

A New Source for Boccaccio's Concept of Fortune: the Pseudo-Aristotelian *Liber de bona fortuna*

Fortune is a key concept in Boccaccio's writings. Along with Intelligence and Love, it is one of the three fundamental laws that rule over the world of the *Decameron* (whose Day 2 is, as we know, entirely devoted to illustrating this notion).¹ In the *Amorosa visione*, Boccaccio's narrative poem inspired by the *Divine Comedy*, Fortune appears as one of the few triumphant forces of which the author dreams. Absolute protagonist in the *De casibus virorum illustrium*, Fortune is an underlying power that weaves the plot of both the *Filocolo* and the stories of the *De mulieribus claris*. The importance of this notion within Boccaccio's intellectual project is also evinced by the sheer number of occurrences of the term *fortuna* in Boccaccio's writings (117 occurrences in the *Decameron* and 284 in the *De casibus*, to mention just two of his works).

In depicting Fortune, Boccaccio draws upon a well-established literary and iconographic tradition, one that was very much part of the cultural heritage of his time.² A good example of Boccaccio's familiarity with it comes from one of his earliest pieces of writing, that is, his transcription of Asclepiades' carmen *O fortuna* in his *zibaldone*, now included in the so-called "Miscellanea Laurenziana":

O Fortuna potens et nimium levis,
Tantum iuris atrox quae tibi vindicas,
Evertisque bonos, erigis improbos,
Nec servare potes muneribus fidem.
Fortuna immeritos auget honoribus,
Fortuna innocuos cladibus afficit.
Iustos illa viros pauperie gravat.
Indignos eadem divitiis beat.
Haec aufert iuvenes ac retinet senes,

¹ The famous thematic triptych is from Branca 1996, 134–64. I wish to express my gratitude to Valérie Cordonier, Rhiannon Daniels, Matthias Roick and David Wallace for generously sharing their insights during the preparation of this article.

² The most comprehensive study of the notion of fortune in the European Middle Ages is still Patch 1974.

Iniusto arbitrio tempora dividens.
 Quod dignis admit, transit ad impios,
 Nec discrimen habet rectave iudicat
 Inconstans fragilis perfida lubrica.
 Nec quos clarificat, perpetuo fovet,
 Nec quos deseruit, perpetuo permit.³

O Fortune, powerful yet overly capricious,
 you, so fierce in your authority, take revenge,
 you topple the good and raise up the wicked,
 nor do you bother to keep your promises.
 Fortune bestows honors upon the undeserving;
 Fortune inflicts catastrophe upon the innocent.
 She oppresses righteous men with poverty
 and it is she who blesses the unworthy with riches.
 She carries off the young and holds back the old,
 determining lifetimes with unfair judgments.
 What she takes from the worthy goes to the wicked,
 nor does she make any distinction or rightly judge.
 She is inconstant, fragile, faithless and deceitful.
 She does not always love those she makes famous,
 nor does she always harm those whom she abandons.

Many of the motifs traditionally associated with the concept of fortune occur in Asclepiades' composition, which features: Fortune's capacity to overturn people's destinies, its fickleness, unpredictability, inconstancy and total unfairness. These motifs will inform many of the stories from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, especially in Day 2, where the protagonists are frequently and sometimes unhappily exposed to the vagaries of Fortune.

In addition to the aforementioned characteristics, Fortune follows a cyclical pattern. This notion, which had a remarkable impact on the figurative arts of the European Middle Ages and Early Modern period, is attributable to the second book of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*.⁴ Fortune brings people from a lowly state to the highest position and reduces the most glorified individuals to the status of beggars. It is this particular conception that Boccaccio describes, for instance, in canto 31 of his *Amorosa visione*:

Ivi vid'io dipinta, in forma vera,
 colei che muta ogni mondano stato,

³ Riese 1869, 81–82 (poem 629). The so-called "Miscellanea Laurenziana" that preserves Boccaccio's *zibaldone* is included in two codices of the Biblioteca Laurenziana of Florence: respectively, mss. Plut. 29.8 and Plut. 33.31. Boccaccio's transcription of the carmen *O fortuna* occurs on f. 33v of the latter. See De Robertis 2013, 309. On the Latin literary tradition of *Fortuna*, see Canter 1922.

⁴ On Boethius' wheel of fortune, see Patch 1974, 147–77; Stabile 1982; Magee 1987.

tal volta lieta, tal con trista cera,
 che, sovra trionfal carro tirato
 da due fiere, ch'ogni color pareo
 d'altrui pigliar il lor color macchiato,
 horribile in la fronte sol avea
 li capei volti, e a nessun priego fatto
 e sorda e cieca mai si rivolgea.
 E legge non avea né fermo patto
 negli atti suoi volubili e incostanti,
 ma come posto talor l'avea fratto:
 volgendo sempre ora indietro ora avanti
 una gran ruota senza alcun riposo,
 con la qual dava or gioia e talora pianti.

