

Between Ghismonda and Massinissa: Boccaccio, Petrarch and the Uses of Tragedy

Tragedy occupies an important place in the literary works of both Boccaccio and Petrarch. Although neither of the two authors wrote a tragic drama in the ancient fashion — for example, in the manner of their predecessor Mussato¹ — both were clearly interested in this literary form and composed narratives that comply with the medieval understanding of tragedy as a tale that begins well and ends in disaster.² Like Dante in *Inferno* 5 — and often in direct dialogue with him — both dedicated many of their tragic narratives to the exploration of love and its potentially destructive impact on one's life. This theme resonates in many of Boccaccio's works, such as the *Filostrato*, the *Elegia di madonna Fiammetta* and Day 4 of the *Decameron*. It also dominates Petrarch's elaborate retellings of the tragic story of Massinissa and Sophonisba in the *Triumphs* and Book 5 of the *Africa*: all tragedies that revolve around the power of love.

Boccaccio scholarship of course has given much attention to his tragic narratives, especially those of Day 4 of the *Decameron*. These tragic *novelle* have been variously described as an attempt to generate an Aristotelian-like catharsis in the members of the *brigata* (and readers at large)³; to assert the naturalness of love⁴; and even to offer an implicit and sophisticated critique of the genre of tragedy itself.⁵ Petrarch's engagement with tragedy, by contrast, has received only scant critical attention, and thus far there has not

¹ On Mussato's tragedy *Ecerinis*, see Witt 2000, 122–30.

² Kelly 1993, 149–57.

³ See, for example: Barolini 1983, 527; Fedi 1987, 53–54; Marcus 1979, 62; and Papio 2000, 110.

⁴ Mazzotta 1986, 131–58; Psaki 2013, 226–27.

⁵ In response to Auerbach's famous critique of Boccaccio's tragic style in *Mimesis*, Marcus argues that Boccaccio was in effect critiquing the literal-mindedness of tragedy. Marcus 1979, 62. James Kriesel (2016) has argued recently that Boccaccio's implicit critique of tragedy was an attempt to authorize the style of his own 'humble' *novelle*.

been an attempt, to the best of my knowledge, to offer a comparative analysis of the two authors' tragedies of love and the ethical and rhetorical goals that governed them. Such a comparison will be at the center of this article. Through this analysis, I wish not only to elucidate further the nature of Boccaccio's and Petrarch's uses of tragedy as an ethical tool, but also to underscore the discrepancies in their ethical and poetic vision: an issue that has been at the center of growing critical attention recently.⁶

The analysis of Boccaccio's and Petrarch's tragedies of love in this article will draw upon Martha Nussbaum's illuminating exposition of the two major ancient approaches to tragedy: the Aristotelian and the Stoic. Nussbaum's various works on classical tragedy establish valuable heuristic categories through which we may define and understand Petrarch's and Boccaccio's uses of tragic narratives as an ethical tool, aimed at affecting and shaping readers. The first part of this article will briefly present the Stoic and Aristotelian approaches, as they emerge from Nussbaum's discussions of the topic. The second part will then turn to an account of Petrarch's engagements with the tragedy of love in his retellings of the tragic story of Massinissa and Sophonisba in Book 5 of the epic *Africa* and the *Triumphus cupidinis* (*The Triumph of Love*). The third and final section will analyze Boccaccio's uses of tragedy in the *Decameron* in comparison to Petrarch's own tragic narratives. As we will see, while Petrarch's tragedies of love are divided between Stoic and Aristotelian elements, Boccaccio's *Decameron* strongly conforms to the Aristotelian vision of tragedy, encapsulating much of what Nussbaum, following Aristotle, identifies as the cornerstones of the ethical value of tragic literature. More specifically, we will see how whereas Petrarch locates the source of tragedy within the individual self and employs his tragic narratives primarily as a means of shaping the reader's relationship to the self, Boccaccio considers tragedy as an outcome of flawed social interactions and accordingly strives mainly to affect the reader's relationship to others.

1.

Let's begin by fleshing out the Stoic and Aristotelian views on the nature and value of tragedy as they arise in Nussbaum's various works. The Stoics' view of tragedy is strongly related to their general mistrust of the emotions and assertion that attachment to external objects is detrimental to the happy life. Adhering to Plato's critique of poetry, the Stoics were deeply suspect of tragedians. Specifically, they considered problematic any tragedy

⁶ See, for example: Barsella 2006; Eisner 2013, esp. 74–94; Lummus 2012; Veglia 2014; and Wallace 2009.

