"O mulieris astutia!" Noetic Women in Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*

The compendium *On Famous Women* [*De mulieribus claris*] of Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75) commemorated for posterity biographies of 104 illustrious women culled mainly from ancient pagan sources; the book exerted influence on subsequent literature across Europe, including via Christine de Pizan and Chaucer.[1] Boccaccio composed the work ca. 1361–62, with subsequent revisions.[2] He imitated the genre of compendia of illustrious men, especially those of Petrarch and Jerome. In *De mulieribus claris* (henceforth *MC*), eloquent and intellectual women, poets and women of letters, and women of wisdom, foresight and occult knowledge, including two sibyls, were included for their excellence in the pursuit of knowledge. These accomplished women contrast with the author's portrayal of the primordial Eve, from whom all women ostensibly descended, and with powerful and dangerous women such as Cleopatra, Semiramis or Medea. The biographies of noetic women provide insights into the work as a whole, especially as these women sought various kinds of knowledge, intellectual cultivation and wisdom. For our purpose, *noetic* signifies the possession of knowledge, whether intellectual, legal, philosophical, esoteric or metaphysical; such advanced knowledge conferred power, which illustrious

[1] For works inspired by and based on Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*, see Kolsky 2005; see also Vittorio Zaccaria in Boccaccio 1970, 15–16. Concerning the numbering of chapters, they are consecutive up to 106, but 11–12 and 19–20 are considered jointly, making the total 104: see Boccaccio 2001, xxiii note 2. Brown's Latin text is based on Zaccaria's edition (with occasional modifications documented in the notes), the manuscript being Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, 90 sup. 98.1 (Gaddi 593), Florence. Zaccaria's notes provide references for Boccaccio's sources. English translations of Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* (cited as *MC*) in this article are from Brown's bilingual edition. For a bilingual French edition with Zaccaria's Latin text, see Boccaccio 2013.

[2] The surviving autograph of Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* is Florence, BML, ms. 90 sup. 98.1. Rhiannon Daniels has examined at least one third of manuscripts available for consultation and compared the views of Pier Giorgio Ricci and Vittorio Zaccaria concerning the redactional phases of Boccaccio's composition of *MC* (Daniels 2009, esp. 138–39).

women exploited to fulfill ambitious accomplishments.[3] My intent is to examine how moral questions of sex interfered in Boccaccio's assessments of these women of mental talents and contributed significantly to the text's ambivalence, with a brief excursus on Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies* [*Livre de la cité des dames*] (1405) to illuminate certain distinctions of purpose between Christine and Boccaccio. Christine de Pizan (1365 – ca. 1430) is of interest here since Boccaccio's *Decameron* served as one of her main models, while Christine's self-presentation corresponds to the female noetic models that Boccaccio sets forth in *MC*.

Boccaccio drew upon sources including Valerius Maximus' *Memorable Deeds and Sayings* [*Factorum ac dictorum memorabilium libri*], Livy's *History of Rome* [*Ab urbe condita*], Jerome's *Lives of Famous Men* [*De viris illustribus*], Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides*,[4] as well as Occitan *vidas* and saints' lives. Petrarch's epistle *Familiares* 21.8 (1358) mentioned 31 famous women, with a sentence usually allocated to each one in continuous prose. Most of these women appeared in *MC*.[5] Boccaccio studied Petrarch's unfinished *Lives of Famous Men* [*De viris illustribus*] (begun ca. 1337), which contained 36 biographies in two books. Roman men were comprised in the first, followed by men of mostly Biblical origin in the second, along with Hercules and Semiramis[6] who was rehabilitated subsequently by Christine de Pizan as a great city builder in the *Cité des dames*, a text that relied heavily on *MC*.[7] Boccaccio consulted a range of classical sources in composing *The Fates of Illustrious Men* [*De casibus virorum illustrium*]

[3] Noetic women of accomplishment evidently intrigue Boccaccio. This is not to imply that these types of knowledge are identical or equivalent, but the category is useful to identify narrative patterns.

[4] Ovid's *Ars amatoria* and *Amores* form part of Boccaccio's literary background concerning women in a more diffuse way. Still other sources are pertinent to individual biographies of women in Boccaccio's work (e.g., Statius' *Thebaid* for Jocasta).

[5] Petrarch's letter was addressed to Anna, third wife of Charles IV of Bohemia, on the occasion of the birth of their daughter. Elsa Filosa has compared Petrarch's *Familiares* 21.8 with *De mulieribus claris* (Filosa 2012, 51–59), including a comparative table on p. 55. Petrarch includes Isis, Carmenta, Sappho, Proba, Sibille (analogous to Eritrea and Almathea in Boccaccio), Semiramide, Didone and Mantova [Manto].

[6] Dante's Semiramis incarnated the vices of lust, ambition and cruelty (*Inferno* 5.55–60). Most memorably, it was Semiramis (9th cent. BCE) who "libito fé licito in sua legge" (v. 56). This is a translation of Orosius' "ut cuique libitum esset liberum fieret" (*Historiae adversum paganos* 1.4.4–8). Ovid alludes to Semiramis in *Met*. 4.58–59. See also Sarolli 1976.

[7] For the fifteenth-century French text of Christine de Pizan's *Livre de la cité des dames*, based on the edition of Earl Jeffrey Richards (with facing Italian translation), see Christine de Pizan 1997. For an English translation, see Christine de Pizan 1998.

(first redaction ca. 1355) and *MC*. However, no secular text available to him corresponded closely to literary biographies of illustrious women, and thus Boccaccio's collection was essentially unprecedented.[8] While pagan and Christian aspects coexist within Boccaccio's compendium, it seems that his purpose was more humanist than Christian, even with the imposition of Christian conceptions of virtue for the mainly pagan women portrayed. Luigi Surdich has noted the "criteri di valutazione appartenenti allo spirito umanistico," governing Boccaccio's portraits of women in MC.[9] Ideological incoherence emerges from the juxtaposition of disparate elements, despite the overall moral framework.

The noetic women in *MC* engage in mental work and sophisticated verbal expression while drawing on advanced knowledge, what we might call the life of the mind, including the act of writing. Their discourse and actions impact the world around them and garner renown; this is normally the domain of illustrious men. The noetic women's functions transcend conventional societal limits on ordinary women's pursuits, for it was unusual for women to access these kinds of knowledge. Such noetic prowess in women of talent renders their extraordinary deeds possible. Vittorio Zaccaria has noted Boccaccio's enthusiasm for intellectual women's achievements as "l'ammirazione convinta, anche se non apertamente dichiarata, di donne intellettuali" [resolute admiration, even if not openly declared, of intellectual women].[10]

Boccaccio seems more wary of women's sexual liberty than their intellectual liberty. While the *Decameron* and *MC* are complex and multifaceted, restrictions on women in *MC* were evidently more important than women's pleasure, in divergence at times from the ethos of the *Decameron*.[11] However, this emphasis on moral restrictions in the women's biographies was attenuated by other kinds of pleasure stemming from the text's creation and reception. Roberta Bruno Pagnamenta, who has written on Boccaccio's ambiguity in the *Decameron*, taking account of Franco Fido's work, character-

[8] For a discussion of recent approaches to Boccaccio's text, see Filosa 2012, 37–44. Boccaccio did not know Plutarch's *On the Virtues of Women* [*Mulierum virtutes*]. See Kolsky 2003, 190, and Franklin 2006, 99 note 90.

[9] Surdich 2001, 273.

[10] Zaccaria in Boccaccio 1970, 8.

[11] Valerio Ferme has analyzed the question of women's pleasure in Ferme 2015, including the interactions of the ten storytellers.

izes the *Decameron* as "un testo che sembra darsi delle regole, ma che finisce col rispettarle soltanto in parte."[12] This remark is apt also for *MC*, for Boccaccio indeed sets forth rules concerning his portrayals of illustrious women to which he does not consistently adhere. Concerning the complexity of textual meaning, Boccaccio writes in *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods* [*Genealogia deorum gentilium*] that poems have hidden meanings: "Stultum credere poetas nil sensisse sub cortice fabularum" [It is a fool's notion that poets convey no meaning beneath the surface of their fictions] (14.10).[13] For Boccaccio, narrative and poetic texts contain veiled meaning that requires interpretation, and we may apply that principle to *MC*, though perhaps not always as Boccaccio might have envisioned. Vittore Branca has emphasized Boccaccio's sustained engagement with historical truth, verisimilitude and the imaginary, including in *MC*.[14]

Boccaccio became a cleric in 1360, and was trained in canon law. He apparently felt compelled to moralize in *MC*, but this was undermined by other statements, and it did not enhance the articulated intent within the compendium itself. He crafted humanist narratives of women's lives in Latin purportedly to confer fame and for moral instruction, which women themselves could read in translation, or directly if they had knowledge of Latin. The decision to compose in Latin demonstrated humanist intent while limiting the potential female readership. While elite or educated women, proportionally small in number, could potentially access Latin manuscripts, that restricted audience did not seem to be the primary focus for Boccaccio. This observation is consistent with the material evidence in *MC* manuscripts made with parchment of quality (more durable than paper) that Rhiannon Daniels has examined: Daniels has found that in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century, there was "a generally higher social and economic class of reader than for the *Teseida* and *Decameron*, and a more culturally prestigious text."[15] Daniels notes that the success of *MC* within courtly circles was reflected by its enthusiastic reception in courts of

[12] Bruno Pagnamenta 1999, 8 and note 2. While the argument that Boccaccio *consciously and deliberately* employs ambiguity in narrative strategy is salient for the *Decameron*, it may be less plausible for the *De mulieribus claris*. Perhaps political concerns and conventional views of women contributed to the *MC*'s ambivalence more than authorial strategy.

