

Travel as ‘Transgression’:  
The Mobility of Women in Giovanni Boccaccio’s  
*De mulieribus claris* and *Decameron*\*

Women could have little expectation of mobility in fourteenth-century Italy. When they did travel it was often from one domestic space to another, as daughters traded their childhood home for their husband’s household in order to forge alliances between dynasties. Even this movement could render women’s legal position unstable; the fragmented nature of Italy meant that in moving from one regional political system to another, they were often subjected to new practices that might alter their property and inheritance rights, such as they were (Feci 2016). In his *Decameron*, Boccaccio famously critiques the spatial limitations imposed upon women, lamenting that they are “nel piccolo circuito delle loro camere racchiuse” without distractions from love’s burden (Proemio.10).<sup>1</sup> In the *De mulieribus claris*, which catalogues the biographies of well-known historical women and euhemerizes female mythological figures, he expands upon the consequences of women’s insular lives, observing that their seclusion limits their participation in world history and thus prevents them from securing a place within its annals (Proem.3).<sup>2</sup> Boccaccio attempts, in this later work, to rectify women’s anonymity and, in so doing, praises several of his subjects who overcome their spatial restrictions in favor of a more *transgressive* geographical mobility than the women of the *Decameron* possess, for whom even successful journeys typically represent only temporary excursions outside of the domestic sphere.

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<sup>1</sup> All citations of the *Decameron* are from Boccaccio 1980.

<sup>2</sup> All citations of the *De mulieribus claris* are from Boccaccio 1967, but the English comes from Boccaccio 2001.

When discussing transgression, I refer in particular to Bertrand Westphal’s definition as found in *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* in order to determine the extent to which women challenge their confinement in each text. For Westphal, transgression involves a willful incursion across a border so that the transgressor can obtain emancipation and destabilize systems of power. Thus, he differentiates transgression from digression: the former is not simply movement within one space but the infiltration of a border to find liberation, refusing the notion of space as homogeneous and instead embracing its plurality and heterogeneity, as well as the opportunities for interaction that therefore arise. Transgression in this sense loses many of the negative connotations borne by its connection to morality, becoming instead a way of exploring the “perpetual oscillation between center and periphery” (2011, 49).<sup>3</sup>

A geocritical focus on transgressive women identifies new ways of challenging patriarchal structures that do not revolve around the policing of female sexuality. Feminist geographers have remarked that the relationship between gender and space goes beyond the questions of the public and private: gender is expressed differently depending on location, thus revealing its constructed nature, and space changes according to the embodied experience of those who inhabit it.<sup>4</sup> Thus, when entering any new space female characters have the potential to impact and disrupt their environments, encouraging the treatment of space as heterogeneous and finding new ways to interpret it.<sup>5</sup> The relational aspect between space and gender has been considered by Roberta Morosini in her studies on gendered travel in Boccaccio. Focusing primarily on sea-crossings, she states that for a female character in the *Decameron*, journeys across water mean remaining in stasis and require a profound understanding of the necessary precautions to be taken in order to survive the experience, where men find such travel generative

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<sup>3</sup> I have offered here an outline of the key characteristics of transgression as described by Westphal in his chapter “Transgressivity,” in which he provides a clear definition of the term (2011, 43–49).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Massey 1994, who provides ample evidence for this assertion in her book dedicated to the connection between identity and one’s embodied existence within a space, or a place. Peyrefitte and Sanders-McDonagh 2018, 325–33 offer a useful introduction to this topic and research surrounding it.

<sup>5</sup> Rose 1993, 133 describes how women “reject the search for totality” and omniscient views of space, which several feminist geographers have argued is predicated by a masculinized view of citizenship. While I do not offer an exhaustive list here, useful discussions on this assumption of male identity as the norm within a given space can be found in Kofman 2005, 522, and Fenster 2005, 244, who states that citizenship works on ideas of “equality, communality, and homogeneity” that women actively challenge.

