

Vittore Branca (Savona, 1913 – Venice, 2004)
In Memoriam

Students of Boccaccio — “Boccacciani,” Branca liked to call our sodality — all know how much in his debt we are as scholars. From the book that marked his debut, *Il cantare trecentesco e il Boccaccio del “Filostrato” e del “Teseida”* (1936), up to his last major contribution on the editorial history of the Certaldan’s masterpiece, *Il capolavoro del Boccaccio e due diverse redazioni* (in collaboration with Maurizio Vitale, 2002), his activity as a Boccaccista spanned nearly seventy years, producing more on Italy’s greatest prose narrator than anyone ever had before in a corpus that seemed to defy limits of the humanly possible for a single individual. The same year as his first book, he published in *La Rassegna* the article that would be the nucleus for his second, *Linee di una storia della critica al “Decameron”* (1939), and on this groundwork he constructed a major new edition of the *Decameron* (1950–51). The complexities of its text and diffusion, which he first catalogued and mapped in *Studi di Filologia Italiana* (1950), updated in *Tradizione delle opere I* (1958) and again in *Tradizione delle opere II* (1991), would continue actively to engage him for the rest of his life. Striking a polemic with De Sanctis and his post-Romantic partisans, whose Boccaccio was an iconoclastic spirit two hundred years ahead of his time (“il medioevo non solo negato ma canzonato”), he argued compellingly for a *Boccaccio medievale* (1956). The publishing history of that seminal essay collection, through successive new editions in multiple languages, is emblematic of Branca’s unflagging energies in maintaining a project, once begun, always open and subject to correction, refinement, expansion, and updating. Thus in 1960 he produced a second edition of the *Decameron*, reprinted in 1965, and in 1966 he engineered a magnificent three-volume *Decameron* lavishly illustrated in full color, a prelude to the international team project he directed in cataloguing a corpus of nearly 8,000 images, *Boccaccio visualizzato: Narrare per parole e per immagini fra Medioevo e Rinascimento*. Other *Decameron*s would issue in 1976 from the identification of the autograph, announced in collaboration with Pier Giorgio Ricci (1962) — the Alinari facsimile; the critical edition published by the Accademia della Crusca, with which his affiliation dated back to 1937; volume 4 of *Tutte le opere*, the definitive modern series he had undertaken with Mondadori and carried to completion with sheer determination (1964–98); and finally, the Einaudi reincarnations, both in hardcover and paperback (1980, 1991, 1992, etc.). Launched by Branca in 1963, *Studi sul Boccaccio* would become a journal of record and ideal partner in all the longer-term ventures, a vehicle for announcing

work in progress and new discoveries, often in team endeavors, as was true of the startling evidence presented in 1994 with Maria Grazia Ciardi DuPré dal Poggetto for the autograph status of the drawings in the Paris *Decameron* (Ms. Ital. 482).

With so much on Boccaccio alone, it is easy to lose sight of the many other intellectual destinations Branca visited at his scholarly desk, recreating them for countless audiences on real travels that took him as a visiting lecturer from Buenos Aires to Tokyo, London to Istanbul, Melbourne to Paris, and from coast to coast in the United States. His journeys to America became more frequent after his retirement with plenary faculty vote as *Professore Emerito* from the University of Padua, where he had joined the faculty in 1953. We provided a vast new frontier he could tap in his never-ending, ecumenical search for talent, workers he could recruit into the Herculean labors of scholarship, endless but finishable, daunting but doable. The University of Pennsylvania Library author catalog lists 15 people called Branca, but only one with 79 books to his name. The entries include *Alfieri e la ricerca dello stile*, *Il cantico di frate Sole*, *I cipressi di Bolgheri* (with Eugenio Montale), *Dal medioevo al Petrarca; Dante e la cultura veneta*, Angelo Roncalli (Pope John XXIII), Ermolao Barbaro, Emilio de Marchi, Angelo Poliziano, Niccolò Tommaseo, Ippolito Nievo, Aesop's fables, the *mercanti scrittori*, Italy in her literary relations with Poland, with Hungary, *Dizionario critico della letteratura italiana*, Manzoni, Rinascimento, Barocco, Romanticismo. Among my favorites are his own prose reminiscences of the War years, *Ponte Santa Trinita: Per amore di libertà, per amore di verità* (1987).

The last time I visited him, in the summer of 2003, as we chatted in his book-lined study overlooking the Canal Grande, he proudly gave me what looked like an offprint. Actually, it was a copy of the program booklet for the ceremony on 7 October 2002, when Florence bestowed on him honorary citizenship. Of all his honors — alumnus with highest distinction of the Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa, degrees *honoris causa*, memberships and titles in such august bodies as the Accademia dei Lincei, the Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti; the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Officier de la Légion d'Honneur, Fellow of the Royal British Academy, his position as Vice-President and President of the Fondazione Cini — this seems to have been the most deeply moving for him. Already an honorary citizen of Certaldo — and, as he liked to characterize himself, “nativo di Savona, adottivo di Venezia, affettivo di Firenze” — that ceremony paid tribute to Branca, both as a scholar of Florentine culture and as a hero of the Resistance. At a time when Florence, without water or electricity, was cut in half by the retreating Germans, who had blown up the

bridges, Branca and his friends in the Comitato Toscano di Liberazione Nazionale proudly printed the first newspaper in the city liberated, not by British or Americans, but by the Florentines themselves in a costly popular insurrection. On August 11, 1944, there appeared two editions of *La Nazione del Popolo*, printed thanks to a power source ingeniously improvised: they jacked up the rear wheels of a Fiat Balilla so the car's engine could power the press. This is one of the stories he tells in *Ponte Santa Trinita*.

Branca, taken by an acute form of leukemia on May 28, 2004, remained active to the end. The last letter I received from him, written two months before his death, thanked me for sending a copy of Marilyn Migiel's new book on the *Decameron* (Marraro Prize, 2004) and inquired about the status of a review I had promised on his *Capolavoro del Boccaccio e due redazioni*. In closing, I recall words from my preface to that review for *Heliotropia 2.1* (2004), finished too late for him to see. ["Our annual summer visits in Venice,] at once professional and friendly, took on a symbolic dimension. They captured Branca's will to maximize every moment, his constant intellectual animation, and his enthusiasm for the scholarly life carried out in the world — not just the career he indefatigably pursued at an international level, but his fondness for socializing more informally, finding or making occasions to mingle culture with company... Younger scholars today, chained to their computers and tuned in only to email, don't engage with the public dimensions of life to which Branca's humanistic commitment went so deep. It ran a gamut from his courage in the Resistance, his energies as a driving force at the Fondazione Cini and Istituto Veneto, to the smiles that welcomed all whom he ushered as guests into their home. He struck an ideal balance between solitude in the *studiolo* and solicitude for 'civil conversation.'"

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