[13] This is the chapter heading of 14.10; English translation is by Charles Osgood (1956).

[14] Branca 1986, 166–68.

[15] Daniels 2009, 141.

France.[16] Besides courtly readers, learned readers would have consulted manuscript copies as Boccaccio envisaged.[17]

Margaret Franklin has argued that Boccaccio's dedication to Andrea Acciaiuoli was a strategic political move for the purpose of patronage, to seek indirectly the favor of Queen Joanna of Naples, who was the first person named in the body of the text (*MC*, Dedicatio §1) and the last woman profiled (*MC* 106). Here, Boccaccio upholds the patriarchal principle that women attain greatness through association with important men, not through independent accomplishments.[18] Concerning reception, perhaps readers (e.g., fathers exhorting their daughters to read the book for moral edification) did not scrutinize the text overmuch, but instead focused on the litany of virtues and vices in the biographies as *exempla*, enjoying them as one enjoys an adventurous myth or tale. Irony, inconsistency and traditional misogyny are juxtaposed with encomia and, to this reader, Boccaccio's dedication notwithstanding, it does not appear to be a true apologia for women, but rather a profoundly ambivalent one. The author's explicit purpose does not entirely cohere with the text as constituted; other concerns emerge in the biographies of notable women.[19] Such ambiguity seems more problematic in *MC* than in the *Decameron*, a vernacular collection of tales told and discussed by the ten narrators of the *brigata*; the framework with narrative layers for tales and discussions, along with the author's comments in the preface, introduction and conclusion, accommodate a plurality of perspectives and moral contexts. Boccaccio in *MC* does not reconcile the extraordinary accomplishments of certain women with conventional misogynistic views (reinforced through theology, philosophy, law, history, medicine, culture and custom) that women in general were inherently inferior to men. Such ambivalence about women, in which a courtly encomium for a lady might be juxtaposed with misogynistic invective, was conventional in

[16] Daniels 2009, 142.

[17] Daniels 2009, 143.

[18] Franklin 2006, 23–27. The redaction history shows that Queen Joanna's biography and the dedication to Andrea were included in the wake of Boccaccio's invitation to Naples in June 1362 by Andrea's brother Niccolò Acciaiuoli, Grand Seneschal to Queen Joanna. With the dedication to Andrea, Boccaccio emphasized the benefit to women of associating with worthy men, whereas a dedication to Joanna would have undermined this (24–25). These are strategic decisions by Boccaccio to gain access to Niccolò Acciaiuoli, rather than idealistic philosophical positions about the nature of women. See also Virginia Brown in Boccaccio 2001, xi–xiii.

[19] While the term "ambivalent" (from Latin *ambi* + *valeo*) is not synonymous with "ambiguous" (from Latin *ambi* + *ago*), there is common ground, and the rhetorical effect of ambiguity stemming from inconsistency and doubt is pertinent; on the subject of Boccaccio's ambiguity, see Bruno Pagnamenta 1999.

the Middle Ages.[20] Erudite currents of misogamy in medieval thought were subverted by persistent irony, such that audiences could perceive the irrational underlying stereotypes.[21] Boccaccio participates in these inconsistent and ironic discourses concerning women. In light of Boccaccio inducing readers to engage in ethical reflection, Marilyn Migiel has focused on debates about the *Decameron*'s exploration of ethical matters, noting "Boccaccio's ideological inconsistency and lack of coherent moral criteria," as traced by R. W. Hastings, and conflicting ethical claims in Boccaccio's writings; Migiel takes into account Victoria Kirkham's work on Boccaccio's conceptions of moral virtue.[22] I do not subscribe to the perspective of a coherent Boccaccian moral program in the *Decameron* or in *MC*, nor to a transformative crisis or religious conversion experience in Boccaccio's life.[23] If Boccaccio had chosen a life of austere Christian piety, the targets for penitence and renunciation would have included his sustained engagement with humanism and secular literature, and not only carnal pleasures evoked in texts.[24] Instead, Boccaccio exalts the love poet Sappho, as well as lauding erudition in other noetic women in *MC*.

The contradictions inherent in *MC* stem from a fundamental inconsistency that also emerged in the *querelle des femmes*. If women were inferior, then how could they possibly surpass men at anything, especially in strength of character or intellectual prowess?[25] Boccaccio seems to grapple with this aporia throughout the text, without reaching a definitive conclusion that withstands scrutiny. As Margaret Franklin has observed, "Boccaccio goads men to strive to be among the best of their sex, and certainly better than the best women."[26] Boccaccio admonishes men to stop being idle and

[20] See Martinez 2016, 201.

[21] McLeod and Wilson 1994, 69. Humor in some medieval misogamy derived from the incongruity between ideals and reality (69), and from inversion (70).

[22] See Migiel 2015, 6–8; Hastings 1989.

[23] See Hollander on the posited 1362 conversion or crisis (1977), 117–24, and 236–37 note 3. He outlines four ways to apprehend Boccaccio's handling of Christian principles in tension with carnal aspects in the texts (120), and it seems to me that nuanced views along those lines accommodating Boccaccio's ambivalence and inconsistency are plausible. Hollander prefers a turning point in Boccaccio's literary life ca. 1350–51, if there was one (122).

[24] Hollander 1977, 123.

[25] Other pertinent questions include: Are women fully human? What does it mean to be a human being? Do women have souls, and are they like men's souls? Does God judge women's sins in the same way as men's sins? The Church's teachings about Eve and original sin reinforced misogyny, despite queries related to humanism, skepticism and dissent.

[26] Franklin 2006, 29.

to surpass women's achievements (*MC* 26.9–11). He urges Andrea Acciaiuoli to strive to surpass all other women in virtues (*MC*, Dedicatio §9), and a stated objective of the compendium is to motivate readers to strive for greater virtue, whether directed toward men or women. By the same token, Christians would be inspired to surpass pagans.[27]

The moralizing strain in the text upheld standards for female Christian models covered previously elsewhere, whereas it was incongruous with the pagan, mythological and Roman women whom Boccaccio commemorated in his compendium. The opening biography of Eve sets the tone: Boccaccio justifies using beauty as an important attribute for women, and beauty contributed to Helen's renown.[28] With classical models, Christian piety is superfluous, and would be imposed anachronistically. "Virtue" for men does not entail the persistent preoccupation with chastity and virginity linked to family honor and reputation as does "virtue" for women. Boccaccio's illustrious women commit insolent transgressions or virtuous acts in accordance with masculine virtues (e.g., Dido, Leena), as well as in accordance with feminine virtues (e.g., Lucretia, Rhea Ilia). In the proem to his *History of Rome*, Livy advises readers of history to absorb every kind of experience, and to use judgment to choose what to imitate and avoid what is shameful; this stated purpose might have influenced Boccaccio's approach.[29] However, Boccaccio and some of his readers might have been reticent to allow women to make up their own minds independently without imposing *a priori* the proper conclusions. Women were not to be truly independent politically, intellectually or socially.

Patricia Phillippy has observed that Boccaccio inscribes his work within the context of Petrarch's *De viris illustribus*, indicating that *MC* is not in fact a collection of *exempla* intended for women, but is primarily a work for male readers.[30] Thus Boccaccio, having dedicated his *libellus* to Andrea Acciaiuoli, ostensibly for potential patronage, warns men about troublesome

[27] See Surdich 2001, 273.

[28] While this is a valid perception concerning social practice and custom, and perhaps for aesthetics in art and literature, ethically it is problematic; Boccaccio explored the question of physical appearance and inner beauty in men in *Decameron* 6.5 with Giotto and Forese da Rabatta, and Socrates was known to be ugly yet wise. A common belief connected physical beauty to inner virtue, with appearance corresponding to qualities of character.

