

Phaethon's Old Age in the *Genealogie* and the *Decameron*

One of Boccaccio's earliest works is a short Latin text that has come to be known as the *Allegoria mitologica*, a copy of which exists in his own hand in the *Zibaldone laurenziano*.¹ The *Allegoria* is primarily a recasting of Ovid's account of Phaethon but with significant changes that transform him into an authorial surrogate for the youthful poet.² Boccaccio does not alter the disastrous consequences of Phaethon's chariot ride but he does change his reason for undertaking the journey. No longer motivated by irresponsible vagaries of his reputation, in Boccaccio's version of the story, Phaethon takes the chariot of the sun in response to pleas from the people of Parthenope:

Si miseris est licitum aliquid suaderi, te per superos adiuramus, o Pheton, quod pias aures nostris vocibus non extollas. Tu enim filius stellarum principis porrectorisque lucis amene, nutritus inter montis Elicone Musas, in operationibus validis roboratus, a patre non devians, nobis digneris ostendere florum generis novi virtutes, circa quas noster animus ansiatur.³

¹ See the introduction to Pastore Stocchi's edition of the *Allegoria mitologica* in vol. 5.2 of *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio* (1093–95). The precise date of composition is uncertain, though Pastore Stocchi assigns it to 1337; the Neapolitan emphasis of the *Allegoria* makes it likely to be among Boccaccio's earliest works.

² Phaethon's story appears in *Metamorphoses* I.747–79 and II.1–328. Following Ovid's first two books closely, the *Allegoria mitologica* is structured in three parts, beginning with the creation and ages of the world, the universal flood and the recreation of man. Phaethon's story appears primarily in the final third.

³ “Se agli infelici è permesso esortare ad alcunché, in nome degli dei ti scongiuriamo, o Fetonte, di non distogliere le tue orecchie pietose dalle nostre voci. Tu infatti, figlio del principe degli astri e datore della ridente luce, allevato fra le Muse del monte Elicona, fortificato in opere di valore, non degenerare dal padre, degnati di mostrare a noi le virtù dei fiori di nuovo genere, circa le quali il nostro animo è in angoscia” (16). All Italian and Latin quotations from Boccaccio are taken from Branca's *Tutte le opere*; references are to standard textual divisions.

Phaethon is appealed to as instructor and artist but also as a mediator between the Parthenopeans and Apollo. His paternity is never in question, nor is it simply a childish whim that begins his trip to the heavens. The impassioned requests of the people for these “new flowers” move him to undertake the *work* of appealing to his father: “ad tanti laboris fastigium me disponam” (17). Upon Phaethon’s arrival, his father attempts to dissuade him from taking the chariot, though his warnings are less severe and extensive than those in Ovid. Nor does Apollo give instructions. Unlike the case of Icarus, the issue is not that Phaethon disregards directions, or is inadequately prepared, but that, as in Ovid, Phaethon is constitutionally incapable of controlling the chariot because he is mortal: “sors tua mortalis est, nec est mortale quod optas” (23). After Phaethon declines to heed these warnings and takes the reins of the chariot, Boccaccio calls him *magnanimus* (26) but then, immediately after, *imprudens* (28).

The ambiguity of Phaethon’s character remains unresolved at the end of the *Allegoria*. He sacrifices himself in an attempt to bring new life and knowledge to people in need of them, and the cost is represented as primarily to him. Though Jove still responds to the cries of the Earth by striking down Phaethon’s “fire with fire,” Boccaccio largely avoids the *Metamorphoses*’ long and moving description of the cataclysmic effects of the veering chariot, limiting this global disaster to a line or two (36), then continuing to lament the fate of Phaethon. On the whole, Boccaccio’s treatment is much more sympathetic, showing Phaethon to be generous and well-intentioned, though unsuccessful.

Boccaccio transforms Phaethon into an acceptable surrogate by re-writing his myth in a redemptive process that is largely contrary to the traditional interpretation of the Middle Ages.⁴ This observation, however, is not a new one. Jonathan Usher sees Phaethon as a “cipher of misplaced cultural ambition,”⁵ expressive of Boccaccian anxieties about the limits of

⁴ Cazalé Bérard uses Giovanni del Virgilio’s commentary on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* as a point of comparison to illustrate how unorthodox Boccaccio’s use of Phaethon is, using it as a marker of “la distanza che separa Boccaccio dai commentatori tradizionali del poeta latino” (448).

