

On Seneca, Mussato, Trevet
and the Boethian “Tragedies” of the *De casibus*

While good work has been done on the so-called Paduan prehumanists since Billanovich put them in the critical spotlight half a century ago,¹ very little has subsequently been accomplished with regard to their influence on Boccaccio, especially his ideas on the relationship among poetry, philosophy and theology. I believe that there is a rich vein yet to be mined in this area, one that will aid us in understanding more profoundly not only his pre-Christian sources, which (always mediated, of course, by the influence of medieval interpretations) range broadly from the Pre-Socratics to Plato and Aristotle, to the Stoics and Neoplatonists, but also the way in which he creatively and convincingly interwove them into a tapestry of Christian doctrine. In other words, there is still something to be learned before we can confidently reconstruct his line, or lines, of humanistic thought. Unfortunately, it has become quite commonplace to think of Boccaccio’s defense of poetry in his final works as something that popped up almost spontaneously when, in reality, those pages actually depict a hypothesis of *theologia poetica* that evolved over a period of twenty-five years or so. Indeed, we may even say that his development of these holistic ideas, his attempts to unlock the wisdom of the ancients — whether enshrined in highly complex cosmological creations like the Calcidian *Timaeus* or simply glimpsed in flashes of literary brilliance in a handful of carefully chosen passages here and there — never really assumed a definitive form. Boccaccio continued to study, to search for texts and to experiment with a variety of different ways in which to read the ancients. Every new discovery brought

¹ Billanovich’s attention to the Padoan circle was demonstrated in several of his studies. The most notable examples are Billanovich *I primi umanisti*, Billanovich “Veterum vestigia vatium” and, as a sort of summary, Billanovich “Il preumanesimo padovano.” The most valuable contributions to follow in Billanovich’s wake, in my opinion, are Witt’s “*In the Footsteps*” and *The Two Latin Cultures*, but it would be hard to say that the subject has been overly neglected. Indeed, *Filologia medievale e umanistica* in Padua is still making great strides.

potentially innovative interpretations with it and every new insight promised to deepen his comprehension of poetry's theological alchemy.

In the pages that follow, I should like to consider one of these insights, in particular those that come from his considerations and understanding of Seneca. Although it has been regularly recognized by scholars during the last couple of generations that Seneca was a remarkably influential literary model for Boccaccio, I believe that it is worth our while to return to the subject in order to see how the Cordovan was incorporated into this array of Boccaccio's larger-scope ideas, especially in the last few years of our author's life. Naturally, we must begin with the idea of the "Two Senecas." Throughout most of the fourteenth century, a single Seneca was thought to have been the author of the moral works, the tragedies and the *Controversie* and *Suasorie*, which were also known as the *Declamationes*.² By 1365, or a little before then, Boccaccio had discovered Martial's *Epigrams*, which contained a key passage that brought him to conclude that there were in reality two Senecas. The verses in question are the following: "duosque Senecas unicumque Lucanum / facunda loquitur Corduba" 'Eloquent Cordova speaks of its two Senecas and its incomparable Lucan' (Martial, *Epig.* 1.61.7–8).³ We know now that Martial was referring to the rhetorician, Seneca the Elder, and his homonymous son, Seneca the Younger, moralist and tragedian. Boccaccio, however, understood this division in another way: that Seneca the philosopher and Seneca the tragedian were two separate individuals.⁴

In the autumn of 1370, Boccaccio traveled from Florence to Naples, carrying with him his first complete copy of the *Genealogie* (now lost), which he did not get back until mid-1372.⁵ In the intervening period, Pietro Piccolo da Monteforte (who was convinced Boccaccio was right in his claim that the tragedian and the moralist were two separate figures) had meticulously studied the work and had even made corrections to it, including the insertion of the epithets "philosophus moralis" and "poeta tragicus" in order to distinguish between the two Senecas.⁶ More important still is the fact that Boccaccio incorporated significant portions of

² Mussato likewise believed in a single Seneca (see Megas 155–56).

³ On Boccaccio's copy of Martial, in which Boccaccio drew Seneca in profile, see Petoletti.

⁴ This was an erroneous conclusion that persisted from the fifth century (Bocciolini Palagi). Cf. Billanovich, *Petrarca letterato* 109–16, Martellotti and Monti and Pasut. The fascinating story continues in Enenkel, Gualdo Rosa and D'Alessi.