that depicted heroes responding to calamity with anguish, sorrow, or extreme anger. Such depictions, they contended, are likely to generate similar emotions in the reader/spectator and cement wrong assumptions about the import of external events.⁷ As Epictetus famously put it: “Look how tragedy comes about: when chance events befall fools.”⁸ Unlike Plato, however, the Stoics did not recommend banishing tragedians from their cities altogether, but rather they sought ways to use tragedy in a beneficial manner, one which would train the reader/spectator to recognize the dangers of overwrought passions. To this end, they encouraged a critical reading of the canonical tragic works, urging the reader/spectator to reflect critically on the actions of the protagonists rather than identify emotionally with their plight. Alternatively, they recommended developing a new, more Stoic-oriented, tragic style.⁹ Such a Stoic style is especially apparent in Seneca’s Latin tragedies, in which, as Nussbaum and Schiesaro have shown, Seneca accentuates the dangers of passion and develops techniques such as “allegories of spectatorship” that are meant to lead the reader/spectator to realize the need to curb passion and accept the vicissitudes of fortune with equanimity.¹⁰

In marked contrast to the Stoic vision, Aristotle refuses to devalue or curb the emotional upheaval caused by viewing a tragedy. In his famous discussion in the *Poetics*, Aristotle highlights tragedy’s concern with a hero tossed about by the vicissitudes of fortune (the famous *peripeteia*); yet rather than critiquing the emotional responses to calamity depicted within the plays, he points to the way in which such depictions elicit “pity” [*eleos*] and “fear” [*phobos*] in the spectator and effect “relief [*catharsis*] to these and similar emotions” (*Poetics* 6.2; 1449b).¹¹ For Aristotle, therefore, the emotional effect of tragedy is natural and even beneficial, providing a certain outlet for powerful emotions.¹² This validation of tragic emotions, as Nussbaum has argued, is strongly related to Aristotle’s notion that humans are inherently fragile and vulnerable to the vicissitudes of chance. For him, calamities such as death, illness and exile are of real consequence and cannot

⁷ Nussbaum 1993, 121–25.

⁸ Quoted in Nussbaum 1993, 129.

⁹ Nussbaum 1993, 126–46.

¹⁰ Nussbaum 1994, 439–84, and Schiesaro 2003, 235–43.

¹¹ The cited edition is Aristotle 1973.

¹² In this regard, my reading of Aristotle here slightly differs from Nussbaum’s emphasis on the cognitive nature of *catharsis*. According to Nussbaum, in this famous passage, Aristotle in effect stresses that by eliciting fear and pity, tragedy provides spectators with a clearer *understanding* of what is required in order to become a good person. See Nussbaum 1992, 280–83.

simply be brushed aside as meaningless, as Plato and the Stoics asserted.¹³ It is precisely because suffering is real and inescapable that responding to tragic events with pity, fear and sorrow has “an important place in the ethical life,” motivating the characters within the play — and possibly the reader/spectator — to laudable action.¹⁴ Tragedy, from the Aristotelian perspective, not only provides readers with an outlet for the emotions, but also validates — and possibly cultivates — the reader/spectator’s sympathetic reaction to the suffering of others.

In addition to its validation of emotions, according to Nussbaum’s reading of the Aristotelian position, Greek tragedy is valuable also for the way in which it develops “practical reason” [*phronesis*] in the reader/spectator, training him or her to become a more perceptive and flexible judge of — and actor in — human reality. For Aristotle, the infinite complexity of human existence suggests that when confronting ethical dilemmas people should not adhere to preconceived and universal rules of conduct — as the Stoics put forth — but rather they should consider the matter at hand in all its singularity and complexity, seeking solutions appropriate to the specific circumstances.¹⁵ As Nussbaum eloquently states: “Good deliberation is like theatrical or musical improvisation, where what counts is flexibility, responsiveness, and openness to the external; to rely on an algorithm here is not only insufficient, it is a sign of immaturity and weakness.”¹⁶ With its focus on the unexpected whims of chance and the inescapable moral conundrums that accompany human existence, Greek tragedy ideally trains viewers and readers to become precisely such acute and attuned readers of reality.

Petrarch and Boccaccio, of course, were likely unfamiliar with Aristotle’s *Poetics* or the Greek tragic corpus.¹⁷ The Aristotelian position on tragic emotions, however, may have trickled down through his other works, such as the *Rhetoric* (especially the discussion of pity and fear in Book 2.8, 1385b–86b). Moreover, there is no question regarding the two writers’ — and espe-

¹³ Nussbaum 1986, 378–91, and Nussbaum 1990, 17.

¹⁴ Nussbaum 1990, 17.

¹⁵ This aspect is discussed at length in Nussbaum 1990, 54–105.

¹⁶ Nussbaum 1990, 74.

¹⁷ Boccaccio may have become acquainted with Euripides’ *Hecuba* in the early 1360s through a Latin translation by Leontius Pilatus. See De Robertis *et al.* 2013, 365–67.

cially Boccaccio's — close acquaintance with Aristotle's overall ethical positions, particularly as espoused in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aspects of the Stoic view of tragedy, meanwhile, were undoubtedly familiar to Boccaccio and Petrarch via Latin treatises, such as Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*, as well as the allusions to tragedy in the writings of late ancient authors such as Augustine and Boethius.¹⁸ Seneca's tragic corpus was discovered in Padua in the late thirteenth century and was clearly known to both Boccaccio and Petrarch.¹⁹ Yet, the question of sources notwithstanding, my aim in this article is not to identify the particular sources upon which Boccaccio and Petrarch relied in writing their own tragedies but rather to highlight the way in which the Aristotelian and Stoic attitudes inform their tragic narratives and help us define their distinct ethical-poetic visions.