⁵ On the same page of “An Autobiographical Phaethon,” Usher writes: “Boccaccio’s Phaethon very likely represents the youthful poet, who has made good progress, has even acquired something of a reputation, but who has then overreached himself, and now needs reparatory instruction” (77). This article, and “Global Warming in the Sonnet,” elucidate the *Allegoria*’s autobiographical connections primarily through its relationship to the *Comedia della ninfe*. Usher’s insightful analysis does extend to some of the other minor works but primarily in the context of Boccaccio’s general vision of himself

his poetic preparation and abilities, and Tobias Foster Gittes includes Phaethon among Boccaccio's many autobiographical "culture-heroes" as one who especially structures Boccaccio's self-representation as a martyr.⁶ Both Usher and Gittes focus principally on the *Allegoria*, and on how these unusual changes to Phaethon's story resonate with Boccaccio's more general construction of himself as an author in his other works. But in the much later *Genealogie deorum gentilium*, Boccaccio restores Ovid's account of Phaethon; the rather straightforward version given there seems to retreat from the interesting alterations made to Phaethon's story in the *Allegoria*. (Usher elegantly refers to the *Genealogie's* analysis as "deliberately meteorological."⁷) After all, Phaethon is an example of failure that ends in an early death. How well-suited is he for adoption as an authorial surrogate in the later works of an established poet?

Yet there is also evidence in the *Genealogie* of Phaethon's autobiographical role. My purpose here is to show how Boccaccio's apparently mundane mythography of Phaethon equally serves an authorial end by turning *oltremisura* transgressions and ambitious projects into goods in themselves, regardless of the success or failure of the attempt. I then suggest that Phaethon makes a similar appearance in the *cornice* of the *Decameron*, structuring not only Boccaccio's attitudes toward himself as a writer, but toward his readers as well. We know that Boccaccio repeatedly returned to and revised the *Decameron* late in his life, as he wrote the *Genealogie*⁸; this article inquires about Phaethon's fate when he survives his youthful crises and arrives at an old age.

The *Genealogie's* treatment of Phaethon in Book 7 begins with a brief summary of Ovid's account that restores Phaethon's traditional motivations. Gone are the pleas of a desperate populace, and Phaethon's journey

as poet. Thus his treatment of the *Genealogie* focuses on the metapoetic discussion in Books 14 and 15, not on the mythography of Phaethon in Book 7.

⁶ See Gittes "St. Boccaccio: The Poet as Panderer and Martyr" (esp. 142–49) which appears in revised form as part of Chapter 3 of *Boccaccio's Naked Muse* (esp. 169–75). Gittes describes Boccaccio's autobiographical affiliation with Phaethon in terms of his pedagogical project, where Phaethon equally represents "a magnanimous figure whose premature and dramatic death was the direct consequence of his selfless desire to improve the lot of his fellow humans" (*Naked Muse* 174). Gittes mentions only the very final passage of the *Genealogie's* account of Phaethon in Book 7, where Boccaccio refers to Paul of Perugia's positive vision of Phaethon as civilizing pedagogue.

⁷ "Autobiographical Phaethon" 49.

⁸ For a minute examination of the late changes and additions to the *Decameron* in the autograph Hamilton 90, dating to the early 1370s, see Vitale and Branca, *Il capolavoro del Boccaccio e due diverse redazioni*.

once again becomes a puerile quest to prove his lofty paternity. Boccaccio's analysis of Phaethon's myth utterly avoids an allegorical or moral interpretation. Instead, we are offered an unexpectedly prosaic "hystoriam et naturalem rationem" (VII.xli.3) for the story. The *Genealogie* first presents the historical event: a great fire that the ancients believed took place under the reign of Cecrops, the mythical first king of Athens. In the accounts cited by Boccaccio, this catastrophic fire was so severe that it dried up rivers, destroyed crops and left the city abandoned. It continued to rage for several months until the autumn, when the seasonal rains finally extinguished it. Boccaccio then moves to the "naturalem rationem" for Phaethon's story. There, the destruction caused by Apollo's chariot corresponds to the annual dry season, which in turn ends every year with the cyclical advent of the rains.⁹

This seemingly insubstantial elucidation of the historical and natural senses of the Phaethon myth is not a meaningless retreat from the project of the *Allegoria*. Rather, these readings represent a radical readjustment of the story's conventional gloss. As a quintessential transgressor, Phaethon's cautionary tale traditionally represents well-deserved punishment meted out to those who attempt to exceed the proper limits of the human sphere.¹⁰ Previously, Boccaccio reformed Phaethon by rewriting the literal version of the story, ennobling his motivations and minimizing the destructive consequences of his chariot ride. Now, something very different happens: the act of transgression itself is redeemed by being justified in natural terms. The exegetical difficulties of Phaethon's transgression dis-

⁹ Boccaccio represents this as part of the natural order of the spheres: "Est enim in Zodiaco spatium XX graduum, a XX° scilicet gradu libre usque ad X° Scorpionis, quod phylosophi viam vocavere combustam, eo quod singulis annis, gradiente sole per spatium illud, omnia in terris videantur exuri" ("C'è infatti nello Zodiaco uno spazio di 20 gradi, cioè dal XX° della Bilancia al X° dello Scorpione, che i filosofi han chiamato *via bruciata*, perché ogni anno, quando il sole percorre quello spazio, tutto sulla terra sembra bruciare" VII.xli.8). The *Genealogie* is cited from vols. 7–8 of Branca's *Tutte le opere*.