[29] Gittes 2008, 224–25.

[30] Phillippy 1986. Maureen Quilligan concurs: "[W]ritten in Latin, the text is aimed at a principally male audience. Its purpose is not to praise women but to spur men on to humanist achievements by goading them with the examples of heroic pagan women" (1961, 39).

women and instructs them about how to manage effectively the women in their lives. Boccaccio included only a few contemporary women of his day, asserting in his conclusion that their number was small; according to Phillippy, this shows that "the virtues of antiquity are beyond imitation by women of Boccaccio's era."[31] Boccaccio places himself under the aegis of Petrarch's *De viris illustribus* (*MC*, Proemium §1). The etymological origin of *virtus* was *vir:* virtues implied manly attributes and conduct, what makes a good man. The reward for men and women for an illustrious life was eternal renown.

Pertinent passages about women's worth occur in other Boccaccian works: for instance, in the prose romance *Filocolo*, the interlocutor Fiammetta reasons that even the basest man in natural virtue is superior to the greatest woman in the world, and therefore any man she desires is of better condition than she is.[32] This may be interpreted as being ludicrous, and Boccaccio presents it for the reader to assess: paradoxically, a woman articulates the notion, showing women's foolishness; whether the statement by Fiammetta is received as being true or false, it impugns women. In the same vein, in the introduction to the first day in the *Decameron*, Filomena, described as being very prudent, "discretissima" among the *brigata*, says of her fellow women:

> Ricordivi che noi siamo tutte femine, e non ce n' ha niuna sì fanciulla, che non possa ben conoscere come le femine sien ragionate insieme e senza la provedenza d'alcuno uomo si sappiano regolare. Noi siamo mobili, riottose, sospettose, pusillanime e paurose.
>
> [You must remember that we are all women, and every one of us is sufficiently adult to acknowledge that women, when left to themselves, are not the most rational of creatures, and that without the supervision of some man or other their capacity for getting things done is somewhat restricted. We are fickle, quarrelsome, suspicious, cowardly, and easily frightened].[33]

[31] Phillippy 1986, 169–70.

[32] Fiammetta says: "Dite ancora mai costui di maggior donna di sé potere venire a fine del suo disio amandola: dicendo che la donna maggiore di sé disidererà d'amare e lui niente pregerà, mostra che ignoto vi sia che il più picciolo uomo, quanto alla naturale virtù, sia di maggiore condizione e di migliore che la maggiore donna del mondo. Dunque, qualunque uomo ella disidererà, di maggiore condizione di sé il disidererà. Fa bene però il virtuoso vivere e 'l vizioso i piccioli grandi, e' grandi piccioli molte volte" (*Filocolo* 4.50.5–6, in Boccaccio 1967, 432).

[33] *Decameron* 1.intro.74–75, in Boccaccio 1976, 24. The English translation is from Boccaccio 1995, 17.

Elissa reinforces this, saying, "Veramente gli uomini sono delle femine capo" [It is true that man is the head of woman].[34] These views are not consistently confirmed by the tales or discussion among the seven ladies and three men of the *brigata*. Marilyn Migiel has noted distinctions in gendered discourse articulated by the female and male characters and narrators.[35] In the author's conclusion to the *Decameron*, Boccaccio addresses women as *nobilissime giovani* (§1), then as *semplici giovinette* (§18), later as *donne* (§20), and finally as *piacevoli donne* (§29).[36] The implication is that beneath the rhetoric, even serious and mature women may be reduced to the subordinate status of *semplici giovinette* to maintain the social order.

It is possible that in *MC* Boccaccio intended to subvert the general belief in women's inherent inferiority; one way to approach the matter is to emphasize how Boccaccio in his writings induces the reader to question his narrators and their reasoning. Jean-Yves Boriaud characterizes the *Corbaccio* as giving literary expression to fear of women,[37] and this is pertinent also for *MC*. The views about women expressed in *MC* do not necessarily reflect Boccaccio's own convictions.[38] While it is certainly worthwhile to examine the reasoning and motivations of Boccaccio's narrators (e.g., in the *Fiammetta* and *Corbaccio*), and to keep the views of narrators separate from those of Boccaccio the author, it does not necessarily resolve major questions. We can still strive to interpret the text with its variety, irony and ambivalence. When Migiel writes, "Boccaccio seems determined to undermine his project,"[39] she seems to forget that perhaps readers misunderstand his actual project. I suspect Boccaccio was as irreverent as some of his women, although occasionally he is humorless in *MC* and sermonizing on women's *pudicitia*. Perhaps a certain amount of conventional misogyny was included to placate elite male readers (including Petrarch?) who were not prepared to contemplate extraordinary women's accomplishments with the implication that women were not inferior to men, or worse, that they could surpass men. After the meeting in 1350 between Petrarch and Boccaccio, Boccaccio continued to develop his ideas in ways that often contradicted Petrarch's views, thus advancing his own distinct cultural and ethical vision.[40] In accordance with convention, Petrarch espoused misogynistic

[34] *Decameron* 1.intro.76; Boccaccio 1995, 17.
[35] Migiel 2003, 29–31; for example, via the narrators Fiammetta and Dioneo.
[36] *Decameron*, Conclusione dell'autore, in Boccaccio 1976, 959–64.
[37] This makes sense; see Boriaud in Boccaccio 2013, xvi.
[38] See Migiel 2015b.
[39] Migiel 2015b, 180.
[40] Zak 2015, 140.

views, as confirmed in *De vita solitaria*.[41] As Letizia Panizza points out, "While classical authors deprecated marriage as a social institution with burdens and distractions inimical to study, they did not condemn sex; ascetic Christian writers in Boccaccio's time denigrated both."[42] Boccaccio showed a persistent interest in the nature of women across his literary works. This does not mean Boccaccio articulated consistent beliefs about women (or sex) throughout his writings.[43] Vittorio Zaccaria remarks of Boccaccio in *MC*, "Meno sicuro e coerente invece — si diceva — si mostra il Boccaccio sul piano morale, didattico e pedagogico" [Less sure and coherent, instead — it has been said — Boccaccio presents himself on the moral, didactic, and pedagogical level].[44]

In any case, let us acknowledge that it is extraordinary that Boccaccio saw fit to commemorate women's accomplishments, which, as he notes, are all the more impressive given their life circumstances and the societal expectations imposed upon them. As Elsa Filosa puts it, "Perché non valorizzare questi elementi di assoluta originalità?" [Why not valorize those elements of absolute originality?].[45] Boccaccio's parameters for *claritas*[46] enhance the interest and range of the women he assembled to portray, as he finds pagan women more intriguing than pious Christian hagiography, whether for moral edification or for reading pleasure, but the transgressive narratives do not fit the medieval mold of *exempla*. In fact, many of Boccaccio's biographies of illustrious women draw on figures of women as goddesses and allegorical representations such as Philosophy (e.g., in Boethius' *De consolatione Philosophiae*) as well as sibyls and muses. He praises them but avoids acknowledging implications about women.

Boccaccio evinces paternalistic concern for women's safety, as when he remarks that girls should not be allowed to wander about with *licentia* (*MC* 9.3) or to converse with unknown men because he has read that it could lead

[41] See Petrarch, *De vita solitaria* 2.3. Petrarch's fondness for the story of Griselda (*Sen.* 17.3, *Decameron* 10.10) is also revealing in this context.

[42] Panizza 2013, 184.

[43] For some feminist perspectives on Boccaccio's writings, see Stillinger and Psaki 2006.

[44] Zaccaria, in Boccaccio 1970, 11.

[45] Filosa notes that Boccaccio's works contain a range of views including both praise of and invective against women (2012, 40–41).