2.

Petrarch's two major retellings of the narrative of Massinissa and Sophonisba in *Africa* 5 and the *Triumphus cupidinis* are based on Livy's account of the story in Book 30.12–15 of *Ab urbe condita*. According to Livy's narration of the events, the Numidian leader Massinissa, who was an ally of Rome during the second Punic war, fell in love with his prisoner, the Carthaginian noblewoman Sophonisba, after defeating in battle her husband, King Syphax. Enthralled by the charms of the beautiful Queen, Massinissa promises her that she would not be sent to Rome as a prisoner, and he marries her on the spot. The marriage, however, is not recognized by the Roman general Scipio, who orders Massinissa to send Sophonisba to Rome as Scipio's rightful prisoner. Torn between his pledge to Sophonisba and Scipio's command, Massinissa ultimately delivers to Sophonisba a cup of poison through which she heroically takes her own life, thereby avoiding captivity.

In Petrarch's *Triumphus cupidinis*, composed likely in the early 1340s in the vernacular and in Dantean *terza rima*,²⁰ the poet-protagonist Petrarch beholds a throng of lovers captured by Cupid and following his triumphant procession. At a certain point, his eyes fall upon a couple of ancient lovers — Massinissa and Sophonisba — and he is filled with a desire to speak with them. The two approach him, and they begin a conversation. The

¹⁸ Kelly 1993, 30–35.

¹⁹ See Papio 2013, 48–49.

²⁰ On the dating of the *Triumphus*, see Petrarch 1996, 44. Another possible date that has been ascribed to the *Triumphus cupidinis* is the early 1350s. I find the earlier dating, before the death of Laura in 1348, more likely.

parallel with Dante's own encounter with Francesca and Paolo, the pair of doomed lovers in *Inferno* 5, is thus evident.²¹ At the same time, we should note how Petrarch strategically transforms Dante's account: whereas Dante converses with a couple from recent history, Petrarch encounters an ancient couple whose story appeared in a venerable ancient source. And whereas Dante speaks with the female figure Francesca, while her lover Paolo weeps silently in the background, Petrarch converses mainly with the male figure Massinissa, wishing to learn about the two "affecti" ("attachments," 2.18) that brought him to ruin: at once his ardent love for Sophonisba and his no less powerful attachment to Scipio, in whom shone brightly the flame of virtue ("chiara vertute accesa," 2.50).²²

Petrarch, therefore, both classicizes the tragedy of love and places the focus on the plight of the male figure, who is helplessly caught between two conflicting loyalties. This classicization of tragedy is also apparent in the way Petrarch transforms the nature of the authority against which *amor* transgresses. In Francesca's tragic story, like all the lustful sinners in *Inferno* 5, the lovers sin against "la virtù divina" (*Inf.* 5.36), the divine laws of the Christian God, whose *giustizia* (*Inf.* 3.4) governs the universe and determines the sinners' fate in hell. In Massinissa's account, Petrarch declares in a language that recalls *Inferno* 5 that "Gran giustizia agli amanti è grave offesa" ("to those who love high justice is high doom," 2.52), yet it is clear that this justice is determined by *Roman* — not Christian — law: Sophonisba, according to Roman custom, is Scipio's rightful property.

While presenting Massinissa as torn between the love for Sophonisba and Roman law, it is clear that Petrarch constructs a conflict that is also internal: between desire and virtue, or passion and self-control. In the parallel account in the *Africa*, first drafted in the late 1330s, Scipio explicitly tells Massinissa that the root cause of his calamity is the fact that he gave in to passion. Employing lines taken directly from Livy, Petrarch's Scipio declares: "Gloria magna quidem magnum vicisse Siphacem; / Sed maior, mihi crede, graves domuisse tumultus / Pectoris atque animo frenum possuisse frementi" ("To vanquish Syphax is a glorious thing, / but doubt not it is greater to put down / the strong emotions raging in the heart / and hold tight rein on the intemperate soul," 5.418–20).²³ Massinissa's problem, according to Scipio, lies in his lack of self-control, and it is by learning to rein

²¹ See Bernardo 1974, 104–07 and Bartuschat 2000, 128–29.

²² Orig. in Petrarch 1996; translation in Petrarch 1962.

