

Boccaccio's *Corbaccio* as a Secret Admirer

From my first reading of the *Corbaccio*, I have thought it was an inside joke. This visceral reaction has inflected my reading both of the treatise and of the scholarly writing dedicated to it. Ideally, of course, the lines of influence should run dynamically in both directions: my opinion of the *Corbaccio* should be formed and informed by a careful reading of scholarship on the “umile trattato”¹; my reading of the scholarship should be checked against my ongoing reading of the treatise. Instead, my immediate reaction left no room for that ideal equilibrium. My overwhelming impression was and remains not only that the *Corbaccio* is intended to be irresistibly funny, but also that it is a joke not on women, but rather on misogyny, and on the nexus of pseudo-intellectualism and masculine privilege that orients misogynous discourse in Boccaccio's time and in the centuries preceding. More than targeting women, the treatise mocks the traps of carnal desire; the self-deception that disguises lust as love; and the seductive but destructive lure of self-righteous superiority, a lure particularly destructive for an intellectual. So my opening statement acknowledges a hard epistemological fact that underpins (and may, for some, undermine) what follows: I have a longstanding and pre-analytical predisposition to take the *Corbaccio* as — to resort to its own register — a mighty, a monumental, piss-take.

I have had excellent company, with Jean-Pierre Barricelli, Anthony Cassell, Per Nykrog, and Robert Hollander, to name just the first few critics to offer such a reading in print. Hollander's title *Boccaccio's Last Fiction* resonates puckishly with Cassell and Victoria Kirkham's *Boccaccio's First Fiction*, suggesting a critical project of both bookending Boccaccio's fictional production, and overturning a certain straight-faced reading of the *Corbaccio* that Hollander once shared but has since revised:

¹ Ed. Giorgio Padoan in *Tutte le opere* (1994), §3. Henceforth, references to the *Corbaccio* will be given parenthetically in the text. I quote the translation of Anthony K. Cassell, giving page numbers parenthetically in the notes: “humble treatise” (1).

...my own response to the *Corbaccio*...was essentially, even pugnaciously, “orthodox.” [...] When...I told my colleague Victoria Kirkham, perhaps the most adroit of the moralizing readers of Boccaccio’s fictions, of this change in my view of Boccaccio’s last *fabula*, she seemed disconcerted. I was letting the side down, as it were. (23)

Anthony Cassell, too, moved from reading the *Corbaccio* in 1975 as a failed moral treatise, to reading it in 1993 as a successful parody of misogynous discourse. Barricelli and Nykrog had no such revisions to make, having argued for a parodic *Corbaccio* in precise and persuasive detail.

While the company is excellent, the view of the *Corbaccio* as parodic remains rather a minority report.² In Appendix 3 of *Boccaccio’s Last Fiction*, Hollander has provided a partial breakdown (current through 1988) of “some critical views concerning various problems in the *Corbaccio*” (76–77). He describes the trajectory of critical positions on the text, which was read unproblematically as autobiographical and unironic until 1947; then, as not autobiographical, but still unironic until 1975 (76). With the publication of Barricelli’s article “Satire of Satire” in 1975, Hollander says, a third stage of Boccaccio criticism opens, one in which the narratorial, structural, and intertextual specificities of the text’s articulation will be the focus of more nuanced readings than those which focused generally on its manifest content and Boccaccio’s sources for it. Both kinds of work on the *Corbaccio* continue unabated, as the parody hypothesis has not won universal acceptance by scholars; indeed, it could hardly be expected to, universal acceptance by scholars being a flat oxymoron. For that matter, an updated summary of scholarly positions on the text — especially whether it is to be read at face value as another straightforward entry in the genre of misogynous diatribe, or whether its satire targets male misogynists — will need to address whether it is even about women and their defects at all.³

For me, too, the reading of the *Corbaccio* as parodic, while necessary, is not sufficient. Eugenio Giusti notes shrewdly that differentiating narra-

² Although Hollander’s book has been reviewed favorably (for example, by Michael Sherberg and Paola Vecchi Galli), reservations about its hypothesis of exuberant parody (see for example the review article by Pier Massimo Forni).

³ Marco Veglia for example finds it surprising that “si è continuata a studiare l’invettiva misogina...per dimostrare che la vedova è il tema del libro” (30). Michaela Paasche Grudin has presented the *Corbaccio* as a political allegory on Florentine liberty, with the widow representing the papal curia (134). Paola Carù, by contrast, still maintains that the text “has its deep focus in the Woman herself: she is the inspiration of action and the occasion for the text, her presence permeates the text, and gives it a reason for being” (39).

tor from author to ironic purpose enables Boccaccio to criticize “i luoghi comuni del tempo: dalla dinamica dell’amour courtois alla trattatistica misogina, dalla poesia onirica come rivelatrice di verità trascendentali ai paradigmi della retorica scolastica” (51). In this essay I review some of the reasons for reading the *Corbaccio* as satire, and look at what the major targets of that satire might be. I suggest that the *Corbaccio* is also an engagement with a certain Petrarchan itinerary represented in (among others) a text that Boccaccio probably never read, the *Secretum*. I survey some of the parallels between the *Corbaccio* and the *Secretum*, and explore how they function in unironic readings of the *Corbaccio*. In the second half of the essay, I explore the spectacular divergences between the two itineraries, and speculate on how and why Boccaccio chose to deploy them. As a coda I turn briefly to the question of how a parody can be invisible even to its intended audience, and whether that outcome makes of it a “failed” text.

In favor of the Corbaccio as satire

The major readings for reading the “piccola...operetta” (§412) as a self-subverting satire require a quick review.⁴ First, the “straight” reading rests more often than not on an understanding that the text’s misogyny represents the author’s deeply felt beliefs provoked by a personal crisis stemming from a humiliating experience with a woman. By contrast, Cassell and Hollander both emphasize that a medieval “I” is more likely to represent almost anyone sooner than the author himself, particularly in the case of Boccaccio: “The one rule I suggest we can apply with confidence to *all* Boccaccio’s fiction is the following: Boccaccio never speaks openly *in propria persona*” (Hollander 1988, 25). The Boccaccian narrator is never coextensive with the author: he is always a persona, whether differentiated only minimally from the historical author, or set up as a target of ridicule or condemnation on one basis or another (Hollander 1988, 24–26; Cassell 1993, xii–xiii).⁵

Second, the blending of the conventions and expectations associated with two well-defined and authoritative literary types — the misogynous diatribe and the dream vision — destabilizes the seriousness of both forms in the *Corbaccio*: “the genres play off each other in a parodic clash” (Cassell 1993, xii). Thus for example the guide figure, with a long line of lofty

⁴ I articulate these arguments in detail in Psaki 1993, 1997, and 2003.