[46] Brown-Grant (1999), relying on McLeod (1991, 64–65), notes that Boccaccio does not use the term *clarus* as a strict synonym for *illustris*, Petrarch's term in *De viris illustribus*. *Clarus* can connote infamy. While the title *De mulieribus claris* does not contain the word *casus*, which would imply a tragic outcome (cf. *De casibus virorum illustrium*), 47 out of 104 women in Boccaccio's text meet infelicitous deaths, including suicides or being killed. See Brown-Grant 1999, 133–34 and note 30.

to damage that could not be restored even by the condition of *perpetue castitatis decus* [the glory of perpetual chastity] (*MC* 9.3). The narrator claims to rely on something he read and considers valid, evading direct responsibility for the authorial stance and deflecting the implications of experience in such matters. Pregnant girls were generally considered unmarriageable and their social status was diminished, disgracing the father. When Isis is seduced by Jupiter, she hides her *scelus* [sin, crime, fault] (*MC* 8.3) but is viewed as responsible and must bear the consequences regardless of circumstances. According to this logic, the interdiction against sex stands and its violation leads inexorably to moral ruin for women. When praising Dido's self-discipline, Boccaccio denounces widows who remarry:

> O pudicitie inviolatum decus! O viduitatis infracte venerandum eternumque specimen, Dido! In te velim ingerant oculos vidue mulieres et potissime christiane tuum robur inspiciant; te, si possunt, castissimum effundentem sanguinem, tota mente considerent… (*MC* 42.16)
>
> [What glory there is in inviolate chastity! O Dido, venerable and eternal model of unsullied widowhood! I wish that women who have lost their husbands would turn their eyes upon you and that Christian women in particular would contemplate your strength. If they can, let them meditate upon how you shed your chaste blood …].

Boccaccio's version of Dido's life omits her involvement with Aeneas as recounted in Vergil's *Aeneid* 4.[47] The view that widows should not remarry but should embrace chastity is consistent with the disapproval of widows in *Corbaccio* and in *Decameron* 8.7. Boccaccio writes that *amor* must be served to the end: "in finem usque servandus est amor" (*MC* 42.23); the polysemic *amor* for women in this context implies an obligation to be celibate. He urges women to fulfill the duties of widowhood by remaining chaste to honor their dead husbands. Other language indicates that sex constitutes sin and profanity for women, e.g., *impudicitie labes* [the defilement caused by lust] (*MC* 42.24). Boccaccio responds rhetorically to anticipated

[47] Dante alludes to Dido's passion for Aeneas in *Inf*. 5.61, *Inf*. 5.85 and *Par*. 9.97–98; Petrarch places Dido among the chaste in the *Triumphus pudicitie* [*Triumph of Chastity*] vv. 10 and 157–59, and alludes to her in *Seniles* 4.5. Petrarch, like Dante, attributes Dido's suicide to the guilt inspired by the betrayal of the memory of her husband Sichaeus, following Justin's *Epitome* of Trogus. Augustine alludes to Dido in *Confessiones* 1.13.20–21, naming her three times in a denunciation of his own prior devotion to literature and lamenting having been moved by her plight in Vergil's *Aeneid*. Boccaccio omits Aeneas altogether from his biography of Dido in *MC*, which readers would be expected to know from the *Aeneid*. For more information about how Boccaccio writes about Dido, see Zaccaria in Boccaccio 1970, esp. 515 note 15. See also Hollander 1977, 171–73 note 90: "Boccaccio's own view of Dido is complicated…"

objections from widows who want to remarry: "Ergo castimoniam maculabo…?" [Shall I then stain my virtue…?] (*MC* 42.19). Boccaccio's vocabulary includes *turpius* (e.g., *MC* 42.22 and 93.1) in reference to coitus defined as shameful. Is Boccaccio merely parodying moralizing discourse against women being sexual? Is he being ironic?[48] Is this sophistry? If only readers could ask him. The overall tone of *MC* does not convey the wit of mock encomium, though Boccaccio was eminently capable of such wit. The work is not satire. The text does not provide definitive clues to Boccaccio's position regarding its inconsistencies. Perhaps readers were to interpret Dido's being a *membrum dyaboli* [limb of Satan] (*MC* 42.23) as an absurd statement, thereby invalidating the rest of the fulmination against women having sex without constraints. Perhaps it was intended to placate devout or ecclesiastical readers who viewed humanist interest in pagan antiquity as a gateway to sin.[49] In Boccaccio's *Corbaccio*, there are indications, such as "Deh stolto!" [you fool!] that are absent in *MC*.[50] In general, Boccaccio wanted readers to judge carefully, weigh the merits of statements, consider more than one point of view, and avoid excessive credulity leading to deception and trouble.[51] His readers are at liberty to question denigrating statements about women of talent and accomplishment whom he has commemorated. Janet Smarr has found that over time Boccaccio grew more skeptical of the abilities of his readers.[52]

The question of women's sexual liberty was for men to judge, with codes of behavior defined as morality for women (virginity, chastity, fidelity to a husband). In the *Decameron* (e.g., 3.1 and 9.2) and in the biography of Rhea Ilia, Boccaccio comments on young women locked up in convents against their will, forced to take vows and to live with severe restrictions on their private lives. About women being hypocritically confined to the cloister under the pretext of religion he writes, "O ridiculum stolidum!" [How ridiculous and foolish!] (*MC* 45.6). He strongly advocates for women taking vows

[48] Hollander 1977 has argued for the presence of irony in Boccaccio's 'minor' vernacular works, and the logic would lend itself also to *MC* on the problem of carnal love and Christian morality in views of women. Medieval and early modern literature is replete with irony, paradox, parody and plurality of views, voices and meanings.

[49] The concluding books of Boccaccio's *Genealogie* defend such humanist intellectual pursuits.

[50] See Hollander 1988, 6.

[51] Migiel (2015b, 174) cites an apt passage from Boccaccio's *De casibus* 1.2.3–4, which brings to mind Boccaccio's point about credulity in the novellas of Ciappelletto and others. Hollander (1988) emphasizes the Boccaccian imperative for readers to be skeptical.

[52] See Daniels 2011, 437 and note 45, citing Smarr 1986, 205–28.

to do so without coercion, voluntarily and with sufficient maturity. He implied that imposing involuntary chastity on young women and girls was unrealistic and doomed to failure because it contravened Nature's imperatives for reproduction. This view is consistent with certain tales of the *Decameron* such as 3.1 and 9.2, but conflicts with Boccaccio's own position articulated elsewhere in *MC* arguing for conventional restrictions on women and sex (e.g., Sulpicia, Gualdrada). He advocated for less extreme treatment, not absolute liberty. Considering Boccaccio's remarks here, in the *Corbaccio* and in the *Decameron*, it seems that repressive domestic control of young women was not necessarily effective.[53] He still advocates for self-discipline and deference in women, for women to suppress their desires for the sake of Christian ideals and figures of authority including the father.

Christine de Pizan in turn would take up a moralizing purpose to defend women against misogyny. In the vernacular *Livre de la cité des dames* (1405), which literate women could read without knowledge of Latin, Christine de Pizan mounted a defense of women while altering *MC* for her own ends. Laurent de Premierfait had translated Boccaccio's book into French by 1401 and Maureen Cheney Curnow has argued that Christine consulted this French version rather than the original.[54] Christine was responding to Boccaccio's own suggestion for his readers to correct and emend passages of his work ("minus debite scripta augentes minuentesque corrigant et emendent," Conclusio §5). Boccaccio's *MC* is the principal source for three quarters of the women in the *Cité des dames*. Christine cites Boccaccio by name twenty-eight times,[55] revising his text and establishing her own authority in the face of patristic and scholastic *auctores*. She presented a different framework of allegorical female interlocutors imbued with divine authority who used arguments and *exempla* with a didactic purpose. Her *cité* did not welcome all women, but only women of virtue: chaste women, virgins and women portrayed as models of good character and admirable deeds.[56] While Boccaccio's noetic women writers became models for Christine's own work,[57] her intent was to counter misogynist discourse by emphasizing the capacity of women to be models of moral conduct and to engage in substantial intellectual work. Christine altered the Boccaccian criteria for inclusion in her compendium and added more Christian women to

[53] Cf. *Decameron* 3.1 and 9.2, for example.

[54] See Phillippy 1986, 167 note 2.

[55] Brownlee 2018, 246.

[56] Christine models her *cité* on Augustine's *Civitas Dei* [*City of God*], an ideal community in a state of virtue.

[57] Thelma Fenster (2003) has argued that Christine set forth the sibyl as heroic model in relation to herself.

her *cité*.[58] She clears the "champ des escritures" [field of letters] for the site to build her *cité* (*Cité des dames* 1.8.1). Thus textuality and writing form the metaphorical foundation for her apologia for women. Christine has a coherent ideological framework in the *Cité des dames* in which women's biographies show that women's inferior status and accomplishments are due to circumstances, rather than to inherent defects in their nature. Unlike Boccaccio, Christine included a number of Christian women (such as martyrs) as well as virtuous women of her own time to demonstrate historical continuity between antiquity and the contemporary era.[59] *Raison*, *Droitture* and *Justice* are the three secular virtues presented as dignified female allegorical figures who guide Christine the protagonist and who preside over the construction of her ideal *cité* and, by extension, the rehabilitation of women's reputation. While she critiques men who "se fondent sur ce qu'ilz ont trouvé en livres et dient aprés les autres et aleguent les autteurs" [base their own writings on what they have found in books and repeat what other writers have said and cite different authors] (*Cité des dames* 1.8.4), Christine reasons as a *femme naturelle* and finds the accumulation of misogynistic statements to be hollow and invalid.