¹⁰ Dante in particular perceived him this way. Phaethon appears in the *Commedia* as a distinctly negative double for the poet (*Inf.* XVII.107, *Par.* XVII.3). He also appears in *Epist.* XI.5, in Dante's harsh indictment of the clergy, who lead others astray with the example of their own transgressions. Gittes writes "Boccaccio's Phaethon is so perfect an inversion of that portrayed by Dante, that it is hard not to view the former as a 'response' to the latter. Dante's applications of the tale of Phaethon consistently use the story for the more traditional, moralizing end of illustrating the limitations of human *ingegno* and the consequences of human arrogance" (*Naked Muse* 301, n.56).

appear as the *Genealogie* rehabilitate the *oltremisura* desire to go beyond limits as itself natural and innate.

This process of naturalization is initially apparent in the parallel Boccaccio draws with the cyclical progression of the seasons; a progression that, though it seems extreme and excessive in the limits of human understanding, is nonetheless part of a divinely ordered, perfect universe. Though Athens under Cecrops is completely destroyed by the raging fire, the fire itself is a consequence of the seasonal weather, finally extinguished in turn by the arrival of the rainy autumn. The extremes of the natural world are complementary parts of a functional whole, balanced by their reciprocal opposites: summer and winter, fire and water. This reciprocity is evinced even at a linguistic level. Tracing the origins of Phaethon's mythology, Boccaccio briefly illuminates the meaning behind the etymology:

*Pheton ante alia, ut ait Leontius thessalus, latine sonat incendium; hic ideo Solis dicitur filius, quia sol caloris fons et origo sit, et sic cum a sole causari videatur calor omnis, non incongrue incendii pater fictus est. Clymenes autem grece, latine sonat humiditas, que ideo Phetontis mater dicta est, quia non possit perseverare calor, nisi congrua subsistat humiditas, et sic ab humiditate, tanquam a matre filius, ali videtur, et in esse perseverare.*¹¹

This linguistic signification, trivial though it may seem, is indicative of the natural correspondence being constructed in this section of the *Genealogie*, in opposition to a disproportionate *oltremisura* — the embodiment of the unnatural. Even at the level of language, two opposites result in a balance that is utterly intelligible; one cannot exist without the other, and both, though seemingly disproportionate, are naturally occurring, necessary goods.

The logic that reforms *oltremisura* from an unnatural, transgressive excess encompasses both the Creator's realm of the physical world and the human realm of language as the hallmark of man's intelligence. Yet lest we assume this extended "meteorological" digression not to be applicable to the figure of Phaethon himself, Boccaccio continues:

¹¹ "*Fetonte*, anzitutto, come dice Leonzio tessalo, in latino significa *incendio*; ed è detto figlio del Sole perché il sole è fonte e origine di calore; e così, poiché tutto il calore sembra causato dal sole, non impropriamente fu immaginato padre dell'incendio. *Climene* poi è parola greca che in latino significa *umidità*; e fu detta madre di Fetonte, perché il calore non può durare, se non gli stia sotto una congrua umidità; e così dall'umidità, come da madre, il figlio sembra essere alimentato e perseverare nel suo essere" (VII.xli.5–6).

Quod autem Phaethon petat a patre ut lucis curram ducat, nil aliud sentire debemus quam innatum quoddam etiam insensibilibus creaturis permanendi et augendi desiderium, ut de insensibilibus tanquam de rationalibus loquar; quod etiam de Terra orante dicere possumus. Quod autem inseritur eum viso Scorpione timuisse atque habenas equorum liquisse, et in eos ultra solitum ascendisse, et celi partem illam exussisse, et terram equo modo descendentes incendisse, ab ordine nature continuo sumptum est.¹²

Rather than attribute Phaethon's motivations to something less selfish and juvenile as in the *Allegoria*, Boccaccio leaves them unchanged from Ovid's version. Yet he defends Phaethon's journey itself as part of the natural order of living things, expressive of a normal desire to grow and learn, a desire shared even by insensate things.¹³ The Earth's prayers themselves, which in Ovid's poem demand our sympathy, are motivated by this same desire. The parallel between rational man and insensate things makes clear the connection to the physical world: the desire to go beyond limits is itself *innatum*, a part of all of God's creations and, therefore, not attributable to the errant or fallen qualities of man.

