

Poetic Genealogy, Mythmaking and the Origins of Urban Nobility: Giovanni Boccaccio and Ambrogio Lorenzetti

Among the many places in the *Decameron* where Boccaccio compares the practice of writers to that of painters is the passage of the Author's Conclusion where he takes on the issue of poetic license.¹ Envisioning objections to the language involved in the stories written in his book, Boccaccio both voices the prospective accusations and offers up his defense as follows:

There will perhaps be those among you who will say that in writing these stories I have taken too many liberties, in that I have sometimes caused ladies to say, and very often to hear, things which are not very suitable to be heard or said by virtuous women. This I deny, for no story is so unseemly as to prevent anyone from telling it, provided it is done in seemly language; and this I believe I may reasonably claim to have done.²

After this tongue-in-cheek disclaimer, Boccaccio allows that there may be some “little parts” or words that are too unrestrained for the liking of “those prudish ladies who are more inclined to weigh words than deeds and exert more creative effort (*s'ingegnan*) in appearing good than in being good.”³ He then puts his would-be critics to the test, invoking a litany of terms that, as Vittore Branca has observed, share their equivocal potential and popular tone with the terminology of contemporary carnival songs.⁴

I assert that I deserve no more disdain for having written them than do men and women at large, in their everyday speech, for using such words as hole and rod (*foro e caviglia*), and mortar and pestle (*mortaio e pe-*

¹ On the relation between the figure of the writer and that of the painter in the *Decameron* see, most recently, Richard Kuhns, “*Decameron*” and the *Philosophy of Storytelling: Author as Midwife and Pimp* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 29–52.

² *Decameron*, Author's Conclusion, 6. Here and throughout the edition used is *Decameron*, ed. Vittore Branca, 3rd ed. (Turin: Einaudi, 1987). Translation from *The Decameron*, trans. G. H. McWilliam, 2nd ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995).

³ My translation.

⁴ See Branca's notes (*Decameron*, p. 1255).

stello), and sausage and stuffing (*salsiccia e mortadello*), and any number of others. Besides, no less fictional authority (*auttorità*) should be granted to my pen than to the brush of the painter, who without incurring censure of a justified kind at least—let alone that he makes Saint Michael wound the serpent with his sword or his lance, and Saint George the dragon wherever he pleases—even makes Christ male and Eve female and, sometimes with a single nail, sometimes with two, fixes to the cross the feet of Him who resolved to die thereon for the salvation of humankind.⁵

What Boccaccio offers up in this passage is a lesson in the ethics of poetic interpretation, the force of which pertains as much to the visual arts of the fourteenth century as it does to the stories of the *Decameron*.

Far from promoting an unambiguously chaste reception of the series of sacred images he calls forth for contemplation, Boccaccio prepares the ground for encounters wherein his readers are asked to identify with potentially erotic scenarios on three levels. On the first level, we are asked to identify with the alternatively martial or phallic weapons wielded by figures like the St. George in Vitale da Bologna's panel of 1340 (Figure 1). On the second level, readers are asked to weigh the erotic implications of the painter's action in "making Christ male and Eve female." Following Boccaccio's suggestion, we might consider the erotic motivation of the Sieneese painter's instrument as he delineated and draped the feminine anatomy of the recumbent Eve in the frescoes at Montesièpi (Figure 2). Finally, having been thoroughly primed by the previous two encounters, we are invited to read metaphorically and in phallic terms, first the instrument — the *chivo* or nail — then the act of forceful penetration — *conficcare* or nailing — involved in the fabrication of a painting like Giotto's early fourteenth-century crucifix for the Church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence (Figure 3). With this last example Boccaccio invites his readers to remember the painter's agency in eroticized terms, as his brush both made and became analogous in its action to the instruments affixing the body of Christ to the cross.

In the notes to his translation, G. H. McWilliam rightly takes issue with the tendency to neutralize the effects of Boccaccio's language and make this passage into a starting point for erudite investigations of the origins and sources of the three-nail crucifixion as an iconographic type.⁶ Boccaccio is patently not interested in the iconographic type per se. As Paul Watson established, he is pointing, as evidence of creative license, to the vary-

⁵ My translation.

⁶ *The Decameron*, p. 870.

ing of established image types by early fourteenth-century painters, asking his readers to make a mental comparison, for instance, between Giotto's Santa Maria Novella crucifix and the one that had been painted about twenty years earlier by Cimabue for the other great mendicant foundation at the opposite end of Florence, the Church of Santa Croce (Figure 4). If this is so, it cannot also be true, as Watson claimed in comparing Boccaccio's reflections on poetic license to those of his ancient counterpart Horace, that "Boccaccio replaces style with iconography to argue that the modern painter takes liberties with traditional religious themes."⁷ Here, indeed, is one those places where the critical fallacy involved in the familiar art-historical practice of separating considerations of style from those of iconography is laid bare. The creative play with what we might consider to be iconographic features is important to Boccaccio primarily insofar as it gives evidence of style, where style is the instrument that has specifically to do with the painter's — and Boccaccio's own — capacity for invention.

Boccaccio demands that the affective and experiential force of the words he has penned be recognized and taken on board as part of an active process of interpretation. This act of imaginative weighing properly attends not the word itself but rather to what he calls the *auttorità* of the painter's instrument. The process Boccaccio describes plays an important part in the constitution of a reader's position with relation to the knowledge of the subject that Boccaccio hopes to convey by means of his pen. In the foregoing passage of the *Decameron* that subject is both brilliantly evoked through the play with the reader's erotic experience, and openly identified as salvation. In the context of a work like the *Decameron*, which is all about finding the imaginative and human means for society to survive the ravages of the plague, Boccaccio's words might well be translated more literally. His subject, which coincides with the reason for Christ's sacrifice, is nothing less than "la salute della umana generazione" or "the health of human generation."

