

## Tests and Traps in Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium*

**A**t the opening of his *De casibus virorum illustrium* (*On the Fates of Illustrious Men*, ca. 1360–73),<sup>1</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio reflects on how he might use his scholarly efforts in service of the state. Struck by how princes and rulers have given themselves to lust, violence, indolence, greed, bloody feuds, sudden vendettas and many other wicked crimes, and cognizant of how these have sullied the state, he writes, “I immediately seized my pen to write against these men” (“festinus arripui calamum scripturus in tales,” 1.1–2).<sup>2</sup> He follows through by recounting the biographies of those, from Adam and Eve to the present day, who have come to a tragic end, and to these biographies he sometimes appends his own exhortations to virtue and against vice.

Given that most readers tend to confirm the didactic and moralizing impulses of *De casibus*, they underscore Boccaccio’s extensive knowledge of classical and patristic sources, his desire to present life stories truthfully, and above all, his public-mindedness. They downplay, as does the narrator of *De casibus*, moments that are puzzling and perplexing. Confirming the nobility of Boccaccio’s project allows readers to offer reassurances about the positive qualities of literature, to construct a portrait of Boccaccio as a humanist equal to (if not more prominent than) Petrarch, and to offer apologies for the stylistic and narrative choices of the work. Moreover, whatever we might think about the earlier Boccaccio who wrote in the vernacular, it appears that readers can trust this narrator to use his literary and scholarly erudition for the political good.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding the cultural contributions of *De casibus* and its political, social and cultural importance, see Vittorio Zaccaria, in Boccaccio 1983, xv–lii; Cerbo 1984; Budra 2000; Zaccaria 2001; Ginsberg 2002; Scanlon 2007, 119–34; Houston 2010, 64–73; Marchesi 2013; and Armstrong 2013, 19–94.

<sup>2</sup> Boccaccio 1983. Unless otherwise noted, all English translations are mine.

<sup>3</sup> This inclination to assume that the Boccaccio who narrates *De casibus* is a reliable narrator is most evident in the scholarship of Zaccaria and Houston. Ginsberg, Marchesi, and

Although the narrator of *De casibus* proclaims that his book could benefit the state, I shall argue against viewing this book as useful and morally uplifting exclusively on account of its examples of inadvisable behavior and its exhortations against vice. Rather, I see *De casibus* teaching the reader in very much the way that I have argued that the *Decameron* teaches the reader: by setting interpretive traps that test the reader, challenging her to decide which of the narrator's assertions she will accept and which she will discard.<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, I focus on the kind of tests and traps that are set when the narrator of *De casibus* engages in misogynistic attacks. These misogynistic attacks are one of the ways in which the author Giovanni Boccaccio undermines the credibility of the Boccaccio who narrates *De casibus* and one of the ways he cautions us against a blanket acceptance of everything a narrator says. In order to avoid confusing author and narrator, I will, when I refer to the Boccaccio who narrates *De casibus*, speak of him as "Boccaccio Narrator" or sometimes simply the "Narrator."

Throughout the chapter entitled "In mulieres" ("Against Women"), which follows the chapter dedicated to Samson, we find openly-expressed statements that misfortune is caused by *women* rather than by *human beings*, some of whom are men and some of whom are women. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, in an analysis of the opening lines of this chapter (1.18.1–5), the Narrator of *De casibus* places his authorial control into question by making claims about women that teeter toward the truly outlandish.<sup>5</sup> His expressed anxieties about women lead him to sound like the misogynist male narrators in Boccaccio's fictional works who discredit themselves as they assert their dominance.

I shall focus on two passages from "Against Women" in which virulently expressed misogynistic statements put readers to a test. The passages raise questions such as: How critically do we think? Are we able to recognize and

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I, on the other hand, are inclined to be more guarded in our assessments of the narrator. Ginsberg highlights and explores the narrator's inconsistencies, ambivalences, and divided commitments (2002, 190–227). In his "Boccaccio on Fortune," Marchesi 2013 invites us to go back to what he calls "this challenging text" (251) and he asks us, among other things, to consider questions of "potential metaliterary significance" (253) having to do with how readers judge what narrators say (253–54). In Migiel 2015, I argue that "*De casibus* would not be a signature Boccaccian work if it did not provide leverage against its narrator" (174).