This is also the moment where *oltremisura* explicitly appears as *ultra solitum*. But who or what exactly is exceeding the bounds is part of the confused structure of the passage, which seems to move with equal ease between Phaethon and the chariot's horses. The agent of ignition, both of the heavens and the earth, is obfuscated, leaving it perhaps with the sense the Italian translation below gives: that Phaethon ignites the heavens, while the crash of the chariot's horses sets fire to the earth. This ambiguity only serves to emphasize the inherent quality of the desire, shared even in

¹² "Nel fatto poi che Fetonte chieda al padre di guidare il carro della luce, dobbiamo intendere un certo innato desiderio di conservarsi e di crescere, anche nelle creature insensibili (per dire di esse come di creature razionali); e ciò possiamo anche dire della Terra che prega. Ciò che poi si aggiunge (che Fetonte, visto lo Scorpione, abbia avuto paura e abbia lasciato andare le briglie dei cavalli e che su di essi sia salito oltre il limite e abbia bruciato quella parte del cielo; e che i cavalli, scendendo in ugual modo verso la terra, la abbiano incendiata), è preso dall'ordine continuo della natura" (VII.xli.7).

¹³ I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for the observation that this same language appears in Pampinea's proposal to the ladies of the *brigata* that they leave the plague-ridden city of Florence in the Introduction to the *Decameron's* first day: "Natural ragione è, di ciascuno che ci nasce, la sua vita quanto può aiutare e conservare e difendere: e concedesi questo tanto, che alcuna volta è già addivenuto che, per guardar quella, senza colpa alcuna si sono uccisi degli uomini. E se questo concedono le leggi, nelle sollecitudini delle quali è il ben vivere d'ogni mortale, quanto maggiormente, senza offesa d'alcuno, è a noi e a qualunque altro onesto alla conservazione della nostra vita prendere quegli rimedii che noi possiamo?" (53-54).

this death spiral by man and animal. The parity of the conjunction allows for no separation between rational soul and irrational appetites, no place to locate *oltremisura* as excess, error or sin. It mitigates the possibilities of judgment in the same way that the exegesis of the myth in historical and natural terms does. Moreover, not only is this innate desire to transcend bounds not a transgression in itself, but our very sense that it is a sin is figured as the result of our human lack of perspective. The failure to understand it as natural is a failure to understand the book of nature. The passage concludes by saying that these interpretations of the Phaethon myth are taken “ab ordine nature continuo.” Perfectly created by God, nature is a continuous unity, but this should not be equated with being moderate, static or unchanging.¹⁴ It is the combination of extremes that makes the balanced whole. Those natural events which seem destructive, excessive or even sinful only appear so from our limited human perspective. The seeming disproportion of the fire that destroyed Athens (and perhaps even of the plague that decimated Florence) is still a part of the natural order. The human desire to go beyond established boundaries is exonerated because it is shared by all created things, and *oltremisura* becomes as natural as the cyclical growth of the springtime, balanced by its opposite in the continually changing but eternally stable seasons.

A final moment in Boccaccio’s treatment of Phaethon in the *Genealogie* is particularly indicative of the change in judgment with respect to the quality of *oltremisura*. Ovid’s account, which Boccaccio has followed scrupulously, includes the famous line “saevis compescuit ignibus ignes” (*Met.* II.313). It describes, of course, the moment when Jupiter uses his lightning bolt to destroy the burning chariot, and with it Phaethon, in order to save the Earth from destruction. Despite his other Ovidian departures in the *Allegoria*, Boccaccio had retained this passage from the *Metamorphoses* even in that early account. Yet at the very end of his analysis in the *Genealogie*, he manages by some tricky calisthenics to invert completely the famous fighting of fire with fire:

Quod autem a Iove fulminatus sit, sic intelligendum reor. Intelligent enim poete non nunquam pro Iove ignem et aliquando aerem, qui hic pro aere accipiendus est, in quo ascendentes vapores humidi conglomerantur in nubes; que, si impulsu alicuius venti extollantur usque ad frigidam aeris regionem, confestim vertuntur in aquas, quas cadentes pluvias dici-

¹⁴ As in fact the end of the *Decameron* reminds us: “Confesso nondimeno le cose di questo mondo non avere stabilità alcuna ma sempre essere in mutamento” (Concl. 27).

mus; et sic fulminatus est, id est extinctus a Iove, id est ab aere causante pluvias.¹⁵

As it turns out, fire should not be understood in this case as fire, but as water. Jupiter certainly was associated with the skies as well as with thunder and lightning, but the process that Boccaccio must use to arrive at this interpretation is palpably onerous: once we understand that “lightning” should mean “air” then we can follow the process of humidity rising, forming clouds, being pushed by the wind to colder altitudes, then finally becoming water and, in turn, drops of rain.