⁵ In addition to this general principle, Nykrog (436–38) lists reasons not to embrace a biographical reading in this specific case.

antecedents in the *Tesoretto*, the *Roman de la Rose*, and the *Consolation of Philosophy*, turns out to be no one like Natura or Reason or Philosophy, but the “embittered, defeated husband — a figure which is traditionally ridiculous by essence” (Nykrog, 440). By so strongly setting up the opening to invoke the *Divine Comedy*, the most prominent of the *Corbaccio*’s intertexts, Boccaccio generates an expectation of a guide who will resemble Virgil to some degree; thus he makes the “triste relitto di marito schiavo e meccanico affarista” (Illiano, 8) who shows up look even less credible in the shade of that towering figure.⁶ “A parody of Dante’s otherworldly guides, the hysterical cuckold has all the authority of a stand-up comic” (Cassell 1993, xvi). The many invocations of the opening of *Inferno* in particular, but also of other Dantean loci,⁷ twist the *piccola operetta*’s pretensions to high seriousness, and, as Hollander points out, also poke sly fun at those of the *Comedy*:

The *Commedia*’s claims for direct experience of God’s heaven...are called into question. Boccaccio...tends to be playful, acknowledging the force of Dante’s claims but also making clear his own dubiety about them. He knows, he contrives to let us perceive, that Dante’s vision, too, is a *favola*. [...] The Boccaccian “climber” falls flat on his face, but even as he falls, he pulls the great vision back with him toward earth. (1988, 40–41)

In a similar way, as I shall discuss later, the *Corbaccio* can both pay homage to and destabilize the claims of a text like Petrarch’s *Secretum*, and foreground the latter’s subdued reservations about the dream-vision genre.

Thirdly, as Cassell pointed out in 1975 (4) and Eugenio Giusti has also emphasized (54), the appetite for righteous indignation and wrathful revenge that the Spirit urges upon the Narrator is wholly inconsistent with any Christian ideal of humility, *caritas*, forgiveness, patience, or forbearance.⁸ For that matter, it is inconsistent with any rational Christian idea of the mechanics of salvation:

...voglio della offesa fattati da lei tu prenda vendetta: la quale ad una ora a te e a lei sarà saluifera. [...] E perciò questa ingannatrice, come a glori-

⁶ Although the *Divine Comedy* claims to be no dream vision, early on it was often described as one (Psaki 1993, 46–47).

⁷ See especially Guyda Armstrong (2001, 2006). See also Padoan’s notes to his edition; Barricelli (106–07); and Hollander, Appendix 1, “Texts in the *Corbaccio* Reflecting Passages in Dante” (59–71).

⁸ Certainly it contradicts the sensible consolation of the opening, “sent by God” (see Hollander 1988, 21–23, and 1998, 392, n. 31).

ficarla eri disposto, così ad avvirla e a parvificarla ti disponi... (§383, 385)⁹

Moreover, the Spirit wholly convinces the Narrator, who promises,

ora io non so, se animo non si muta, la nostra città avrà un buon tempo poco che cantare altro che delle sue miserie o cattività; senza che, io m'ingegnerò con più perpetuo verso testimonianza delle sue malvagie e disoneste opere lasciare a' futuri. (§391)¹⁰

Indeed, in a truly telltale passage the Christian virtues mentioned above are recast as defects: the Spirit informs us that he suffers burning punishment in purgatory in part for avarice, in part for his inappropriate patience with his wife (“la sconvenevole pazienza colla quale io comportai le scelerate e disoneste maniere di colei della qual tu vorresti d’aver veduta essere digiuno,” § 64).¹¹ The Spirit’s claim that meekness or forbearance can require purgation, his adjuration to hate the widow (§ 382–83), and his injunction to vengeance (which belongs to God), “all contrast and conflict with the tenets of Christianity, forgiveness, charity, and the prohibition of revenge” (Cassell 1993, xiii). Barricelli notes that “even God, at the very end, is cast in an unchristian, unmerciful mold,” the most revealing disproportion of all (108). While Giorgio Padoan notes the discrepancy, he considers it accidental, attributing it to the heightened emotional intensity that underlies the treatise.¹²

A final prompt to a satirical reading is that the illusion of multiple voices — dreamer, Spirit, Narrator, friends, God — is deliberately subverted to foreground the single, and quite partial, perspective that is pri-

⁹ “I wish you to avenge the offense she has done to you, for it is something which will bring salvation to both of you at the same time. [...] For this reason, prepare to belittle and vilify this deceiving woman just as you were ready to exalt her” (72–73).

¹⁰ Square brackets indicate my adaptation of Cassell’s translation: [Now I do not know, if my intention does not change, but that our city will for quite some time have little else to celebrate but her vices and sufferings]; [not to mention that I will strive] to leave to posterity witness of her wicked and indecent acts in more lasting verse” (73).

I disagree with Cassell’s translation [Without a change of heart, our city for a good long time will have little to sing about except its miseries and its slavery], which seems to misrepresent the referent of *sue* as “the city” rather than “the widow.” Grudin relies on this version to build her argument that the narrator at least once tips his hand that he is targeting a general, social, rather than individual, evil (131).

¹¹ “...the unseemly patience with which I bore the wicked and shameless ways of her upon whom you wish you had never set eyes” (11–12). If patience with outrageous provocation is punishable, then Griselda will meet the Spirit in the same purgatory.

¹² “il Boccaccio pare qui scordarsi del *Padre nostro* (rimetti i nostri debiti, come noi li rimettiamo ai nostri debitori)” (*Corbaccio*, p. 597, note to §383).

viledged in the treatise. The reader is offered frequent reminders that the real source of the misogynous discourse is not divine wisdom (God or the Bible), inside information (the Spirit), or outside consolation (the solicitous friends of the opening). The detailed and hyperbolic vituperation derives solely from the Narrator whose bitterness and bile plaster his text with signs that shriek “caveat lector.” The “moral lesson” of the *Corbaccio* purports to originate in divine omniscience, whose authority is seconded and glossed by the experience of the unfortunate husband. However, Boccaccio unveils that lesson as deriving from the single-minded perspective that dictates the redirection of the Narrator’s admiration from womankind and the widow to mankind and himself (Psaki 1993, 52–54; 1997, 132–33).

The bright red flags Boccaccio planted in his text can lead to, or at least be explained by, the hypothesis that the *Corbaccio* is a joke. But one question eludes, or rather overflows, this explanatory model: why did he bother? Why would the author trouble to elaborate, at such length and with such careful preparation, a view with which he profoundly disagrees? Hollander posits that Boccaccio, disgusted with boneheaded misreadings and inapposite criticisms of the *Decameron*, was giving his critics “the bird” in the form of a “*Remedium* they could understand — or thought they could” (1988, 43). The hypothesis that the text is created to take issue with the misogynous tradition, to undercut it by pillorying its inconsistencies, is attractive in featuring a Boccaccio too deft to write a stolid “defense” of women, of a “*contrasto*” in the explicit style of Pucci’s later poem. But regardless of its purport, on its surface the *Corbaccio* articulates a strong position on the worth of women, a stance which as Marilyn Migiel notes the hypothesis of parody will not negate, undo, or even properly account for.¹³ And in any case, the problem remains: is the goal of creating a self-subverting artifact, and an artifact that will also subvert its “serious” models, sufficient justification for the *Corbaccio*’s length, detail, careful construction, and elaborate assembly of set pieces from the misogynous corpus?

About the care of that construction there really is no doubt at all. Evidence from the 1350 *Zibaldone Laurenziano* points to the careful preparation — the reading of literally years — of compiling passages, examples, witticisms, phrasing, from the fountainheads of the misogynous repertoire. These include Theophrastus’ *Liber Aureolus* (from St. Jerome’s *De nuptiis*) and Walter Map’s *Valerius Rufino ne ducat uxorem* (Cassell, xi).

¹³ “Misogyny isn’t easily erased by the ironic reversal of the surface meaning of an utterance” (14).