⁵ Zaccaria 181, 193, 235.

⁶ Cf. Billanovich "Pietro Piccolo." It is interesting to note that Coluccio Salutati and Benvenuto da Imola were similarly convinced of Boccaccio's theory. See Toynebee.

Pietro Piccolo's letter into the second redaction of the *Genealogie* and into the *Esposizioni*.

In order to assess Seneca the tragic poet's influence on Boccaccio, it must first be recognized that the very definition of "tragedy" was anything but clear during our poet's youth. Some have claimed that Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolcro had made a commentary on Seneca's tragedies, but it is no longer extant.⁷ If Boccaccio knew it, we could assume that he had become at least somewhat familiar with the tragedian's works at some time before 1340. Several scholars have pointed out that the *Fiammetta*, which was complete by 1343, includes quotations and reworkings from Seneca's tragedies (especially the *Phaedra*),⁸ but — in a still incomplete survey — I have been unable to verify other meaningful borrowings elsewhere. Curiously, it would seem that after 1343, Boccaccio set aside Seneca's tragedies for quite some time. The most exhaustive study addressing the presence of Seneca in the *Decameron*, Velli's, identifies only passages inspired by Seneca the moralist. Likewise, the *Zibaldoni* (complete by 1356) contain several *sententie* culled from Seneca's moral works but nothing from the tragedies. I have found a single quotation from the *Thyestes* in Boccaccio's letter to Zanobi da Strada,⁹ dated 1353, but that is hardly enough to convince us of a profound acquaintance with the tragic corpus. If we believe Seznec (221), in fact, it may be that Boccaccio had no complete knowledge of the tragedies for most of his literary career. We may assume, then, that until very shortly after his discovery of Martial's *Epigrams* in 1365, Boccaccio still believed the tragedian and the moralist to be one in the same. While this identification endured, the author of the tragedies — indeed, the entire tragic genre itself — was clearly oriented toward moral ends. This should hardly surprise us, insofar as most commentaries of the Trecento consistently identified the literary *causa finalis* as belonging to ethics. We can learn something, though, from looking at what Boccaccio believed "tragedy" to be in order to understand his estimation of Seneca *tragicus*, especially once the moralist had been separated from the tragedian, and the way in which Seneca so sparked his interest in the *Genealogie* and the *Esposizioni*.

Most commentators and "lexicographers" took as their principal point of departure a few definitions from Isidore of Seville, who defined tragedy

⁷ Sabbadini 2:37–39. Admittedly, we do not know when Dionigi made his commentary, but it must have been before 1342, the year of his death.

⁸ See Crescini 160–63, Serafini, Cook and Velli.

⁹ *Ep.* 9.18.

loosely as lofty, sorrowful, poetic songs about the crimes of wicked ancient kings, as opposed to comedy, which was dedicated to comic tales of normal people.¹⁰ We should remember, moreover, that tragedy was considered high style and that several *glossatores* (including Jacopo¹¹ and Pietro Alighieri,¹² Jacopo della Lana,¹³ the author of the *Ottimo Commento*¹⁴ and even Benvenuto da Imola¹⁵) classified Vergil's *Aeneid* in the same genre. Guido da Pisa even classified Homer as a tragic poet (6).¹⁶

In order to hazard an initial hypothesis about Boccaccio's perception of Seneca, we may consider the *Octavia*. If Petrarca was unsure about its author's true identity,¹⁷ Boccaccio certainly was not. Two passages in the *Genealogie* (9.4.2 and 9) show that he did indeed believe that Seneca, *tragicus*, was the author of the *Octavia*. Characteristic of this particular

¹⁰ See *Etym.* 8.7.5–6 and 18.45–46.

¹¹ Of the four styles, Jacopo explains, “il primo ‘tragidia’ è chiamato, sotto ’l quale particolarmente d’architetoniche magnificenze si tratta, si come Lucano, e Vergilio nell’*Eneidos*; il secondo ‘commedia,’ sotto il quale generalmente e universalmente si tratta de tutte le cose” (86).

¹² Pietro 318.