²³ Edition: Petrarch 1926; translation: Petrarch 1977. Scipio's words in Livy's original account are: "[N]on est, non — mihi crede — tantum ab hostibus armatis aetati nostrae

in passion that he may avoid calamity. In both the *Africa* and the *Triumphs*, this ideal of self-control is embodied in the figure of Scipio himself, who is portrayed as a model of chastity and discipline against whom fortune has no power: “A lui Fortuna fu sempre serena, / ma non già quanto degno era il valore, / del qual, più d’altro mai, l’alma ebbe piena” (“Fortune to him was ever generous / Yet not beyond the measure of the worth / That filled his soul past all comparison,” 2.34–36). While Massinissa is subjected to the yoke of fortune due to his passion, Scipio’s self-control lifts him beyond tragedy; fortune simply has no power over him.

As my account thus far suggests, Petrarch’s two classicized versions of Massinissa’s tragedy are much closer to the Stoic conception of tragedy than to the Aristotelian one. Much like Dante’s Christian tragedy of Francesca, Petrarch’s narrative proscribes a way around calamity, a route the reader is instructed to follow after reading these tragic tales. However, whereas for Dante the solution to tragedy born of desire depends on transforming one’s love from earthly to divine objects, in Petrarch’s case the focus is on curbing desire in the manner of Scipio. In both the *Triumphs* and the *Africa*, the horrific outcomes of Massinissa’s surrender to passion as well as the contrasting praises awarded Scipio for his unwavering virtue, ideally induce the reader to realize Massinissa’s mistake and follow in Scipio’s heroic footsteps.

And still, while Petrarch’s tragedy of Massinissa shares crucial features with Stoic tragedy, there are aspects of Petrarch’s account that question this Stoic ideal. When Massinissa concludes his account in the *Triumphs*, the poet-protagonist describes his reaction to the story in the following manner: “Pien di pietate, e ripensando ’l breve / spazio al gran foco di duo tali amanti, / pareami al sol aver un cor di neve” (“O’erwhelmed with pity, thinking of the brief / Time granted to the love of such a pair, / My heart was like to snow that melts i’ the sun,” 2.73–75). Rather than considering Massinissa to be a negative exemplum, the poet-protagonist — not unlike Dante following Francesca’s story — is filled with compassion towards Massinissa’s amorous plight, his heart melting like snow in the sun. This allusion to *pietate* as a response to the sorrows of love of course recalls the opening poem of

periculi quantum ab circumfuis undique voluptatibus. Qui eas temperantia sua frenavit ac domuit multo maius decus maioremque victoriam sibi peperit quam nos Syphace victo habemus” (“There is no danger — believe me, there is none — so great to our time of life from armed enemies as from pleasures all about us. Whoever has checked and mastered them by his self-control has gained for himself a far greater distinction and a greater victory than is ours by the defeat of Syphax,” 30.14.6–7). Livy 1961–84, 8:416–17.

the *Canzoniere*, in which Petrarch asks his readers to show him “pietà, non che perdono” (1.8), even while referring to his love-story as a “giovenile errore” (1.3).²⁴ The fall of the male protagonist is presented from this perspective as a necessity, a submission to powers beyond his control, turning him into an object worthy of pity and compassion, not scorn. Petrarch’s tragedy of love thereby emerges as inherently divided between Stoic and Aristotelian elements.

This mixture of Stoic and Aristotelian attitudes is also intrinsic to Book 5 of the *Africa*: here, even within Petrarch’s Latin epic dedicated to the praises of Scipio, the account of Massinissa’s amorous plight and tragic downfall features a protagonist who is more worthy of pity than criticism. Scipio himself, at the same time, emerges as stony and cruel. Following Scipio’s admonitions regarding the need to conquer passion quoted above, the narrative of the *Africa* describes Massinissa’s tormented internal dialogue, in which he accuses Scipio of being harsh and cruel: “Si tristia duri / Corda geris silicis, pectusque adamante rigescit, / Quid michi Romana fore cum feritate putasti, / Scipio?” (“Now shall we choose / a death with honor. So my chief commands — / unless he deems that I can bear to live bereft of heart. Ah Scipio, if yours be / a heart of senseless flint within a breast / of firmest adamant, what portion then / of Roman harshness think you apt for me?” 5.466–69). Massinissa accompanies these sorrowful words with loud wailings that are heard throughout the camp.

The description of Massinissa’s lamentations is then followed by a subtle allusion to the myth of Apollo and Daphne. In a wonderful simile, the poet describes the setting of the sun in the sea as Apollo (the sun-god) bathing his tearful face in the water, filled with pity for Massinissa’s torments: “Atque ideo, similes regis miseratus amores, / Intulit Oceano vultus lacrimosaque lavit” (“Wherefore with pity for the king whose love / was like to his, he bathed his tear-stained face / beneath the ocean wave,” *Africa* 5.484–85). Apollo’s “similar love,” to which these lines refer, is clearly his love for Daphne: an allusion that is again bound to remind any reader who is familiar with the *Canzoniere* of Petrarch’s own love for Laura. The description of Apollo’s compassion for Massinissa may thus be regarded as a manifestation of the poet’s own identification with and compassion for his tormented protagonist. In the *Africa*, no less than in the *Triumphs*, we have an intra-diegetic expression of compassion for the suffering Massinissa, inviting the reader to identify with his plight no less than with Scipio’s heroism. In both works, Aristotelian pity is inextricably intertwined with the Stoic valorization of self-control.