The *Corbaccio's* editors track his literary debts (to Matheolus, Jean de Meun, and the *fabliaux*, as well as to Andreas Cappellanus and the *De Vetula*) in careful detail. In her *Medioevo francese nel Corbaccio*, Simonetta Mazzoni Peruzzi adds a minute and extensive analysis of Boccaccio's borrowings from French sources such as the *Roman des sept sages*, the *Roman de Renart*, and *La Veuve*, revealing for French culture "un ruolo primario, anzi potremmo dire preponderante" in the *Corbaccio* (229). Both Hollander and Illiano emphasize the intricate organization of the treatise, which was — rather oddly — long treated as though it were an "unpartitioned autobiographical outburst against the female sex" (Hollander 1988, 2). Illiano refers to "l'ineccepibile unità-unitarietà dell'ispirazione, la ponderata saldezza dell'impostazione, e la calibrata coerenza-compattezza della costruzione espositiva e narrativa" (*Premessa*). In other words, there is no doubting the *impegno* of the painstaking compilation and intricate assiduity of the work's construction. But once fully recognized, the minute "micromosaico" (Mazzoni Peruzzi, 181) can suggest two quite opposed readings: on the one hand, that the *Corbaccio* shows a calculating, passionless, and fully critical distance on its surface content; on the other, that it bespeaks a deeply invested, no-holds-barred commitment to it. What then is this methodical but hyperbolic mosaic in aid of?

It's safe to say that most Boccaccisti have linked the methodical order to an end which is redemptive, whether spiritually or intellectually (or both). As Francesco Bruni puts it, "anche il *Corbaccio* presenta il movimento peccato-espiazione" (48). Giusti perceives in the treatise a "fine didattico-utilitaristico" (60, n. 7), while Veglia sees its purpose as to model a conversion away from erotic love and the literary culture which underwrites it. In Illiano's terms, "questa geniale vocazione realistica e umoristica al denudamento dell'umile umanità dell'eros attempato" (21) is indeed a self-accusation, but not a parodic one:

Non si possono eliminare le responsabilità dell'intellettuale attribuendo ogni colpa al comodo idolo polemico delle diaboliche tentazioni femminili: occorre invece vagliare decisamente gli errori di parte maschile. (40)

Boccaccio would be aiming to expose the lover's seriously disordered state, while simultaneously demonstrating the "ascendenza della spiritualità petrarchesca" (Illiano, 80) as the true center of positive value in the work. The invocation of the Petrarchan itinerary arises from a reading of the *Corbaccio* as a work aiming at the reclamation of both protagonist and reader — a reading very nearly opposite to my own. Nevertheless, the nudge toward Petrarch is helpful in detaching our gaze from the most visible, even obtrusive, *auctor* in the *Corbaccio*: Dante Alighieri.

The shadow of Petrarch in the Corbaccio

Individual critics read differently the fact that the *Corbaccio* is steeped in Dante, and particularly in the *Inferno*; as Hollander puts it,

Perhaps nothing is as important about the frequent presence of Dante in the *Corbaccio* as the fact itself. [...] A work that is so deeply involved in the intricacies of another is more than merely unlikely to have been written by a jilted old man, bent on revenge. (1988, 41–42)

The prominence of Dante in the *Corbaccio* is part of what has long kept the figure of Petrarch off my radar. Moreover, surface contrasts between the *Corbaccio* and the *Secretum* kept the two texts far apart in my mind for a long time, and only when I taught them in close proximity did their similarities leap into prominence instead. The dramatic differences between the two — of tone and structure, most notably, but also of the guide-figure — suddenly became less visible than their similarities of theme and articulation.

In both works a narrator undergoes an emotionally fraught and imperfect conversion, urged and instructed by a guide in the form of an otherworld visitor, to disentangle himself from a tenacious, painful, and ultimately destructive amorous obsession. In both, the guide figure administers equally painful and unpleasant medicine in the form of a doctrine described as salutary, larded with quotations and allusions, chastising the protagonist for a long list of shortcomings causally connected to his predicament. Once the general parallels came into focus, specific rhetorical, lexical, and conceptual echoes begin to emerge as well. I do not suggest that the composition of the *Corbaccio* reflects even a familiarity with the *Secretum* as we now have it, let alone an ongoing consultation of it. Instead, I believe that the two authors conversed about these themes and topics, while both were writing on them. As Marco Veglia describes the relationship, “un dato si impone ora sicuro: i due amici meditavano negli stessi anni sui medesimi problemi e, non di rado, sceglievano per esprimersi eguali parole” (40). The hypothesis that the two authors were concurrently exploring analogous issues allows for a kind of influence that is less unidirectional than open borrowing or programmatic adaptation, and for this reason I identify the *Corbaccio* as a *secret* admirer of the *Secretum*.

Yet perhaps “secret” understates the relationship between the two texts. Many more conceptual and verbal parallels knit them together than I can adequately canvass here, and they do argue an ongoing and open interaction to some degree. Regardless of whether or not the *Corbaccio* emerges, as I suspect it does, in the course of a rich, lively, long-term ex-

change with Petrarch, the fact remains that both Boccaccio and Petrarch are engaging in a well-known discourse, or rather in an intellectual and critical debate with a discourse, through these two texts. Their interaction generates both contrasts and echoes. Some of the most distinct echoes or parallels occur in the third book of the *Secretum*, which contains the greatest overlap with the thematic profile of the *Corbaccio*. Six of these parallels stand out: the guide's reproof to the narrator for mistaking love for the highest good; the narrator's failure to use his erudition to avoid that trap; the shame of being a lover at a mature age; the degradation of being pointed out as an object of ridicule; the narrator's delusional claim that the woman's virtue, not her beauty, captivated him; and the hideous nature of the object of desire, which only the distracting state of sexual excitement conceals from the lover. I shall look at each of these six motifs in turn, with an eye to evaluating how the two works can illuminate each other and may have helped to shape each other.

Both Augustinus and the *Corbaccio*'s nameless Spirit-guide repeated thematize the mistaking of earthly love for the highest good, an error in which Franciscus at least persists to the point of provoking a quarrel. Augustinus posits that the love of temporal things distances and even deadens the heart to God more thoroughly than any other mechanism, and of those temporal things erotic love, which actually makes him "eius amore miseriumum,"¹⁴ is the principal one:

Augustinus: Ut cernas apertius, animum intende. Nichil est quod eque oblivionem Dei contemptum ve pariat atque amor rerum temporalium; iste precipue, quem proprio quodam nomine Amorem, et (quod sacrilegium omne transcendit) Deum etiam vocant, ut scilicet humanis furoribus excusatio celestis accedat fiatque divino instinctu scelus immane licentius.¹⁵ (154)

While the content here may seem too diffuse or anodyne to indicate any specific filiation, the lexical and conceptual parallels to the *Secretum* cluster in such a way that the latter "compa[re] in filigrana nell'operetta,"

¹⁴ I cite the edition of the *Secretum* by Enrico Carrara in *Prose del Petrarca* (154) and the English translation by Carol Quillen ("miserable" because of his "love for her," 115). References to the *Secretum* will occur parenthetically in the text, and references to the translation occur parenthetically in the notes.