(2017). In the *De mulieribus claris*, those women who have a civilizing mission and act with intent to change their environment view crossing the sea as a means of exploring new spaces, often helping them overcome the dangers the unknown depths pose to other characters whose biographies are given (2019, 230).<sup>6</sup> I propose that, while women of the *Decameron* often ultimately reinforce the idea of women's position within the home rather than encouraging further mobility, the more fluid, mythological world of pre-Christian formation enables certain women of the *De mulieribus claris* to transgress spatially and undermine the wider patriarchal system.<sup>7</sup> In other words, women of the *Decameron* who travel frequently exchange one man's authority for another, whereas in the Greco-Roman world those women who seek not to civilize people or extend patriarchal control but impose their own can more readily find space to do so and create inclusive communities. I am therefore concerned not with women's movement across bodies of water but across boundaries that delineate power structures, and not with women's imposition of civilization but with their embrace of heterogeneity. Rather than assume that there is only one, homogeneous way of inhabiting a space, and one (patriarchal) authority that presides, transgressive women devise new ways of thinking about and using the lands that they encounter.

It is, of course, impossible to make statements that apply to all of Boccaccio's women characters or to assign a feminist or misogynistic label to an individual work; there is too much variation in representation among and within texts.<sup>8</sup> The *De mulieribus claris* has particularly divided critics, who

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<sup>6</sup> While women's travel in the *Decameron* and *De mulieribus claris* is often treated in analyses of individual characters rather than as a sustained theme, the application of geocriticism to Boccaccio's works is a developing field, one case for which is made by Papio 2017, 24–45, who argues for the importance of mapping the geography of Boccaccio's texts. Roberta Morosini has also contributed a detailed chapter to gendered travel in the *Decameron* and *De mulieribus claris* in her book *Il mare salato* (2020). Morosini argues that women travellers in the *Decameron* who choose to traverse the Mediterranean must wear men's clothing (170) or, when obliged to travel, become "un oggetto di scambio" (174), while in the *De mulieribus claris* the sea lacks "autonomia narrativa" and is influenced by the women who come into contact with it (248).

<sup>7</sup> For the rigidity of borders in the fourteenth century (as compared to a more fluid mythological space) see, for example, Robin 1997. The importance of localized identities was created by the rise of city states, which made the conceptualization of space "increasingly narrow and exclusionary in its social and sexual dimensions" (166).

<sup>8</sup> Numerous critics have commented upon the disparity in Boccaccio's representations of women according to what he wishes to say of society at the time. The *Corbaccio*, for

debate the degree to which the work praises women. For Constance Jordan, the text functions as a *concessio*, “a figure of thought in which a proposition — in this case the *virtus* of women as praiseworthy — is made in order to be discredited” (1987, 42). I align instead with a growing body of critics, including Stephen D. Kolsky, who view accusations of misogyny in the *De mulieribus claris* as overstated. He argues that one cannot make a case for the text’s overall depiction of women based solely upon one biography and that the multiplicity of examples is designed to prevent totalizing readings (2003, 23).<sup>9</sup> The variety of the *Decameron*’s one hundred *novelle* has led to a similarly widespread reluctance to assign it a clear-cut feminist position. Through this “polyphony,” Boccaccio seems to encourage the reader to reflect upon women’s standing rather than offer any decisive viewpoint (Psaki 1997, 134).<sup>10</sup> My argument is therefore based upon commonalities between biographies and *novelle* while affirming that there are women who travel without transgressing in both texts. I focus on women who are given the opportunity to escape the male authority represented by the family or the husband to suggest that, in order to be transgressive, women must seek to avoid its reimposition. While Argia and Dido remain devoted to their hus-

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example, is now largely read as a parodic denunciation of misogynistic systems that result from men’s fears, or as a warning against misreading, rather than an anomaly among Boccaccio’s writings (Hollander 1988; Psaki 2003; Kriesel 2019, 207). Margaret Franklin proposes that depictions of Amazons differ from one Boccaccian text to another: while in the *De mulieribus claris* they never renounce their independence, in the *Teseida* they seek to atone and adopt behavior considered more appropriate to their gender (2010, 13). The collision between real and mythologized women is explored by Elizabeth Casteen, who focuses on Giovanna I and her portrayal in a number of Boccaccio’s texts as a literary inspiration, a quasi-mythological woman, or a real political figure (2018, 219–45). Casteen concludes that Giovanna oscillates between “monstrosity” and “near-saintly perfection” (221) according to Boccaccio’s evolving opinion on Neapolitan political events.

