The kind of knowledge (whether moral, philosophical or practical) that comes out of the Decameron's discourse is certainly not traditional. In place of the medieval concept of moral teaching in which the author's thought appears to be the only possible and is exposed as a model to be imitated, Boccaccio promotes an ideal of philosophical learning and understanding that privileges a multi-facet perspective as well as the active role of the reader.

Some of the issues related to the Decameron's epistemology, however, will require further investigation. For instance, it could be interesting to describe Boccaccio's stance within the poetical dialogue between Cavalcanti and Dante on the concepts of mystical vision, knowledge, brightness, wisdom—a dialogue that emerged from the lyrics of the *Stilnovo* as well as from Dante's *Commedia* (*Paradiso X*). Furthermore, it would be necessary to evaluate the theory of knowledge in early modern Epicureanism, Averroism and Thomism, and Ockhamism, in order to provide a broader picture of the Decameron's philosophy and show how such philosophical movements are involved in the elaboration of Boccaccio's attitudes toward life. Finally, it would be worth exploring the epistemological implications of the canzoni which appear at the end of each Day of the Decameron and see how they are related to the overall understanding of the collection.

Moreover, another aspect of Boccaccio's discourse that has not yet been closely explored is its relationship with the tradition of the rhetorical-sophistic thought. The argumentative style



was something deeply inherent to the medieval spirit, and was typically used in the teaching practices of the Middle Ages. According to the so-called *esprit de controverse*, whereby dialectic becomes the logic of the possible, the world is described and narrated by a binary discourse whose characteristics are the form of the main rhetorical, philosophical, and juridical culture. Boccaccio took on some features of the sophistic thought through Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, Seneca, and Macrobius, elaborating them in the *questioni d'amore* of the *Filocolo*, and eventually linked them to the epistemic power of language in the variety of possibilities offered by the tales of the Decameron.

Lastly, the study of the manuscript tradition, especially Boccaccio's autographs in Italy, would certainly turn out to be illuminating in order to characterize the author's dynamics of composition. A systematic examination of Boccaccio's manuscripts could better define the author's philosophical background both by explaining how it influenced the making of the collection and by showing how Boccaccio structured the rhetorical bases of his vernacular prose. A fundamental source for the making of the Decameron is the manuscript labelled Paris, BNF, Ms. Ital. 482, which Vittore Branca identified as an early authorial redaction (years 1349-1351) of the collection before the definitive version transmitted by the codex Hamilton 90 of the Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz of Berlin. This manuscript, now held in Paris, written by Giovanni d'Agnolo Capponi by the years 1365-1369, may bring to light new philosophical aspects that hitherto have been overlooked by scholars.

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