I saw, in her true form,
 at times with a happy mien, at times with a sad one,
 that lady who changes every worldly condition
 painted there upon a triumphant chariot drawn
 by two beasts who seemed to borrow
 every color from someone else for their spotted skins;
 horrendous, she had her hair gathered
 one her brow, nor was she,
 blind and deaf, ever moved at all by prayer.
 Nor did she have any law, nor firm covenant
 in her fickle and inconstant acts; rather,
 no sooner had she made a pact than she broke it,
 turning always, now backward, now forward,
 without ever pausing, a great wheel
 by which she sometimes gave joy and sometimes woe.⁵

The same image of Fortune is also presented by Lauretta at the beginning of *Decameron* 2.4: “Graziosissime donne, niuno atto della fortuna, secondo il mio giudicio, si può veder maggiore che vedere uno d’infima miseria a stato reale elevare, come la novella di Pampinea n’ha mostrato essere al suo Alessandro adivenuto” ‘Fairest ladies, it is in my opinion impossible to envisage a more striking act of Fortune than the spectacle of a person being raised from the depths of poverty to regal status, which is what happened, as we have been shown by Pampinea’s story, to her Alessandro.’⁶

Scholarship has contributed substantially to the understanding of Boccaccio’s conception of fortune. His circular view of fortune, for instance, is one of the aspects investigated by Teodolinda Barolini in her 1983 article on “The Wheel of the *Decameron*.” By looking at the overall narrative parable outlined by Boccaccio, Barolini showed that the entire *Decameron* may be

⁵ *Amorosa visione* 31.16–30. Both text and translation cited from Boccaccio 1986.

⁶ *Decameron* 2.4.119 (text cited from Boccaccio 1976 and translation from Boccaccio 1995).

pictured as a wheel: the wheel of life, of virtues and vices, as well as the wheel of fortune.⁷ In his 1998 book on Boccaccio, Francesco Tateo examined fortune's effects on the narrative strategies of the *Decameron* by showing how Boccaccio uses them as the key plot device for his stories.⁸ More recently, Filippo Andrei has stressed the Boethian background of the *Decameron's* tales, also claiming that the circular trajectory followed by the protagonists of Day 2 reflects Boccaccio's intent to portray these stories as journeys.⁹ Boccaccio's recourse to Boethius' *Consolation* for his emplotment of Fortune is not restricted to the *Decameron*; as Michael Papio has shown in his 2013 article, traces of Boethius' conception are clearly to be found in several of Boccaccio's other writings.¹⁰

Among the sources that shape Boccaccio's conception of fortune, there is however, one that has so far escaped scholars' attention. As a matter of fact, there are places within Boccaccio's writings — especially within his *De casibus virorum illustrium* — where Fortune comes to be connected to a different notion other than those mentioned above (inconstancy, fickleness, the wheel of fortune): impetus. In this paper, I will focus on some specific passages from Boccaccio's works in order to show that the notion of impetus may be considered as a significant clue to his use of a different and previously unnoticed source — the pseudo-Aristotelian treatise known as the *Liber de bona fortuna*.¹¹ After first examining the presence of this work within Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium* — which is the text bearing the most explicit traces of the *Liber* — I will consider the historical evidence for Boccaccio's reliance on this tract. A copy of the *Liber* was in fact available in the library of the Augustinian Convent of Santo Spirito in Florence, whose collection was extensively used by Boccaccio during his Florentine stay of 1372–74, the period in which he brought his *De casibus virorum illustrium* to final completion.¹² Finally, I will explore Boccaccio's use of the *Liber de bona fortuna* in works other than his *De casibus*. I will refer in particular to two passages in his *Decameron*, a work where the presence of the *Liber* is an undercurrent of the story rather than an explicit feature.

⁷ Barolini 1983, 534.

⁸ Tateo 1998, 178–88.

⁹ Andrei 2017, 108–13.

¹⁰ Papio 2013, 50–51.

¹¹ Comprehensive studies of Boccaccio's sources in his *De casibus* have been provided by Carraro 1980 and Simionato 2013. Both contributions offer a quite detailed and well-grounded investigation of Boccaccio's literary, historical and theological influences. However, neither Carraro nor Simionato mention the *Liber de bona fortuna*.

¹² Branca 1977, 180–87.