<sup>9</sup> Other readings of the *De mulieribus claris* include Margaret Franklin’s suggestion that Boccaccio saw the remarkable women of which he wrote as the “occasional happy freak of nature” rather than examples of women’s abilities in his own time (2006, 7–8). Others interpret Boccaccio’s ambiguous position towards women as a deliberate literary technique that explores the “ironic distance” between author and narrator (Migiel 2015, 181) or as an experimentation with humanist practices (Shemek 2014, 204).

<sup>10</sup> Thus, even those *novelle* that have traditionally been labelled misogynistic can be re-interpreted. See, for example, Marcus 2006, 132. She reads 8.7, the story of the scholar, as a way for Boccaccio to comment upon disparaging views of women, and not as an expression of his own opinion. The *Decameron* depicts an ultimately fictional world that may not seek real societal change (Migiel 2006, 231), and it is the business of storytelling and its uses with which Boccaccio is truly concerned (Migiel 2003, 4).

bands, I show that they exert their own influence rather than accept the continuation of patriarchal power. In this context, Hypsicratea (78), also of the *De mulieribus claris*, despite participating on the battlefield, cannot be considered to have travelled transgressively as she journeys by her husband's side, her actions dictated by his, and her death determined by his jealousy.

By looking at transgression through a geocritical, gendered lens, I observe the ways in which Boccaccio's representation of women is influenced by the politics of citizenship, gender, and mobility that feature in the two differing worlds he portrays. Although the women of the *Decameron* travel, successfully transgressive movement is facilitated in the mythological world by gaps in the homogeneous 'ownership' of space: it appears that Greco-Roman women can more easily carve out gender-inclusive spaces by exploiting the fluidity and dynamism of borders. I identify within the Westphalian notion of transgression three key attributes that, while profoundly interconnected, generate productive comparisons between the *Decameron* and the *De mulieribus claris* when addressed singularly, and undermine the apparent success of the journeys undertaken by women in the *Decameron*. I first address the intention of women in crossing from the domestic, familial space into the unknown to assess the extent of their agency in travelling and whether or not they mean to be transgressive. Secondly, I explore the degree to which they emancipate themselves from the patriarchal system, refusing male authority and creating spaces in which their own capabilities flourish. Finally, I examine whether women characters successfully destabilize the established order, demonstrating the heterogeneity of space and allowing for harmonious interaction. They depart from the patriarchal script in which one totalizing system forces others to comply and forge spaces that accommodate plurality. By differentiating between transgressive women and those who simply act in unexpected ways, Boccaccio's characters can be assessed in a more nuanced manner that sees his proto-feminism fluctuate, rather than exist as a distinct presence or absence.

#### Intentionality: Beritola and Argia

The *Decameron*'s Beritola (2.6) and the *De mulieribus claris*' Argia (29) exemplify two journeys that achieve varying degrees of transgression thanks to the different worlds they represent. These narratives illustrate that women do not simply challenge or follow patriarchal gender norms; two journeys that ostensibly share similar motivations can differ in their subversive outcomes. For example, both Beritola and Argia travel as a result of the loss of their respective husbands, and without a man to guide their de-

cision-making they each resolve to cross a boundary delineating a new political domain. Argia, who appears in Statius' *Thebaid*, leaves the domestic sphere in Boccaccio's retelling and enters the battlefield, praised for her act of love. Beritola, however, is rendered immobile by her marital devotion and earns only pity for failing to act with intention; her passivity leads to her total degradation. Transgression as a motivated act is thus denied to Beritola, whose society has stabilized. Boccaccio promises his reader a return to normality no matter how far from civilization one strays and perhaps reassures his contemporaries that the damage wreaked by the Black Death as described in the *Decameron's* introduction is not irrevocable. If Beritola's 'animalization' can be reversed, then so too can the breakdown of a plague-ridden society.