<sup>4</sup> Migiel 2015b, especially chapter 4, "Some Restrictions Apply: Testing the Reader in *Decameron* 3.8."

<sup>5</sup> Migiel 2015, 172–75.

expose the rhetorical sleight of hand involved in the deflection of responsibility? How trusting are we when examples are cited as evidence? Do we notice when examples work contrary to forceful claims? Might we be able to propose counter-arguments?

Here is a key passage in which the Narrator blames women for the downfall of men:

Demum astutia muliebri mentes hominum terebrantes, sensere acutius quis incedendi modus, quando pectoris delitie, quando cruris paululum ostendendum sit; qua oculi parte prospiciendi sint homines, qua lubrica gesticulatione trahendi; quis faciem deceat risus, et – quod optime novērunt – dum tempus est, id nolle quod velint ostendere. Sed quid earum artes nescius explicare conor? Ante celi sydera vel maris harenas dinumeres. Hec tamen palam omnia: que sint in conclave mellita verba, que blanditie, que lascivie, que si oportuerint lacrimae, que illis plurimum obsequiose sunt, honestius tacuisse arbitror quam narrasse. His igitur tot et talibus, seu ab eorum aliquot, sepiissime capiuntur spectatores egregii, quibus plus cure oblectatio voluptatis est quam virtutis labor. Qui dum advententes quas ipsi confecimus catenas confringere nequeamus, in exitium sepiissime ruimus. Heu michi! Satis ad perniciem erat humani generis rudis forma, nisi tot superadderentur ministeria. Ea forsitan captus est primus homo: his captus est Paris, captus Thyestes et Pyrrus; his decipulis grandis pre ceteris Hercules in excusationem mortalium ceterorum occupatus est, adeo ut non solum Deyaniram, predilectissimam sibi, verum se ipsum amplissimamque famam suam oblivisceretur omnino, seque sic dilecte puelle iussis obsequentem redderet, ut, fortitudinis omnia argumenta deposita, nens muliebre officium exerceret. (1.18.8–13)

In short, as they worm their way into the minds of men with feminine wiles, they detect with great acumen how to proceed: when to show off the delights of the breast, when to show off a little bit of leg, what glances to use on men, what sort of sensual gestures to attract them, what sort of smile is appropriate, and — what they know remarkably well — when the moment is right, how to make it look as if they don't want what they do want. But why do I, ignorant [of these matters] as I am, attempt to detail their arts? You could sooner count the stars in the sky or the grains of sand in the sea. This is all well known. As for the honeyed words they offer in enclosed rooms, the flattery, the wantonness, the tears (if necessary) that they generally have readily available: I judge that it is nobler to be silent than to speak. By all of these things — or some one of them — the illustrious spectators are often taken in, as they are more concerned with delightful pleasure than with the exertion of virtue. And while we are unable to destroy the chains that we realize we ourselves have fashioned, we often hurtle toward ruin. Alas! Uncultivated beauty was sufficient to bring about the fall of the human race without all this extra assistance. The first man, perhaps, was conquered in that way. Paris was captured, Thyestes and Pyrrhus were captured; by these snares the powerful Hercules was entangled, thus excusing all other mortals, and thus he completely and utterly forgot

not only his very beloved Deianira, but also himself and his widespread reputation. He offered himself submissively to the commands of his beloved mistress so that, having put all evidence of his strength aside, he could engage in weaving, a womanly exercise.

According to the Narrator, women have a strategic vision they implement purposefully by means of selective display of parts of their bodies that should typically remain hidden and by means of a body language of glances, gestures, and smiles. Women are not just selective about how they display their bodies; they also work through infiltration (“worming their way into the minds of men”) and by deceit (knowing “how to make it look as if they don’t want what they do want”). As the passage goes on, the Narrator returns to the women’s strategies, “the honeyed words they offer in enclosed rooms, the flattery, the wantonness, the tears (if necessary) that they generally have readily available.” The requisite examples of men’s downfall — the first man, Paris, Thyestes, Pyrrhus, Hercules — appear to secure the Narrator’s claim.