So why insist in this moment only on departing from the Ovidian account and transforming lightning into rain? The key reason for this change is that extinguishing fire with water maintains the natural order of balance in opposites, a moral for which *saevis compescuit ignibus ignes* is not particularly well-suited. But beyond this, Jupiter’s destruction of Phaethon with the lightning bolt is clearly a scene of divine judgment; lightning cannot but represent the punishment of a transgressor. Death by lightning is the deserved fate of one who has committed the sin of attempting to exceed his proper sphere. The extinguishing of fire by its logical opposite on the other hand is in keeping with nature, producing a reading of Phaethon that sees his characteristic *oltremisura* not as a sin, but as a natural and even positive quality, for which he is neither judged nor punished. He is not executed, merely extinguished, and even his death is a part of the order of the natural world.

But though the *Genealogie* reposition Phaethon’s chariot ride as natural rather than transgressive, does it continue the *Allegoria*’s use of him as an authorial surrogate? I suggest that the prosaic explication of the mythology of Phaethon in the *Genealogie* is itself evidence of the extent to which Boccaccio identified with him even later in life — it is autobiographical in its resistance to moral and allegorical interpretation. In the *Allegoria*’s construction, Phaethon is a figure whose youthful attempt to help others results in his own failure and death; not a pleasant comparison in the context of a project about which Boccaccio expressed strong reservations. Yet the first book frames his anxieties about his ability to com-

¹⁵ “Che poi Fetonte sia stato fulminato da Giove, credo debba interpretarsi così. I poeti talora intendono per Giove il fuoco e talora l’aria, e qui deve essere preso per l’aria, nella quale i vapori umidi, salendo, si agglomerano in nubi; le quali, se per la spinta di qualche vento siano sollevate fino alla regione fredda dell’aria, subito sono convertite in acque, che, quando cadono, noi chiamiamo piogge; e così Fetonte fu fulminato, cioè estinto da Giove, ossia dall’aria che provoca le piogge” (VII.xli.11).

plete the *Genealogie* successfully in terms that subtly evoke the Phaethon. Right before he proposes Petrarch as a superior candidate to himself for authorship of the *Genealogie*, Boccaccio writes:

Et ob id, miles elegantissime, pensande sunt hominum vires et examinanda ingenia, et sic illis convenientia onera imponenda. Potuit Athlas sustinere capite celum, eique fesso sub onere Alcides potuit prestare vicem, divini homines ambo, et invictum fere robur fuit ambobus. Ast ego quid? Brevis sum homuncio, nulle michi vires, ingenium tardum et fluxa memoria; et tu meis humeris, non dicam celum, quod illi tulere, quin imo et terram super addere cupis et maria, ac etiam celicolas ipsos, et cum eis sustentatores egregios. Nil aliud hoc est nisi velle ut pondere premar et peream.¹⁶

Whether these ambivalences are rhetorical or genuine, the beginning of the *Genealogie* emphasizes the poet's concern that his strengths are unequal to the task. It is the mythology of Phaethon's that structures Boccaccio's expression of anxiety here; Phaethon who, through no real fault of his own but that of birth and nature, was incapable of completing the journey which he was begged to undertake. The trajectory Boccaccio describes — the heavens, the earth, the seas and the gods — is that of Phaethon as he travels to the Sun, outrages the Earth and is finally at her behest thrown into the Eridanus by Jupiter. Moreover, Boccaccio's repeated references to writing as work with very real costs should also remind us of Phaethon's acquiescence to undertake the journey in the *Allegoria*, not as a pleasure-filled jaunt to see his father, but as arduous labor. A similar reference exists in Boccaccio's ultimate acquisition to his interlocutor's insistence that he compose the *Genealogie*. He finally concedes: "Vincor, inquam, magis fere lepiditate verborum quam viribus rationum; urges etenim, me inpelis, trahis, et ut paream, si nolim velim, necesse est."¹⁷ Phaethon is ultimately persuaded by the desperate entreaties of his people; Boccaccio is similarly overwhelmed by pleas for help and guidance. The success of

¹⁶ "E perciò, cavaliere gentilissimo, occorre soppesare le forze degli uomini ed esaminarne gli ingegni e ad essi sono da imporre carichi adeguati. Atlante poté sostenere il cielo col capo; e a lui, spossato sotto il peso, Alcide poté offrire di sostituirlo: divini uomini entrambi, e di forza quasi invincibile. Ma io, che posso? Sono un omiciattolo, non ho forze adeguate, tardo è il mio ingegno e vacillante la memoria; e tu desideri imporre alle mie spalle, non dirò il cielo, che essi sopportarono, ma anche la terra e i mari e perfino gli stessi abitanti del cielo e con essi quegli egregi che lo sorreggono. Ciò altro non è che volere che io sia schiacciato dal peso e perisca" (I.proemI.19–21).