²⁴ Petrarch 1976.

3.

Turning now to Boccaccio's *Decameron*, it should first be noted that interpretations of the tragic Day 4 have often referred to it through the prism of Aristotelian catharsis, as already mentioned. According to Barolini, Fedi, Marcus, Papio and others, the inclusion of tales of suffering, woe, and death in the midst of the otherwise cheerful collection provides the members of the *brigata* — and readers at large — with an outlet for troubling emotions, especially the fear of death.²⁵ This position is understandable, given the narrative and historical context of the plague, and may be supported by the frequent references to the members of the *brigata's* compassionate and tearful reactions to the tragic tales they hear over the course of Day 4.

Yet while Aristotelian catharsis may be intrinsic to the *Decameron*, the stories of Day 4 do not merely provide an emotional outlet for readers, but also offer subtle lessons on how to *avert* tragedy, in so far as possible. This ethical use of tragedy evokes the Stoic position, yet Boccaccio's sense of how tragedy may be averted is ostensibly very different from the Stoic strategies of Petrarch (or the Christian path of Dante). In fact, Boccaccio's use of tragedy in the *Decameron* strongly recalls the Aristotelian ethical position described in the beginning of this article, namely that emotional intelligence and 'practical reason' are crucial tools in navigating complex and perilous social and personal situations, reducing thereby the risk for calamity.

In what follows, I will discuss two particular ways in which Boccaccio's understanding and use of tragedy differ from Petrarch's Stoical approach and adhere to the Aristotelian position. First, I will analyze Boccaccio's refusal to consider love as inherently and universally tragic, emphasizing instead the need to be attuned to circumstance when deliberating about love.²⁶ Second, I will show how whereas Petrarch sees tragedy as primarily an individual and internal matter, Boccaccio stresses that tragedy is an outcome of flawed social interactions. Accordingly, while Petrarch employs tragedy mainly as a means of shaping the reader's relationship to the self, Boccaccio aims at influencing the reader's relationship to others, cultivating traits such as mercy, compassion, and wise flexibility in interpersonal interactions.

²⁵ See note 3. Barolini, at the same time, also emphasizes the way the tragedies of Day 4 are crucial as a means of *cultivating* compassion among the members of the *brigata* (Barolini 1983, 527).

²⁶ My emphasis on the importance of context for moral deliberation in the *Decameron* is also indebted to Timothy Kircher's illuminating discussion of Boccaccio's ethical outlook in Kircher 2006, esp. 99–144.

Boccaccio's departure from Petrarch's negative view of *amor* is already apparent in the Introduction to Day 4. Responding in this Introduction to a group of detractors, who apparently critiqued his dedication to tales of love, Boccaccio asserts that love is a natural and inescapable force; the attempt to control it is, in fact, potentially tragic. In the *mezza novella* he narrates as part of his self-defense, Boccaccio describes how Filippo Balducci's efforts to 'save' his son from *amor* by raising him in total seclusion collapsed the moment the son saw a group of women for the first time. For Boccaccio the author-narrator, Balducci's miscalculated efforts to curb his son's desire provides an answer to his own detractors' admonitions to give up on his amorous tales dedicated to women.²⁷ Such attempts to curb love, he declares, are not only blind but also potentially disastrous, given that the efforts to resist "[le] leggi [...] della natura" ("the laws of nature") often cause "grandissimo danno" ("very great damage," 4.intro.41) to those who attempt to do so.²⁸

While the tragic potential of Balducci's — and the detractors' — blindness to the power of love does not materialize in the Introduction, the stories of Day 4 will repeatedly demonstrate the catastrophic consequences of similar attempts to curb love. In the opening novella of the day, the narrator Fiammetta describes how Prince Tancredi's strong *amor* (4.1.5) for his daughter Ghismonda led him to delay giving her hand in marriage. To fulfill her natural urges, Ghismonda chose a lover from among her father's entourage: the socially inferior though virtuous Guiscardo. Tancredi discovered the two in action, arrested Guiscardo, and, utterly devastated, asked his daughter to explain her affair. In a bold response, Ghismonda places responsibility for her actions squarely on Tancredi's shoulders, accusing him of failing to recognize that she is "di carne e non di pietra o di ferro" ("of flesh and blood, [...] not of stone or iron," 4.1.33), and hence naturally disposed to love. According to Ghismonda, Tancredi's failure to recognize the inevitability of love among the young was the main cause of the disaster about to unfold, culminating with her defiant suicide.