The Narrator strives to keep us from questioning his investment in making such arguments about women. Posing the question, “But why do I, ignorant [of these matters] as I am, attempt to detail their arts?”, he may seem to invite the reader to consider intention and motivation. Our question could be: Actually, yes, come to think of it, why does he attempt this? But with a nifty sleight of hand, the Narrator transforms the question. By responding, “You could sooner count the stars in the sky or the grains of sand in the sea,” he directs our attention away from his own motives and toward the vast multiplicity of women’s arts. From here, the Narrator asserts categorically that the evidence about women is incontrovertible: “This is all well known.” The suggestion is that it would be self-evident even to someone like himself who is “ignorant” about these matters. This allows him to return to the detailing of women’s arts, which he does by means of the rhetorical device of apophasis. He adds to the catalogue of women’s strategies (“the honeyed words they offer in enclosed rooms, the flattery, the wantonness, the tears [if necessary] that they generally have readily available”), but then moves to classify these things as unworthy of mention. Apophasis allows the Narrator to level his accusations again women and to place himself above reproach for doing so.

In the midst of attacking women and drawing attention away from his own motivation, the narrator explores the idea that, if men have been subject to women, they themselves bear responsibility for their own downfall. Two key sentences follow the second catalogue of the artful means by which women imperil men: “By all of these things — or some one of them — the illustrious spectators are often taken in, as they are more concerned with

delightful pleasure than with the exertion of virtue. And if we are unable to pay attention and break the chains that we ourselves have fashioned, we often hurtle toward ruin.” In revising *De casibus*, Boccaccio has changed the grammatical subject of the second sentence. In the earlier redaction of the work, the Narrator speaks about men using the third-person plural: “Qui dum advertentes quas ipsi sibi confecere catenas eas confringere nequeunt in exitium sepissime ruunt” (“And while *they* are unable to destroy the chains that *they* realize *they themselves* have fashioned, *they* often hurtle toward ruin,” emphasis mine). By using the third-person plural, he leaves unresolved the question of whether he too is a man who has come to ruin because of decisions he himself has made with regard to women. In the revised version which forms the basis for the critical edition, the Narrator clarifies by using the first-person plural “we.” Speaking of “our” inability to pay attention and of the chains that “we ourselves” have fashioned, he announces that all men, himself included, are also to blame.

I would offer that Boccaccio selects the image of men fashioning their own chains because he wishes his readers to recall the following passage in Ecclesiastes 7:27:

et inveni amariorem morte mulierem, quae laqueus venatorum est, et sagena cor eius; vincula sunt manus illius. Qui placet Deo effugiet illam; qui autem peccator est capietur ab illa.<sup>6</sup>

And I found woman to be more bitter than death. She is a hunter's trap, her heart a snare, her hands fetters that bind. He who is pleasing to God will escape her, but the sinner will be captured by her.

While the biblical passage associates all the features of entrapment with woman, it is quite clear that only sinners will be captured by her. Since the passage makes no sense if we think that it refers to us as sinners by nature, we must conclude that we become sinners when we freely choose to act in a way that, upon evaluation of the object chosen, the end in view or the intention, and the circumstances of the action, can be judged to be sinful. To be a sinner is to be responsible for having made a bad choice. By recalling the biblical passage, which underscores that sinners are victims of (women's) snares, and by having his Narrator admit that men fashion their own chains, Boccaccio allows us to take some distance from the Narrator's misogynistic blaming of women.

Still, just as the Narrator acknowledges that men also bear responsibility for what happens to them, the Narrator doubles down in his attack on women. To do that, he needs the complicity of the reader. How should we

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<sup>6</sup> Biblia sacra iuxta vulgatam 1969.

understand his statement, “Alas! Uncultivated beauty was sufficient to bring about the fall of the human race without all this extra assistance”? In the context of the passage, all the extra assistance (“tot superadderentur ministeria”) could refer to two things: the most proximate thing (the extra assistance that men provide because men fashion their own chains) but also the matters the Narrator had discussed earlier (the extra things that women do in order to highlight their beauty). No matter that the Narrator had earlier claimed that women, in their uncultivated form, exhibited multiple defects.