¹³ “*Tragedia* è una poetria opposita alla *Comedia*, imperocché la *comedia* tratta novelle di quelli che nel principio sono stati piccioli e fievoli e de poca fortuna, e nella fine grandi, forti e graziosi: la *tragedia* è l’opposito, ché tratta novelle di quelle di quelli che nel principio sono stati grandi ed eccellenti, nel fine piccioli e di nessuno valore. Or trattando di Troia Virgilio, che fu grande vittoriosa ed eccelsa, e poi fu condotta a distruzione, fu necessario che tal trattato fosse *tragedia*” (1: 351).

¹⁴ “*Tragedia* è uno stile poetico nel quale si tractano magnifiche cose, come fa Lucano e Virgilio ne l’*Eneyda*. Scrivensi in questo stile le antiche opere e le fellonie delli scelerati re” (*L’ultima forma dell’Ottimo commento* 52–53).

¹⁵ “*Tragedia* est stylus altus et superbus; tractat enim de memorabilibus et horrendis gestis, qualia sunt mutationes regnorum, eversiones urbium, conflictus bellorum, interitus regum, strages et caedes virorum, et aliae maximae clades; et talia describentes vocati sunt tragœdi, sive tragici, sicut Homerus, Virgilius, Euripides, Staius, Simonides, Ennius, et alii plures” (1: 18). Cf. “Erat olim *tragedia*, quicquid per antiquos de infaustis lugubribusque deorum, regum et magnatum ruinis, mortibus, excidiis et infelicibus casibus mesto carmine scribeba[n]tur” (Segarelli 14).

¹⁶ Some very useful additional information is to be found in Kelly. For reasons that will soon become clear, however, I am not in complete agreement with his assertion that Boccaccio did not consider the *De casibus* to be related to tragedies (*Tragedy and Comedy* 45). *In stricto sensu*, Kelly is right that the prose of the *De casibus* does not emulate the high style of the genre, but I am persuaded by Zaccaria (p. xlvi of the introduction to his edition) that there are substantial non-formal similarities worth keeping in mind. If I read his meaning correctly in *Chaucerian Tragedy* (25), his stance somewhat softened between these two studies.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Hortis 20–22, and of course Petrarca's *Fam.* 24.5.

tragedy is the opening monologue of Seneca the character (*Octavia*, 377–80):

Quid me, potens Fortuna, fallaci mihi
blandita vultu, sorte contentum mea
alte extulisti, gravius ut ruerem edita
receptus arce totque prospicerem metus?

Why, potent Fortune, with false, flattering looks, have you exalted me so highly when I was content with my lot? Was it so that I, raised to the heights, might see so many fears and might then fall into more grievous ruin?¹⁸

These are verses that surely would have brought to Boccaccio's mind (in reality, to any good medieval reader's mind) the great Neoplatonist best-seller of the Middle Ages: Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. I believe that the intertwining of the misfortunes of paradigmatic tragedy and those caused by Fortuna was a natural, and meaningful, reaction in the fourteenth century. It is no coincidence that the other commonplace phrase frequently coupled with Isidore's definitions of tragedy comes precisely from Boethius: "quid tragoediarum clamor aliud deflet nisi indiscreto ictu fortunam felicia regna vertentem?" 'What else is the cry of tragedies if not that happy states are overthrown by the indiscriminate blows of Fortune?'¹⁹ The connection between Seneca's tragedies and Boethius' laments was, it seems, quite well-founded. This selfsame connection was made, for example, by Pace da Ferrara, whose *Evidentia Ecerinidis* (ca. 1317) was certainly a widely disseminated *accessus* to Mussato's masterpiece (in Megas 203) and twice by Mussato himself: in the *Evidentia tragediarum* (in Megas 124) and in his *Vita Seneca* (in Megas 159). Silvia Locati, I think, sums up the message here quite well: "La fortuna avversa, che mette a dura prova l'uomo creando una situazione di difficoltà, deve suscitare nel lettore una riflessione di tipo morale" (lxxiii). What made Seneca's tragedies so compelling was the human struggle they illustrated. While it may not immediately occur to the modern reader to associate the violent wrongdoings of Seneca's tragedies with a prisoner's edifying conversations in the company of Dame Philosophy, the string of quotations above brings them together in a fashion that is undeniably coherent.

In order to put together these various pieces of the mosaic we are constructing, we must now bring in Nicholas Trevet, whose commentaries on

¹⁸ The English translation comes from Miller's ed.

¹⁹ *De consolatione Philosophiae* 2 pr. 2.12. The English translation was taken from Tester's ed.