The *Liber de bona fortuna*, which was recently edited for the first time as part of the *Aristoteles Latinus* series, is a compilation of the chapters on fortune taken from the *Magna Moralia* (1206b30–07b19) and the *Eudemian Ethics* (1246b37–48b11).¹³ Compiled in Paris between 1263 and 1265 using the Latin translations of Dominican scholar William of Moerbeke, it enjoyed widespread and long-lasting fortune in both manuscript and print until the end of the sixteenth century.¹⁴ What is more, the success of the *Liber* was so much greater than that of the two works from which it was drawn that it quickly came to replace them within the intellectual panorama of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Europe. The *Eudemian Ethics* was in fact never translated in its entirety during the Middle Ages, since the only fragments available in Latin were books 4–6 (for the simple reason that they corresponded to books 5–7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*) and chapter 14 of book VIII (the very section of text that was relayed by the *Liber de bona fortuna*).¹⁵ Aristotle's *Magna Moralia* was translated by Bartholomew of Messina between 1258 and 1266, but the number of extant manuscripts testifies to a quite limited circulation (56 exemplars, as opposed to roughly 150 of the *Liber de bona fortuna*).¹⁶ A possible reason for the success of the *Liber de bona fortuna*, which was thought to be genuinely Aristotelian throughout the Middle Ages, is its focus upon a specific topic that was highly significant for many medieval thinkers and men of letters. The *Liber* gave immediate access, so it seemed, to Aristotle's thoughts on fortune.

Distinguishing it from all other medieval accounts of this concept, the *Liber* not only systematically describes good fortune as an *impetus naturae*, but does so with such emphasis as to make this definition the core thrust of the entire work. It should not surprise us, therefore, that when the first medieval collections of the *Auctoritates Aristotelis* were made available during the thirteenth century, they all featured a section devoted to the *Liber*, a section that centered on the definition of 'well-fortuned men' (*bene fortunati*) as those who act impetuously and without reason (*sine ratione*).¹⁷ It is precisely this view that lies at the basis of some specific passages from Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium*.

An ambitiously vast work divided into nine books, Boccaccio's *De casibus* provides the reader with stories of a wide array of historical figures ruined at the hands of Fortune, stretching from Adam down to the author's

¹³ The *Liber* is cited in *Aristoteles Latinus* 2016.

¹⁴ See Cordonier-Steel 2012.

¹⁵ Lacombe 1939, 73.

¹⁶ Lacombe 1939, 71–72; Pannier 1988, 195–97.

¹⁷ On this topic, see Hamesse 1974, 11–15. The section concerning the *Liber de bona fortuna* is found at pp. 249–50.

own time.¹⁸ Making use of a narrative technique already employed in his *Amorosa visione*, Boccaccio imagines these figures marching before him and lamenting their sufferings.¹⁹ For each group of figures, Boccaccio decides to tell the story of the character whom he considers the most exemplary, with a clear moral.²⁰ Unsurprisingly, Fortune stands out as the absolute protagonist of the work, the force responsible for both the rise and fall (*casus*) of all its characters.²¹

The first passage from Boccaccio's *De casibus* worthy of discussion here occurs in chapter eleven of book three. After having recounted the misfortunes of some Roman and Greek political rulers such as Tarquinius Superbus (chap. 3), Xerxes (chap. 6) and Appius Claudius (chap. 9), Boccaccio imagines once again the crowd of lamenting figures (*flentium conventus*, as the title of the chapter reads) passing before him. One of them steps out from the group: the Athenian statesman Alcibiades, whose story will be the topic of the following two chapters. Boccaccio introduces him with the following words:

Cui et plures alii flentes exponentesque varia sequebantur, inter quos grecus immixtus veniebat Alcibiades, *non minus reliquis novercantis Fortune concussus impetu*. Quem, ut in alienas potius quam in domesticas clades opus impenderem, institui precedentibus addere.²²

Many others were following him [Laertes Tolumnius], weeping and telling their own stories; among them, there was a Greek man coming, Alcibiades, *shaken by the impetus of harsh Fortune no less than all others*.

¹⁸ Boccaccio's contribution to a new kind of biographic genre has been examined by Aricò 2016.

¹⁹ See Hortis 1879, 120.

²⁰ Boccaccio, *De casibus*, 1 Proem. 10: "Sed ex claris quosdam clariores excerptisse sat erit, ut, dum segnes fluxosque principes et Deo iudicio quassatos in solum reges viderint, Dei potentiam, fragilitatem suam, et Fortune lubricum noscant, et letis modum ponere discant, et aliorum periculo sue possint utilitati consulere" 'It will be sufficient to select from the famous those who are best known; this way, by seeing exhausted and slack princes as well as kings cast down to the ground by God's judgement, they [readers] will understand God's power, their own fragility, Fortune's instability, and they will learn how to moderate their giddiness and take advantage of someone else's misfortunes.' On this point, see Aurigemma 1987, 74–5; Zaccaria 2001, 41; Marchesi 2013, 246; Papio 2013, 58.

²¹ This mechanism of rise and fall is, in turn, dependent on Boethius' wheel of fortune. On the "Boethian subtext" of Boccaccio's *De casibus*, see Papio 2013, 54. On the notion of *casus*, see Aurigemma 1987, 70. On the *de casibus* literature, see Budra 2000, 39–59.