Beritola's narrative begins when her husband, Arrighetto, is imprisoned for his political leanings. Pregnant and terrified, she flees for Naples with her son and a wetnurse, and gives birth on the journey shortly before a strong wind pushes their boat to the island of Ponza. There, Beritola disembarks to grieve for her husband, leaving her two children behind. In her absence, pirates seize the little boat and take its passengers with them, leaving Beritola disconsolate and isolated. She finds companionship with two kid goats that she nurses as though they were her offspring, transforming herself into a wild creature. She is ultimately discovered and recognized by the *marchese*, Corrado Malaspina, who takes her to his home. Contemporaneously, her children, protected by false identities, are bought by the *marchese* and Beritola's eldest son, Giuffredi, is imprisoned after having fallen in love with the nobleman's daughter. Sometime after these events, Arrighetto's jailer dies and, freed from political threat, Giuffredi reveals his identity. The son is reunited with his family and allowed to marry the *marchese's* daughter.<sup>11</sup>

Beritola at first appears to take on an active role in protecting herself and her children, but her transgression proves to be superficial. Boccaccio uses Emilia's narration to show that the protagonist's actions are not a calculated

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<sup>11</sup> Francesco Ciabattini's intertextual reading (2018, 209–25) draws parallels between Beritola and Hecuba from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Book 8, which Boccaccio reworks in the *De mulieribus claris*. Ciabattini's comparison is based on Hecuba's transformation into a monstrous beast after discovering the deaths of her last two remaining children. The travel element of her biography is much reduced: Boccaccio narrates that she may have wandered the fields in grief but might also have been taken into slavery (33.7–8). As such, Hecuba's story offers little of substance to this essay; suffice it to say that Boccaccio seems more overtly interested in exploring the dangers of women's mobility in Beritola's medieval world, while Hecuba's destination in the *De mulieribus claris* is unknown and overlooked.

escape from her political system and that her mobility is not meant to transgress. Emilia explains:

Madama Beritola in tanto mutamento di cose, non sappiendo che d'Arri-ghetto si fosse e sempre di quello che era avvenuto temendo, per tema di vergogna, ogni sua cosa lasciata, [...] montata sopra una barchetta se ne fuggì a Lipari, e [...] con tutti sopra un legnetto montò per tornarsene a Napoli a' suoi parenti." (2.6.8)

The word “mutamento” signals to the reader that the protagonist is a woman on the edge of a significant change, but the effect is ruined by her destination. Beritola wishes to return to her parents, re-enclosing herself within the home, a space in which Boccaccio declares, from the *Decameron's* opening pages, that women are “ristrette da' voleri, da' piaceri, da' comandamenti de' padri, delle madri” (Proem.10). The use of suffixes that diminish or reduce, as seen in “barchetta” and “legnetto,” further indicates that Beritola's mode of transport, and thus her preparation for crossing the sea, is inadequate. Her actions are prompted by panic rather than reasoned decision-making.

Beritola does not wish, by travelling, to assert her independence, but it is the loss of her children that pushes her into complete inertia. She turns her back on all that governs humanity, refusing any intentionality: “povera e sola e abbandonata, senza saper dove mai alcuno doversene ritrovare, quivi vedendosi, tramortita il marito e' figliuoli chiamando cadde in su il lito” (2.6.11–12). She substitutes her children for kid goats and continues to weep for her husband. Christopher Nissen views her newfound wildness as a “return to reason”; she can do nothing to help her family and so adopts an animalesque comportment (2011, 516). While for Nissen this is a genuine transformation that makes Beritola happy, Roberta Morosini views it as a mere physical change that underlines the character's failure to understand the civilized world (2017, 74). I perceive this behavior not as the result of reasoned choice but as a surrender to the whims of Fortune, and as a change in temperament as well as in body given that Beritola abandons all hope. Her transgression in crossing a boundary from the domestic into the unknown is limited by her passivity, as she survives thanks only to basic drives: “da fame costretta a pascer l'erbe si diede” (2.6.14). Further supporting an interpretation of her behavior as a surrender rather than a choice, it is not Beritola herself who decides to transform. It is the kid goats that, when “dalla madre a lei niuna distinzione fecero,” become arbiters of change in her story, whereas she simply maintains her motherly instincts in feeding the animals (2.6.16). Goats and woman alike exchange their true relatives for some semblance of familiarity, and Beritola remains this way, “divenuta

fiera,” until the *marchese* arrives (2.6.17). She is saved by chance, having relinquished her connections to the human world and posing no transgressive threat to any political system. In Boccaccio’s period Beritola’s presence in a remote location does not offer an opportunity to flourish but to become lost in the vastness of heterogeneous space. Women are discouraged from seeing the possibility inherent in the absence of patriarchal systems and so heterogeneous space is not liberatory but instead poses a great danger.