¹⁵ "Augustinus: So that you can understand more fully, listen to me. There is nothing that so produces indifference and contempt for God as love of temporal things. And especially this thing that people call by the name 'Love' or even (the greatest sacrilege) call God, so that heavenly sanction assents to human madness, and a great crime becomes somehow permitted because it is imagined to be divinely inspired" (115–16).

to borrow a phrase from Mazzoni Peruzzi (13). The misapprehension of the lowest for the highest; the qualifier *miserrimum*; the dismissal of the allocation “Love” and of the implication that it has something divine in it; the urging to pay attention, for a more “open” comprehension; all are reprised in some detail in the Spirit-guide’s speech in the *Corbaccio*:

“...tu quella cosa, la quale è *infima miseria*, come molti stolti fanno, *estimi somma felicità*, credendo che nel vostro concupiscibile e carnale amore sia alcuna parte di *bene*; e per ciò *apri le orecchie a quello che io ora ti dirò*.”¹⁶ (§76)

The *Corbaccio* guide later returns to the improper attribution of divinity to love:

“E una gente di voi *miseri* mortali, tra i quali tu medesimo, avendo il conoscimento gittato via, il chiamate *iddio*, e quasi a *sommo aiutatore* ne’ bisogni li fate *sacrificio* delle vostre menti e divotissime *orazioni* li porgete!”¹⁷ (§130)

The “miserable mortals” entangled in carnal love not only assign to this emotion an external power and independent identity, but render unto it what is due to God: prayer and sacrifice.

This wisdom, whether anodyne or context-specific, is said to absolutely litter the learned writings that both narrators have consulted, in vain, for years on end. The narrator’s failure, despite long years of study, to dissuade or enlighten or even effectively frighten himself away from the false good that is love, is a melancholy refrain in both *Secretum* and *Corbaccio*. The futility of study which does not lead to true understanding and changed behavior is the object of many a reproach in both texts:

Franciscus: Memini semper, ex quo primum legi. Memoratu enim digna res est sanumque consilium.

Augustinus: Quid vel legisse vel meminisse profuit? Excusabilius erat ignorantie clipeum posse pretendere.¹⁸ (184)

¹⁶ “...you consider that which is sordid misery to be supreme happiness, believing that there can be some good in your concupiscent and carnal love” (14). Marco Veglia has juxtaposed these two passages (40) in connection with his claim, quoted above, that in the same years the two friends were canvassing the same concerns, often in the same words.

¹⁷ “And a host of you wretched mortals, among them you yourself, throwing away your judgment, call it a ‘god’ and, in need, make devout prayers to it and sacrifice your minds to it as if to the Highest Helper!” (24)

¹⁸ “Franciscus: I have always remembered that, ever since I first read it. The saying is worth committing to memory, and its counsel is sound.

The *Corbaccio* guide expounds systematically what it is that the Narrator has failed to learn from his studies:

[La poesia], non menoma tra l'altre scienze, ti dovea parimente mostrare che è amore e che cosa le femine sono, e chi tu medesimo sii, e che a te s'appartiene.¹⁹ (§127)

Indeed, both texts repeatedly emphasize that love itself is “inconsistent ... with your profession” (133; “*professio tua discordet a moribus*,” 186) for reasons of simple decorum as well as of the disillusion that should result from long study.

Franciscus, despite all his reading, cannot understand why Cicero called love the most violent of the passions:

Augustinus: ...non frustra Cicero noster dixisse videatur quod “omnibus ex animi passionibus profecto nulla est amore vehementior.” [...] Franciscus: Notavi sepius illum locum, et miratus sum quod ita vehementissimam hanc ex omnibus passionem dixerit. Augustinus: Minime mirareris, nisi quia animum invasit oblivio. Ceterum brevi admonitione in multorum malorum memoriam revocandus est.²⁰ (154/156)

Similarly the *Corbaccio* Narrator must be reminded of everything that ancient texts and modern events have told him about the devastation wrought by love:

“Vien teco medesimo rivolgendo l'antiche istorie e le cose moderne e guarda di quanti mali, di quanti incendii, di quante morti, di quanti di-

Augustinus: But what have you gained from having read it and remembered it? Better you should claim the shield of ignorance.” (132)

¹⁹ “[Poetry], not the least among the disciplines, [should] also have shown you what love is, what women are, and who you are yourself and what your duties are” (23). I correct Cassell’s “must” to “should,” parallel to his translations of *doveavanti* (24, 35) in related constructions (“Dovevanti, oltre a questo, li tuoi studii mostrare (e mostrarono, se tu l'avessi voluto vedere) che cose le femine sono,” §132) [“Moreover, your studies should have shown you (and did show you, had you wished to see it) what women are,” 24].

²⁰ “Augustinus: Thus it seems that our Cicero did not speak unreasonably when he said, ‘Out of all the passions certainly none is stronger than love.’ [...] Franciscus: I have often noted that passage, and I have been amazed that he called love the strongest of the passions. Augustinus: You should hardly be amazed, unless forgetfulness has taken over your soul. Nonetheless, you must be made to remember with a brief description of love’s many evils” (116).

sfacimenti, di quante ruine et estermministrazioni questa dannevole passione è stata cagione!”²¹ (§129)

The state of heightened erotic and emotional excitement derails the reading and reflection that should equip a scholar to evade or dominate love. Erudition, the guides emphasize, can reach the mind without being taken to heart.

The wisdom that the narrators were unable to internalize through study, they also did not gain through time: both guides wax acerbic on the unsuitability of love pursuits in persons of a certain age. The *Corbaccio* depicts the indignities of failing sexual vigor, and the inappropriateness for a mature man of surreptitious assignations, empty flattery, dancing, singing, jousting and arms, to conclude:

“Male è addunque la tua etade omai agl’innamoramenti decevole: alla quale non il seguire le passioni, o lasciarsi a loro sopravvenenti vincere, sta bene, ma il vincer quelle; e con opere virtuose, che la tua fama ampliassero, e con aperta fronte e lieta dare di sè ottimo esempio a’ più giovani s’appartiene.”²² (§124)

Augustinus too urges the more virtuous and productive activities that are appropriate to age, though to be sure he omits the spur of fame:

Cogita quam multe occupationes te undique circumstent, quibus et utilius et honestius incumberes. Cogita quam multa inter manus tuas inexplata sint opera, quibus ius suum reddere multo equius foret, nec tam iniquis portionibus hoc brevis punctum temporis partiri.²³ (186/188)

In short, rather than priding himself on his *lunga fedeltà*, Augustinus tells Franciscus, “Pudeat ergo senem amatorem dici; pudeat esse tam diu vulgi fabula...” (182),²⁴ in which we hear the echo of “favola fui gran tempo.”

²¹ “Turn over in your own mind ancient history and modern events and look how much evil, how much fire, how much death, how much destruction, how much ruin and slaughter this damnable passion has caused!” (24)

²² “Your age, therefore, is now ill-suited for love affairs. At your time of life, it is proper not to follow passions, or to permit yourself to be vanquished at their approach, but to overcome them. With virtuous works which may increase your fame, it is your duty to set an excellent example to many young men cheerfully and sincerely” (22–23).

²³ “Think how many activities now surround you to which you might more usefully and more virtuously devote yourself. Think how many incomplete tasks you have on hand, how much better it would be to give these tasks the attention they deserve rather than portioning out to them such a meager share of a mere brief moment” (133).

²⁴ “Therefore, be ashamed to be called an elderly lover. Be ashamed that for so long now you have been the talk of the town” (131).