²² Boccaccio, *De casibus* 3.11.7. The italics are mine. A partial English translation of Boccaccio's text is available in Boccaccio 1965. However, from this point forward in the essay, the translations are mine.

The way in which Boccaccio describes Alcibiades seems to suggest that he is elaborating on the account of fortune provided in the *Liber de bona fortuna*. Boccaccio argues that Alcibiades was shaken by the impetus of harsh Fortune no less than all the other figures he has thus far encountered (“non minus reliquis novercantis Fortune concussus impetus”). As Valérie Cordonier has shown, the notion of *impetus* in connection with fortune must be considered a key feature of the *Liber*. No other medieval treatments of this topic provided a similar account; those that did so, in fact, clearly depended upon the *Liber*.²³

At the very beginning of the *Liber*, a question is raised as to which category good fortune properly pertains: nature or reason. That is not an easy question to answer, since both nature and reason involve constancy, orderliness and regularity, whereas Fortune is by definition inconstant and mutable.²⁴ However, where intellect and reason are most dominant, there is the least fortune, whereas where there is the most fortune, there is the least intellect (as one of the most iconic statements of the whole *Liber* puts it). It must be concluded, then, that good fortune most properly pertains to the sphere of nature.²⁵ It is at this very stage in the argument that the concept of impetus first occurs. The author argues:

Est igitur bona fortuna sine ratione natura. Bene fortunatus est enim sine ratione habens *impetum* ad bona et hec adipiscens, hoc autem est natura. In anima enim inest natura tale quo *impetus* ferimur sine ratione ad que utique bene habebimus. Et si quis interroget sic habentem, “propter quid hoc placet tibi operari,” “Nescio,” inquit, “sed placet michi”, simile patiens hiis qui a deo aguntur. Et enim a deo vecti sine ratione *impetum* habent ad operari aliquid.²⁶

Good fortune, then, is nature apart from reason. Indeed, the well-fortuned man is he who without the use of reason senses an impetus towards good things and attains them, whereas this is <an effect> of nature. Indeed, there is by nature an impetus of this sort in the soul, on account of which

²³ Cordonier 2010, pp. 755–58.

²⁴ “Neque enim utique dicet quis fortunam quod est natura. Natura enim semper cuius est causa, huius ut in pluribus aut similiter factiva est, fortuna autem numquam, sed inordinate et ut accidit. Propter quod fortuna in talibus. Neque utique intellectum quondam aut rationem rectam. Et enim hic non minus est ordinatum et quod semper similiter, fortuna autem non” (*Liber* 1206b38–07a4).

²⁵ “Propter quod et ubi plurimus intellectus et ratio, ibi minima fortuna, ubi autem plurima fortuna, ibi minimus intellectus. [...] Restat igitur et convenientissimum bone fortune est natura” (*Liber de bona fortuna* 1207a5–a18). This sentence was also included in the section on the *Liber* within the *Auctoritates Aristotelis*. See Hamesse 1974, 249.

²⁶ *Liber de bona fortuna* 1207a36–b5. My emphasis.

we are drawn, apart from reason, towards things that we would most certainly enjoy. And if one were to ask a man in this state, “Why do you like to do that?,” he would say: “I do not know, but it pleases me,” being in the same state as those who are acted upon by God. And indeed, those who are directed by God do have an impetus apart from reason to do something.

Following the strictly literal meaning of the text, good fortune is described as “nature apart from reason.” More specifically, it is precisely because reason is missing that another principle (i.e., impetus) can make its appearance, since reason and impetus are two mutually exclusive concepts. According to the account presented in the *Liber*, therefore, impetus turns out to be the most representative feature of Fortune.²⁷ This fact seems to be entirely consistent with the definition of a “well-fortuned man” (*bene fortunatus*) given in the work. According to the *Liber*, well-fortuned individuals are those who have a natural impetus toward the ends they desire. Their deliberation (*consilium*) does not follow the normal rational process and, for this very reason, their actions are more likely to be in harmony with the chain of events (i.e., with Fortune). In other words, given the a-rational character of Fortune, an impulsive way of acting turns out to be the most effective. The *Liber’s bene fortunati* do not even need to reflect on how to accomplish their ends. On the contrary, they succeed in what they do precisely because they let their natural impetus guide them. What they put into practice is nothing but an a-rational course of conduct, which proves to be successful precisely because it perfectly matches the a-rational and unpredictable nature of Fortune.²⁸

In depicting Fortune as an impetus, Boccaccio was clearly echoing the central motif of the *Liber de bona fortuna*, a hypothesis that seems to be further confirmed by another passage of his *De casibus* in which he dwells on the figure of the Roman general and statesman Gaius Marius (6.2.7). Having achieved the highest positions in the government of the Roman Republic (eventually holding the office of consul seven times in his career), Gaius Marius opposed Sulla in what would later be known as the first civil war of Roman history (88–87 BC).²⁹ Despite Marius’ attempts to organize

²⁷ The very term “impetus” occurs no fewer than twelve times throughout the short *Liber de bona fortuna*.