Seneca's tragedies were widely available in northern and north-central Italy throughout the Trecento. Trevet, the English Dominican friar known for his commentaries on Augustine's *City of God* and on Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, was of Dante's generation, more or less. His interest in Seneca's tragedies was imposed from above, inasmuch as Cardinal Niccolò di Prato had specifically asked him to put his talents as a commentator of Boethius and Seneca's *Declamationes* to work in a series of expositions on the ten tragedies circulating under Seneca's name, including the *Octavia*. Trevet was no humanistic philologist; instead, he was a friar soaked through with the exegetic tradition of the Chartrians (he borrowed heavily from Guillaume de Conches) and was intimately acquainted with all these texts. In them he found certain strains of thought that he believed to be of great value. In his commentary on the second book of the *Consolation of Philosophy*, we read:

Probat mutabilitatem fortune divulgari cotidianis clamoribus, quare clamores poetarum [...] in theatro recitantium tragedias nil aliud concinebant quam mutabilitatem fortune. [...] Antiqua gesta atque facinora scelleratorum regum luctuoso carmine spectante populo concinebant. Vero tragedia est carmen de magnis iniquitatibus a prosperitate incipiens et in adversitate terminans.

[Boethius] demonstrates that the instability of fortune is broadcasted by daily laments, for the laments of the poets who recite tragedies sang nothing but Fortune's instability. [...] In doleful song, they sang of the ancient and villainous deeds of wicked kings as the audience looked on. Indeed, tragedy is the song of great iniquities that begins in prosperity and ends in adversity.²⁰

This passage, penned years before Trevet's glosses on Seneca, highlights a moral, ethical code, according to which crimes are punished (again, cf. Kelly 128). This same concern with the implicit lessons of tragedy, of the fall of great figures, encourages the reader to reflect. A similar perspective appears in Trevet's accessus to the tragedies:

Virgilius ergo in Eneydos, Lucanus et Ovidius de transformatis poete tragici dici possunt quia de materia tragica, scilicet de casu regum et magnorum virorum et de rebus publicis scripserunt, sed tamen minus proprie. Seneca autem in libro, qui pre manibus habetur, non solum de materia tragica sed etiam scripsit more tragico; et ideo merito liber iste liber tragediarum dicitur; continet enim luctuosa *carmina de casibus magnorum*.²¹

²⁰ Cited in Kelly, *Ideas and Forms of Tragedy* 128.

²¹ Trevet 6–7, emphasis added.

Therefore, Vergil in the *Aeneid*, Lucan and the Ovid of the *Metamorphoses* can be called tragic poets (even though properly speaking they were not) on account of their material; in other words, they wrote of the fall of kings and great men and governments. However, Seneca, in the book we have before us, wrote not only of tragic subjects but also in a tragic style. For that reason, this book may rightly be called a book of tragedies, for it indeed contains sorrowful *verses about the fall of great men*.

That Boccaccio knew Trevet's commentaries on Seneca's tragedies is not in doubt. In fact, we find a copy of them in the Parva Libraria.²² It would seem logical to assume that Boccaccio must have acquired them — or begun to study them seriously — in the 1360s, as he was preparing his *De casibus* and the *Genealogie*. If the tragedies came in remarkably handy for their mythological content in the latter work, I have no doubt that the former benefited substantially from a Trevetian-Boethian reading of tragedy's purpose as a genre, even given the fact that Van Acker was unable to trace down verbatim quotations. The repeated observation that in Seneca one could find, as Mussato puts it, a high style that treats “de ruinis et casibus magnorum regum et principum”²³ makes it difficult to discount the possibility that Boccaccio had just this in mind when he began his treatise on the “falls of great men.”

Both the Boethian gloss and Trevet's *accessus* are in perfect conformity with Boccaccio's own explicit *causa finalis*, which we read in his proem to the *De casibus* (Proem 6–7):

[E]xemplis agendum ratus sum eis describere quid Deus omnipotens, seu ut eorum loquar more Fortuna, in elatos possit et fecerit. Et, ne in tempus aut sexum cadat obiectio, a mundi primordio in nostrum usque evum, consternatos duces illustresque alios, tam viros quam mulieres, passim disiectos, in medium succincte deducere mens est. [...] Sed ex claris quosdam clariores excerpisse sat erit, ut, dum segnes fluxosque principes et Dei iudicio quassatos in solum reges viderint, Dei potentiam, fragilitatem suam, et Fortune lubricum noscant, et letis modum ponere discant, et aliorum periculo sue possint utilitati consulere.