It is a series of circumstances outside of her control (the death of King Charles and the actions of her son) that reunite Beritola with her family. Her removal from the island and re-entry into society is facilitated by the *marchese* and, once this is done, the novella’s focus passes from her to her son. The women of the *brigata* exemplify how the reader should think of this passivity: “forse non molto più si sarebbe la novella d’Emilia distesa, che la compassione avuta dalle giovani donne a’ casi di madama Beritola loro avrebbe condotte a lagrimare” (2.7.2). Despite the novella’s happy ending, the principal emotion felt by Emilia’s audience for her protagonist is pity. She is trapped by circumstance and seemingly continues to exist in this state of emotional distress when her apathy forces the narrative to abandon her in favor of a character who will propel the story forward. Beritola even confirms her passivity in the restoration of her happiness when she tells Currado “in me la mia perduta speranza rivocareste” (2.6.59). Whether happy or sad, Beritola continually acquiesces to the circumstances in which she finds herself rather than shaping them of her own volition. The fact of her mobility is in opposition to the norms of feminine behavior, but she does not anticipate undermining dominant power structures.

Beritola’s problems are ultimately resolved, her withdrawal from civilization reversible, but Argia transgresses in a far more impactful manner. Living in a time of war in which boundaries are contested, the mythological woman’s actions serve to pit her against the patriarchy and King Creon’s laws in a way that cannot be reversed. Instead, she is celebrated by Boccaccio for having “preclarum coniugalis amoris testimonium perenne reliquit” ‘left to posterity a flawless, splendid, and eternal record of conjugal love’ (29.1). Wife of Polynices and daughter of Adrastus, Argia appears in Statius’ *Thebaid*, although Boccaccio alters many of the circumstances surrounding her mobility. In Book 12 of the *Thebaid*, unlike the other wives who sit in indecision wondering whether to go to Thebes or to Athens, to plead with Creon or to Theseus for help, Argia leaves to bury Polynices. Statius writes: “hic non femineae subitum virtutis amorem / colligit Argia, sexuque immane relicto / tractat opus” ‘Here Argia conceives a sudden passion for un-womanly courage and engages in monstrous work, abandoning her sex’



(12.177–79).<sup>12</sup> Statius emphasizes the extent to which Argia’s behavior is subversive, but this praise is then undermined by the presentation of her decision as a foolish and reckless one, born of a lack of desire to live rather than any bravery. “Immitesque deos regemque cruentum / contemptrix animae et magno temeraria luctu / provocet” ‘She challenges ruthless gods and the bloody king, despising her life, rash with mighty mourning’ (12.184–86). Once in motion, she is haunted by her “mitis coniunx” ‘gentle husband’ (12.189) whom she imagines as she journeys, sped on by her devotion to his authority. The version of the tale found in the *Thebaid* somewhat aligns with the behavior exhibited by Beritola: Argia panics and fails to consider the consequences of her actions. Statius’ Argia envisages herself accompanied by men, hallucinating the various authoritative figures in her life, just as Beritola helplessly laments her lost family, plagued by thoughts of their absence. Both women act in desperation and cease to care about their own lives, thus affirming that women are emotional and irrational.

Boccaccio’s recounting of this journey differs from Statius’ in several critical aspects that render Argia’s actions far more transgressive, and intentionally so. She breaks out of the domestic sphere while adhering to feminine behaviors and thus demonstrates that mobility is in and of itself a feminine quality, unlike several women in the *Decameron* who assume a masculine identity in order to travel, a disguise that implies that to move is to be a man (Barolini 1993, 287; Morosini 2010). After having received confirmation of Polynices’ death, Boccaccio’s Argia decides on a course of action, “regio abiecto splendore et mollicie thalami atque debilitate feminei sexus seposita” ‘casting aside royal splendor, the comfort of her chamber, and womanly weakness’ (29.3). Where Beritola attempts to flee to the safety of her father’s house, Argia vacates the enclosed safety of her father’s castle. Significantly, she travels *as a woman* despite Boccaccio’s insistence that she has set aside the weakness associated with her gender. She appropriates courage as a feminine characteristic, conscious of the dangers in travelling:

Nec eam terruere insidentium itinera manus impie, non fere, non aves occisorum hominum sequentes corpora, non circumvolantes, ut arbitrantur stolidi, cesorum manes, nec — quod terribilius videbatur — Creontis imperantis edictum, quo cavebatur pena capitalis supplicii, ne quis cuiquam occisorum funebre prestaret officium. (29.4)

The bandits who lay in wait for travelers did not frighten her, nor the wild beasts, nor the birds seeking carrion, nor the spirits of the dead which (as

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<sup>12</sup> All citations and translations herein refer to Statius 2003.

foolish report has it) fly about. Nor was Argia afraid of something seemingly more terrible still: Creon's order forbidding, under pain of capital punishment, the performance of funeral rites for any of the slain.

Argia is particularly aware that as a woman these threats are all the more pernicious to her, but her vulnerability does not stop her. Unlike in the *Thebaid*, Argia's actions do not seem to be a last resort; her focus is on completing a goal rather than ending her life. Beritola, meanwhile, travels in a little boat from which she disembarks, never considering the possibility that pirates might threaten her children's safety, her actions stemming from ignorance of her situation rather than any particular fortitude. Of further interest is the manner in which Boccaccio here undermines the woman-as-nature/man-as-culture divide that he enforces in Beritola's *novella*. Where Beritola uses her maternal instincts to survive her psychological suffering and becomes animal-like herself, barely differentiated from a mother goat and restored to civilization by a man, for Argia the world of beasts and savagery is one of men. Their presence indicates that she is entering a world where women do not belong, but that she will repurpose for her own ends.

Critics have used the fact that Argia's motivation arises from wifely devotion to negate her transgression. For Lynn Shutters, Argia follows convention, conforming to the courtly romance tradition as her presence on the battlefield allows her to make a spectacle of her love (2016, 282). Stephen D. Kolsky reads her behavior as a sign of her faithfulness to her husband, as the love she expresses "acknowledges no other authority than her husband's: the heroism of an exceptional wife is centred on him" (2003, 146). Yet Argia's mobility is notably prompted by her husband's death and the *lack* of his instruction; she leaves the castle where she might have profited from her father's protection and travels without a man to safeguard herself from harm. She is also highly dismissive of the supposed spirits haunting the battlefield, unlike in the *Thebaid* where Argia is plagued by visions of key male figures in her life. Boccaccio's Argia thus seems a more reasoned individual than the male soldiers who have devised such rumors. In making it clear that Argia believes her husband to be a body and not a spirit, Boccaccio shows that Polynices is an object without whims or desires. His authority can no longer be projected, and so Argia acts of her own accord and in direct opposition to what is expected of her by male relatives. Argia's defiance extends beyond even this: while Beritola abandons the human world and avoids any and all people who could oppose this action, Argia deliberately enters into conflict with the rules set out by another individual. She defies King Creon's edict that none of the corpses left on the battlefield are

to be buried and steals her husband's body back. His cremation becomes an open disruption that Creon's state cannot ignore.

Boccaccio's commentary on Argia's narrative encourages us to read her transgression in comparison to Beritola's behavior. He criticizes women like Beritola in order to underline Argia's excellence:

Flevere persepe plurime virorum egritudines carceres paupertatem et infortunia multa, stante tamen spe mitioris fortune et amoto severioris pavore. Quod est laudabile videatur, extremum tamen dilectionis inditium dici non potest, ut Argie dici obsequia potuere. Hec hostiles petiit agros, dum flere posset in patria. (29.6–7)

While hope of a kindlier fortune remains and when fear of a crueler one is removed, many women weep over the illnesses, imprisonment, poverty, and numerous misfortunes of their husbands. This may seem praiseworthy, but one cannot claim that it is an overwhelming proof of love, as can be said of Argia's last rites for her husband. She went into the enemy's territory when she could have wept at home.

Intentionally defying the spatial limitations placed upon women is in this way lauded. Beritola's aim in travelling can be considered a return to patriarchal authority and the secluded protection it offers within the domestic space, a seclusion that is rendered more totalizing by her subsequent separation from civilization. Beritola considers only the danger of what she leaves behind and not the risks she will face in travelling. Argia's objective is instead clearly defined; she is aware of her vulnerability, but she does not sacrifice her femininity in order to negate it.