²⁸ *Liber de bona fortuna*, 1247a4–11: “Quod quidem enim sunt quidam bene fortunate, videmus: insipientes enim existentes dirigunt multa in quibus fortuna domina. Si autem et in quibus ars est, multo magis et fortuna inerit, puta in militare et gubernativa. Utrum igitur ab aliquot habitu isti sunt? Aut non, eo quod ipsi quales quidam sunt operative sunt eorum que bone fortune? Nunc quidem enim sic putant ut, natura quibusdam existentibus, natura autem quales quosdam facit, et confestim a nativitate differunt.”

²⁹ Armitage 2017, 51–58.

a defense against Sulla's legions marching upon Rome, he was defeated and forced to flee the city. He ended up in northern Africa, exiled and banned from returning to Rome under pain of death. Yet this was not the lowest point of Marius' misfortune, as Boccaccio makes clear in the final part of the chapter:

*Sed adhuc odii Fortune durante impetu, in tantum sevitia Sylle fervuit, ut etiam sepultum Marii iuberet violari cadaver. Quod cum atrocius fieri non posset, sumptas ex loculo reliquias proici fluminis in alveum iussit.*³⁰

But while the hostility of Fortune's onslaught lasted, Sulla's cruelty so boiled over that he even ordered the disinterment and desecration of Marius' dead body, the remains of which — since he could not behave more savagely — he ordered to be removed from the grave and thrown into the deepest part of the river.

Fortune's assault, Boccaccio argues, lasted even beyond Marius' death, for the remains of his entombed body were disinterred by Sulla and thrown into a river. Once again, we find the notion of *impetus* explicitly associated with Fortune, in a context in which the goddess' power appears particularly striking and virtually impossible to overcome.

It is, however, in book five of the *De casibus* that we find the most explicit evidence of Boccaccio's familiarity with the *Liber de bona fortuna*. Having outlined the 'descending' parable of Marcus Atilius Regulus (ca. 307–250 BC), Boccaccio devotes one chapter to describing the characteristics of Fortune's opponent *par excellence*: virtue. His opening clause is indeed highly rhetorical, as it provides very emphatic praise of Rome's political achievements: "Quid mirer imperium Oceano terminasse Romanos, dum tales intueor illi rei publice fuisse cives?" 'If I think of the citizens the Roman republic had, why should I be surprised that the Romans extended their empire to the ocean?' This question, which elaborates on the famous *topos* of Rome's virtue, is followed by a more general consideration on the way that Fortune may possibly be opposed:

Equidem adversus eos nulle fuere Fortune vires et argumento sit, videre volentibus, ubi virtus sit ibi nullas partes esse Fortune.³¹

In fact, the power of Fortune could not oppose them [the Romans]; and this can be proved — at least to those who are willing to see — that where there is virtue, Fortune has no power at all.

The last sentence of the passage ("ubi virtus sit ibi nullas partes esse Fortune") is in fact a clear reformulation of the most representative statement

³⁰ Boccaccio, *De casibus* 6.2.23. My emphasis.

³¹ Boccaccio, *De casibus* 5.4.1.

of the *Liber de bona fortuna*: “ubi plurimus intellectus ibi minima fortuna” ‘where there is the most intellect, there is the least fortune.’³² This sentence occurs towards the beginning of the *Liber*, and it is the clause that most effectively condenses the entire discussion that follows. By positing a sharp distinction between fortune and reason, this assertion iconically captures the most profound meaning of the *Liber*. As often happens to certain statements in literary texts, this sententia beginning with “ubi” became representative of the whole work and eventually enjoyed a life of its own and a much larger readership than the *Liber* itself. Unsurprisingly, it is later to be found in the writings of many Italian authors from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, such as Marsilio Ficino (1433–99), Girolamo Savonarola (1452–98) and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–94).³³ All of them will turn to this same sententia while referring to the doctrine conveyed by the *Liber de bona fortuna*.

Of course, the way in which the maxim occurs in Boccaccio’s *De casibus* does not amount to a straightforwardly literal quotation. It is, in fact, something more. Boccaccio here replaces the concept of reason with that of virtue, thus giving the sententia a more morally oriented connotation. While the *Liber* sees in the concepts of reason and fortune an opposition between constancy on the one hand, and inconstancy on the other, Boccaccio describes this opposition in more factual terms. He is not as interested in highlighting Fortune’s inner instability as he is in making his readers aware of the way in which Fortune can be defeated in reality. Only a prudent and audacious course of conduct, like that acclaimed by the Romans, can hopefully limit and eventually combat the impetus of Fortune.