As he adduces five examples of men overcome by women’s wiles, the Narrator provides information that encourages us to think twice about whether these examples confirm his theory. Although the final examples are announced with bold tones, as the Narrator cites three men (Paris, Thyestes and Pyrrhus) who were ‘captured’ and goes on to elaborate on the case of Hercules, which he cites as evidence that no mortal can escape the snares of women, he opens the door to doubt when he hedges with a qualifier as he provides his first example: “The first man, *perhaps*, was conquered in that way” (emphasis mine). If we accept this assertion, we have to forget that in the very first chapter of Book 1, there is absolutely no indication that Adam, who appears along with Eve, was undone by her feminine wiles, although she does serve as the conduit that passes along to Adam the serpent’s false advice to ignore God’s command to them (1.9).

It behooves us to consider why, in the second redaction of *De casibus*, Boccaccio put forth the examples of Adam, Paris, Thyestes, Pyrrhus and Hercules, and why in the first redaction, he had named Adam, Paris, Aegisthus, Samson and Hercules. A first explanation could be straightforward. With Aegisthus, Boccaccio might risk confusing his reader, since the Latin name is *Aegyptus*, meaning “Egypt” as well as the Aegyptus who was a great-grandson of Jupiter (referred to in *Genealogie deorum gentilium* 2.21); and it seems reasonable to see the mention of Samson as redundant, since his story was told at length in the previous chapter (1.17). I would propose, however, that there is more to the revision, and that Boccaccio introduces Thyestes and Pyrrhus to encourage us to question whether the examples chosen shore up the Narrator’s claim that their downfall is the result of women’s ill-doing.

Subsequently, in a passage that is frequently cited as evidence of Boccaccio’s misogyny, the Narrator launches into an all-out attack on women, piling adjective upon adjective and example upon example. This is where we will see further evidence that the logic of the narrator is being put into question.

Avarissimum quippe animal est femina, iracundum, instabile, infidele, libidinosum, truculentum, vanis potius quam certis avidum. Si mentior, acta patent: auro Dalila Sansonem tradidit hostibus; Euridices cupiditate monilis Amphioraum latitantem detexit; Danes Iovem, in aurum versum, per tegulas effluentem adversus virgineam honestatem, suscepit in gremio; Aragnes se a Pallade victam suspendio confessa est; Amata ob Enee victoria laqueum induti; Phyllis amore Demophontis inpatiens se suspendit. Cui se Nysus, Megarensium rex, tutius credidisse debuerat quam Sylle? Hec fervens libidine hosti patrem cum patria tradidit. Qua in parte securior quam in coniugis sinu esse debuerat Agamenon? Hec urens semi-vinctum adultero perimendum concessit. Sino Semiramidis inclitam ob pruriginem legem; Herculem Ioles blanda seduxit; Egyptia Salomonem; Antonium Cleopatra; Poppeia non semel tantum relictis viris adhesit adulteris. Totiens insuper, quo promptior apparebat pecunia, ibi Sempronie verti illico animus compertus est; Medea patrem spoliavit, fratrem discerpit, propriis filiis non pepercit; Prognos non Ytim filium tantum occidit, sed coctum patri comedendum apposuit. (*De cas.* 1.18.18–23)