This general subject and the cumulative effect of Boccaccio's erotically charged references to acts of wounding go a long way toward explaining his unconventional pairing of Christ and Eve as examples of bodies that are both literally gendered and figuratively engendered by the painter's instrument. Boccaccio's pairing is a genealogical one, which points to Eve's body as the foundation of the fruitful or living tree of Christ's crucified body. The absent term here is the Virgin, and specifically the curative fig-

⁷ Paul F. Watson, "The Cement of Fiction: Giovanni Boccaccio and the Painters of Florence," *Modern Language Notes* 99 (1984): 61.

ure portrayed by Dante in the words delivered by St. Bernard in the opening verses of the thirty-second canto of *Paradiso*: “The wound that Mary closed and anointed, that one who is so beautiful at her feet is she who opened it and pierced it.”⁸ Boccaccio’s subject comes vividly into relief when it is considered in relation to Dante’s words and by comparison to an image like the *Maestà* painted by Ambrogio Lorenzetti and his workshop for the Rotunda of San Galgano in the Cistercian monastery at Montesiepi (Figure 2).⁹ Here, in one of the many fourteenth-century images that offer pictorial praise to the Virgin, Eve is shown seductively reclining and displaying the branch of the fig tree at the foot of the Virgin’s throne. She appears as a reminder of the relation that St. Jerome indicated in the aphorism: “Death came through Eve, but life came through Mary.”¹⁰ While Boccaccio never names the Virgin, he portrays her healing act as the absent subject of an extended analogy between the wounding instruments of the saints and the creative instruments of painters and poets.

While there is no strict connection between the paintings I have used to illustrate my essay thus far and the sort of reading practices Boccaccio advocates, it is clear that certain painters of his time actively invited such erotically charged encounters. Among the works mentioned so far, Vitale da Bologna’s *St. George and the Dragon* constitutes an obvious example (Figure 1). In this painting Vitale counterpoised his own anagrammatic signature with the moment in which the saint transfixes the dragon.¹¹

⁸ *Paradiso* 32:4–6. Translation from *The Divine Comedy*, vol. 3, parts 1 and 2, *Paradiso, Text and Commentary*, ed. and trans. Charles S. Singleton (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977).

⁹ On fourteenth-century images of the Madonna with Eve at her feet see Anne Dunlop, “Flesh and the Feminine: Early-Renaissance Images of the Madonna with Eve at Her Feet,” *Oxford Art Journal* 25.2 (2002): 127–48. For the Montesiepi frescoes specifically see Anne Dunlop, “Once More on the Patronage of Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s Frescoes at San Galgano, Montesiepi,” *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 63 (2000): 387–403. Dunlop’s articles both include extensive bibliographical notes.

¹⁰ St. Jerome, *Letter XXII: To Estochium*, sect. 21. Translation from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Church Fathers*, ser. 2, vol. 6, *The Principle Works of St. Jerome*, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Christian Literature, 1892).

¹¹ See Robert Gibbs, “Vitale da Bologna.” In *Grove Art Online* (Oxford University Press, 2006), <http://www.groveart.com> (accessed August 31, 2006), who notes that the signature resembles Bolognese lawyers’ marks. Vitale’s signature is also discussed, with less promising possibilities for understanding the imagery of the panel, as a form of personal publicity in Roberta Bosi, “Sulle ‘firme’ dei pittori bolognesi, XIV–XV secolo,” in *Le opere e i nomi: prospettive sulla “firma” medioevale: in margine ai lavori per il Corpus delle opere firmate del medioevo*, ed. Maria Monica Donato (Pisa: Scuola Normale Superiore, 2000), 59–69.

Whereas the lance wounds the dragon in the mouth, the signature recording the presence of the artist's witnessing hand is emblazoned like a brand, and quite evidently where the painter pleased, on the hindquarters of the rearing horse. Vitale set these two points in motion, activating the interval between them with the dramatic torsion of a central group composed of the saint and his horse. He thus invited reflection on the erotic motivation and license of his own hand in the making of the work.

For his part, Boccaccio found his own inventive faculty reflected primarily in the practices of painters and other artisans of the preceding generation. Most notable among the painters who populate the *Decameron* is Giotto. He appears briefly but significantly as the venerable *maestro*, one of the two main characters in the fifth story of the Sixth Day. This tale concludes with Giotto's witty reproach of the jurist, sir Forese da Rabatta, for putting stock in outward appearances. In the words delivered by Boccaccio's narrator, Panfilo, the poet attributed to the great Florentine painter a special knowledge of nature:

...he had an *ingegno* of such excellence that there was nothing from nature — mother and motivator (*operatrice*) of all things by means of the continuous rotation of the heavens — that he with his stylus and his pen and or his brush could not depict with the appearance not of a reproduction but of the thing itself. Indeed, one frequently finds with things made by him that people's eyes are taken in error leading them to believe to be true/real that which was painted.¹²

After warning his readers not to fall into a similar error, Panfilo proceeds to suggest that there is more to be discovered in Giotto's imitative powers than the amazing but potentially misleading illusions achieved in his paintings. Delivering the lines that would be echoed and reinterpreted by Petrarch in describing his testamentary gift to Francesco da Carrara of a Madonna by Giotto's hand, Boccaccio's narrator says:

Hence, having returned to light that art that has been buried for many centuries under the error of those more interested in delighting the ignorant than satisfying (*compiacere*) the intellects of the wise, he merits being called one of the lights of Florentine glory.