Intention is significant to transgression not only in its existence — both women desire something in travelling — but in terms of what exactly is intended. Beritola, in Boccaccio's thirteenth-century narrative, does not hope to challenge the established political structures that define the space she inhabits. Argia instead undermines power balances by exploiting fluctuating borders. Travelling to the battlefield, she uses the heterogeneity of this space to defy Creon and accomplish her own aims, liberating herself from the domestic sphere.

#### Emancipation: Giletta of Narbonne and Elissa/Dido

Boccaccio shows his readers that, when accomplished successfully, challenging existing orders of power can emancipate women from patriarchal authority. In foregoing one political system, they can liberate themselves from it and often assert their desires, rendering the new space they occupy more complex in its representation. Giletta of Narbonne of the *Decameron* (3.9) strengthens the idea of a homogenous space over which her husband

is master, only ever digressing as she reinforces her husband's authority no matter where she finds herself.<sup>13</sup> Her subversion is temporary, lasting only until she is brought back into the fold of domesticity, and so does not fit the requirements of spatial transgression. Dido of the *De mulieribus claris*, meanwhile, proves her worth on the political stage by rejecting her brother's control, creating a country over which she has complete jurisdiction and, through her ingenuity, transforming notions of space. Both women act in ways not expected of their gender, but only Dido transgresses spatially. Boccaccio brings Giletta back into the domestic realm; as with Beritola, he reassures his reader that the status quo will be restored, whereas Dido's Carthage flourishes even after her death as a new space that maintains its independence until its destruction at the hands of the Roman Republic.

Giletta heals the King of France's ulcer and when he offers her a reward, she requests the right to marry Beltramo of Roussillon. Her new husband protests this union with a woman below his social station and leaves her to go to Florence. Giletta heads for Roussillon and creates order out of the chaos caused by her husband's long absence. Although she proves herself highly capable, Beltramo writes to her and declares that he will not accept her as his wife until she has his child in her womb and his ring on her finger. She tells the court she is going on a pilgrimage, taking her jewels, a male cousin, and a maid. Arriving secretly in Florence, she discovers the name of the woman with whom Beltramo has fallen in love. Giletta decides to trick her husband, disguising herself as his lover and waiting in the woman's house for his arrival, after which they make love. Finally, pregnant and with his ring on her finger, she reveals herself to Beltramo, who accedes that she is his wife.

The above synopsis reveals that, although Giletta defies her husband's initial wishes, she cannot disregard his authority. Her story instead points to the omnipresence of the patriarchy, which transcends even firmly delineated borders. Thus, no matter the space that she occupies nor her mobility, Giletta heals rather than ruptures political systems: first a king, then a city, then her husband. Despite demonstrating her capabilities as a female ruler, she does not long for emancipation but rather reinforces the notion of woman as devoted wife above all things. After her husband abandons her for Florence, she

se ne venne a Rossiglione, dove da tutti come lor donna fu ricevuta. Quivi trovando ella, per lo lungo tempo che senza conte stato v'era, ogni cosa

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<sup>13</sup> Westphal defines digression as movement within one delineated space, while transgression involves movement between "competing systems" (2011, 47).

guasta e scapestrata, sì come savia donna con gran diligenza e sollecitudine ogni cosa rimise in ordine; di che i subgetti si contentaron molto e lei ebbero molto cara e poserle grande amore, forte biasimando il conte di ciò che egli di lei non si contentava. (3.9.29)

Such is Beltramo's authority that, even in his absence, his wife is welcomed into the city of Roussillon. In opposition to Beritola, who is led to despair and the rejection of civilization by her husband's absence, Giletta strengthens the idea of a homogenous space under the control of her husband and rebuilds it. Her involvement in governance, although unexpected for a woman, is not intended to challenge Beltramo's authority but rather to please him by substantiating his power. She does not take advantage of his waning popularity among his subjects (disgruntled by his treatment of Giletta and his abandonment of them) in order to seize power for herself. Once she has cemented her position, she declines the independence it could bring, preferring to focus on romance and win the love of her husband. It is he who, in travelling to Florence, unfetters himself from the political system by defying the King of France's wishes and allowing his city to go to ruins.

