

Introduction

The essays included in this issue of *Heliotropia* had their source in a symposium on “Giovanni Boccaccio and Fourteenth-Century Italian Culture: Tradition and Innovation,” which was held on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Madison,¹ 21–22 April 2006, and which was, in part, an anticipatory celebration of my retirement from the university (in August, 2007).² The four sessions, which took place over the two days were dedicated to the following general themes: “New Perspectives on Boccaccio, Social and Moral”; “New Perspectives on Boccaccio and His Age: Art, Politics, Music”; “New Perspectives on Boccaccio’s *Decameron*”; and “New Perspectives on Boccaccio’s Minor Works.”³

Giovanni Boccaccio is often — and unfortunately — the neglected member of the “Three Crowns of Florence,” and he himself would probably be the first to say that the other two — Dante and Petrarch — were more worthy than he. Indeed, Boccaccio always saw himself as the *discipulus* of these two great *magistri*. After all, he was the first public lecturer on Dante — the first true Dante professor —, and he wrote a biography of the great Florentine poet and an unfinished commentary on the *Inferno*; he had arrived at Canto 17 of *Inferno* when overtaken by the illness, which would lead to his death. Boccaccio also took much inspiration and lexical borrowings from the master, as his works suggest: the *Amorosa visione*, as the *Divine comedy*, is in *terza rima* but in only fifty cantos; the *Decameron* — with its hundred stories vs. the hundred *canti* of the *Comedy* — is set in plague-ridden Florence in 1348, when the author was thirty-five years old, just as Dante was “nel mezzo del cammin di [sua] vita” at the beginning of his poem; and so on. As for Petrarch, Boccaccio was his fervent friend and admirer, who visited him, sent him books, engaged him in conversation, and even composed the codex (Vatican, Chigiano L. V, 176) that has become known as the “Chigi” version, one of the several stages in the composition of the *Canzoniere*.

Part of the reason for neglect, for the lack of name — or product — recognition may be that, of late, there have been few anniversaries pertinent to Boccaccio. The most recent commemoration took place over thirty years ago, in 1975, the six-hundredth anniversary of his death; however, the next

one is rapidly approaching in three years, in 2013, the seven-hundredth anniversary of his birth. Over the past few decades medievalists have witnessed — and mostly survived — several big years for both Dante and Petrarch: 1965 (Dante's birth), 1974 (Petrarch's death), 1990 (Beatrice's death), 2000 (Dante's journey through the afterlife), and 2004 (Petrarch's birth). Another factor in the public's general amnesia is that Boccaccio seems to be so familiar to us; we think we know him as a friend and thus do not perhaps hold him in awe as we do either Dante or Petrarch. I have often wondered who would have been the better dinner companion: Dante, or Petrarch, or Boccaccio. Dante would probably be too severe, too theological, or too moralistic; Petrarch way too egocentric. But Boccaccio would probably have been very good company, for he was a wonderful *raconteur*, a perfect guest for the late-night talk shows with David Letterman or Jay Leno.

However much Boccaccio might have preferred to see himself as a humble admirer of Dante, a simple friend and fellow scholar to Petrarch, he is more than these. Indeed, he is one of the greatest writers of the fourteenth century, not to say of the Late Middle Ages in the whole of Europe. Part of his greatness lies in his versatility as an author. His so-called minor works alone fill many volumes and are important in their own right. Boccaccio wrote innovative works in verse and prose both in Italian and in Latin. His early works in Italian include his first work of prose narrative, *Filocolo*, often referred to as the "first novel of modern Europe," and what has been called the first "modern psychological-realistic novel," *L'elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*. Boccaccio's humanistic works in Latin include the *De casibus virorum illustrium*, an account in nine books of the fates of illustrious men, and his treatise on mythology, *The Genealogy of the Pagan Gods* (*Genealogia deorum gentilium*), on which he worked for the last quarter century of his life.

And then there is the *Decameron*, one of the best known and most widely read literary works of the late Middle Ages. The presentation of the manifold variety of human nature in all its comic and tragic aspects has made this work a favorite among readers of all nations and classes and has thereby secured its place in the canon of great literature. No matter how interesting and enjoyable the subject matter may be, the success of any literary work rests ultimately on the abilities of the author to describe a scene, to create a mood, to draw a character, to present, in short, a verbal picture of what he sees in his artistic imagination and in the world around him. In this regard we note the many, special talents of Giovanni Boccaccio as a writer: his long, elegant and syntactically complex periods, his incorporation of a broad range of rhetorical and literary devices and narra-

tive styles, his harmonious presentation and mixture of sublime and common elements in theme and language, his incisive, often ribald wit and inventive capacity, and his adroit manipulation of sources. Indeed, in the *Decameron* we witness the creation virtually *ex nihilo* of the Italian prose tradition — vibrant, flexible, full of vitality, meaning and nuance, in short, a truly wonderful accomplishment of the late medieval world.

And so Boccaccio's importance spans many areas: as an innovator and stylist, as a writer in the vernacular, and as a Latin humanist. The symposium was intended to assess Boccaccio's many contributions to medieval and early Renaissance literature, his relationship with other writers and other representational modes, as well as his importance to and impact on the history and culture of fourteenth-century Italy.

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¹ A special exhibit of Boccaccio's works was on display in the Department of Special Collections in Memorial Library. I would like to thank Robin Rider, Curator of Rare Books, and her staff in Special Collections for their invaluable assistance in the realization of this exhibit.

² I would like to acknowledge the Anonymous Fund and the Department of French and Italian of the University of Wisconsin-Madison for their generous financial support of this symposium. Thanks also go to Associate Dean Magdalena Hauner for her encouragement, to Mary Noles for her tireless efforts toward the realization of this event, and to my many colleagues and students in the Department for their participation in the symposium. A particular debt of gratitude goes to Ernesto Livorni, and Patrick Rumble and Michael Papio (U. of Massachusetts Amherst) for presiding over the various sessions.

³ The papers presented in each session were, respectively: 1. Pier Massimo Forni (The Johns Hopkins University), "Boccaccio e il vivere civile"; Marilyn Migiel (Cornell University), "New Lessons in Criticism and Blame from the *Decameron*"; 2. C. Jean Campbell (Emory University), "Mythmaking and the Origins of Urban Nobility"; Piotr Salwa (University of Warsaw), "La novella post-boccacciana e la propaganda politica"; Eleonora M. Beck (Lewis and Clark College), "Boccaccio and Music: Musical Criticism in the *Decameron*"; 3. Simone Marchesi (Princeton University), "Boccaccio's Vernacular Classicism: Intertextuality and Interdiscursivity in the *Decameron*"; Christopher Livanos (University of Wisconsin-Madison), "Greek Settings in the *Decameron* and Greek-Italian Intellectual Interactions in the Age of Boccaccio"; 4. Suzanne Hagedorn (College of William and Mary), "Boccaccio and the Classics: *De Claris Mulieribus*"; F. Regina Psaki (University of Oregon), "Boccaccio's *Corbaccio*: An Inside Joke on Petrarch."