The blindness of authority figures to the power of love has tragic consequences also in *novelle* 4.5 and 4.8. In 4.5, the narrator Filomena specifies that Lisabetta's brothers failed, like Tancredi, to give her hand in marriage (4.5.4). She took a lover, and when the brothers discovered the affair they murdered him, ultimately bringing about her own death as well. In *novella* 4.8, Girolamo's mother strives to quash her son's love for the socially inferior Salvestra by sending him away to Paris. The separation only increases

²⁷ On this parallel, see also Sherberg 2011, 26–27.

²⁸ Boccaccio 2014. Translations are based on Boccaccio 1972.

Girolamo's love, leading eventually to the death of the two lovers. In the introductory section of the story, the narrator Neifile recalls the author-narrator's statements in the Introduction to the day; she declares that it is foolish to fight against "la natura delle cose" (4.8.3), especially in matters of the heart (4.8.4). The recurring plot line of authority figures attempting to curb love to tragic ends thus emerges in the beginning (4.1), middle (4.5), and towards the end (4.8) of Day 4, constituting thereby part of the structural scaffolding of the entire day.

Although several of the tales of Day 4 stress that tragedy ensues when people deny the natural power of love, there are, no doubt, also instances in the work that suggest that love itself is destructive. It should suffice to think of Tancredi's own dubious and excessive *amor* for his daughter or the "folle amore" (4.3.34) of Restagnone in *novella* 4.3 to see that love itself may indeed be responsible for calamity. One tale that specifically discusses the perilous side of love is the story King Charles (10.6), which contains interesting parallels with *novella* 4.1. Both tales are narrated by Fiammetta, both deal with an authority figure possessed by excessive love, and both display — like Petrarch's *Triumph* and *Africa* — a connection to Livy's story of Massinissa and Sophonisba.²⁹ In *novella* 10.6, Count Guido advises King Charles the First, who recently defeated King Manfred in battle, not to act upon his desire for the two young daughters of a Florentine Ghibelline nobleman. In his efforts to persuade the King to give up on his passion, the Count tells Charles that while such a passion would be understandable in a young man, it is unbecoming in an elderly King (10.6.27). Furthermore, the Count warns him that if he would give in to his passion, the King will not only ruin the girls' father, but will also lead his subjects to consider him a tyrant and thus bring about chaos to the entire kingdom (10.6.28–31). Concluding his speech, the Count quotes the very same words used by Livy's Scipio to convince Massinissa to curb his passion, words that are also quoted by Petrarch in the *Africa*, as we have seen: "Io vi ricordo, re, che grandissima gloria v'è aver vinto Manfredi, ma molto maggiore è se medesimo vincere" ("Let me remind you, my lord, that you covered yourself with glory by conquering Manfred [...] But it is far more glorious to conquer oneself," 10.6.32). The admonitions of the Count have their desired effect, leading the King to rein in his passion and thus avert tragedy.

The juxtaposition of *novelle* 4.1 and 10.6 therefore highlights the *Decameron's* nuanced attitude toward love and its tragic potential: while 4.1 shows how repression of *amor* leads to disaster, 10.6 offers an example

²⁹ Giuseppe Velli has argued that Ghismonda's heroic suicide in 4.1 is modeled on that of Livy's Sophonisba. See Velli 1995, 236–37.

of how giving in to passion may be destructive. The difference is ostensibly contextual: what is natural and inevitable among the young becomes unnatural and excessive in an elderly King. In the case of the *Decameron*, there is no univocal statement about love and its tragic potential, but rather an emphasis on the importance of circumstance in deliberations about it. While Petrarch borrows the words of Livy's Scipio to offer a blanket warning on the perils of passion, Boccaccio employs the very same words as a moral pertinent to a particular situation only. In his use of tragedy (or tragedy-averted) in the *Decameron*, Boccaccio thus avoids a universal repudiation of love and strives instead to urge (and train) his readers to be perceptive and discerning in matters of love, to weigh carefully when desire should be curbed and when it should be given its due so as to avoid calamity. The importance of sensitivity to context in ethical deliberation, as we have seen, is a defining trait of Aristotelian ethics and a cornerstone of what tragedy, according to Nussbaum, can cultivate in its readers.

In addition to indicating their different attitude toward love, the integration of the quote of Livy's Scipio in both Boccaccio and Petrarch points to another important distinction in their understanding and use of tragedy: when Petrarch's Scipio urges Massinissa to conquer his desire in *Africa* 5, his concern is ostensibly saving Massinissa from himself, preventing him from bringing calamity upon his own head. In *Decameron* 10.6, in contrast, Count Guido's primary aim is not to save the King from himself, but rather to save his *subjects* from the consequences of his passion, whether the girls, their father, or the entire population of the kingdom. While Petrarch thus conceives of tragedy primarily as the drama of the individual soul helplessly caught in the grip of passion, the *Decameron* paints tragedy as social and political in nature, generated by the collapse of relations between self and others, particularly authority figures and their subjects. And while Petrarch accordingly uses tragedy mainly to affect the reader's relationship to the self, Boccaccio's ethical and rhetorical goal largely targets the reader's relationship to others.