While Christine's thought and writings included the topic of love, she was wary about women being viewed as sexual beings due to the danger posed to their reputation by claims of them being promiscuous or lacking in virtue, modesty and prudence. We see something similar in Boccaccio's condemnation in *MC* of women who express their sexuality. This wariness informs Christine's moral position in the debate on the *Roman de la rose* and the *Cité des dames* (e.g., in *Cité des dames* 1.9.2, concerning Ovid). Women were not supposed to subvert or destabilize the patriarchal social order, and Boccaccio did not advocate such a goal. Whereas Christine de Pizan goes further than Boccaccio in her consistent defense of women on moral grounds, arguing against longstanding traditional misogyny, she did not advocate revolution either. Still, she has Droitture declare of men:

> [I]lz demandent aux femmes trop plus grant constance que ilz mesmes ne scevent avoir, car eulx qui se dient tant estre fors et de noble condicion, ne se pevent tenir de cheoir en plusieurs tres grans deffaulx et pechez, non mie tous par ignorence, mais par pure malice, ayant cognoissance que ilz mesprennent.
>
> [They demand more constancy from women than they themselves can muster, for these men who claim to be so strong and of such noble condition are unable to prevent themselves from falling into many, even graver

[58] See Stecopoulos and Uitti 1992, 49–50.
[59] See Phillippy 1986.

> faults and sins, not all of them out of ignorance, but rather out of pure malice, knowing well that they are in the wrong. (*Cité des dames* 2.47.1)[60]

This point is fundamental to Christine's critique of traditional misogyny. Boccaccio's compendium approaches this argument but does not articulate it; it remains implicit, as when he exhorts men to strive with diligence toward achievements to rival great women (e.g., Proba, *MC* 97.6 and 97.9). He reflects on virtue in the chapter on Leena (*MC* 50.1–3), remarking that virtue may be found anywhere and that Leena, who proved to be strong and brave, must not have had an evil nature despite being a prostitute. While Boccaccio indicates that prostitution was dishonorable, he subverts this by speculating that in her case it was due to idleness and upbringing.

A counterpoint to this moralizing intent is found also in the tales of the *Decameron*. Pleasure frequently trumps moral edification at several levels: the author's pleasure in composing the work for future readers, pleasure experienced by Boccaccio's readers and pleasure sought by the characters. When he writes, "O mulieris astutia!," he expresses marvel at Dido's ingenious use of the ox hide strips to designate the land for her city (*MC* 42.8). Dido and Semiramis built cities and ruled them. In *MC*, Boccaccio's pleasure in composing and revising the Latin work is conveyed to its readers, usually male. It is also the pleasure of contemplating interesting, talented, courageous women, just as readers might enjoy an intriguing tale, and perhaps with a potential erotic component for readers' imagination. Boccaccio expresses confidence that the work will please men and women readers alike (*MC*, Proemium §8). For Marco Santagata, the originality of Boccaccio's compendium is its literary and historical erudition in narrative form with an intention to inform and give pleasure.[61] Zaccaria comments on Boccaccio's intent:

> [Scrive] con un fine più letterario che moraleggiante, o almeno in egual misura letterario e moraleggiante, senza una precisa impostazione pedagogica, ma con l'intento di far conoscere, attraverso le ricostruite biografie femminili, la funzione morale ed educativa della cultura.
>
> He writes with a purpose more literary than moralizing, or at least in equal measure literary and moralizing, without a precise pedagogical position, but with the intent to make known, through the reconstituted women's biographies, the moral and educational function of culture.[62]

[60] English trans. in Christine de Pizan 1998.

[61] Santagata: "Ma la vera grande novità di quest'opera consiste nella fusione di erudizione storico-letteraria e narratività, nell'intento di informare e insieme dilettare" (2019, 223).

[62] Zaccaria 2001, 3.

Zaccaria highlights the biographies as being "raccolti piacevoli" [pleasing narratives] that contain "interesse e diletto" [interest and pleasure].[63] In his estimation, "[i]n generale è più evidente e sicuro l'atteggiamento culturale e letterario del Boccaccio che quello morale e pedagogico" [in general, the cultural and literary attitude of Boccaccio is more evident and sure than the moral and pedagogical one].[64] In the *Cité des dames*, Christian de Pizan's moral purpose would diverge from that of Boccaccio's *raccolti piacevoli*.

It is a paradox of Boccaccio's *MC* that women should be praised and honored despite the common view that women were less capable than men. Illustrious women constituted exceptions that did not invalidate norms, particularly in the arena of intellectual achievements and nonphysical qualities of character, which would not tend to involve feats of physical strength, combat or political rule, although Boccaccio includes examples of excellence in female rulers. Despite the emphasis on Christian virtues for women, Boccaccio evidently is more interested in commemorating pagan women than female Christian saints and martyrs, since he asserts at the outset that no one has set forth the merits of pagan women in a book written for that purpose, whereas Christian women have already been described in other works (*MC*, Proemium §11). Zaccaria distinguished between the moral and literary purposes inherent in Boccaccio's work.[65] Zaccaria defined *MC* as "un trattato, retto da un intento programmatico, nel quadro del moralismo medievale" [a treatise, set up with programmatic intent, in the framework of medieval moralism].[66] Thus Boccaccio incorporated the Ciceronian rhetorical principles *delectare* [to provide pleasure], *movere* [to move] and *docere* [to instruct]: but for which readers?[67] Pleasure and advice for men are distinct from moral edification for women, and this lies at the heart of the text's inconsistency. Diversion via narratives of adventure is more compelling when

[63] Zaccaria in Boccaccio 1970, 5.
[64] Zaccaria in Boccaccio 1970, 8.
[65] Zaccaria in Boccaccio 1970, 4.
[66] Zaccaria in Boccaccio 1970, 5.
[67] These three rhetorical tenets are elaborated in Cicero's *De oratore* (2.115 and 2.128) and *Orator* (69); the terms may be articulated as *probare*, *conciliare* and *flectere*, although it seems to me that they are not identical to the aforementioned three. Horace, for his part, emphasized *delectare* and *prodesse* in the *Ars poetica* (cf. vv. 333–34). See Pernot 2012, 115 and 218–19. For Horace, poetry should move the reader, give pleasure (*delectare*) and instruct or be useful (*prodesse*). Dante included Horace and Cicero in Limbo among the virtuous pagans (*Inf.* 4.89 and 4.141). While Boccaccio's *libellus* presents a series of biographies in narrative prose, not poetry or oratory, principles of eloquence and literary composition are nonetheless salient.

the women transgress than when they are docile and obedient. The biography as literary narrative tends to absorb the reader's attention.[68] It is plausible that for Boccaccio the pleasure of contemplating literary and intellectual women transcended misogynistic discourse about them more than for other types of achievements (e.g., political or military ones). Margaret Franklin observes that the *querelle des femmes* was for men and for their own edification, whereas women did not usually have a voice in such debates.[69] Boccaccio was not interested in changing women's place in the social order. Various characters in his works articulate misogynistic statements, but they cannot be conflated with the author's views. Does Boccaccio wish to defend women against misogyny?[70] It does not seem to be the case, since he also engages in misogynist discourse at times, in accordance with convention. It would be a strange oxymoron indeed for him to defend against it while validating it. Filosa notes that Boccaccio, while looking forward, often remains anchored in the legacy of medieval misogyny,[71] a factor that contributes to the profound ambivalence of *MC*.

Franklin finds that Boccaccio's "fundamental stance regarding the nature and role of women proceeds from a consistent and deeply held point of view that accommodates the varying circumstances in which men and women find themselves."[72] She observes that Boccaccio would not have advocated for a transformation of the social hierarchy in light of the mosaic of exceptional and extraordinary women who rise out of the ranks, and that he notes whether women wield power by what he considers legitimate means. Boccaccio bestows renown, though not always praise, on the women whose lives he recounts. However, he does not advocate for all women to imitate them as models, save for certain qualities such as chastity; indeed, some women are presented as cases for reflection on vice. Thus, these are negative *exempla* in that they are not intended as ideals for imitation in real women's lives, but are presented for contemplation. The lives themselves belie the exhortations to women to adhere to social and moral conventions. Stephen Kolsky writes: "The commentator makes desperate attempts to impose a re-

[68] The tale of Griselda (*Decameron* 10.10) presents an extreme example of female humility, obedience and marital fidelity in which the reader is compelled to wonder about the good sense of both Griselda and Gualtieri.