As is well established, Boccaccio is here defining Giotto's painting as poetry, where poetry is understood as a veil for unseen truths. The narrator is also reflecting Boccaccio's desire to revive the sort of human poetry that he would describe and defend in the great treatise he composed between 1350 and 1374, the *Genealogie deorum gentilium*. It is

¹² *Decameron*, Day 5, nov. 6, 5–6. My translation.

possible to read the contest of wits between Giotto, the master painter and poet, and Forese, the jurist, in relation to this later work, as a rehearsal of the contest that Boccaccio would himself enter on behalf of poetry and against the accusations of jurists (among others).¹³ As part of an extended defense of poetry that occupies the fourteenth book of the *Genealogie*, Boccaccio provides the following answer to the question of whether or not it is a useful faculty: “Poetry...” he says, “is not only something, it is a venerable science (*scienza*). It is *facultas*, not useless but all juiced-up (*succi plena*) for those who would press forward (*premere*) common sense (or ‘understanding:’ *sensus*) by means of fictional invention (*ex fictionibus ingenio*).”¹⁴

As Boccaccio indicates in his praise of Giotto’s art, the understanding or truth value involved in fiction-making is founded in the imitation of nature, “the mother and motivator of all things.” It is also explicitly associated with the instruments of poetic making, including the stylus, the pen, or the brush. By way of explaining the connection between instruments and knowledge in Boccaccio’s formulation, it is useful to dwell for a moment on the implications of this last point, and observe that Boccaccio established a hierarchy among the three instruments that his narrator associates with Giotto’s imitative practice. What Panfilo says, specifically, is that Giotto imitates nature “con lo stile e con la penna o col pennello,” which is to say “with the stylus *and* with the pen *or* the brush.” Within this array of instruments the stylus subtends the pen and the brush. The latter two instruments indicate respectively (although not exclusively) the activity of the poet and that of the painter. While Boccaccio’s configuration of the instruments in relation to each other has rarely been noticed, it isn’t surprising, given that he is here indicating the shared origins, in the regulation of the imaginative faculty, of poetry and painting. For painters and poets alike, the stylus was a primary instrument. As illustrated in Rogier van der Weyden’s *St. Luke Portraying the Virgin* of circa 1435, its operation belonged to the levels of composition and/or education (Figure 5).

¹³ Boccaccio singles out jurists among his opponents in *Genealogie deorum gentilium*, Book 14, chap. 4. Here and throughout the edition used is “*Genealogie deorum gentilium*,” “*De montibus, silvis, fontibus, lacubus, fluminibus, stagnis seu paludibus, et de diversis nominibus maris*,” ed. and trans. Vittorio Zaccaria, 2 vols. Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio 7/8 (Milan: Mondadori, 1998).

¹⁴ *Genealogie*, book 14, chap. 6, 9. The translation is based on the one provided by Gregory Stone in his discussion of this passage. Gregory B. Stone, *The Ethics of Nature in the Middle Ages: On Boccaccio’s Poetaphysics* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 152.

Where painting was concerned, both the educational associations of the stylus and its relation to the acquisition of knowledge through the practice of imitation were described at the beginning of the fifteenth century by Cennino Cennini in the *Libro dell'arte*. Situating himself within an artisanal lineage founded in Giotto's practice, Cennini presented the stylus as the instrument by means of which the painter both learned to imitate the outward appearance of natural things and inwardly shaped or regulated his *ingenium*, giving rise simultaneously to the capacity for invention and to an ethical artisanal body.¹⁵ As Mary Pardo and Maurizio Bettini have explained on somewhat different grounds, the notion of *ingenium* operative in the fourteenth-century reception of Giotto's works was indebted to the reading of Pliny by Petrarch and his humanist followers.¹⁶ It was also indebted, where the specific question of the link between instruments and experience is concerned, to that complex notion that Winthrop Wetherbee described in his study of the Chartrian poets of the twelfth century as "a vital link in human consciousness, uniting the highest and the basest capacities of will and curiosity."¹⁷

Although the visual traces of the stylus were obliterated in the final painting, the value attached to the stages of education and composition that the stylus represented remained to be discovered in a process that Boccaccio characterizes as weighing. The challenge to the wise interpreter was to look for the traces of the author's instrument and recognize, in self-reflexive terms, the real substance conveyed in the ethical operation or regulation of the imaginative faculty. This recognition is important for the appreciation of what Hans Belting and others have described as the experiential charge of the new sorts of sacred images that Boccaccio enumerated in the Conclusion to the *Decameron*.¹⁸ The authority of an image like the Santa Maria Novella

¹⁵ Cennino Cennini, *Il libro dell'arte*, chaps. 1–13. Here and throughout the edition used is *Il libro dell'arte*, ed. Franco Brunello (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1982).

¹⁶ Maurizio Bettini, "Tra Plinio e sant'Agostino: Francesco Petrarca sulle arti figurative," in *Memoria dell'antico nell'arte italiana*, vol. 1, *L'uso dei classici*, ed. Salvatore Settis (Turin: Einaudi, 1984), 221–67, Mary Pardo, "Giotto and the Things Not Seen, Hidden in the Shadow of Natural Ones," *Artibus et Historiae* 18, no. 36 (1997): 41–53.

¹⁷ Winthrop Wetherbee, *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 94.