In addition to the textual evidence, Boccaccio’s familiarity with the *Liber* may be supported by more strictly historical evidence. A copy of this work was available in the library of the Augustinian Convent of Santo Spirito in Florence, Boccaccio’s connection to which has already been sufficiently investigated by scholars.³⁴ Santo Spirito was the neighborhood where Boccaccio’s paternal house was located. It was in this house that Boccaccio lived from late 1372 to the early months of 1374, as he was commissioned by the Florentine Signoria to read Dante’s *Commedia* publicly in the church of Santo Stefano in Badia (thus offering the first ever public lectures on Dante).³⁵ While in Florence, Boccaccio was one of the leading members of

³² *Liber de bona fortuna* 1207a4–5.

³³ Ficino 1962, 943–44; Savonarola 1957, 145; Pico della Mirandola 2004, 108. I am currently preparing an essay on the presence of the *Liber de bona fortuna* in Renaissance Florence.

³⁴ On this point, see Mazza 1966; Branca 1977, 183–84, *et infra*.

³⁵ Branca 1977, 180–87.

the so-called “circle of Santo Spirito,” a group featuring some of the most eminent intellectual figures of the time (including Tedaldo della Casa, Benvenuto da Imola and Coluccio Salutati).³⁶ He also further strengthened his friendship with the Augustinian friars of Santo Spirito, one of whom, Fra Martino of Signa, eventually became Boccaccio’s father confessor. In light of this, Boccaccio’s testament (1374) acts as clear witness to both the very strong ties between himself and the Augustinian Convent and his personal bond with Fra Martino:

Ita reliquit venerabili fratri Martino de Signa [...] omnes suos libros [...] cum ista conditione, quod dictus magister Martinus possit uti dictis libris, et de eis exhibere copiam cui voluerit, donec vixerit [...] et tempore suae mortis debeat consignare dictos libros conventui fratrum sancti Spiritus, sine aliqua diminutione, et debeant mitti in quodam armario dicti loci et ibidem debeant perpetuo remanere ad hoc ut quilibet de dicto conventu possit legere et studere super dictis libris.³⁷

To wit, he leaves all his books [...] to the venerable friar Martino of Signa, [...] on the following condition, that the aforementioned magister Martino may use those books and present a copy of them to whomever he wishes for as long as he lives. [...] At the time of his death, he must leave the books to the Convent of the friars of Santo Spirito, without any decrease in their number, and these books must be stored in a cabinet in that place and must remain there forever so that the community of the aforementioned Convent can read and study them.

Leaving aside the issues involving the relocation and actual placement of Boccaccio’s books in the library of Santo Spirito, it is sufficient here to stress that his donation is testimony to the strong relations he maintained with the conventual community and its library collections.³⁸ Furthermore, it is important to remember that while Boccaccio was lecturing on Dante and spending most of his time with the friends and friars of Santo Spirito, he was also thoroughly revising and bringing to fruition his *De casibus virorum illustrium*.³⁹ Indeed, his exposure to the contents of the *Liber de bona fortuna* may have occurred during those years, since a copy of this text

³⁶ Branca 1977, 183.

³⁷ Quoted in Mazza 1966, 3.

³⁸ A complete catalog of all books donated by Boccaccio to the Convent of Santo Spirito has been recently provided by De Robertis 2013, 403–09.

³⁹ Zaccaria 2001, 59–97 provides a comprehensive study of the two redactions of Boccaccio’s *De casibus* (made, respectively, between the mid-1350s and 1360, and in 1373). On this point, see also Pastore Stocchi 1984, 421–22; Ricci 1985, 179–88; Marchesi 2013, 245–46. The first scholarly contribution on Boccaccio’s *De casibus* offering a thorough investigation into the origin of the text is Hortis 1879, 117–54.

was available in the main collection of the library (the so-called *Libraria maior*).

A comprehensive inventory of the conventual library of Santo Spirito was provided in the early 1960s by the Augustinian scholar David Gutiérrez, who made use of a mid-fifteenth-century manuscript inventory of the library held in the Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana of Florence.⁴⁰ The inventory includes all books owned by Santo Spirito between 1287 (the year when the Convent was given the status of *Studium generale* and the library was officially established) and 1451 (when the inventory transcribed by Gutiérrez was compiled).⁴¹

It is, however, possible to be more precise as to when the *Liber de bona fortuna* actually entered the library collection. According to the inventory, the codex containing the *Liber* is said to come from the books formerly belonging to the *magister* Francesco de' Nerli ("Liber de bona fortuna, de libris magistri Francisci de Nerllis").⁴² According to the scarce evidence at our disposal, this Francesco de' Nerli can be identified either with Francesco Biancozzo de' Nerli or with Francesco de' Nerli, both Augustinian friars in Florence in the mid-fourteenth century, the former dying in 1362, and the latter in 1369.⁴³ No matter precisely who this *magister* Francesco was, it is logical to assume that he, as was customary, donated his books to the Convent upon his death and therefore that his copy of the *Liber* must already have been in the library when Boccaccio was working on his *De casibus* in 1373.