[69] Franklin 2006, 27–29.

[70] On medieval misogyny, see Bloch 1991. See also Blamires 1992 and 1997; Maclean 1980.

[71] Filosa: "il Certaldese, pur guardando avanti, rimane spesso ancorato ai retaggi misogini medievali" (2012, 42).

[72] Franklin 2006, 7.

ductive reading on the text's polyvalences — not always with great success."[73] Kolsky notes that the biographies do not rely on the *exemplum* tradition in that they do not clarify or illustrate an overarching lesson while being embedded within it; instead, the purpose of the text is to present the narratives themselves for the benefit of readers.

In the dedication to Andrea Acciaiuoli of Florence, Boccaccio refers to his compilation of women's biographies as a *libellus* [little book] (§2) qualified by the adjective *humilis* (§§3 and 6), in a rhetorical expression of authorial modesty not unlike that found in the *Vita nuova*. These terms also establish a context for the narration of lives of illustrious women, exceptional women who are sufficiently worthy to merit commemoration. Boccaccio considers such instances to be truly extraordinary, given women's inferior status and weaker constitution in general (§5). Boccaccio alludes to Andrea's powers of intellect (§5), a virtue she shared with illustrious women of intellectual accomplishment, for which antiquity furnished the greatest examples. The author invites Andrea to read his *libellus* for the *lepiditas* (§8), the charm of the stories, as well as for guidance and models to emulate: "inmixta hystoriarum delectationi, sacra mentes subintrabit utilitas" [holy profit will mix with entertainment and so steal insensibly into readers' minds] (Proemium §7). Boccaccio anticipates that his *libellus* will please both men and women readers (Proemium §7), and to judge from the book's reception, his anticipation of readers' approbation would prove correct.

Noetic women in Boccaccio's compendium present various kinds of knowledge and mental talents: women who helped to advance civilization by means of the alphabet, reasoned discourse and laws (Isis, Nicostrata/Carmenta, Dido); women poets (Sappho, Cornificia, Proba); women of wisdom, prophecy and occult knowledge (Manto, Eritrea, Almathea and again Nicostrata/Carmenta); and erudite women in other contexts, such as the legal and theological (Hortensia, Leuntio, Nicaula and Pope Joan). In several of these cases Boccaccio's praise is generally generous and lavish. The biographies of these women are of particular interest for understanding Boccaccio's purpose and views because their pursuits involve mental achievements made with language. Poets such as Proba could constitute a female version of the *doctus poeta*. The poets and sibyls were privy to special gifts of inspiration, perhaps divine in origin.

Isis [Yside] (*MC* 8) provided an alphabet and educated her people, and Boccaccio praises her for being endowed with great talents worthy of remembrance. Both Boccaccio and Christine de Pizan portray Isis in a similar

[73] Kolsky 2003, 70.

way, as a teacher of literacy and the ways of civilization. Isis taught the Egyptians agriculture and she gave them laws (*MC* 8.4). Nicostrata (*MC* 27), renamed Carmenta by the Latins for being a seer and predicting the future in verse (carmen), gave the people the Latin alphabet (*MC* 27.6–7) as well as grammar (*MC* 27.13). Boccaccio proudly recounts her accomplishments as a figure of Italian ancestry (in fact, she was an Arcadian immigrant). Dido founded Carthage and gave her people laws. Isis, Nicostrata (or Carmenta) and Dido contributed significantly to civilization, which was not usually considered to be women's purview. Boccaccio lauds Hortensia (*MC* 84), daughter of the orator Quintus Hortensius, who spoke with eloquence about unjust taxation and attained glory as a result of her success in persuading the *triumviri* to revoke an offending tax law. Boccaccio concludes by aligning her achievements with her father's distinction in oratory, but Hortensia was the one who performed the work and brought about the change in taxation. This feat required her to understand the system of taxation and financial consequences in order to form arguments for changing it. No man dared to do so at that time, and Hortensia showed courage in addition to sophisticated knowledge and rhetorical skill. Boccaccio notes this admirable combination of characteristics and laments its frequent absence in learned men (*MC* 84.1). Here Boccaccio seeks to exhort male readers to excel by means of comparison with a woman's achievements, to motivate men to compete with her. As with Isis, we see women of *ingenium* performing an essential function by contributing to laws, reasoned discourse and codes of conduct for the sake of civilization. Queen Nicaula (*MC* 43), identified with the biblical Queen of Sheba, also benefited civilization through advanced knowledge in the natural sciences, and traveled to meet Solomon. Boccaccio notes that she declined to pursue feminine luxury and idleness (*MC* 43.1). However, Boccaccio undermines the early accomplishments of Ceres in fostering civilization because vices then flourished, and he implies that she was responsible for them (*MC* 9–12).

Leuntio [Leontium] (*MC* 60), a Greek woman of intellectual brilliance in literature and philosophy, composed a treatise arguing against Theophrastus. However, Boccaccio chastises her for being a courtesan, lamenting that her sexual incontinence reduced her achievement and stained philosophy: "ingenium tam celebre, sacro superumque munere datum, adeo spurcido exercitio subigi potuisse" [so brilliant a talent, bestowed as a sacred gift from heaven, could be subjected to so filthy a way of life] (*MC* 60.5). Boccaccio's vocabulary in this chapter is revealing: *indecentia*, *pudor*, *meretrix*, *meretricula*, *indignum*, *inhonestis*, *ignominiosis*, *deturpare*, *impudicis*, *lasciviis*. Women's virtue and reputation are viewed as incompatible

with engagement in sex outside marriage, and especially so with prostitution. Boccaccio remarks in the chapter on the prostitute Leena that virtue is more worthy of admiration when a person was thought incapable of it (*MC* 50.2). While he undermines the common belief that women who were both scorned and sought out by men for sex could not possibly attain virtue, he also affirms that conventional view and anticipates moralistic objections from female readers.

Boccaccio includes biographies of two sibyls and Manto [Manthone] (*MC* 30), daughter of the seer Tiresias of Thebes and likewise endowed with the gift of prophecy. The sibyl Eritrea [Erythraea] or Eriphila (*MC* 21) was described as a marvelous woman, more laudable than the sibyl Almathea [Amalthea] (*MC* 26). Eritrea foretold in verse the fall of Troy, the history of Rome and the life and resurrection of Christ. Boccaccio writes that God loved Eritrea very much and she was worthy of reverence above all pagan women; he finds it plausible that she was a virgin: "ego facile credam: non enim in contagioso pectore tanta futurorum lux effulsisse potuisset" [I can easily believe this, for I do not think that so clear a vision of the future could have shone forth in an unclean breast] (*MC* 21.9). Sexuality for women implies defilement, pollution and profanation of the sacred. Chastity and virginity are thus the feminine ideal. Almathea, identified as a *virgo* (*MC* 26.1), was said to maintain her virginity from *contagione* (*MC* 26.2), avoiding contact with men for centuries. Almathea was portrayed as a ruthless negotiator with Tarquinius Priscus, willing to destroy essential books on the complete history of Rome if her price was not met. Over three days, out of nine books, she burned three, then three more, and finally he paid the original price demanded for the remaining three books. Boccaccio does not indicate that Almathea wrote the books, yet she provided them, though not as a gift to Rome.

Manto was taught by her father, Tiresias, and had an agile and capable mind; with her *ingenium* (*MC* 30.2), she learned to interpret fire and animal entrails. Boccaccio recounts a version that Manto married and bore a son, whereas another version has her maintaining her virginity, which Boccaccio prefers for her:

> Quidam vero arbitrati sunt eam in mortem usque constanti proposito virginitatem servasse: floridam quippe atque sanctissimum opus et laudabile plurimum, ni illud nephastis suis labefactasset artibus Deoque vero, cui dicanda est, virginitatem servasset. (*MC* 30.7)
>
> [Other authorities, however, believe that Manto resolutely preserved her virginity until her death. This would have been a splendid, holy, and

> praiseworthy thing to do, had she not stained such an action with her wicked arts and had she reserved her virginity for the true God, to whom it should have been consecrated].

Are we to conclude that Manto should not have used her knowledge and prophetic abilities, instead suppressing her gifts unless she remained a virgin?