To be sure, woman is a creature that is extremely greedy, angry, fickle, unfaithful, lascivious, aggressive and desirous more of what is fleeting than what is sure. If I am lying, the facts will make things clear. For gold, Delilah betrayed Samson to the enemies. Eriphyle,<sup>7</sup> who desired a necklace, revealed where Amphiarus was hiding. Danae received into her lap Jupiter, who had turned himself into gold and flowed down through the roof, in a surge against virginal honor. Hanging herself, Arachne acknowledged that she was defeated by Pallas. On account of Aeneas' victory Amata slipped on a noose. Phyllis, impatient for the love of Demophoon, hung herself. By whom should Nisus, King of Megara, have believed himself more protected than by Scylla? But she, burning with passion, betrayed both her father and her country to the enemy. Where should Agamemnon have been safer than in the arms of his wife? But she, inflamed, delivered him up all entangled to her adulterous lover to be killed. And this, leaving aside Semiramis, famous for her lascivious law, Iole who seduced Hercules with flattery, Solomon seduced by the Egyptian woman, Antony by Cleopatra, and Poppaea, who left husbands multiple times and went to live in adultery with her lovers. How many times, moreover, when money appeared more readily did Sempronia's thought turn there. Medea plundered her father, tore her brother to pieces, and did not spare her own children. Procne not only killed her son, Itys, but also prepared him as a meal for his father.

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<sup>7</sup> Note that while the Latin text reads "Eurydice," the Eurydice that was the daughter of Talauis (i.e., *Eurydice Thalaonis*) is by tradition called Eriphyle, and thus most translations of this passage name her as such even though here and in other of Boccaccio's works, she appears as "Eurydice." See *De mul.* 29, the story of Argia (Boccaccio 1970, 122–27), and *Genealogie* 2.39.

The sixteen examples appear to be loosely organized into clusters, so as to illustrate the greed, anger, fickleness, unfaithfulness, lasciviousness and aggression that the narrator has ascribed to women at the beginning of this passage. Clearly the two women named first (Delilah and Eriphyle) are said to be motivated by greed. There follow some women who, although their emotions are not described, are presumably distressed and angry (Arachne, Amata); then there is a woman who is said to be impatient in her love (Phyllis), who again we would presume to be distressed and angry, and who (like Arachne and Amata) placed the noose around her neck. There are fickle and unfaithful women (Scylla and the wife of Agamemnon). There is a notable group of five women singled out for their lasciviousness (Semiramis, Iole, the daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh, Cleopatra, Poppaea). And perhaps just in case we had forgotten about the role that greed plays, the narrator reminds us of Sempronia's obsession with money. The fierce physical aggression of the two women named last (Medea and Procne) suggests that the arc will close satisfactorily, proving what the narrator claims he will prove by setting out the facts.

The careful reader will have noticed that of the sixteen examples in the passage, I have been able to account only for fifteen thus far. Where to put Danae? The narrator names her in third place, between Eriphyle and Arachne; about her, he says that she "received into her lap Jupiter, who had turned himself into gold and flowed down through the roof, in a surge against virginal honor." Following as it does upon the mention of Delilah and Eriphyle's greed, the sentence implies that Danae desired gold and precious things. We are likely expected to recall Horace's ode to Danae in *Carmina* 3.16, where both Eriphyle and Danae are cited as evidence of the destructive power of money.<sup>8</sup> But Boccaccio was also aware of an alternate interpretation of the Danae myth. In his Eleventh Eclogue, he provides a sweeping list of pagan myths that have Christian parallels; figuring among these is mention of Jove's impregnation of Danae as like the Immaculate Conception.<sup>9</sup> This is the avenue of interpretation adopted as well by Petrus Berchorius in his *Ovidius moralizatus* (1340) when he reads Danae as a figure for the Virgin Mary made pregnant by the Holy Spirit.<sup>10</sup> In addition to

<sup>8</sup> Also relevant for the negative depiction of Danae in the Middle Ages is Ovid's *Amores* 2.19.27–28 and 3.4.15–22.

<sup>9</sup> For the Latin text with parallel English translation, see Boccaccio 1987, 11.136–40.