¹⁸ Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), esp. 349–408. On images of the crucifixion in particular see Philipp P. Fehl, "The Naked Christ in Santa Maria Novella in Florence: Reflections on an Exhibition and Its Consequences," *Storia dell'arte* 45 (1982): 161–64. On the general topic of artistic license as it concerns the Christ's humanity see

crucifix does not, however, depend entirely on the self-reflexive recognition of the creative authority of the painter's brush. Such images also belong to an old tradition of icons, whose authority derives in no small part from their resemblance to an established pictorial tradition, the primary function of which was to convey, in recognizable terms, its relation to a sacred archetype, in this case Christ's sacrificial body.

There is, however, another sort of poetic imagery that depends for its meaningful operation primarily on the recognition and weighing of the author's inventive faculty. This sort of fiction-making, or *mythopoesis*, would be the focus of attention in the *Genealogie deorum gentilium*. The *Genealogie* is concerned, on the level of its material, with the poetry of the ancients and, on the level of theory, with the truth value of a sort of poetry that is grounded in human experience. It deals not with sacred archetypes but rather with human history and with myths, understood in euhemeristic terms, as "poetic records of secular civilization."¹⁹ As Thomas Hyde has explained, the sorts of truths revealed by Boccaccio's allegorical readings of the ancient fables recorded in the *Genealogie* have to do with ethical or natural philosophy rather than with Christian doctrine.

It is to myths of secular civilization in the age of the Tuscan communes, and to the question of making up origins by means of poetic invention, that I will now turn my attention. These questions are important but largely neglected ones where pictorial representations of civic sovereignty are concerned, including most prominently the great fresco scheme painted between 1338 and 1340 by Ambrogio Lorenzetti in the Sala dei Nove of Siena's Palazzo Pubblico. It is indicative of the limitations of the prevailing political interpretations of Ambrogio's frescoes that they cannot address the central and animating moment of Ambrogio's mythic city except in terms that ultimately deny its experiential force.²⁰ I am referring here to the group of fes-

Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

¹⁹ Thomas Hyde, "Boccaccio: The Genealogies of Myth," *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 100 (1985): 239–41.

²⁰ See, for instance, Chiara Frugoni, *A Distant City: Images of Urban Experience in the Medieval World*, trans. William McQuaig (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 162, Randolph Starn and Loren Partridge, "The Republican Regime of the Sala dei Nove in Siena, 1338–40," in *Arts of Power: Three Halls of State in Italy, 1300–1600* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 49–51. According to Frugoni: "A statute of the city of Siena prohibited dancing in the streets, and the existence of this prohibition leads us to realize that the dance of the girls depicted by the artist is not meant to be a real episode, but rather a symbolic figure...."

tively attired dancers at the heart of the peaceful and well-governed city (Figure 6). This motif has occasioned a great deal of debate in the literature of the past few decades, much of it sparked by the over-determined question of whether or not the dancers are to be taken as maidens.²¹ Unfortunately, in all the discussion of the intended gender and/or social identity of the dancing figures, scholarship has somehow lost track of the fact that Ambrogio's dancers are neither male nor female. They are, on that elementary level that so rarely figures into art-historical discussions of meaning, confections of plaster and pigment. While this response to the debates on gender may sound facetious, it bears the perfectly serious burden of indicating the necessity of considering these figures, in the first place, as poetic fictions.

Summarizing an argument that I have presented in greater detail elsewhere, I would observe here that Ambrogio's group of dancers is not simply, as is sometimes argued, a transparent symbol of harmony.²² It is also an elaborate but wonderfully compact pictorial and material representation of the creative processes of nature. Everything from the insect imagery decorating three of the dancers' dresses — caterpillars, cocoons, and dragonflies — to the unlaced sleeves and deeply slashed hem of the caterpillar dress, which evoke the shedding of a caterpillar's hairy skin, may be explained as parts of an elaborate representation of natural metamorphosis. Through their association with the cyclical pattern of the bridge dance, the figures constitute a vivid and highly animated metaphor for the process of remembrance, where the subject remembered is the generative power of nature.²³

Although his practice needs to be situated firmly in the realm of poetic invention, Ambrogio's imagery shares the inclination of late medieval philosophy to comprehend and represent the workings of nature by appealing to a combination of practical and received knowledge. Particularly telling, where the Sieneese dancers are concerned, are the descriptions of

²¹ The argument that Ambrogio's dancers are intended to represent male entertainers was developed by Jane Bridgeman in "Ambrogio Lorenzetti's Dancing 'Maidens': A Case of Mistaken Identity," *Apollo* 133 (1991): 81–92. Substantial and generally positive responses to Bridgeman's argument include Jonathan J. G. Alexander, "Dancing in the Streets," *Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 54 (1996): 147–62, esp. 53, Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. 2, *Renaissance Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 103–17. Skinner both reviews and provides bibliographic information for the other contributions to this question.

²² C. Jean Campbell, "The City's New Clothes: Ambrogio Lorenzetti and the Poetics of Peace," *Art Bulletin* 83 (2001): 240–58. The article provides the relevant bibliography.