Boccaccio's use of tragedy as a means of affecting relationships between self and others is another central feature of *novella* 4.1. Discussions of the tale have often elaborated on Tancredi's excessive — even incestuous — love for his daughter, and accompanying efforts to repress her desire, as a major cause of the calamity that follows.³⁰ While this aspect is no doubt crucial, as

³⁰ See Almansi 1975, 133–57, Baratto 1970, 183–85, Marcus 1979, 46–50, Mazzotta 1986, 134–45, and Picone 2008, 188–90. In discussing the cause of tragedy, critics also point to the fatal collision of values inherent in the tale; while Ghismonda celebrates the new

we have already seen, we should also note the attention given to other failed interpersonal interactions in the tale, such as the choice of cruelty over mercy and compassion. Starting in the opening sentence of the story, the contrast between cruelty and benign humanity is established as a major concern of the tale about to unfold: “Tancredi, prencipe di Salerno, fu signore assai *umano* e di *benigno* ingegno, se egli nell’amoroso sangue nella sua vecchiezza non s’avesse le mani bruttate” (emphases added, “Tancredi, Prince of Salerno, was a most humane ruler, and kindly of disposition, except for the fact that in his old age he sullied his hands with the blood of lovers,” 4.1.3, slightly modified).

The opening foreshadowing of Tancredi’s cruelty resurfaces in Ghismonda’s speech to her father after the discovery of her affair. Towards the end of her speech, Ghismonda warns him not to be cruel to her captured beloved:

se tu nella tua estrema vecchiezza a far quello che giovane non usasti, cioè a *incrudelir*, se’ disposto, usa in me la tua *crudeltà*, [...] per ciò che io t’acerto che quello che di Guiscardo fatto avrai o farai, se di me non fai il simigliante, le mie mani medesime il faranno. (4.1.44, emphases added)

if you are intent, in your extreme old age, upon behaving as you never behaved in your youth, and resorting to *cruelty*, then let your *cruelty* be aimed at me... I swear that unless you do the same to me as you have already done, or intend to do, to Guiscardo, these hands of mine will do it for you. (*emphases added*)

Tancredi, as we know from the beginning, did not heed his daughter’s admonitions, but chose to be cruel rather than merciful in punishing Guiscardo, thus paving the way for his daughter’s suicide. Tancredi’s failure thereby consists both of resorting to cruelty in exacting punishment and misreading the seriousness of his daughter’s resolve, to horrific outcomes. The quality of mercy, as well as the need to be alert to the intentions of others, thus emerge as crucial aspects of the tragedy.³¹

stilnovistic ideal of love, which locates nobility in one’s virtue and gentle heart, Tancredi embodies the traditional aristocratic emphasis on lineage. See Mazzotta 1986, 144–47 and Picone 2008, 189–90. Sherberg offers a slightly different reading of the tension governing the tale, claiming that the prince’s problem lies in the blurring of the roles of father and ruler, as he cannot separate his emotions towards his daughter from his princely duties. See Sherberg 2011, 120–22.

³¹ Thomas Aquinas’s discussion of *crudelitas* in the *Summa theologiae* offers a valuable gloss on Tancredi’s actions in the tale. Following Seneca’s *De clementia* 2.4, Aquinas defines cruelty as “nihil aliud est quam atrocitas animi in exigendis poenis” (“nothing other

But it is not only Tancredi who is criticized for his failed treatment of others in the story. Ghismonda's own behavior emerges as problematic in this regard just as well. This fact becomes particularly apparent in that same speech, which she delivered in front of her father. Asked to explain her affair, Ghismonda's elaborate response is not only bold and eloquent, as noted above, but also haughty and cruel. At the beginning of her speech, Ghismonda scornfully addresses her father by his first name "Tancredi" (4.1.31), rather than the more respectful "padre." She then states that she has no intention of asking for mercy: "né a negare né a pregare son disposta" ("I am resolved neither to contradict you nor to implore your forgiveness," 4.1.31). Such an appeal, she declares, would not conform to "la grandezza dell'animo mio" ("the greatness of my mind," 4.1.31, translation modified). Instead of begging for mercy, she promises to defend her case through rational arguments and facts — "vere ragioni" e "fatti" (4.1.31) — a logical exercise that leads her to heap all the blame upon her father, as we have already seen. At the close of her speech, she disdainfully sends Tancredi to go cry with the women: "va con le femine a spander le lagrime" (4.1.45).