The entry of the *Liber de bona fortuna* in the inventory of the convent library of Santo Spirito provides us with an additional and interesting clue. Thanks to the transcription of the text's incipit and the explicit (respectively, "Quidam ordinavit" and "Quia multum possumus"), it is clear that the copy Boccaccio used must have included Giles of Rome's commentary on the *Liber*, the so-called *Sententia de bona fortuna*. Composed between 1275 and 1278, Giles' *Sententia de bona fortuna* is the earliest known interpretive work devoted to the *Liber*. A detailed study of Giles' *Sententia* has been provided by Valérie Cordonier.⁴⁴ She showed that in his reading of the treatise, Giles proposed a ground-breaking model of divine providence, a model that will later be harshly criticized by Henry of Ghent (1217–93). Commenting

⁴⁰ Gutiérrez 1962.

⁴¹ Gutiérrez 1962, 5–7.

⁴² Gutiérrez 1962, 409, 67.

⁴³ Cerracchini 1738, 77.

⁴⁴ Cordonier 2018.

on the final section of the *Liber* (1248b.3–5), Giles first distinguishes between two kinds of good fortune (one continuous and divine, the other discontinuous and accidental) and then connects the latter to divine benevolence. As Cordonier pointed out, the distinction between continuous and discontinuous fortune made by Giles in his *Sententia* was totally new, not only when compared with previous thinkers elaborating on the *Liber* (like Thomas Aquinas), but also and more decisively with the long-term Peripatetic tradition.⁴⁵ By acknowledging the existence of a divinely inspired kind of fortune and by linking it to God’s benevolence, Giles offers a markedly Christian interpretation of the pseudo-Aristotelian *Liber de bona fortuna*. Leaving aside all the exegetical disputes that Giles’ position gave rise to, what is important to underline here is that Boccaccio’s reading of the *Liber* was probably filtered through Giles of Rome’s interpretive lens. Looking back at the passages from the *De casibus* already discussed, it is fair to say that a Christian reading of the *Liber de bona fortuna* is what probably lies at the basis of Boccaccio’s reworking of the *Liber* in book 5 of his *De casibus*. By replacing the Aristotelian concept of reason with that of virtue (5.4), Boccaccio provides his account with a more Christian-oriented connotation, a move that is totally in line with his intent to spur the reader to moral reflection. Boccaccio’s reliance upon a Christian ‘version’ of Aristotle offers further evidence for Michael Papio’s claim that the study of Boccaccio’s acquaintance with the ancient intellectual tradition “will aid us in understanding more profoundly not only his pre-Christian sources, which (always mediated, of course, by the influence of medieval interpretation) range broadly from the Pre-Socratics to Plato and Aristotle, to the Stoics and Neoplatonists, but also the way in which he creatively and convincingly interwove them into a tapestry of Christian doctrine.”⁴⁶

Regardless of how Boccaccio first became acquainted with the *Liber de bona fortuna*, its inclusion within medieval Aristotelian florilegia must have attracted his attention. Indeed, Renaissance collections of the *Auctoritates Aristotelis* enjoyed a remarkable degree of circulation up until the sixteenth century. Not only did such collections cover the entirety of Aristotle’s corpus, but they also provided immediate access to the core concepts of his thought. The sententia “ubi plurimus intellectus, ibi minima fortuna,” on which Boccaccio elaborates in book five of his *De casibus*, was — as we have seen — commonly included in these collections.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Cordonier 2018, 236.

⁴⁶ Papio 2013, 47.

⁴⁷ Hamesse 1974, 249–50.

The *De casibus virorum illustrium* is the work bearing the most striking traces of Boccaccio's utilization of the *Liber de bona fortuna*. In the *Decameron*, Boccaccio's reliance on this treatise is not so explicit, but is instead embedded in the texture of the plot. As mentioned earlier, the *Liber de bona fortuna* departs from other medieval accounts of fortune in that it describes this concept in quite different terms. No reference whatsoever to motifs such as the wheel or the fickle woman is to be found in the *Liber*. Rather, this work systematically associates Fortune with an impetuous force, a force that expresses itself through impulsive and violent action. It is to this violent action that Boccaccio appears to refer in two specific passages from his *Decameron*.