¹⁷ "Sono vinto quasi più dalla dolcezza delle tue parole che dalla forza degli argomenti; tu mi incalzi, mi trascini; ed è necessario che, voglia o non voglia, io obbedisca" (I.proemI.38).

emotional rather than rational appeals raises the possibility that, like Phaethon, Boccaccio too is magnanimous, but imprudent.

These references at the outset of the *Genealogie* to Phaethon are veiled, just as the explanation of his myth declines to offer an allegorical interpretation. Given his anxieties about the *Genealogie*, it is not surprising that Boccaccio should avoid a moral gloss that warns against projects that exceed natural strengths and abilities. Under the circumstances, the best option is to justify the project in itself, regardless of its success or failure. Thus the *Genealogie's* mythography of Phaethon naturalizes *oltremisura* actions, ennobling the innate human desire to transcend limits and to undertake ambitious projects.¹⁸ Overall, it reflects the evading of judgment, and reveals Boccaccio's autobiographical desire to frame the *Genealogie* as a generous concession to the needs of a larger populace, an admirable didactic project defensible in its intent alone, regardless of the final outcome, particularly since the ambition of the project could no longer be excused as the hubris of a young poet.

Part of what makes the *Genealogie* such an ambitious project is its vast scope, which Boccaccio claims is alone enough to "crush and destroy" him. But it is not just the amount of writing that makes the project difficult, it is the nature of the undertaking: reading and interpretation. Boccaccio explains that he cannot promise to proceed perfectly in this either, since the original intentions of the authors of mythology are irrecoverable:

Porro, princeps eximie, uti componendo membra deveniam, sic sensus absconditos sub duro cortice enucleando procedam, non tamen ad unguem iuxta intentionem fingentium fecisse promictam. Quis enim tempestate nostra antiquorum queat terebrare pectora et mentes excutere, in vitam aliam iam diu a mortali segregatas, et, quos habuere, sensus elicere? Esset edepol divinum potius quam humanum! Veteres quippe, relictis lictis suis nominibus insignitis, in viam universe carnis abiere, sensusque ex eis iuxta iudicium post se liquere nascentium, quorum quot sunt capita, fere tot inveniuntur iudicia. Nec mirabile; videmus enim divini voluminis verba ab ipsa lucida, certa ac immobili veritate prolata, etiam si aliquando tecta sint tenui figurationis velo, in tot interpretationes distrahi, quot ad illa devenere lectores. Et ob id in hoc minus paves-

¹⁸ Usher traces this same pattern in some of Boccaccio's other minor works. He writes: "But the generic idea of seeking the heights, and precipitating disaster, is one which will inform the whole of the *De Casibus*. [...] It contains a detailed and eloquent plea for the wholehearted pursuit of ambitions, even if they often lead to downfall" ("Autobiographical Phaethon" 81–82).

cens accedam; nam, etsi minus bene dixero, saltem ad melius dicendum prudentiorem alterum excitabo.¹⁹

Meaning in every text turns out to be as individual as the quality of judgment. The recognition at the outset of the *Genealogie* that a singular prescription of meaning is impossible to recover conversely indicates the inability of the author to control the meaning of his own work. If here Boccaccio struggles with this problem as a reader, in the *Decameron*, he must reckon with it as a writer. In fact, the passage above echoes the *Conclusionone dell'autore* in its assertion that even the clear truth of Scripture has been subject to diverse interpretation. Even God's perfect writing cannot attain a unitary meaning. How much less so can Boccaccio hope to write or interpret singularly?

Given that this passage from the *Genealogie* quotes almost directly from the *Conclusionone* of the *Decameron*, it is not unreasonable to ask if Phaethon, though unnamed, serves a poetic function there as well. Like Boccaccio's public lectures on Dante's *Commedia*, both the *Genealogie* and the *Decameron* represent the popular dissemination of knowledge, moving from an elite scholarly class to a broader audience. This pedagogical project is represented by Phaethon, but also by Prometheus, who similarly represents self-sacrifice for the purpose of the dissemination of knowledge in the *Genealogie*.²⁰ In a recent article, Susanna Barsella ex-

¹⁹ "Inoltre, eccelso principe, come verrò a comporre le membra, così procederò, enucleando i significati nascosti sotto la dura scorza; ma non prometterei di farlo in modo impeccabile, secondo l'intenzione dei poeti che li hanno pensati. Chi infatti al nostro tempo potrebbe penetrare negli animi e esplorare le menti degli antichi, ormai allontanate, verso un'altra, dalla vita mortale, e trarre dalle loro opere i sensi che ebbero? Impresa piuttosto divina che umana! Gli antichi, lasciando le opere insignite dei loro nomi, sono andati sulla via della comune umanità, e il senso da trarne lo lasciarono al giudizio di coloro che sarebbero nati dopo di sé; e di questi, quante sono le teste, quasi altrettanti si trovano i giudizi. E non è da meravigliarsi. Vediamo infatti che le parole del libro divino, rivelate dalla stessa luminosa, certa ed immobile Verità, anche se talora siano coperte sotto il fragile velo della allegoria, sono tratte a tante interpretazioni quanti i lettori che ad esse si accostarono. E perciò meno timoroso mi avvicinerò all'argomento; poiché, anche se mi esprimerò con minor chiarezza, almeno altri più saggi provocherò a meglio esprimersi" (I.proemI.42-44).