Concerning poets, Boccaccio refers to the Greek poet Sappho as a *puella* (*MC* 47.1), and reasons that she must have had honorable parents since no ignoble soul would want to write poetry, for it is not meant for a vulgar mind [*animus plebeius*] (*MC* 47.1).[74] Boccaccio affirms, in the wake of Dante and *stilnovo* poets, that poetry inspired by love is eminently worthwhile, and therefore one's soul must be noble in order to love.[75] Boccaccio here shares Petrarch's disdain for the masses, as distinct from inner nobility and intellectual prowess. Sappho studied with diligence and ascended Parnassus to be with the Muses (*MC* 47.2), endowed with "ampliori fervore animi et ingenii suasa vivacitate" [wider spiritual and intellectual fervor] (*MC* 47.2). Her poetic accomplishments exceeded those of most men, and her fame endured through time. Boccaccio places poetic glory above even kings, popes and military conquerors: "quo splendore profecto, non clariora sunt regum dyademata, non pontificum infule, nec etiam triunphantium lauree" [such glory neither the crowns of kings nor pontifical mitres nor even the conquerors' laurel can surpass] (*MC* 47.3). This hierarchy reveals the author's priorities concerning the worthiest accomplishments, and here it transcends the sex of the one who wields the pen, as it were: despite being a woman (identified as a mere *puella*), Sappho's greatness is ranked above exalted worldly and religious figures of authority. Branca has noted the interplay of sacred and profane in *MC*.[76] Here, Boccaccio's valorization of secular literature is apparent: amatory poetry written by a woman becomes sacred, as does the woman who created it. Boccaccio's portrayal of the quasi-mythical Sappho constitutes an apotheosis of Boccaccio's ideal for noetic women.

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[74] Petrarch identifies Sappho as a girl: "Sappho, greca puella" (*Fam*. 21.8).

[75] Robert Hollander has referred to Boccaccio's "religion of love" (1977, 93) in vernacular works, perceiving irony in Boccaccio's treatments of it. It seems to me that Boccaccio is aligned with Dante in condemning uncontrolled lust while seeking to channel (or sublimate) erotic love and desire into an acceptable structure compatible with Christianity, an ambitious but perhaps futile enterprise.

[76] Branca: "E lo scambio continuo di sacro e di profano – che caratterizza del resto varie opere del Boccaccio e particolarmente il *De mulieribus*" (1986, 415).

Boccaccio's treatment of Sappho is aligned with his defense of poetry in book 14 of the *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*. For Boccaccio, poetry is a useful art of divine provenance (*Gen*. 14.6.3) that induces virtue and is profoundly worthy despite a few instances of corruption in the recounting of adulterous and licentious adventures, such as those of the gods (*Gen*. 14.6.7–8). It is rare for true poets to be born with such a precious gift (*Gen*. 14.7.1). Poetry covers truth with a veil of fiction (*Gen*. 14.7.8), a topos of medieval allegory. Boccaccio cites Cicero as an authority to emphasize the presence of an inborn faculty and inspiration operating within the poet (*Gen*. 14.7.6). Indeed, he even claims that poetic allegory is an essential component of Scripture.[77]

Having evoked the poetic figure of Sappho, Boccaccio recounts her suffering in unrequited love and notes that the elegiac verses she subsequently produced are called Sapphic in her name. In this Boccaccio agrees with Ovid in epistle 15 of his *Heroides*. For Ovid, Sappho's modesty was irrelevant to the greatness of her love expressed in her poetic production: "non veniunt in idem pudor atque amor" [modesty and love are not at one].[78] Boccaccio was a *grand lecteur* of Ovid, as Dante was a *grand lecteur* of Vergil.[79] Unlike other women in *MC*, Sappho is exempt from judgment via standards of female chastity and modesty, perhaps because Boccaccio surmised that she refrained from sex since her desire was unrequited. There is no mention of lesbian love or yearning (little is certain about Sappho, as most evidence has not survived).[80] Boccaccio labored at poetic composition, and if he indeed considered poetry superior to prose, he affirmed that what Sappho accomplished was difficult even for men to achieve.[81]

Christine de Pizan, for her part, calls Sappho wise: "la sage Sapho" (*Cité des dames* 1.30), and emphasizes her learning and *estude* [study], including the liberal arts, along with her excellence in poetry. This is not a portrayal of a young girl in love with an unresponsive man as Boccaccio sets forth in *MC*, but a mature mind engaged in intellectual pursuits, more like Christine herself. In Sappho's biography, Christine cites Boccaccio directly and em-

[77] *Gen*. 11.2, 14.8, etc.; Jerome was frequently cited as an authority on the literary quality of the Bible.

[78] *Heroides* 15.121 (in Ovid 1977).

[79] Robert Hollander, among others, has wrestled with the question of Boccaccio's reception of Ovid (1977, 112–16).

[80] Joan DeJean (1989) does not mention Boccaccio or Christine de Pizan, though their chapters on Sappho are precursors to the early modern material in her study.

[81] On Boccaccio's poetic labors and the possibility of a *canzoniere*, see Hollander 1977, 109–12.

phasizes his praise of Sappho's learning in contrast to the ignorant and bestial men around her, "bestiaulx et sans sciences" (1.30.1), stating that Sappho invented new "Sapphic" poetic genres, echoing Boccaccio. Christine the author aligns the poetic and intellectual achievements of Sappho, Cornificia and Proba with her own endeavors as an erudite woman writer, pointing to the authority of Boccaccio's endorsement that bestows honor on them.[82]

Cornificia (*MC* 86) appears to be a female double of her poet brother Cornificius, and Boccaccio wavers on whether she was Roman. Cornificia, like Camilla and others, scorned conventional women's activities and instead wrote distinguished epigrams, for which Boccaccio praises her rejection of convention, while denouncing ordinary women for prioritizing vanity in beauty, sex, marriage and children. Boccaccio also berates women this way in the biography of the painter Tamaris (*MC* 56), daughter of Micon the painter, stating that making art was more worthwhile than women's customary spinning and weaving. While Boccaccio may encourage women to pursue substantial achievements in the arts rather than conventional domestic concerns, this did not account for the ubiquitous social expectations and pressures on women, as well as the disapproval and discouragement they would encounter if they attempted to engage in such pursuits in the face of restrictions imposed on them. If women heeded Boccaccio's exhortations to excel in learning and letters, they risked contravening his other exhortations to be docile, respectful, modest and obedient (e.g., *MC* 39.7 on Camilla, *et passim*). He laments that women were "diffidentes" (*MC* 86.3), lacking sufficient faith in themselves. The social milieu exacerbated this perceived tendency with conventional expectations enforced by both men and women. Boccaccio asserts that if women study well, they can attain the same glory as would men: "cum omnia que gloriosos homines faciunt, si studiis insudare velint, habeant cum eis comunia" [yet, if women are willing to apply themselves to study, they share with men the ability to do everything that makes men famous] (*MC* 86.3). This is an extraordinary statement, for it subverts the misogynistic view that Boccaccio himself articulates elsewhere in the text, perhaps with irony, that women are inherently inferior to men mentally, as well as in the constitution of their character. Cornificia worked diligently and used her *ingenium* (*MC* 86.4), and through her effort, *honesto labore*, she achieved excellence and renown surpassing most men. Boccaccio places her above those of her sex, "femineum superasse sexum" [she succeeded in rising above her sex] (*MC* 86.4).

[82] Kevin Brownlee analyzes how Christine appropriates Boccaccio's text concerning Sappho, Cornificia and Proba, aligning herself with them (1999, 247–50).

Christine de Pizan includes Cornificia [Corniffie] just prior to her chapter on Proba: Cornificia became educated and neglected all other feminine activities (*Cité des dames* 1.28.1), mastering both poetry and philosophy, and seeking knowledge in all its branches. She even surpassed her brother. Christine cites Boccaccio directly concerning learning in women; Raison explains: "Fille chiere, peus veoir comment cellui aucteur Bocace tesmongne ce que je t'ay dit et comment il loe et appreuve science en femme" [Dear daughter, you can see how this author Boccaccio testifies to what I have told you and how he praises and approves learning in women] (*Cité* 1.28.1).

Boccaccio praises the fourth-century Christian poet Proba (Faltonia Betitia Proba), wife of Adelphus, for her knowledge of letters and the liberal arts. The biography begins thus: "Proba, facto et nomine, literarum notitia, memoratu dignissima fuit femina" [Proba, an excellent woman in reality as well as name, is worthy of remembrance for her knowledge of literature] (*MC* 97.1). Proba fulfills her ambition to compose a *cento* to harmonize in verse Vergil's poetry (Boccaccio cites the *Bucolics*, *Georgics* and *Aeneid*) with the Bible, which required mastery of both, as Boccaccio emphasizes, comparing her favorably against unlettered men in her "professio sacrarum literarum" [profession of sacred letters] (*MC* 97.9). Boccaccio surmises that Proba composed a *cento* based on Homer as well, and thus she would have mastered Greek letters in addition to Latin, an accomplishment most men could not attain. Boccaccio praises Proba because "ab ingenio segniciei rubinigem absterxit omnem" [she removed all the rustiness of sluggishness from her mind] (*MC* 97.10). Proba's revision, recomposition and re-disposition in a new order to fulfill an ideological purpose is akin to Christine de Pizan's revision of Boccaccio's *MC*.