Ghismonda's speech, therefore, not only ignores all the rhetorical strategies for "misericordiam captans" ("moving one's listeners to compassion") mentioned in Cicero's *De inventione* 1.55.106–09,³² but in effect swings to the other extreme with her contemptuous and harsh attitude. And while she is undoubtedly brave, her tirade is also ostensibly unhelpful and may have pushed the emotional Tancredi over the edge, contributing thereby to the calamity.³³ Ghismonda's statement that she is not made "di pietra o di ferro" (4.1.33) thus becomes rather ironic, as apart from her love Ghismonda proves herself to be quite rigid and stony, not unlike Petrarch's Scipio in the

than the atrocity of spirit in exacting punishment," *2a 2ae* 159.1 translation slightly modified). A little later, Aquinas opposes cruelty to the virtue of clemency, which he praises as "quamdam animi lenitatem sive dulcedinem per quam aliquis est diminutivus poenarum" ("a certain mildness or sweetness of disposition concerned with the diminution of punishment," *2a 2ae* 159.1). Tancredi's oscillation between the poles of humanity and cruelty in Boccaccio's tale thus closely echoes Aquinas' discussion, pointing in a similar manner to the value of clemency in deciding punishment. Edition and translation: Aquinas 1971.

³² Cicero 1960. See also *Rhetorica ad Herennium* 2.31.50 in Pseudo-Cicero 1981.

³³ On the problematic aspects of Ghismonda's speech, see also Psaki's following statement: "Ghismonda launches into a fully fledged oration, though one which is the opposite of persuasive. [...] Ghismonda's defenses, accusations, and contemptuous dismissal of Tancredi may well be gratifying to articulate, but they goad him into doing the irrevocable." Psaki 2013, 229–30.

Africa. The entire interaction between Tancredi and Ghismonda is therefore marked by miscalculations, inflexibility, and mutual cruelty; with catastrophic consequences.

The fact that the interpersonal failures of both Tancredi and Ghismonda led to tragedy is made especially apparent when we compare their actions to those of Andreuola and her father, Messer Negro, in story 4.6. This *novella* opens the second half of the stories of Day 4 and is therefore clearly meant to be considered in parallel to 4.1, the opening of the entire day. Like Ghismonda, the heroine of 4.6, Andreuola, is a woman of noble birth who falls in love with a man of humble origins. When her lover mysteriously dies in her arms, Andreuola proves herself constant and resourceful. Arrested by the podestà, Andreuola forcefully rejects his attempts to take advantage of her situation and have sex with her, recalling thus Ghismonda's own boldness and defiance. Yet when Andreuola faces the other authority figure in the story — her father — she acts in a completely different manner than Ghismonda. Having to explain her actions to her father, she bursts into tears and throws herself at his feet. She then addresses him respectfully as “padre mio” (4.6.38), refers to her miserable condition, and humbly asks for his forgiveness: “quanto più posso, umilmente perdono vi domando del fallo mio” (“my sole request — and it is one that I make in all humility — is that you should pardon my transgression,” 4.6.38–39).

Whereas Ghismonda's speech, therefore, was proud and scornful, Andreuola's is humble and respectful. And while Tancredi reacts to Ghismonda's words with his cruel decision to execute Guiscardo, Andreuola's father remains true to his “benigno e amorevole” (“generous and affectionate,” 4.6.40) nature, gives his daughter full pardon, and arranges a nobleman's funeral for the deceased Gabriotto. The ending of 4.6 is accordingly the least tragic of all the *novelle* of Day 4. The avoidance of tragedy, Day 4 of the *Decameron* therefore suggests, requires the prudent humility and wise flexibility of Andreuola and the benign humanity of her father, not the Stoic rigidity of Ghismonda or the blind and impulsive cruelty of Tancredi.

In conclusion, the comparison of Boccaccio's and Petrarch's tragedies of love brings to light two very different attitudes toward the origin of tragedy in human life and accordingly two distinct uses of tragedy as an ethical tool to shape and influence readers. Petrarch's two major accounts of the tragedy of Massinissa and Sophonisba generally adhere to the Stoic view of tragedy: love is inevitably disastrous, and the role of tragic literature is to lead the reader away from its danger. At the same time, however, Petrarch also includes in his accounts intra-diegetic expressions of compassion for the suffering of Massinissa, which come close to an Aristotelian admission of human vulnerability and the value of pity. In contrast to Petrarch's Stoic bent,

the *Decameron's* tragic tales do not consider love as essentially disastrous nor portray tragedy as primarily an individual and internal matter, caused by the submission of reason to passion. Instead, the *Decameron's* tales show that at times it is the failure to give love its due that leads to disaster and that failed social interactions are most often responsible for calamity. In accordance with these assertions, Boccaccio's tragic tales subtly alert to the importance of considering context when deliberating about love and strive to cultivate in the reader the compassionate humanity and wise flexibility that was so lacking from both Tancredi and Ghismonda. This combination of emotional sensitivity and practical wisdom, the *Decameron's* tales imply, will assist in preventing tragedy in human society in so far as possible. It is always striking how amidst the tragedy of the plague Boccaccio had found the power to be at his most optimistic regarding both humanity and the healing power of literature.

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