²³ On the dance as a metaphor for remembrance see, for example, Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 10 (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 62.

the reproductive processes of various sorts of insects offered by Albertus Magnus in the *De animalibus*. For example, in the description of the life-cycle of a silk worm, Albertus distinguished between the “saffron or white threads” produced by the silkworm in fabricating the cocoon and those other colors of silk cloth “made by art,” implicitly by the art of the dyer.²⁴ Ambrogio went about representing his own creative capacity as an artisan through a similar but reversed process of analogy. His brushstrokes, which are least apparent in the natural saffron-colored fabric of the caterpillar dress, emerge as a calligraphic chevron pattern in the cocoon dress and finally disappear once again, only to be assimilated, along with the bodies of the dragonflies, to a bilaterally symmetrical pattern that represents the woven structure of the fabric. At the next level of the fiction is the weaving pattern of the dance itself. The dancers pass through the line they have formed, tracing a pattern that artfully re-enacts, but does not reproduce, the process of weaving a raised pattern into a rectilinear ground. Ambrogio’s figure thus both partakes of an ancient set of metaphors figuring the origins of *poesis* in the experiential realms of dance and weaving, and renews and reinvigorates those associations through the lens of contemporary artisanal techniques.²⁵ By means of his brush, Ambrogio wove both his own poetic agency and, by association, human agency in general into a metaphor for the relation between the great process of nature and the manifold processes of art.

Confronted with such imagery, and following the model that Boccaccio advocated for readers of the *Decameron*, I would argue that it is incumbent on the interpreter to recognize and weigh the authority of the human maker. Ambrogio’s invitation is explicit. At the very heart of the dance, where we might expect to find a personification of nature, is an instrument, specifically a tambourine (Figure 7). While the tambourine is comprehensible under one aspect as an accouterment of the festive dance, under another aspect it is detachable from that role and attached to the subjective experience of the viewer. It is isolated in a void between two of the dancers, and displayed flat against the painted surface in such a manner that its fictive membrane confronts the viewer and effectively confounds the difference between the painted figure and the ground. For the viewer

²⁴ Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus*, book 26, chap. 24: “Hic vermis ... circa se facit sericum croceum vel album: omnes enim alii colores in serico fiunt per artem.” The text edition used is *De animalibus*, ed. Hermann Stadler, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters*, vols. 15 and 16 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1916 and 1920). My translation.

²⁵ For the ancient material see J. M. Snyder, “The Web of Song: Weaving Images in Homer and the Lyric Poets,” *Classical Journal* 76 (1981): 193–96.

thus confronted, it suggests the possibilities of both vision and penetration.

This sort of structure is a familiar one in the art of the late Middle Ages, particularly in fourteenth-century ivories, where the props of the courtly playlets decorating mirror cases, combs, and caskets typically serve double duty. A particularly fine example of the ivory carvers' visual trickery is to be found in the representation of two lovers playing chess that decorates a mirror case from the first half of the fourteenth century now in the collection of the Louvre (Figure 8). Here, the lady's handmaiden is shown displaying a circlet flat against the ivory ground in one hand, while pointing with her other hand toward a deeply carved fold in the lap of the lady's dress. While the viewer is left to assemble the relevant pieces of female genitalia in their own mind, the lewd outcome of this reading is never really in question. It is driven home, not only in such details as the falcon digging into the orifice formed by the page's fist, but also in the composition of the scene as a whole. While the page looks toward the chess game at the center of the field, the hands of the other three figures are configured at this focal point to frame an aperture, which is penetrated (none too subtly) by the pole of the sheltering tent.

Although Ambrogio employed a similar structural trick in the invention of the dancers, its effects are not similarly determined by the surrounding fiction. The possibility of penetration, which is suggested in the representation of the dancer about to pass under the interlaced arms of her companions and through the line of the dance, appears beside the aperture presented by the tambourine, but the relation between the instrument and the act is nowhere determined. It can only be comprehended through a metonymical process of the sort that does not lend itself to simple or fixed conclusions. The effect is to suspend the conclusion, but not the act of erotic reading, as viewers are asked to recognize their own creative capacity and thereby assemble the visual clues. Whether the resulting mental image is lewd or generative of the sort of knowledge that the painter seeks to represent in what Boccaccio calls the *compiacere* or complaisance of the wise man, depends finally on the judgment the viewer.

In the case of Ambrogio's frescoes, which are painted in the executive council chamber of the city hall, there is no doubt about the makeup of the prospective audience. The ideal viewer can only be posited as a member of the governing body of Siena. The question remains, therefore, as to how the sort of knowledge of nature that is pressed forward by poetic invention and engaged in the terms I have been describing might inform such an interpreter. By way of explanation it is useful to turn to the *Ninfale Fiesolano* and to Boccaccio's account therein of the generation of a vital and

noble political body.²⁶

The *Ninfale*, which is generally dated to circa 1344, in the years following Boccaccio's return to Florence from the Neapolitan court, is a pastoral fable in rhymed octaves set in the hills around Fiesole. Beginning as a tragic love story between a young shepherd named Africo and a nymph named Mensola, Boccaccio's fable ends as an account of the foundations of the cities of Fiesole and Florence. The *Ninfale* is accordingly described, on the grounds of both its mythological material and its narrative trajectory, as an etiological fable or a tale of origins. Boccaccio's tale is not, however, simply about the origins of a city. As many commentators have observed, the *Ninfale* has a biographical dimension, which relates, on the one hand, to Boccaccio's own status as an illegitimate son and, on the other, to his vocation and aspirations as a poet.²⁷ This personal dimension was effectively related by Thomas Hyde to the larger pattern of "retrograde generation" that characterizes Boccaccio's search for poetic origins in the *Genealogie deorum gentilium*. Summarizing an argument that has much broader implications for the study of the urban cultures of fourteenth-century Tuscany, Hyde suggested:

Perhaps we ought to see the genealogical structure of this great encyclopedia...as a final generalization of his personal burden into an image for the new age he helped to inaugurate. An illegitimate and upstart age, cast loose from historical succession, at sea, attempting with an uneasy combination of aggression and filial piety to adopt a foster parent, wishing for legitimacy but unwilling to accept its imaginative constraints, struggling greedily and guiltily to inherit.²⁸

The *Ninfale Fiesolano* bears consideration in this light as one of the several vernacular poems in which Boccaccio approaches the question of legitimacy as a poetic problem with both personal and cultural dimensions. In fact, Boccaccio's etiological fable is at least as much about the interdependent origins (amorous and generative) of poetic invention and urban nobility as it is about the origins of Fiesole and Florence.