Indeed, both works thematize throughout the painful degradation of being pointed out as an object of ridicule — by the crowd in the *Secretum*, and by the object of desire in the *Corbaccio*: “cogita, quam turpe sit digito monstrari, et in vulgi fabulam esse conversum” (186).²⁵ For the *Corbaccio* the notoriety is all the more intolerable for having been provoked by the vanity and malice of the widow herself:

“Ahi, dionesta cosa e sconvenevole, che uomo, lasciamo stare gentile, che non mi tengo, ma sempre con valenti uomini usato e cresciuto, e delle cose del mondo, avvegna che non pienamente, ma assai convenevolmente informato, sia da una femina a guisa d’un matto ora col muso ora *col dito* all’altre femine *mostrato!*”²⁶ (§114)

Word got around even more thoroughly through the offices of the widow’s lover,

“al quale essa, per più farlisi cara, ha le mie lettere *palesate* e con lui insieme a guisa d’un beccone, schernito; senza che, colui, di me facendo una *favola*, già con alcuno per lo modo che più gli è piaciuto, n’ha *parlato*.”²⁷ (§112)

The dynamic of fame and infamy works differently in the *Corbaccio* than in the *Secretum*; the former’s Spirit-guide does not try to dissuade the Narrator from seeking fame, as Augustinus tries to dissuade Franciscus. Nevertheless, both texts emphasize, and in similar phrasing, the indignity of being an object of public derision.

The self-deception that the two guides reprove in their charges is nowhere more palpable than in their implausible claims that they fell in love with the excellence, not the beauty, of the lady. Near the end of his discourse the *Corbaccio* Spirit returns to the Narrator’s claim to have been seduced by the widow’s reputed virtues:

“Io voglio presupporre che vero fosse ciò che l’amico tuo del valore di costei ti ragionò; il che se così credesti che fosse, mai non mi farai credere che in lei libidinoso amore avessi posto, sì come colui ch’avresti conosciuto quelle virtù essere contrarie a quello tuo vizioso desiderio... sì che

²⁵ “Think about...how vulgar it is to be pointed at and gossiped about” (133).

²⁶ “Ah! How shameful and improper for a man — not to say a gentleman, for such I do not consider myself, although I have grown up and have always associated with worthy men and am quite properly informed of the ways of the world, although not fully—to be pointed out by a woman to other women like a madman, first with her snout, then with her finger!” (21)

²⁷ “...she showed him my letter to make herself dearer to him, and with him mocked me as a fool. Furthermore, he too has already talked about it with others, making up a story about me just as he liked...” (20).

non quelle ad amarla ti tirarono, ma la sua forma per certo; e alcuna cosa veduta di lei ti mise in speranza del tuo disonesto volere potere recare a fine.”²⁸ (§346)

Petrarch makes Augustinus’s incredulity far less mild and stately; indeed, he virtually explodes with derisive incredulity:

Franciscus: Hanc presentem in testimonium evoco, conscientiamque meam facio contestem, me (quod iam superius dixeram) illius non magis corpus amasse quam animam. [...]

Augustinus: Me ne ludis? An si idem animus in squalido et nodoso corpore habitaret, similiter placuisset?²⁹ (148)

Franciscus’s delusional claim that what he admired was his lady’s virtue is exposed when he admits that he beleaguered her for a reciprocal love relationship (152/154; trans., 115). Both narrators are brought to acknowledge that under the guise of devoted admiration what they sought was sex, and their pretense to the contrary was not merely deception but self-deception of the grossest kind.

That there is very little overlap between the qualities the narrators attributed to their ladies, and those they were secretly aching to find, brings us to the sixth motif the *Corbaccio* shares with (and elaborates over) the *Secretum*’s trajectory. If Augustinus’s explosive derision amplifies the Spirit’s restrained incredulity, the latter’s detailed tour of repulsion and immersion in the abject is ramped up exponentially from the decorous expressions of Augustinus. The *Secretum* hints reticently at what the *Corbaccio* reveals, indeed revels in, with Rabelaisian earthiness:

Pauci enim sunt qui, ex quo semel virus illud illecebrose voluptatis imberint, feminei corporis feditatem, de qua loquor, sat viriliter, ne dicam satis constanter, examinent. Facile relabuntur animi et urgente natura in eam potissimum partem recident, in quam diutissime pependerit.³⁰ (188)

²⁸ “I wish to presuppose that what your friend told you about her worth was true. If you had believed him, you will never make me believe that you bore a lecherous love for her, because you would have known that her virtues were opposed to your depraved desire... so that not her virtues, but surely her appearance drew you to love her; and something you either heard or saw of her gave you hope of being able to fulfill your lewd desires” (65–66).

²⁹ “Franciscus: Truth is my witness and my conscience corroborates that (as I have already said before) I have not loved her body more than her soul. [...]

Augustinus: Are you kidding me? You think that the same soul in a squalid and misshapen body would have similarly pleased you?” (112)

³⁰ “For, among those who have tasted the poison of this irresistible pleasure, there are few who are able to summon either the manliness or the constancy to really consider the

The Spirit is clearly one of those few who can not only examine “in manly and determined fashion,” but retail, the hideous corporeality of the love object, which can be masked only by unfamiliarity and randiness (on the Narrator’s part) or deliberate disguise (on the widow’s):

E, se tu, come io ’l più delle mattine la vedeo, veduta l’avessi colla cappellina fondata in capo e col veluzo dintorno alla gola, così pantanosa nel viso come ora dissi, e col mantello foderato covare il fuoco, in su la calca-gna sedendosi, colle ochiaia livide tossire e sputare farfalloni, io non temo punto che tutte le sue virtù, dal tuo amico udite, avessero tanto potuto farti di lei innamorare che, quelle vedendo, cento milia cotanti non t’avessero fatto diamorare.³¹ (§285)

The Spirit’s graphic unmasking and unveiling of the widow’s repulsive frame is, within the treatise, the parallel to his revelation of her moral failings, and he justifies the unseemly language in terms of the desperate need for efficacious (if foul) medicine (§280; 301). Alongside the *Secretum*’s circumspection and restraint, however, his discourse is not curative; rather, it is a self-subverting caricature. Ultimately the *Corbaccio*’s hyperbolic romp through the foul physicality of the widow diminishes her less than it does the Spirit-guide who voices it, and the Narrator who relishes it. It’s ironic that the historical author, who took pains to plaster the discourse with warning signs, was taken as the sincere and unmediated speaker of the vituperation. The laddish community constituted by the two male characters and the readers inscribed in the *libello*’s future are also implicated, whereas the *Secretum* characters — and readers — retain their stature and gravitas intact.

This survey of major parallels between the *Secretum* as we now have it and the *Corbaccio* has highlighted the dynamic interaction between the two textual worlds, an interaction whose precise modality we cannot determine with any certainty. But however the two authors may have inte-

filthiness of the female body that I am talking about here. Souls relapse easily, and as nature urges them on, they return to habits to which they were accustomed and from which they have long suffered” (134).

³¹ “If you had seen her, as I saw her most mornings, with her nightcap pulled down over her head, with the little veil around her throat, so swamp-faced, as I have just said, sitting on her haunches in her lined mantle, brooding over the fire, with livid rings under her eyes, coughing and spitting great gobs of phlegm, I have not the least fear that all her virtues, of which your friend spoke, would have had as much power to make you fall in love with her once as seeing that would have made you fall out of love a hundred thousand times” (54).

racted in composing or revising their texts, these or similar parallels have also been invoked in non-parodic readings of the *Corbaccio*.

The Secretum in straight-faced readings of the Corbaccio

The possible relationship of the *Corbaccio* to the *Secretum* immediately stirs up a hornet's nest of disputed datings, as inconclusive as they are acrimonious, whose complexities are for the moment less urgent than a quick survey of what's at stake in that dispute's principal questions.³² For both texts, is the date of the narrative setting (the crisis) the same as the date of composition? Is the dating hypothesis driven by a reading of the text and its place in a putative itinerary for the poet's life? Do the connections between these two undated texts suggest that they are being revised in the same period, with some degree of contact between the authors? Analyses by Francisco Rico, although they embrace a moralizing reading of the *Corbaccio*, highlight parallels between the two texts that lend themselves to a parodic interpretation as well.