²⁰ Boccaccio's use of Prometheus in the *Genealogie* has already been explored, first by Marino, and later, more extensively by Gittes: "Both Prometheus and Phaethon represent aspects of Boccaccio: the former both as a compiler/creator (one whose creation is not *ex nihilo* but consists in the constitution or re-constitution of a given entity through the task of compilation) and as a purveyor of intellectual knowledge (the stolen fire), and the latter — according to the peculiarly Boccaccian interpretation presented in the

plores the myth of Prometheus in the *Decameron*, arguing that he is an underlying presence that reminds us of Boccaccio's civilizing role as the poet-philosopher who brings learning to those in need of education.²¹ Prometheus appears to be the positive version of the authorial surrogate, a vision of the pedagogue who succeeds in his didactic aims, and whose *ol-tremisura* actions yield positive results. Though it would be easy to see Phaethon as Prometheus' flawed double, Boccaccio's careful exegesis in the *Genealogie* makes them equally guiltless by framing what appears to be a transgression by Phaethon in natural terms, emphasizing the honor of the attempt, rather than the outcome. In this sense, Prometheus and Phaethon are equals, both motivated by noble aims, and sacrificing themselves in an attempt to help a larger community. In both transgressive attempts there are inherent dangers, but the difference between Prometheus and Phaethon is the outcome, not the action. If the failure of Phaethon's attempt is not a consequence of his own flaws, then the responsibility for its disastrous result must lie elsewhere. It is to the *cornice* of the *Decameron* that we must turn to discover who bears the responsibility for the ends of these educative projects.

In the *Genealogie*, the fire under Cecrops seems to be purely destructive, but even that cataclysmic event turns out to be *ab ordine nature*. In the introduction to Day I of the *Decameron*, Boccaccio describes the historical event that precipitates the *brigata's* flight from Florence and the storytelling: the equally destructive plague is the generative force of the *Decameron*. There are similarities between the *Genealogie's* description of the fire during the reign of Cecrops and the *Decameron's* opening account of the plague. The plague begins in the Orient and sweeps toward Italy, while the fire begins "in partibus Grecie et orientis" and leaves Greece as abandoned as the desolate city of Florence. The ancients also believed the origins of the fire not to be natural, but shrouded in astrological mystery: "nec hoc humano opere factum, sed corporum supercelestium infusione

Allegoria mitologica — as a mediator figure who aims to redeem humanity" (*Naked Muse* 294–95, n.28).

²¹ "In Boccaccio, the poets' educative function consisted in encasing the worldly commitment to the construction of a just society within a Christian superstructure. His innovative views eminently emerge in his conception of the poet-philosopher, which appears in all his challenging originality in Boccaccio's reinterpretation of the myth of Prometheus as a myth of civilization. [...] This version of the myth, centered on the humanizing power of knowledge, permeates the *Decameron*" (120).

emissum.”²² The influence of celestial bodies echoes Boccaccio’s description of the uncertain beginning of the plague: “la quale, per operazion de’ corpi superiori o per le nostre inique opere da giusta ira di Dio a nostra correzione mandata sopra i mortali” (I.intro.8). The linguistic either-or of the plague’s origins is also reflected in the absence of a known cure: “A cura delle quali infermità né consiglio di medico né virtù di medicina alcuna pareva che valesse o facesse profitto” (I.intro.13). However exceptional and disproportionate it appeared to be, the ancient fire was natural in origin and natural in end; similarly the plague cannot be cured by human influence, but must end naturally over the course of time. The destruction of the plague is also explicitly compared to fire in the next line: “E fu questa pestilenza di maggior forza per ciò che essa dagli infermi di quella per lo comunicare insieme s’avventava a’ sani, non altramenti che faccia il fuoco alle cose secche o unte quando molto gli sono avvicinate” (I.intro.14). The connection between the historical background of Phaethon’s myth and the plague that decimated Florence is part of Boccaccio’s elaborate defense of the *Decameron* in its frame. Just as the extremes of the dry and rainy seasons are necessary to the growth of all living things, so the grievous beginning of the *Decameron* is necessary to arrive at the goods of civilization and knowledge.