I decided that I should describe with examples what Almighty God (or, in their parlance Fortune), can do and has done to the lofty. And, lest an objection be made regarding epoch or gender, I intend to provide brief accounts of distraught leaders and others, both men and women, and from Creation to our own time, who have been brought down and scattered far and wide. [...] It will suffice, though, for me to select from the famous those who are best known, such that [the readers], upon seeing

²² Mazza 55–56.

²³ *Vita Seneca* M. in Megas 160.

exhausted, enervated princes and kings cast down to the ground by God's judgment, they will come to know the power of God, their own fragility and the fickleness of Fortune and they will learn both to moderate their giddiness and to be able to draw useful lessons for themselves from the downfalls of others.²⁴

Were this not enough to convince us of the Boethian subtext throughout the *De casibus*, we need only consider the introduction to book 6, in which Fortuna herself appears to our author in order to show him which "tragedies" he should recount and in which order.²⁵ This *demonstratio infelicitium*, as she calls it, brings us quite close (indeed, Boccaccio may well have considered it identical) to the common definitions of tragedy.

What more did Boccaccio get from Trevet? First, we should note that it was from Trevet that Boccaccio "learned" what a tragic play actually looked like.²⁶

Et nota quod tragedie et comedie solebant in theatro hoc modo recitari: theatrum erat area semicircularis, in cuius medio erat parva domuncula, que scena dicebatur, in qua erat pulpitem super quod poeta carmina pronuntiabat; extra vero erant mimi, qui carminum pronuntiationem gestu corporis effigiabant per adaptationem ad quemlibet ex cuius persona loquebatur.

And note that tragedies and comedies used to be acted out in theaters in this manner. The theater was a semicircular area, in the middle of which stood a little house, which was called a "scene." In it there was a pulpit upon which the poet would read out his poetry; outside it, there were mimes who would act out the poetic reading with gestures of the body, and would modify them to be coherent with whichever character was speaking.

[Q]ueste cotali comedie poi recitavano nella scena, cioè in una piccola cassetta, la quale era costituita nel mezzo del teatro, stando dintorno alla detta scena tutto il popolo, e gli uomini e le femine, della città ad udire. E non gli traeva tanto il disiderio di udire quanto di vedere i giuochi che dalla recitazione del comedo procedevano; li quali erano in questa forma: che una spezie di buffoni, chiamati «mimi», l'ufficio de' quali è sapere

²⁴ "Verum non tantum felicitatis regni decore ac multiplicis prolis serenitate fulgida facta est, quin, urgente adversa fortuna, orbi toto longe deveniret cognita" (*De mulieribus claris* 34.3)

²⁵ The moral connection between the *De casibus* and the *De consolazione philosophiae* was especially solid. Even illustrators picked up on it. See figs. 1 and 2, in which artists from the same school imagined very similar representations of the personification of Fortune in each work.

²⁶ (*Hercules furens* 5). Pietro's description is a bit different (Pietro [1] 8). See also Isidore 18.42–43.

contrafare gli atti degli uomini, uscivano di quella scena, informati dal comedo, in quegli abiti ch'erano convenienti a quelle persone gli atti delle quali dovevano contrafare, e questi cotali atti, onesti o disonesti che fossero, secondo che il comedo diceva, facevano.²⁷ (*Esp.* 1.lit.85–86.)

There is no doubt that this description comes from Trevet. Interesting, though, is the fact that Boccaccio chooses to leave out the idea that tragedies were performed in the same manner. I would suggest that this decision was born of his desire not to exclude works like the *Aeneid* from the tragic genre. Perhaps stated somewhat better, I should say instead that he did not want to exclude the lofty ancient tragedies from the category of great poetry. The other great lesson learned from Trevet was that Varro (via Augustine) was the key to unlocking the theological content of ancient poetry without having to defend those who had written of the gods' scandalous behavior. In Trevet's *accessus* to his commentary on Seneca's tragedies, the English Dominican begins with the following statement²⁸:

Tria genera theologie distingui a Varrone narrat Augustinus, libro VI de civitate Dei, quorum nomina sic latine exprimuntur ut primum dicatur fabulosum, secundum naturale, tertium civile. Primo genere utuntur poete, secundo philosophi, tercio sacerdotes et populi. [...] Unde comparans beatus Augustinus hec duo genera theologie invicem ait: si verum attendamus, deteriora sunt templa ubi hec aguntur quam theatra ubi finguntur. Omisso autem secundo et tertio genere theologie, de primo advertendum quod theologia poetica, que in theatro exercetur, duas partes habet, quarum una potest dici tragica et altera comica. [...] Virgilius ergo in Eneydos, Lucanus et Ovidius de transformatis poete tragici dici possunt quia de materia tragica, scilicet de casu regum et magnorum virorum et de rebus publicis scripserunt.

Augustine tell us, in the sixth book of his *City of God*, that Varro had distinguished three types of theology, whose names may be translated into Latin as follows: the first is the fabulous; the second is the natural; the third is the civil. The first type is employed by poets, the second by philosophers and the third by priests and the people. [...] Comparing these [first] two types of theology, Augustine instead says: if we are looking for the truth, the temples where they do these things are worse than the theaters where they only pretend. Leaving aside the second and third types of theology, it must be recognized straightaway that poetic theology, which is acted out in the theater, is divided into two parts: one of them

²⁷ Cf. "Nam que in scenis atque theatris a mimis et histrionibus, atque parasitis, et huius modi hominibus enormia canebantur olim, omnino abstulere atque reprobavere Romani veteres, Cicerone teste, et ipsam scenam et artem ludricam damnare, agentesque nota multare censoria, et eos amovere tribubus" (*Gen.* 14.14).

²⁸ *Il commento di Nicola Trevet al Tieste di Seneca* 5–7.

may be called tragic and the other comic. [...] So, Vergil in the *Aeneid*, Lucan and Ovid in the *Metamorphoses* may be called tragic poets on account of their tragic subject matter; that is, they wrote of the fall of kingdoms and great men and states.

Boccaccio rewrites this paragraph in *Genealogie* 15.8, the chapter entitled “Gentiles poetas mythicos esse theologos” “That the pagan poets of myth were theologians,” to separate all tragic poetry from the fabulous and reclassifies it (together with the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses*) in the category of *theologia physica* where all great poets — and we think here of the Neoplatonist interpretations dear to him — were disguising metaphysical truths beneath the veil of their verses. This move was useful to him for two particular reasons: first, because it moves tragic poetry off the vulgar public stage and, second, because it allows the *De casibus* to assume theological overtones.²⁹

Once tragic poets are excluded from the category of theater, their alleged detrimental relationship to the Muses may be eliminated. It must necessarily be Trevet’s commentaries on Boethius and Seneca that inspired the distinction (in the *Genealogie* and the *Esposizioni*) between the *scenice meretricule* and the revered Muses of antiquity.³⁰ We recall from those pages that Boethius was invoked as the *auctoritas* for deriding comic theater and defending his own Muses, who were far more serious. Could it be that Boccaccio got this idea from Mussato who already dealt with this subject in his *Life of Seneca*? Mussato was an ardent defender of poetry, which he called a “secunda theologia,” and — like Boccaccio — was eager to eliminate comic poets from the high style:

[Seneca] theologiam poeticam exprimere sic curavit, ut in ipso opere theologum se patenter ostenderet et poetam. Constat quippe in antiquitatum libris primos philosophantes ac theologizantes fuisse poetas. [...] Vera equidem poetica sunt, si quis diligenter inspiciat, cum aliud aspectui subicitur et aliud intellectui subinfertur. Quamquam nonnulli parum diligentius considerantes poetas et poeticam methodum vilipendant; sibi quidem quod arguant assumunt quosdam vocitatos olim poetas, qui per vagos membrorum oculorumque iactus homines ad luxus et ineptias incitabant; quibus histrionum pronomina advenientibus competeabant: scenici enim erant illi comedi.³¹

²⁹ It is important to note that Pietro Piccolo, perhaps citing from memory, mentions not three types of theology, but three types of poetry (Billanovich “Pietro Piccolo,” 51–52).

³⁰ *Gen.* 14.5.11 and 14.20.1. *Esp.* 1.litt.72 and 108.

³¹ *Vita Seneca* M, in *Megas* p. 157–58.