Rico's learned and agile article "La datación (petrarquesca) del *Corbaccio*" reviews the various dating hypotheses for both the *Corbaccio* and the *Secretum*, and the ramifications of these, based on his limpid perception that "El *Corbaccio* es el *Secretum* de Boccaccio" (308). Of course, Rico's reading does not depend on the hypothesis that Boccaccio had actually read the *Secretum*; indeed, he claims quite confidently that Boccaccio never did (309). Rather, Rico speculates that Petrarch had conveyed its content to Boccaccio indirectly, in private communications both oral and written.³³ Rico's rationale for juxtaposing the two texts causally is their

³² A helpful synthesis and evaluation of the dating controversy surrounding the *Secretum* is Craig Kallendorf's "The Historical Petrarch," in which he examines and contextualizes the work of Hans Baron (1963, 1985) on the subject; Kallendorf includes details on the scholarly conversation carried out in reviews and articles.

On dating the *Corbaccio*, see the treatments by Padoan and Hollander, who each argue strong (and strongly opposed) positions. Hollander, suggesting that Boccaccio wanted to tweak the noses of tone-deaf *Decameron* readers, assigns the work's composition to 1354–55, dismissing Padoan's hypothesis that the treatise expresses the bitterness of a disillusionment suffered late in life and should thus be dated to 1365, or 1363 at the earliest. Grudin argues a dating in mid 1370's, largely on the basis of the political turmoil she sees as the work's true topic.

³³ "...tampoco rehuiré expresar ya mi opinión de que Boccaccio no leyó nunca el *Secretum*, pero Petrarca le hizo partícipe de la sustancia del diálogo de manera indirecta, en conversaciones y amonestaciones privadas, de palabra y por escrito, y por ventura sin mencionar siquiera el libro como tal" (309).

declared turn away from youthful concerns to more weighty and worthy ones:

Uno y otro libro pone en juego datos, diseños y fines idénticos o palmariamente similares, con un mismo argumento último: a los cuarenta años ha llegado el momento de decir adiós a los amoríos y cambiar las puerilidades por una actividad espiritualmente más sólida, digna de una fama más legítima. (308)

Rico concludes that 1352–54 would be the logical date of a Boccaccian intellectual and spiritual crisis analogous to that posited in the *Secretum*: the moment at which a man crosses over into maturity, setting aside both sexual passion and the lust for fame and glory as his motivation and his matter, and taking up serious and edifying undertakings worthy of his efforts, that may lead to true spiritual and intellectual benefit for author and reader alike. However, Rico argues forcefully that there is no reason at all to assume that the date of the treatise's setting is identical to that of its composition:

... no me parece imprudente conjeturar que fue también en torno a su quincuagésimo aniversario cuando Boccaccio, inducido por el paradigma petarquesco, ideó y consumó la composición de un libro, el *Corbaccio*, que ofreciera asimismo una explicación de su itinerario intelectual y humano, cifrándolo en la circunstancia (más o menos ficticia, pero en cualquier caso rehecha con fantasía de narrador) en que sintió su "animo permutato" y emprendió nuevos caminos en la vida y en la obra. (314–15)

Thus, Rico offers the early 1360's as a dating for the *Corbaccio*'s composition, predicated on a reading of the treatise as unironic, and acknowledging how intertwined are that dating and his reading: "la mera datación constituye también el significado del *Corbaccio*" (319).

While Rico differentiates between the date of the narrative action and the date of composition, however, he does not differentiate at all between the narrator and the author (301 ff.). On the contrary, he says, "el *Corbaccio* recrea un episodio presentado como decisivo en el itinerario espiritual del protagonista y escritor" (302–03), where "protagonist and writer" refer to one conflated figure. Similarly, Marco Veglia's understanding that Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio share a "revisione amara e sofferta della loro esperienza cavalcantiana" (41) is predicated on an identification of author and narrator as one and the same. And if we accept that postulate as a given, this unironic reading of the relationship between the two texts is, if not unassailable, at least admirably sturdy. But if we ask instead whether the Boccaccian narrator is perfectly coextensive with the author, or partially overlaps with the author, or is minimally representative of the author, then any reading based on the assumption that the *Corbaccio*

represents, transparently, the author's heartfelt spiritual crisis and earnest conversion on the model putatively established in the *Secretum*, will wobble and ultimately collapse.

I am not trying to use the two texts to establish dating, or for that matter to use dating to interpret the texts. For me the parallels between them are of interest for interpretation on rhetorical, not biographical grounds. It is as plausible that the *Corbaccio* was set in 1354 but composed in 1365, as it is that it was set and composed in 1354 but revised in the mid-1360's, when contact between Boccaccio and Petrarch was most consistent and productive. To me the two texts suggest a virtual recording session made in separate soundproofed studios, with some contact and influence taking place during the breaks. But the parallels between the two, at the macro- and micro-levels, work to foreground and to problematize the differences, which remain clamorous; the consonances between them turn up the volume on their dissonances. As we shall see, the *Secretum* and the *Corbaccio* stage the same scenario, one as muted and inconclusive tragedy, the other as broad farce.

The Corbaccio: missing the point

We thus return to the question of whether the *Corbaccio* is an irony-free zone, the setting and the record of a serious crisis and conversion. If it is, it seems to have missed most of the points of the *Secretum*. In the *Secretum* for example the guide Augustinus is a lofty, venerable, ancient figure of towering intellectual accomplishment and influence, and no immediate relation to the love object of Franciscus. In the *Corbaccio*, as we have seen, we have that familiar (and familiarly contemptible) figure of a betrayed husband, a merchant and contemporary, not up to even the lovesick Narrator's intellectual credibility, let alone that of Augustinus.³⁴ He is, moreover, all too intimate with the manifold vices and horrors of the deceptive and decrepit widow. If the *Corbaccio* was meant to be a serious instructive treatise — either about the dangers of women, or the need to turn one's attention away from juvenile loves and letters — then Boccaccio with his Spirit-guide missed a golden opportunity to give it *gravitas*.

³⁴ Augustinus is certainly not to be conflated unproblematically with the historical Augustine; as David Marsh notes, "it is clear that Franciscus and Augustinus represent the author's own contrasting viewpoints, rather than the historical Petrarch and Augustine" (212). Nonetheless, Augustinus clearly imports the intellectual and doctrinal credibility of Augustine.

There are as well many other impulses fundamental to the *Secretum's* ethical architecture that Boccaccio either did not pick up on, or chose to jettison. The *Secretum* in Book II launches a careful attack on anger and spite, although Augustinus assures Franciscus that these are not among his particular failings:

Augustinus: [...] Iram quoque pretervehor, qua etsi sepe iusto magis exardeas, confestim tamen nature bonitate mitigabilis compescere motus animi soles, memor horatiani consilii:

*ira furor brevis est, animum rege; qui, nisi paret,
imperat; hunc vinclis, hunc tu compesce cathena.*

Franciscus: Aliquantulum michi, fateor, et poeticum hoc et plurima generis philosophorum consilia profuerunt, atque in primis evi brevis recordatio. Que enim rabies pauculos dies, quos inter homines agimus, in hominum odium perniciemque consumere? [...] Itaque quid se quid alios precipitare iuvat? Quid optimas partes brevissimi temporis amittere...³⁵ (96/98)

This virtuous and philosophical perspective on anger³⁶ is replaced in the *Corbaccio* by a careful cultivation of ira, contempt, and calculated revenge:

A volere de' falli commessi soddisfare interamente si conviene, a quello che fatto hai, operare il contrario; ma questo si vuole intendere sanamente. Ciò, che tu hai amato, ti conviene avere in odio.... Voglio che tu abbi in odio la sua bellezza, in quanto di peccare ti fu cagione, o essere ti potesse nel futuro; voglio che tu abbi in odio ogni cosa che in le' in così fatto atto dilettevole la stimassi... voglio che della offesa fattati da lei tu prenda vendetta.... come a glorificarla eri disposto, così ad avvirla e a parvificarla ti disponi.... [...] e questa soddisfazione, quanto a questo peccato, tanto ti sia assai.³⁷ (§382–83; 385, 387)

³⁵ “Augustinus: I pass over anger too. Although sometimes it does inflame you more than it should, nonetheless you are, by virtue of the goodness of your nature, usually quick to restrain your emotions, mindful of the advice of Horace: ‘Anger is a kind of fleeting madness; control your passions, for unless it obeys, it rules. Restrain this passion with fetters, bind it up with chains.’