<sup>10</sup> Petrus Berchorius, *Ovidius moralizatus* 218, as quoted by Brumble 1998, 94: "This girl can figure the glorious virgin who was guarded in the box of faith. There she was made pregnant by Jove — that is the Holy Spirit; and when a golden rain — that is the Son of God — descended into her virginal womb she conceived Perseus — that is Christ, God,



presentations such as this, where Danae and Jupiter exemplify positive qualities and offer leverage against the representation of Danae as venal, there is another crucial counterweight, offered by Arachne in the tapestry she weaves at the beginning of Book 6 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. There, the violation of Danae appears as sixth in a series of rapes perpetrated by the gods (by Jupiter, Neptune, Apollo, Bacchus, and Saturn). If there is blame to be assigned for the sexual assaults that Arachne narrates in her tapestry, it is clearly not to be assigned to the women, but rather to the dissimulating male divinities.

Danae proves a potential stumbling block, as indeed she was for medieval and Renaissance artists.<sup>11</sup> Is it Danae who is greedy and lascivious, or is it Jupiter who is lustful, deceitful, and violent? I believe that, despite what Boccaccio Narrator says against women here, Giovanni Boccaccio himself would have wanted us to sense the complexity and the contradiction. He encourages us to do that by naming Arachne immediately after Danae, thus reminding us of the story that Arachne told about Jupiter's rape of Danae.

Between Danae and Arachne, the accusation that women are at fault for men's ruin begins to unravel. Unlike Delilah and Eriphyle, who made choices to betray men, Danae made no such choice. And in the story of Arachne there is no harm to a man at all – unless we assume that her tapestry portraying the rapes perpetrated by male divinities is an affront to masculine power, and unless we assume that Arachne's refusal to acknowledge Pallas Minerva as her superior in weaving constitutes an affront to masculine power because Pallas stands in for that power. Boccaccio Narrator maneuvers around this inconsistency by claiming that Arachne, by hanging herself, “acknowledged that she was defeated by Pallas.”

The mention of Arachne leads scholars to point out other moments where Boccaccio mentions her. There is an extended biography of Arachne in *De mulieribus claris*, written around the same time as the first version of *De casibus*,<sup>12</sup> and there is a brief biographical statement about Arachne that appears in a gloss on his *Teseida delle nozze d'Emilia*. Since the information included in this brief gloss is largely consistent with what is said about Arachne in *De casibus*, I cite it in full here:

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and man.” Cf. Psalm 71:6: “He will come down like the rain upon the fleece.” And so, the father of this girl — that is, the Jewish people — repudiated her with her son and rejected faith in her.”

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed overview of the way that Danae was represented and viewed from antiquity through the seventeenth century, see Hammer-Tugendhat 2015, 136–44. See also Léglu 2010, 131: “Intriguingly, the tale of Danaë was interpreted in divergent ways in the Middle Ages, both as a narrative concerning a prostitute and as an allegory of virginity.”

<sup>12</sup> Boccaccio 1970, chapter 18.

Aragne fu una giovane di bassa conditione la quale fu optima maestra di tessere, intanto che ella osava vantarsi d'esserne migliore maestra che Pallade; laonde Pallade, presa forma d'una vecchierella, andò a-lllei e cominciolla amichevolmente a riprendere, dicendole che ella non faceva saviamente di volersi aguagliare agl'iddii, non che farsi maggiore. Di che Aragne le disse villania; onde Pallade subitamente si trasformò nella sua vera forma e disse se ella voleva tessere a pruova con lei. Aragne, vergognandosi d'essersi vantata e non ritenere lo 'nvito fatto da Pallas, disse di sì. Fece adunque ciascuna di loro la sua tela; quella di Pallas fu più bella; il che veggendo Aragne per dolore s'impiccò per la gola; ma Pallade non sofferse ch'ella morisse, anzi la convertì in ragnolo, il quale, non avendo la sua arte dimenticata, ancora tesse, come noi veggiamo.<sup>13</sup>

Arachne was a young lady of lowly condition who was an excellent master of weaving, so much so that she dared to boast that she was a better crafts-woman than Pallas. So Pallas took the form of an old lady and went to her and began to chide her in a friendly fashion, saying that she was not acting wisely in wanting to compare herself to the gods, much less in wanting to make herself out to be greater. Arachne belittled this, and so Pallas immediately changed into her own true shape and told Arachne that she wanted to have a weaving contest with her. Arachne was ashamed to refuse the invitation after she had boasted, and said yes. And so each one made a tapestry. That of Pallas was more beautiful. Arachne was pained when she saw this, and she hanged herself by the neck. But Pallas would not tolerate her to die; instead she changed her into a spider, which still weaves, as we see, since it has not forgotten its art.<sup>14</sup>