The process of education, or of reading, may begin in grief and suffering, but it ultimately it will be replaced with its opposite:

[L]a presente opera al vostro iudicio avrà grave e noioso principio, sí come è la dolorosa ricordazione della pestifera mortalità trapassata, universalmente a ciascuno che quella vide o altramenti conobbe dannosa, la quale essa porta nella sua fronte. Ma non voglio per ciò che questo di piú avanti leggere vi spaventi, quasi sempre tra’ sospiri e tralle lagrime leggendo dobbiate trapassare. Questo orrido cominciamento vi fia non altramenti che a’ camminanti una montagna aspra e erta, presso alla quale un bellissimo piano e dilettevole sia reposto, il quale tanto piú viene lor piacevole quanto maggiore è stata del salire e dello smontare la gravezza. E sí come la estremità della allegrezza il dolore occupa, cosí le miserie da sopravveniente letizia sono terminate. A questa breve noia [...] seguita prestamente la dolcezza e il piacere quale io v’ho davanti promesso e che forse non sarebbe da cosí fatto inizio, se non si dicesse, aspettato. (I.intro.2–7)

I suggested above that Boccaccio’s explication of the myth of Phaethon in historical and natural terms justifies *oltremisura* desires and goals in

²² “[C]he ciò non accadde per opera dell’uomo, ma fu mandato per influsso di corpi sovracelesti” (*Gen.* VII.xli.3). The *Decameron* is Vol. 4 of *Tutte le opere*.

themselves by aligning them with changing extremes that balance the created universe. In this passage, Boccaccio works with the same premise: the *Decameron* originates in the suffering caused by the plague, but it promises to conclude with the natural opposite of its destructive force. The metaphor of a climb up a difficult mountain is likewise naturalizing; extremes of pleasure find their balance in a painful ending, but Boccaccio's dark beginning promises an end in joy.

Despite this promise, however, there is always the risk that Boccaccio's educative program in the *Decameron* will be unsuccessful. For while Prometheus succeeds in his civilizing goals, Phaethon carries with him the possibility of a failed project. Thus, the attempt to disseminate knowledge must be laudable in itself, and Boccaccio claims the value of the *Decameron* regardless of how readers finally interpret it: "Ciascuna cosa in se medesima è buona a alcuna cosa, e male adoperata può essere nociva di molte; e così dico delle mie novelle" (Concl. 13). Whether we speak of the fire that destroyed Athens, or the *novelle* of the *Decameron*, the problem is not with the thing itself, or the appearance of extremes. The problem is always one of our limited perspective, of our inability to "read" correctly: "Niuna corrotta mente intese mai sanamente parola" (Concl. 11).

The following passage from the *Conclusion* appears right before the moment so clearly recalled by the opening of the *Genealogie*. Again, echoes of Phaethon appear in the presence of doubt about the success of his pedagogical project, for like Scripture, the *Decameron* is open to misinterpretation and misuse:

Le quali, chenti che elle si sieno, e nuocere e giovar possono, sí come possono tutte l'altre cose, avendo riguardo all'ascoltatore. Chi non sa ch'è il vino ottima cosa a' viventi, secondo Cinciglione e Scolai e assai altri, e a colui che ha la febbre è nocivo? direm noi, per ciò che nuoce a' febricitanti, che sia malvagio? Chi non sa che il fuoco è utilissimo, anzi necessario a' mortali? direm noi, per ciò che egli arde le case e le ville e le città, che sia malvagio? L'arme similmente la salute difendon di coloro che pacificamente di viver desiderano, e anche uccidon gli uomini molte volte, non per malizia di loro, ma di coloro che malvagiamente l'adoperano. (Concl. 8–10)

After its painful beginning, the plague is rarely mentioned in the *Decameron*. Despite the joking reference to drunkards, there is a seriousness here to the reappearance of fever, especially since the *brigata* has just returned to Florence. Yet Boccaccio writes that wine may harm a feverish patient even though at other times it is salutary, just like fire is sometimes destructive, but is still necessary for the survival of mankind. The reappearance of fire here should remind us of Prometheus, but also of the

youthful Phaethon of the *Allegoria*, who sacrificed himself in response to the pleas of the Parthenopeans, desperate for the new flowers of the sun. Exculpated in the *Genealogie* from blame by the naturalization of his *oltremisura* attempt, Phaethon cannot essentially transform fire into a destructive, negative substance, even though his chariot ride burns “le case e le ville e le città.” In the same way, the *Decameron* is a project justified in its aims, regardless of its success or failures. Its author offers the educative potential of literature, but readers alone are capable of turning it into either a corrupting or a civilizing force. When Boccaccio disavows his ability to determine the meaning of his text in the *Conclusione*, it is less about a lack of authorial control than it is about the power of readership. It is a way of making readers understand just how great a responsibility they bear to make good use of the things (and the texts) of this world. They, at the end, are the ones who can make of the *Decameron*'s author either a Prometheus or a Phaethon.

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