Perhaps the culminating example of the rule that women of intellect and talent ideally should be celibate occurs in a biography of Pope Joan, near the end of Boccaccio's collection. Joan, *Iohanna anglica papa*, pretended to be a cleric while pursuing love and literature, staying with her student lover in England. For this woman engaging in intellectual pursuits, Boccaccio uses a medieval military trope typically used for men in love: she served in love's army, "Veneri et literarum militavit" [she served in the armies of Love and Literature] (*MC* 101.2).[83] She excelled at liberal and sacred letters,

[83] The topos of serving in love's army occurs, for instance, in the twelfth-century *De amore* of Andreas Capellanus and in the thirteenth-century *Roman de la rose*. In the prologue and conclusion of the *Decameron*, Boccaccio links love and literature, identifying his collection of tales as a Galeotto (Galahalt or Gallehault), meaning a go-between for lovers, or trickster: "Comincia il libro chiamato *Decameron* cognominato prencipe Galeotto …" (*Decameron* proemio 1).

lectured at Rome, and was esteemed for her knowledge as well as her *honestas* and *sanctitas* [virtue and holiness] (*MC* 101.4–5). As Boccaccio tells it, God himself disapproved of this state of affairs, and did not allow women to administer holy offices, nor to be ordained as priests: this usurpation of the sacred male function at the pinnacle of the western ecclesiastical hierarchy is viewed as blasphemous, audacious, forbidden, excessive and deceitful. Boccaccio denounces Joan, who was expelled as a result of giving birth, which was considered to be a further profanation of the prestigious holy position, meriting invective and infamy: "O scelus indignum!" [What a shameful crime!] (*MC* 101.9). It is illuminating to juxtapose Pope Joan's downfall with the deeds of popes, bishops, abbots, monks and other ecclesiastical figures condemned for corruption in the *Decameron*.[84]

In the conclusion of *MC*, Boccaccio mentions an excessive attachment to his own work, "circa opus suum nimia laborantis affectio" [an excessive attachment to his own work] (Conclusio, §5). The subjects are dear to him, and his concern for these illustrious women is manifested in their selection, enumeration, narration and commemoration in the compilation. Christine in *Cité des dames* concludes by urging women to demonstrate their virtue (to inhabit the *Cité* she has constructed) and to invalidate misogynistic views. Boccaccio's anxiety that women might surpass men in virtue or bravery becomes in Christine's *Cité des dames* an invitation for women to do so, not in order to disrupt the social order, but to counter beliefs detrimental to women's character and moral rectitude.

As a moral-didactic text, the *MC* is not consistent, insofar as the women's lives conform neither to conventional roles nor to virtuous ideals as defined for them. The works of the ancients contained huntresses, ambitious queens, Amazon warriors and women of knowledge and wisdom, but their presence alone did not imply that ordinary women should strive to imitate them. On the contrary, narratives about them provided sustenance to the imagination, a diversion from quotidian restrictions and routines, similar to festivals that served as a temporary respite from daily life and the normative social order.[85] By the same token, Boccaccio's exceptional women were exciting and perhaps occasionally threatening, but after one took pleasure in reading the biographies, the reader's societal hierarchy and the subordinate status of women remained. The textual pleasure provided by Boccaccio

[84] Kristina Olson has cogently analyzed critiques by Dante and Boccaccio of power wielded by political and ecclesiastical figures under the rubrics of history, ethics and *cortesia* (2014).

[85] An ancient precedent for this was the Saturnalia, the Roman version of the Greek Kronia (Κρόνια) festival, where slaves could speak freely, and the social hierarchy was temporarily suspended.

and the text's inconsistency undermined the moralizing strain congruent with traditional misogyny. Marilyn Migiel comments on eloquent women's attributes in *MC*: "Women are considered worthy when they are most manly and when they deny their sexuality. Their eloquence puts them in a 'double bind' because it both raises them above their sex and constitutes a threat to men; in several instances, their eloquence is best expressed when they are deprived of the ability to speak."[86] "Manly" signifies the cultivation of virtues attributed to men, such as courage, strength, justice, self-discipline, intellectual achievement, wise rulership and so forth.

Boccaccio's *MC* unwittingly parallels the *Mulierum virtutes* of Plutarch who, disagreeing with Thucydides, argued that women should be lauded for accomplishments. Indeed, it is even advisable for women to aspire to extraordinary achievements, despite their limiting domestic and subordinate functions, and to enter the public sphere. Plutarch asserts that it shows better taste to favor the fame of women for their deeds[87] and acknowledges pleasure in recounting such accomplishments.[88] While Boccaccio does not make such points overtly, they are implicit in his work. He does not emphasize reading famous women (e.g., Sappho) as *auctores*, but readers can envision their deeds as the author narrates them. Teodolinda Barolini's reflection on the proverb "le parole son femmine e i fatti sono maschi" [words are female and deeds are male] in reference to the *Decameron*'s questions of gender is apt also for *MC*. In fact, Barolini concludes that the proverb is disproven in the text, for "le parole fanno fatti" [words make deeds].[89]

In his conclusion, Boccaccio acknowledges having selected only a few women for his collection, for there were many more whose achievements were lost: Time triumphs over Fame (*MC*, Conclusio §2), in a nod to Petrarch's *Triumphus temporis*. Yet some women among his biographies demonstrate every virtue, including chastity, virginity, loyalty, prudence and all manner of fortitude. Still, a disturbing conclusion is avoided concerning gender equity of capacity and character, whereas equity in achievement was acknowledged only for exceptions to the rule of universal, *a priori* inequity between men and women. Does Boccaccio avoid the evident dissent from tradition to avoid ruffling male readers, or also for himself? Stephen Kolsky comments:

> Whilst at times classical women are presented as positive guides for behaviour, the *MC* resists the more advanced, 'progressive' positions on women

[86] Migiel 2015, 180.
[87] Plutarch 1961, 243a–d.
[88] Plutarch 1961, 243a.
[89] Barolini 2006, 303.

> that it implicitly proposes. Where a narrative portrays figures who have achieved beyond those limits generally imposed on women, the commentary tends to misread their actions, or render them one-dimensional, in keeping with the defence of subordinate and submissive roles. As a result, Boccaccio's work persistently conveys messages that are opaque: at once subversive and conservative.[90]

This strange blend produces the ambivalence in the work, as Kolsky among others has noted.[91] Boccaccio apparently did not resolve his ambivalent position on women, particularly noetic women, in *MC*, because it was too radical and iconoclastic to maintain with open conviction that women were capable of achieving excellence like men (or even of surpassing them), although that is what his *libellus* demonstrates. Instead, he hedges and qualifies and subverts, writing mainly about quasi-imaginary women from myth and the distant past, while retaining the flawed, hierarchical traditional models.

While *MC* sets a new precedent with literary biographies of illustrious women, Boccaccio apologizes in his conclusion for the work's shortcomings, anticipating potential criticism. Boccaccio uses anticlericalism and humor elsewhere to criticize ecclesiastical and monastic figures who are corrupt and hypocritical, but uncontrolled appetites do not trouble famous men's achievements in other works as they do in the case of women's, even as counterexamples.[92] Boccaccio indicated that women had to work harder than men to overcome their inferior minds and bodies in order to achieve greatness yet he did not directly confront significant gender implications in this work because it would be too disruptive to the social, cultural, intellectual, religious and moral order to state such a position overtly and definitively. The project stands as an ambivalent exploration, but not an endorsement of women's achievements. Christine de Pizan, drawing on Boccaccio's biographies and her own noetic ingenuity, constructs a defense of women in the *Cité des dames* to counter traditional misogyny. Eschewing the labyrinth of love evoked in his *Corbaccio*, Boccaccio constructs another kind of labyrinth in *MC* to explore his abiding fascination with intelligent, interesting and accomplished women. His cultivated readers could contemplate each woman portrayed, and particularly the illustrious noetic women, perhaps calling into question normative beliefs about women. However, they could merely reinforce conventional views if desired; the book would not

[90] Kolsky 2005, 3.

[91] Kolsky writes: "The *De mulieribus claris* exemplifies male ambivalence toward women" (2005, 4).

[92] E.g., *Decameron* 1.1, 1.2, 1.4, 1.6 and 4.2.

compel an ideological confrontation, unless careful and perceptive readers were amenable to the possibilities.

ALISON BAIRD LOVELL UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN, MADISON

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