Franciscus: I acknowledge that this saying of Horace and other similar advice given by the philosophers has helped me a little, but above all what has helped me is the recollection of how short life is. For what madness it is to pass the few precious days we have among our fellow human beings in hating and hurting them! [...] And so why contribute to one’s own or another’s ruin? Why waste the best part of a life that is all too short?” (85)

³⁶ See the interpretation of Aeolus and the mountain as an extended metaphor on the containment of anger (122/124/126; trans., 93).

³⁷ “If you want to atone fully for the errors you have committed, you must act in the opposite way to what you have done; but this must be understood correctly. What you have loved you must hate.... I wish you to hate her beauty, since it was the cause of your sin,

Likewise, the *Corbaccio* completely reverses the attack in *Secretum* II on *superbia* in all its senses, including complacency on the basis of one's eloquence, learning, and person (372–78; trans. 71–76). The Spirit-guide, on the contrary, carefully inculcates in the Narrator a sense of his own superiority — as a scholar, as a man, as a poet — and urges him to hold that thought, not to embrace humility in any meaningful way.

...per che ottimamente si comprenderà il più vile e 'l più minimo uomo del mondo, il quale del bene dello 'ntelletto privato non sia, prevalere a quella femina, in quanto femina, che temporalmente è tenuta più che niun'altra eccellente.³⁸ (§193)

For pages and pages Spirit adjures the Narrator to be proud of his masculinity, his intellect, his erudition, in a way that pointedly contradicts any advice dispensed in the *Secretum*.

Most clamorously, indeed, the second target of the third book of the *Secretum* disappears completely in the *Corbaccio*. In Book III Augustinus tries to make Franciscus renounce his two principal desires — love and fame — for the purpose of salvation, calling them his two chains:

Augustinus: Duabus adhuc adamantinis dextra leuaque premeris cathenis, que nec de morte neque de vita sinunt cogitare.

[...]

Franciscus: Quenam sunt memoras cathene?

Augustinus: Amor et gloria.

[...]

Franciscus: Quando ego talia de te merui, ut speciosissimas michi curas velles eripere, et tenebris damnare perpetuis serenissimam animi mei partem?³⁹ (130/132)

And Augustinus, we are to understand, has some success in dissuading his pupil from love, but far less in dissuading him from intellectual pursuits:

or could be in the future. I wish you to hate everything about her which you judged sensually attractive. [...] I wish you to avenge the offense she has done to you.... prepare yourself to belittle and vilify this deceiving woman just as you were ready to exalt her.... And let this expiation be sufficient as far as this sin is concerned.” (72–73)

³⁸ “...it will be quite clearly recognized that the basest or lowest man in the world, who is not deprived of the good of his intellect, is worth more than that woman who is temporarily considered more excellent than any other, inasmuch as she is a woman” (35).

³⁹ “Augustinus: You are still held down on either side by two adamantine, strong as steel chains. These do not allow you to think about life or death. [...] Franciscus: What are these chains you are describing? Augustinus: Love and glory. [...] Franciscus: What have I done to deserve such things from you, that you would seek to rip out my glorious occupations and to condemn to perpetual darkness the most serene part of my soul?” (102–03)

Franciscus: ...non ignarus, ut paulo ante dicebas, multo michi futurum esse securius studium hoc unum sectari et, deviiis pretermisissis, rectum callem salutis apprehendere. Sed desiderium frenare non valeo.⁴⁰ (214)

The *Secretum's* two targets of love and glory shrink in the *Corbaccio* to one — extricating oneself from love — not to focus, as in the *Secretum*, on the divine, but to live up to one's "true" potential as a scholar and man of letters, and to punish the sex which impedes and mocks that high calling. In other words, the purpose exposed in the *Secretum* as fallacious, vain-glorious, and ultimately empty, is precisely that which both the *Corbaccio* guide and narrator exalt.

Misprision or revision?

Given its imperfect adherences to, and indeed its strong departures from, Petrarch's narrative line, we might suppose that the *Corbaccio* has missed most of the lesson of the *Secretum*. But did Boccaccio miss these points accidentally, or on purpose? For Francesco Bruni, it is the former:

In realtà ... Boccaccio traduce le indicazioni del suo grande amico in modi che denotano una ricezione lontanissima da una reale comprensione del pensiero petrarchesco.... L'adesione aproblematica all'idea della gloria diverge dalle indicazioni del suo maestro. (50)

For Bruni, Boccaccio *thought* he was following Petrarch: "nel sostenere idee che erano molto lontane da quelle di Petrarca, egli era tuttavia sicuro di seguirne fedelmente l'insegnamento" (52). I disagree; I do not believe that Boccaccio labored under the mistaken impression of faithfully following or reproducing Petrarch's teaching. Rather, he takes a different tack to interrogate the same process — because Petrarch too is interrogating a literary process, not staging it uncritically. Boccaccio was fully aware of and fully in control of the differences in their ideas, the ethical and epistemological resonances and implications of those ideas, their articulation in these conventional forms, and their literary goals in each case. Nothing I read in Boccaccio disposes me to posit that he was imperipient, or guilty of blind spots quite so monstrously large, or inadequate to the subtlety of understanding Petrarch (or for that matter Dante). So I'm ob-

⁴⁰ "Franciscus: [...] I know, as you said a little while ago, that it would be much safer for me to pursue only the care of myself now and, bypassing the detours, to seize the right path of salvation. But I cannot restrain my desire for the world." (148) Quillen identifies the object of the desire as "the world," and Carozza and Shey as "study." It seems surest to translate literally, as J.D. Nichols does ("But I cannot restrain my desires," 93) and leave the object to desire to the reader's interpretation.

liged to come back to the question: when, within the context of palpable parallels, the *Corbaccio's* ideals and procedures diverge so sharply from those of the *Secretum*, what was Boccaccio doing, and why?