The first half of Boccaccio's pastoral fable culminates in a masquerade orchestrated by Venus and involving the coming of age of the young shepherd Africo. Boccaccio's narrator describes his protagonist early in the romance in terms drawn largely from the lexicon of contemporary vernacular lyric as: "beardless still, with locks of curly blond hair and a face fair

²⁶ The edition used here and throughout is *Ninfale fiesolano*, ed. Pier Massimo Forni (Milan: Mursia, 1991).

²⁷ See the introduction to Forni's edition of the *Ninfale*, pp. 14–15, 22 n. 4.

²⁸ Hyde, "Boccaccio," 744.

as a lily or a rose.”²⁹ He goes on to explain how this androgynous youth, inflamed by his love for the nymph Mensola, and under the coaching of Venus, “counterfeited” himself as a nymph. We are told specifically that Africo borrowed his mother’s gown, which he bound with bryony vines to facilitate easy movement, and went off into the wooded hills of Fiesole to join the company of Diana’s nymphs. Through his use of such terms as *ritrarre* (to copy) and *contraffare* (to counterfeit) to describe the fabrication of the shepherd’s disguise, Boccaccio compares Africo’s masquerade to the artisanal processes of fiction-making.³⁰

Considered in this context, the description the young shepherd made over as a nymph may be construed as a portrait of the origins of fiction-making in the imitation of nature. When Boccaccio interrupts his narrative to offer a lyric description of Africo made over as a nymph, he collapses the fictional timeline, transposing his subject to confront the reader in a prismatic portrait.³¹ The portrait of Africo mirrors that of the angelic Mensola presented near the beginning of the romance, after the young shepherd first spies the would-be object of his heart’s desire.³² It is, however, an obviously imperfect mirror of the earlier description. According to Boccaccio, Africo’s hair is of modest length, but so fair that it *seems* filled with gold. Mensola’s, on the other hand, not only *is* fair as gold, but is also of great length. Most tellingly where Boccaccio’s subject is concerned, Africo’s face is described as being pallid from the breathtaking anxiety or *affanni* he has suffered in the absence of his beloved Mensola, whereas we know that the sight of her shining eyes has the power to suspend all such anxiety. As the narrator tells us, “whoever sees her eyes never suffers distress” (“chi li vede non sente mai affanni”).³³ Were the mirror of the poet’s description to be replaced by Mensola’s presence, we might see Africo’s affliction healed and his desire fulfilled, but the absent subject of this complex por-

²⁹ *Ninfale*, stanza 22, vv. 4–6. Translation from Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Nymph of Fiesole*, trans. Daniel J. Donno (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960). For Boccaccio’s debt in these verses to vernacular lyric see the notes to Forni’s edition.

³⁰ *Ninfale*, stanza 200, v. 3, stanza 264, v. 5. Later in the century Cennini would use the term *ritrarre* to describe the practice of copying a master’s drawings with tracing paper (*Libro dell’arte*, chap. 23). Significantly for the present argument *ritrarre* here designates not just the act of tracing but also its goal, which is to capture or copy not the outward appearance but “la sostanza d’una buona figura or disegno” (“the substance of a good figure or drawing”).

³¹ *Ninfale*, stanza 211, vv. 5–6.

³² *Ninfale*, stanza 30.

³³ *Ninfale*, stanza 30, v. 5.

trait is, finally, neither Africo nor Mensola. The subject that Boccaccio seeks to represent in an affectively grounded and similarly reflexive identification with the reading subject is rather nature's breath-giving or animating spirit.

Up to this point in the story, Africo's actions — which have been motivated by nature, orchestrated by Venus and described by the narrator — are not those of a self-conscious artist. His eventual unmasking, however, marks an important turning point for the developing figure of the artist/poet. While his disguise works for a time, its limits are tested and ultimately breached when the nymphs decide to go bathing and invite their new companion to join them. Realizing that if the maidens disrobed before him, he would no longer be able to hide his mounting desire, Africo, in a moment of newfound ingenuity, decides to take advantage of the situation to reveal the emerging male body under his female clothing. In this broadly comical portrayal of the emergence of the young artist's style (so to speak) Boccaccio has Africo perform a striptease before the bathing nymphs to reveal "all that he had in front" ("tutto ciò che avea davante"). Not surprisingly, the display sends them screaming from the pool in terror. After having raped Mensola, Africo takes the matter even more thoroughly, if only temporarily, into his own hands. He re-spins the tale of his love in his own words, eventually gaining — with the help of Amor — both Mensola's forgiveness and her compliance with his desire. Africo's effeminate costume thus serves not just as a disguise, but specifically as a disguise that masks transformation. It masks both the transformation of the youthful protagonist into sexual maturity, and the transformation of the fable itself, from a tale of as yet uncivilized motives to one of relatively self-conscious motives and more regulated desire, expressed by poetic language.