Seneca thus sought to express a poetic theology, so as to show in this same work [the tragedies] that he was clearly a theologian and a poet. Of course, it is true as we read in the books of the ancients that the first philosophers and theologians were poets. [...] In fact, true poetry, if one considers the matter carefully, contains one thing at first sight and conceals another upon further reflection. Nevertheless, some who do not consider it carefully enough denigrate poets and the poetic style; indeed, they accept what was once claimed by certain so-called poets, by those who, moving their limbs and eyes wildly, used to incite men to debauchery and folly. These are the men who rightly got the names of actors: these players were in fact comedians.

This division between comic and tragic poets, which Mussato employed specifically in order to be able to cast Seneca as the ideal *poeta vates*, appears both in the *Genealogie* and the *Esposizioni*. Unlike Mussato, however, who made his appeal to admit *theologia poetica* into the realm of theology proper with a pagan poet at center stage, Boccaccio maintains all the same arguments but shifts Seneca to one side in favor of a far weightier authority: Boethius himself.

Here, finally, is the passage to which I have alluded several times now. Referring to the critics of poetry, Boccaccio writes:

Satis possunt, quod ignorabant, videre poetis infesti, Boetium scilicet, dum Musas meretriculas scenicas vocitabat, de theatri Musarum specie intellexisse. [...] Ergo, postquam illas philosophia suo inmiscet artificio, eas honestas esse existimandum est; et si honeste sint, et hi, quibus familiares sunt, ut horum videtur velle deductio, honesti sint homines necesse est. Et si honeste sunt muse, et poete honesti sunt homines.³²

Those bothered by poets can now see what they earlier were ignorant of: the fact that Boethius, while calling the Muses 'little tarts of the stage,' had in mind the theatrical type of Muses. [...] Therefore, since Philosophy has incorporated the Muses into her own art, one must believe that they are honorable; and if the Muses are honorable, so too necessarily must be those men to whom they are familiar (as is clear in the critics' own process of deduction). And if the Muses are honorable, so too must poets be honorable men.

Boccaccio uses Boethius in several ways here, but a full understanding of this clever re-appropriation depends first and foremost on our comprehension of the link he has made between poetry and philosophy, one indeed that was possible only through separating Seneca's tragedies from the deleterious implications of Augustine's railing against the Roman stage.

³² *Gen.* 14.20.6–8.

What makes this all so fascinating is precisely Boccaccio's explicit link, made during the years of his rediscovery of Seneca *tragicus*, between the idea of literary tragedies and disastrous metaphorical ones. In fact, the very word "tragedy" appears only in the *De casibus*, the *Genealogie* and the *Esposizioni*, and almost always accompanied by Seneca's name. In those few cases in which the term appears as a metaphor, there is always a patina of Boethian reflection, a reminder of the frailty of human existence. We read, for instance:

Mellita verba et bilinguim suasiones iniecte credulis ruinas urbium et incendia crebra, regionum populationes, et regnorum subversiones, sino exitia, stulte credentium suscitasse fere per omne trivium flebiles clamitant tragedie.

On just about every street corner, doleful tragedies reveal that it was the honeyed words and two-faced exhortations, imbibed by the gullible, that senselessly caused the frequent fires and downfalls of cities, the plundering of entire regions and the overturning or annihilation of the kingdoms of the credulous.³³

The *De casibus* is, in effect, a collection fashioned of *materia tragica* recounted in a *modus historicus* and intended to spur the reader to moral introspection. Indeed, we can use Trevet's own categories and say that it has a *modus mixtus*, just like the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses*.³⁴ When read along the lines of Mussato's moral interpretations, Seneca's tragedies (and the great stature afforded to them by the Paduans) make substantially more sense within Boccaccio's own scholarly production. Indeed, without renewing our understanding of what Seneca's work could mean in the fourteenth century, it would be hard to come to an appropriate understanding of Boccaccio's newfound fascination with him during the last decade of his life.

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³³ *De casibus* 1.11.12. See also 2.17.9. The only other occurrence in the *De casibus* depends upon Trevet's unflattering description of the theatrical event itself: 7.6.22.

³⁴ *Il commento di Nicola Trevet al Tieste di Seneca* 6.