On the one hand, as should be obvious, he was setting up his reader to take some critical distance on the *Corbaccio* and its claims. The *Secretum's* solemnity, orthodoxy, decorum, make the *Corbaccio's* indecorous, unorthodox, rowdy rant sound perilously (and comically) hollow. On the other hand, I recalled above that the systematic presence of Dante in the *Corbaccio* allows for a kind of bidirectional critique. For Cassell, Boccaccio “parodically unmasks the fictiveness and falseness of the authoritarian voice brought to sublime transcendence by his famous poet predecessor” (xvii).⁴¹ The Petrarchan intertext, I believe, works in much the same way. On the one hand the *Secretum*, once an intimate book and now so public, helps readers past and present to see the holes in the *Corbaccio's* rational fabric: the blame projected onto the female sex rather than onto one's own complicity in amorous suffering; the pursuit of self-satisfaction and self-aggrandizement rather than humility; the embrace of rage and revenge rather than charity; the exaltation of intellectual pursuits and the recognition they bring, rather than renunciation of such pursuits (as of all earthly goods) as ends in themselves. The *Secretum's* minute and methodical moral inventory, conducted through the phantasm of a magisterial intellectual and saint, helps readers to see and dismiss the partial, mingy, self-serving, and blind caricature of the same in the *Corbaccio*, prettied up though it may be by rhetorical complexity, lofty genre expectations, and the weight of erudition.

But that isn't all it does. The trajectory of the *Secretum* is also there to be interrogated itself: if not the text we now have, at least the nexus of ideals and values that it epitomizes in Petrarch's intellectual itinerary. We cannot identify that nexus unequivocally, particularly given that the text may have undergone drastic revision and that we cannot establish with any certainty how public a document it was intended to be. But we can state with slightly greater certainty that in the *Secretum*, Petrarch portrayed an attempt at self-analysis, self-confession, and self-conversion that did not succeed. The alter-ego figure named Franciscus does not manage to master himself, to reassign his desires and his undertakings as Augustinus has directed him; he cannot revise his heart on the basis of his erudition and his faith.

⁴¹ See also Psaki 1993, 44 and 52.

In this limited respect at least I think that the *Corbaccio* shares the *Secretum*'s goal: both texts represent a conversion attempt that fails. The *umile trattato* is operating a similar critique — not only insofar as the reader is invited to interrogate the *Corbaccio*'s premises and conclusions in light of a Petrarchan itinerary articulated (among other places) in the *Secretum*: “il movimento peccato-espiazione” (Bruni 48), “la revisione amara e sofferta della ... esperienza ‘cavalcantiana’” (Veglia 40). Veglia thinks that the *Corbaccio*'s target is “il carattere letterario della ‘malattia’ del protagonista” (30); the entire treatise tends, for him, “alla dimostrazione e al chiarimento di un particolare pensiero: nella fattispecie, il rischio di imbestiamento e morte spirituale per le seduzioni di un amore malamente concepito per suggestioni letterarie” (30). I think the *Corbaccio* is instead unveiling the pitfalls, less of the initial self-delusion through literary models, than of the inevitably solipsistic attempt at self-examination and self-chastisement conducted through literary models. I agree with Eugenio Giusti that, along with misogyny, the pretensions of the dream-vision genre as “rivelatrice di verità trascendentali” (51) are among the major targets of the *Corbaccio*'s irony.

What we see in Boccaccio's treatise (indeed, in both texts, but using opposite strategies) is a systematic dismantling of the very underpinnings of the confessional, or pseudo-confessional, structure: its premises, procedures, and promises. The use of the prism of an omniscient interlocutor — a projection of the troubled protagonist (or even, given the important but imperfect differentiation between protagonist and author, of the author) — is shown in both cases to channel a quite partial and impossibly optimistic project of self-correction that is inevitably vulnerable to self-deception and self-congratulation. The two books show two different, indeed nearly opposite, ways of failing in the undertaking. Franciscus “sees the better and chooses the worse,” and the book ends not with a bang but a whimper. In the *Corbaccio*, the Narrator's conversion is quite successful — only he is won over not to virtue and piety, but to pride and revenge. His is a completely faulty, self-deluding, indeed sinful change of heart. In Boccaccio's caricature, the recourse to a tradition of literary authorities, and to the conversion model (or the model for conversion), is shown to have crippling defects: irrational vehemence; emotional furor disguised as dispassionate introspection; self-delusion and self-satisfaction; rhetorical fillips and curlicues that take over the content.

Hollander called the *Corbaccio* an anti-*Vita Nuova*;⁴² it is also an anti-*Secretum*. At the same time it is a secret admirer of the tale that the *Secretum* too would tell: that the project of dispassionate self-examination and self-correction is bound to fail. More sharply than the *Secretum*, however, Boccaccio indicts the *auctoritates* who have retailed that project, whether in the form of the dream-vision (as in the *Corbaccio*, where the enlightenment is purported to result from divine intervention) or of a waking epiphany (as in the *Secretum*, where the enlightenment is acknowledged to emerge from the author's creative intelligence). I do not think that Boccaccio's skepticism or critical distance on the assumptions, procedures, and solutions of his authors in the least diminishes his reverence for them, or his dedication to them. Indeed, in this case he seems to share that skepticism with Petrarch, who in this case is also in the process of destabilizing a revered genre.

Satire, Parody and Failure: when we can't tell the difference between critique of a discourse and complicity with it

The evidence suggests that the *Corbaccio* was not understood by early readers as at all parodic. The 82 manuscripts which preserve it don't really suggest that kind of reception; the *Corbaccino*, the Trecento "reduction" into *ottave* by Ludovico Bartoli, doesn't suggest it; and certainly the first couple of hundred years of modern *Corbaccio* criticism doesn't suggest it. Hollander's explanation — that Boccaccio meant to "give his [*Decameron*] detractors what they seemed to want" (1988, 43) — would also explain why the *Corbaccio* passed for serious misogyny, or at least passed for a book that targeted women, and men's carnal love for them, rather than targeting misogyny and the self-delusion and self-importance of intellectuals (by definition male). Nonetheless, the fact that the *Corbaccio* was long read as a serious moralizing text does not prove that it was written as one.

The elusiveness of parody should not particularly confuse or surprise us. It is now virtually impossible to parody political speech, particularly partisan speech, because no caricature is so broad or gross that "straight" examples cannot equal or surpass it. *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* run the risk of merely echoing and amplifying, rather than exposing or pillorying, the irony-deaf contradictions and inconsistencies of political discourse from both ends of the political spectrum. We recognize parody by differences of degree, not of kind, and by a calculation of context and

⁴² Bruscoli said this first, in his edition of *L'Ameto-Lettere-Il Corbaccio* (1940), pp. 303–04; I thank Kenneth P. Clarke for alerting me to it.

probability. Even within my own time, place, language, and horizon of expectations, and despite my intimate knowledge of the tortured fragmentation of our political landscape, I find myself hesitating over letters to the editor, trying to distinguish bluff extremism from sly parody. The potential for error increases exponentially with the shift to another language, let alone to another age. Decoding the presence and target of humor in the convoluted textual layering of Boccaccio and his vernacular and Latin intertexts becomes a far more risky business, and I admit the stakes are high. I pursue it only because the danger of erring in the other direction — giving Boccaccio too little credit for interrogating his culture’s conventional wisdom, and his own projects — is just as great, and to my mind more regrettable.

If the *Corbaccio* is a parody that long lay hidden in plain sight, is it a failed text? Or is it a text failed by its readers? Both questions are provocative, in taking for granted that the *Corbaccio*’s status as either caustic and contestatory, or confirming and complicit, is an *essential* status consciously encoded into the text by its author and susceptible of definitive determination by informed readers — provided the author has not made the code too abstruse. I agree with Robert Hollander that Boccaccio gave us every signpost he could, short of an actual commentary, but “we simply were not up to him” (1988, 43). The Middle Ages is burdened by the fanciful notion, projected backwards in later periods, that its textual production was mostly earnest and transparent. The *Corbaccio* is not the first medieval text to pass for simpler or more straightforward than it is, and it will certainly not be the last.

F. REGINA PSAKI

UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

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