It is fair to conclude, as Linda Armao does, that the example Africo presents in these passages of the *Ninfale* is not to be taken straightforwardly as an ethical model.³⁴ Neither, however, should it be forgotten. The genealogical and self-reflexive perspective that Boccaccio established in the portrait of Africo made over as a nymph needs to be remembered here and throughout the fable. It represents, as a vanishing point, the origins of the sort of poetic authority that is invented or made up in the process of fiction. This perspective is important both to Boccaccio's account of the origins of

³⁴ Linda Armao, "The *Ninfale fiesolano*: Ovidian Bravura Veiling Truth," in *Italiana 1988*, ed. Paolo A. Giordano and Anthony J. Tamburri, Rosary College Italian Studies 4 (River Forest, IL: Rosary College, 1990), 35–49.

urban nobility, and to the comprehension of any truth value that this sort of human poetry might hope to convey.

As far as the fable itself is concerned, it is enough to point out that the union of Africo and Mensola had tragic immediate results, first in the suicide of Africo and then in the punishment of Mensola by Diana. Like the nymphs of the ancient fables upon which Boccaccio's tale depends, the wayward Mensola is transformed into a feature of the natural world. She becomes the stream that still winds through the Tuscan countryside between Florence and Settignano in a place that Boccaccio knew very well. In the long run, the union of Africo and Mensola also had positive results in the birth of the beautiful, eloquent, and courteous Pruneo, who, according to Boccaccio, would grow up to become the first native governor of the newly founded city of Fiesole. In the sense that he becomes "model son and citizen" Pruneo's example does undoubtedly supersede that of his father Africo. Like the initial workings of the artist's stylus, Africo's example and the erotically motivated connection to nature that it represents are always there to be remembered.

In fact, the subsequent course of Boccaccio's tale suggests that its periodic remembrance is essential to the well-being of the city. As Boccaccio's tale progresses, its setting moves from the countryside to the city and from nature to civilization. Africo's unmasking inaugurates a chain of events that parallels the transition from the matter of song to that of history. This last transition involved a new genre of source material, as Boccaccio literally wove his pastoral song into the account of the history of the foundation of Fiesole and Florence that had recently been established in Giovanni Villani's *Cronica*.³⁵ According to Boccaccio, the founding of the city of Fiesole by the mythical and foreign king Atalante witnessed the destruction of the chaste and native order of the goddess Diana. For scholars like Natalino Sapegno and Aldo Scaglione, these events were concomitant with the ascent of the principle of active and natural love represented by Africo, Pruneo, and their descendants.³⁶

While the principles represented by Africo and Pruneo might be distin-

³⁵ Much of Boccaccio's material for this portion of the *Ninfale* is derived from Books 1 and 2 of Villani's *Cronica*. See the notes to Forni's edition of the *Ninfale*, beginning with stanza 436. Boccaccio echoes Villani's account (sometimes right down to specific wording) in passages sprinkled throughout the final stanzas including: 455, 1–2; 459, 6–8; 464, 1–2. He also observes at the beginning of stanza 463 that the story he is telling has been written, with greater clarity, elsewhere.

³⁶ See Natalino Sapegno, *Storia letteraria d'Italia: Il Trecento* (Milan: Vallardi, 1955), 346, Aldo D. Scaglione, *Nature and Love in the Late Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 121, 206 n. 42.

guished more strongly than such interpretations suggest, and along the lines that Armao has suggested, the genealogical connection between father and son also needs to be taken into account. As Boccaccio indicates in the course of the tale, Pruneo's example as model citizen was insufficient in and of itself. During times of good government, the descendants of Pruneo provided the ethical core of the urban nobility, first in Fiesole and then later in Florence; during the period of tyranny under Totila, they retreated to their ancestral home "nel lor primaio antico colle," which is to say in the hills around Fiesole, where both their story and Tuscan history began. Nobility, it would seem, is not inherent to the city. Having been born, like Pruneo, in the countryside, it needs periodic renewal of the sort that the reader may find reflected in Africo's masquerade.

Turning back to Ambrogio's frescoes with this principle in mind, I would offer two related suggestions regarding the figure of the dancers at the heart of the peaceful cityscape and the potential they represent for ethical reading. The first suggestion, which I have pursued in an earlier article with relation to a similar dialogue in the *Decameron*, is that the dancers open a view to the necessary and sustaining relation between the city and the countryside.³⁷ They represent one of two incommensurable possibilities for traversing the uncertain territory between fear and security. This imaginary journey was framed by Ambrogio with the two personifications labeled Timor and Securitas that loom at the city gates and preside respectively over the barren and the fruitful countrysides occupying the opposing walls of the room (Figs. 9 and 10). The first, more familiar, option for negotiating this uncertain territory is human government, as portrayed in Ambrogio's diagrammatic explanation of the constitution of Siena's sovereignty. The second option, which is represented by Ambrogio in the figure of the dancers, has to do with poetic invention and the embodied experience of judgment. These two topics return the argument, finally, to the questions of poetic license and fictional authority raised at outset of this essay. The poetic function of Ambrogio's dancers is to initiate an inventive and evaluative process based in the erotic experience of a viewer who will hopefully be inclined in the end to weigh not their appearance but rather the act of their making and the authority of Ambrogio's

³⁷ Campbell, "City's New Clothes," 254–55. On the *Decameron* specifically see Marga Cottino-Jones, "The City/Country Conflict in the *Decameron*," *Studi sul Boccaccio* 8 (1974): 147–84. On the social function of the healing process represented in the *Decameron* see also Millicent Joy Marcus, *An Allegory of Form: Literary Self-Consciousness in the Decameron* (Saratoga, CA: Anma, 1979), 110–25.

brush. Insofar as it renews the relation between the governing body of the citizen and an origin that is made up and conveyed in the process of poetic invention, an erotically charged engagement with Ambrogio's dancers is not only necessary for the comprehension of the fiction of the peaceful and fruitful city, it is also a potentially ennobling act.