The first passage appears within the second Day, whose tales are devoted precisely to our subject. In the story recounted by Pampinea (2.3), Alessandro, the protagonist, is described on his way back from England — where he had been sent by three of his relatives who had reduced themselves to penury — before ending up in Bruges and falling in with an abbot. This abbot, later discovered to be the daughter of the king of England, hears about Alessandro's misfortunes and observes: "if he kept his courage, God would not only restore him to the position from which he had been toppled [*gittato*] by Fortune, but set him even higher" (2.3.22).⁴⁸ The image of Fortune here depicted by Boccaccio owes to a great deal, of course, to the account given by Boethius in his *Consolation of Philosophy*, where she is described turning a wheel that raises some and casts down others according to her capricious will. It is noteworthy, however, that Boccaccio sets out to render Fortune's action by using a verb (*gittare*) that expresses a markedly violent and sudden act.⁴⁹ It seems as though Boccaccio is here combining the two accounts of fortune provided, respectively, by Boethius' *Consolation* and by the *Liber de bona fortuna*. The parable presents Alessandro as having reached his life's nadir but describes that fall using the *Liber's* own terminology.

Even more consistent with the concept of fortune presented in the *Liber de bona fortuna* is the second passage from the *Decameron* that I would like to discuss: the famous story of Griselda (10.10). After having taken their children away from Griselda and led her to believe that he had put them to death, Gualtieri turns Griselda out of doors with no more than the shift she

⁴⁸ The original is cited from Boccaccio 1976, the translation from Boccaccio 1995.

⁴⁹ The same verb is used by Boccaccio in Fortune's self-description in the *Amorosa visione*: "Ogni uom che vuol montarci su sia oso / di farlo, ma quand'io 'l gitto a basso / inverso me non torni allor cruccioso" (31.31–33, ed. Branca, 100).

is wearing. By virtue of her otherworldly patience, Griselda accepts her bitter destiny with no opposition whatsoever:

Per che recatigliele ed ella rivestitigliasi, ai piccoli servigi della paterna casa si diede, sì come far soleva, con forte animo sostenendo il fiero assalto della nimica fortuna. (10.10.48)

So he brought them to her, and Griselda, having put them on, applied herself as before to the menial chores in her father's house, bravely enduring *the cruel assault* of hostile Fortune. (Emphasis mine.)

Also in this case we find the motif of fortune explicitly associated with the idea of an impetuous and “hitting” action, an association that seems to restate the *Liber*'s definition of Fortune as a force entailing a principle of impetus (“ad felicitatem talis utique erit bona fortuna magis propria, cuius in ipso principium impetus est ad adipiscendum bona” ‘Such good fortune will be, in any case, more particular to the happiness of him [viz. the well-fortuned man] in whom rises the impetus toward the attainment of good things’).⁵⁰

If compared with the *De casibus*, Boccaccio's allusions in the *Decameron* to the doctrine conveyed by the *Liber de bona fortuna* appear much looser. There is no explicit reference to the notion of impetus in connection to the problem of fortune to be found in his collection of tales. Rather, Boccaccio seems here instead to extrapolate some of the central motifs of the *Liber* (the notion that fortune is violent, the idea that men must behave impulsively in order to endure her and so on) and to use them in the portrayal of one specific character or situation in the story.

The *Liber de bona fortuna* played a significant role in medieval and humanistic discussions on fortune, fate and free will. Despite its presence in the writings of many prominent authors, such as Coluccio Salutati, Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pontano, the real impact of this work on medieval and humanistic circles is a story that remains to be fully told. Boccaccio's recourse to the *Liber* stands out as one of the earliest instances of its use among Italian writers, and it opens up an interesting and potentially promising line of research.

Boccaccio's acquaintance with the contents of the *Liber de bona fortuna* is a clear witness to both his keen interest in the problem of fortune and his outstanding familiarity with ancient sources. In his *De casibus virorum illustrium*, Boccaccio not only applies the doctrine of the *Liber* to his narrative framework in an accurate and consistent way, but also reworks it to make it compatible with his own view. Boccaccio's *De casibus* is the work

⁵⁰ *Liber de bona fortuna* 1207b15.

where the presence of the *Liber* is especially striking. In the *Decameron*, he may well have had it in mind while framing the stories of Alessandro (2.3) and Griselda (10.10), but his dependence on the *Liber* does not amount here to a clear and direct reference. Following this somewhat looser pattern, one would be tempted to wonder whether possible echoes of the *Liber* might be seen, for instance, behind Criseyde's sudden way of choosing a course of action, or the behavior of a character such as Diomede, described by Chaucer as "sudden Diomede" ('sodeyn Diomede').⁵¹ These pages can, of course, offer nothing more than a preliminary investigation into this possible connection, but the connection certainly deserves to be developed further both by considering Boccaccio's works and by examining other possible influences within his own cultural context.

TOMMASO DE ROBERTIS

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

⁵¹ Cited in Barney 1981.

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