Figure 1. Miniature depicting Fortune and her Wheel. School of the Coëtivy Master. Detail. *Les cas des nobles hommes et femmes*. Translated into French by Laurence de Premierfait. University of Glasgow. MS Hunter 371, fol. 1^r. 1467.

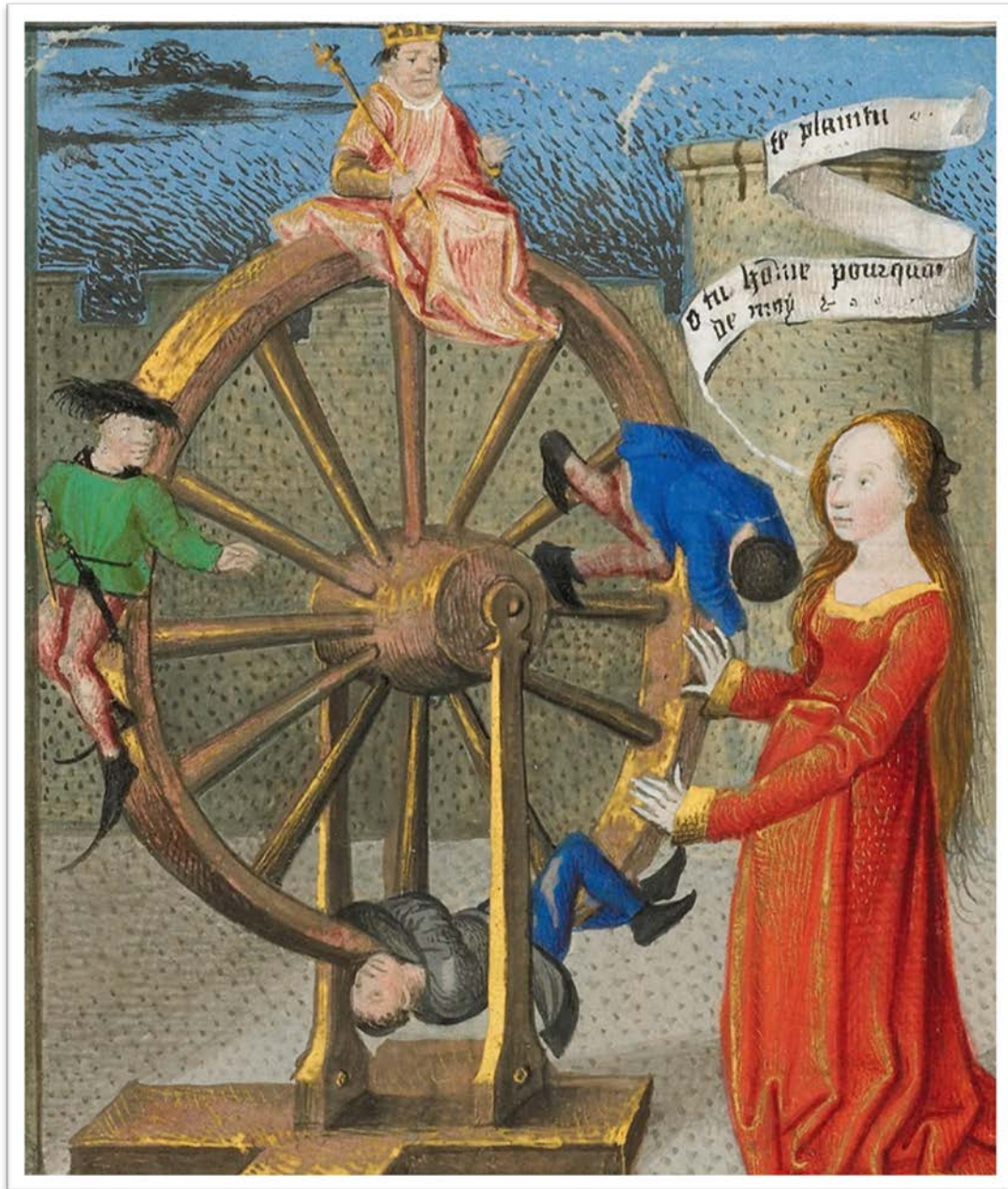


Figure 2. Miniature depicting Fortune and her Wheel. Detail. Coëtivy Master. *Consolation de philosophie*. Translator unknown. J. Paul Getty Museum. MS 42, fol. 1v. Ca. 1465.

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