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Illustrations

Figure 1: Vitale da Bologna, *St. George and the Dragon*, panel, c. 1340, Bologna, Pinacoteca Nazionale



Figure 3: Giotto, *Crucifix*, c. 1305, Santa Maria Novella, Florence



Figure 4: Cimabue, *Crucifix*, c. 1285, Santa Croce, Florence

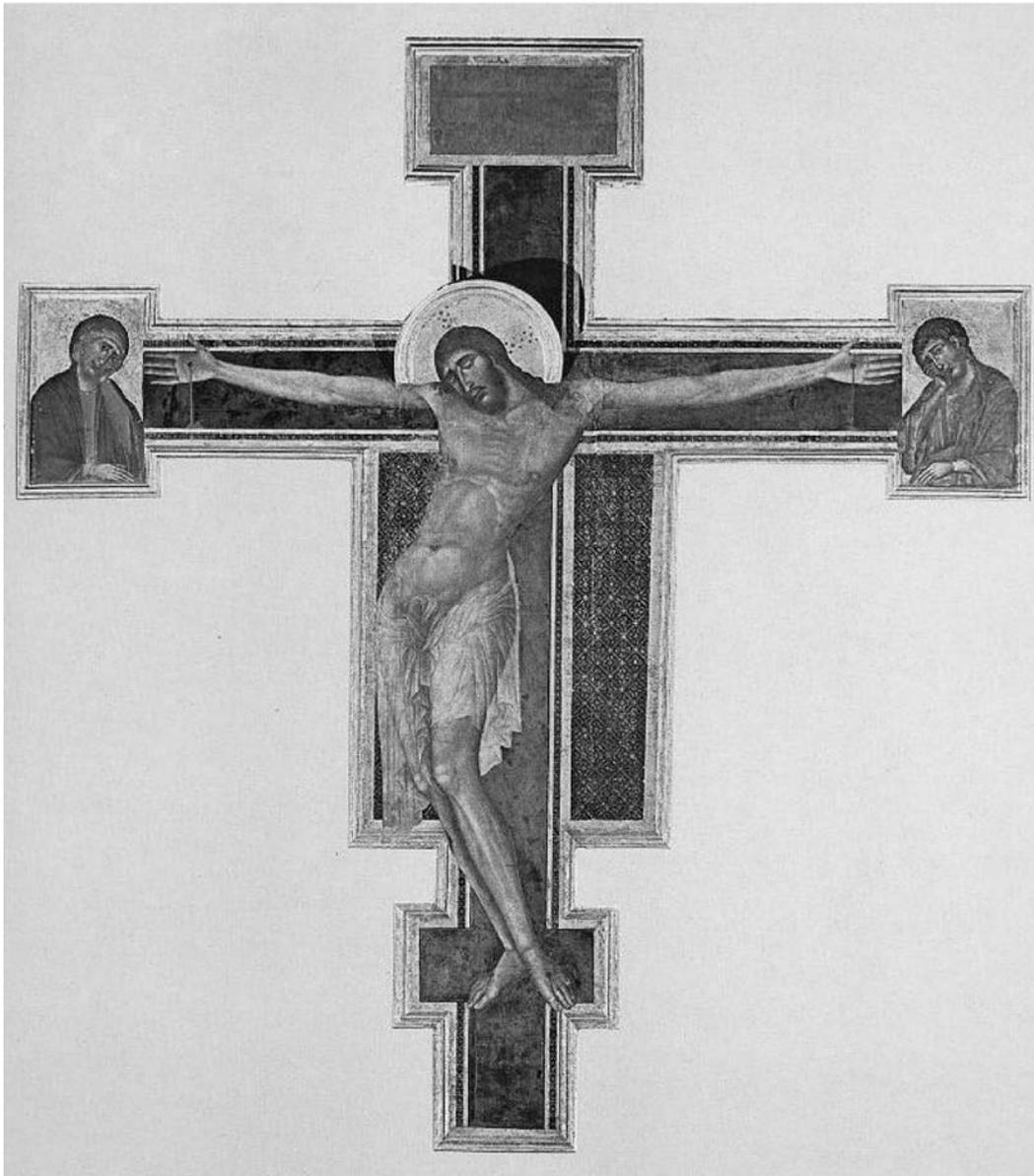


Figure 5: Rogier van der Weyden, detail of *St. Luke Painting the Virgin*, panel, c. 1435, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Figure 6: Ambrogio Lorenzetti, detail of *The City of Siena Under the Rule of Good Government*, fresco, 1338–40, Sala dei Nove, Palazzo Pubblico Siena



Figure 7: Ambrogio Lorenzetti, detail of dancers from the *City Under the Rule of Good Government*



Figure 8: Parisian Workshop, *Lovers Playing Chess*, first quarter of the 14th century, ivory, Musée du Louvre, Paris



Figure 9: Ambrogio Lorenzetti, detail of the gateway from *The City Under the Rule of Tyranny*, 1338–40, fresco, Sala dei Nove, Palazzo Pubblico, Siena



Figure 10: Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *The Countryside under the Rule of Good Government*, 1338–40, fresco, Sala dei Nove, Palazzo Pubblico, Siena