Assuming that the story told in this gloss is supposed to relay the information that we thanks to the story that Ovid tells in Book 6 of the *Metamorphoses*, we are faced with a curious mixture of truth and untruth. Let us return to Ovid:

Non illud Pallas, non illud carpere Livor  
possit opus: doluit successu flava virago  
et rupit pictas, caelestia crimina, vestes,  
utque Cytoriaco radium de monte tenebat,  
ter quater Idmoniae frontem percussit Arachnes.  
Non tulit infelix laqueoque animosa ligavit  
guttura: pendentem Pallas miserata levavit  
atque ita “vive quidem, pende tamen, improba” dixit,  
“Lexque eadem poenae, ne sis segura futuri,

<sup>13</sup> Boccaccio 2015. The gloss is found in the note to *Teseida* 11.61.

<sup>14</sup> Boccaccio 1974, 309–10. I have, however, modified the last two sentences of this passage, which McCoy translates thus: “When Arachne saw this, she hanged herself by the neck. But Pallas would not allow her to die; instead she changed her into a spider, which still weaves, as we see, since it has not forgotten its art.”

dicta tuo generi serisque nepotibus esto!"

(*Metamorphoses* 6.129–38)<sup>15</sup>

Neither Pallas nor Envy could speak badly of the work. Pained at the outcome, Pallas ripped up Arachne's portrayal of divine crimes; then with her shuttle, she struck Arachne in the forehead three or four times. The unfortunate [Arachne] could not bear this; she tied a noose around her courageous neck. Pallas, taking pity on her, lifted her up as she was hanging there and said, "So live, while you still hang, you impudent thing. And lest you be secure about the future, let this punishment apply to your offspring and your distant descendants."

The gloss in the *Teseida* matches the Ovidian source as follows: Arachne is a young woman of lowly condition; she is an excellent weaver; Pallas does take on the form of an old woman in order to deliver a warning to Arachne; Arachne does belittle the old woman; Pallas does change back to her true shape; Arachne and Pallas do enter into a weaving contest where each weaves a tapestry; when Arachne attempts to hang herself, Pallas does not allow her to die but instead changes her into a spider; spiders still weave today. There are also, however, multiple places where the gloss distorts Ovid's account. The gloss does not report the subject matter of the tapestries, which is key to understanding the conflict between Pallas and Arachne. Whereas Ovid tells us that Arachne was "unafraid, though she did blush" and he portrays her as "stubborn," there is no clear evidence for assuming, as Boccaccio does, that Arachne is "ashamed to refuse the invitation." He may be asking the reader to consent to a reading of Arachne's blush as evidence that she feels ashamed, but there is at least one other cause that we might entertain (e.g., that Arachne, who will in her tapestry point out the dissimulation of the gods, blushes because she did not recognize the disguised Pallas). The most glaring distortion, however, comes with Boccaccio's statement that the tapestry of Pallas is the more beautiful of the two ("quella di Pallas fu più bella"), that Arachne hangs herself because she is pained by this ("per dolore s'impiccò") and that Pallas changes Arachne into a spider because she is unable to tolerate it ("Pallade non sofferse ch'ella morisse").

In putting forth examples from the learned narrators of *De casibus* and the scholarly glossator in the *Teseida*, examples that suggest that Boccaccio did not wish us to accept a narrator's claims without careful consideration of counterarguments, I hope to have demonstrated that we need to be wary even when a Boccaccian narrator speaks with scholarly authority and with ethical emphases. We must continue to explore how Boccaccio, by using his

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<sup>15</sup> Ovid 1977.

narrators to set tests and traps for us, separates the discerning reader committed to careful examination of the evidence from the unsuspecting reader willing to accept an authority figure's blanket assertions.

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