If we split the novella into a tripartite structure, with the opening sequence being Giletta's healing of the king, the middle section that of her experience in Narbonne, and the bedroom antics that ultimately win over her husband as the conclusion, it is noteworthy that the second of these has been largely overlooked. Anthony Cassell identifies a tendency to read 3.9 as a "twofold plot" while making the case for the importance of "threads that give purpose and unity to the subordinate actions and subplots" and yet he, too, offers little analysis of Giletta's brief foray in the political arena (2014, 177). He alludes to the episode when he draws parallels between her and two women of the *De mulieribus claris*, Penthesilea (32) and Sulpicia (85), observing that both women travel in order to reunite with the men they love (197–98). Markedly different in Penthesilea's biography is the fact that Hector is believed to have borne witness to her prowess himself (32.5) while Sulpicia is commended for leaving behind the domestic sphere and facing the same consequences borne by her husband (85.5). These women earn the admiration of their lovers through deeds that subvert what it means to be feminine, whereas Giletta's accomplishments outside of the bedroom are ignored by Beltramo and forsaken by the woman herself.

Certainly, Giletta's success in rebuilding her husband's city is impressive, and yet she views it as a mere extension of her wifely duties, accepted and subordinated by Beltramo in her happy ending. Although Boccaccio shows that women can be capable rulers, Giletta's achievements are heavily associated with Beltramo and attenuated by her desire to abscond to the

private sphere once more. Boccaccio forewarns us of this outcome when he has Giletta re-enter the domestic space upon arriving in Florence. Her plan's success depends not upon her exceptional management of Roussillon but rather upon hiding out in the bedroom of another woman. Despite her ingenuity, Giletta remains focused on pleasing her spouse and becoming the woman that he desires, almost literally morphing into her through her disguise as she takes on the identity of her husband's lover. Emancipation is far from uppermost in her thoughts despite her impressive adaptive capacity.

Dido of the *De mulieribus claris* is, by contrast, able to emancipate herself from her family and, more specifically, from the patriarchal authority of her brother. So fully does she accomplish this that her transformation is indicated in the title: she is named both Dido and Elissa, her life split by the idea of a before and after as she becomes the Queen of Carthage. She does not lose her identity as Beritola does, nor is it subsumed by a man as occurs in Giletta's *novella*. Rather, Dido intentionally chooses a new path and a new self that emancipates her from her familial connections.

Dido appears in classical mythology as the spurned and spiteful lover of Aeneas in Virgil's *Aeneid*. Boccaccio begins her biography by announcing his intention to defend her reputation, "si forte paucis literulis meis saltem pro parte notam, indigne obiectam decori sue viduitatis, abstergere queam" 'I hope that my modest remarks may cleanse away (at least in part) the infamy undeservedly cast on the honor of her widowhood' (42.1). Nevertheless, critics perceive an ambiguity within this biography, suggesting it is not as laudatory as it seems and failing to explore the active role Dido takes in her own liberation, highlighting instead Boccaccio's insistence on her chastity. Craig Kallendorf argues that Boccaccio offers "an image of a chaste and constant Dido" that renders her portrayal both sympathetic and "historically accurate" (1985, 412–13). Deanna Shemek interprets Dido as an example of Boccaccio's wider preference that, once widowed, women remain celibate (2014, 202). Her death is interpreted as the narrative turn that ultimately saves her newly established state: when compelled to remarry, she commits suicide, her chastity ensuring the safety of her subjects (Jordan 1987, 35). This understanding of Dido as a self-sacrificing woman whom Boccaccio idealizes for the purity of her body and her wifely fidelity casts her death as acquiescence rather than defiance. I reason instead that, where Giletta's commitment to her husband reinserts her into the domestic space, Dido dies in the new country she has forged and enables its continuation and future prosperity.

At all points in the narrative, Dido relies upon her own ingenuity rather than male protection for her survival. Upon discovering the death of her husband at the hands of her brother, she responds by becoming mobile:

fugam capessere deliberavit, ne forsitan et ipsa avaritia fratris traheretur in necem; et posita feminea mollicie et firmato in virile robur animo, ex quo postea Didonis nomen meruit, Phenicum lingua sonans quod virago latina (42.5).

Elissa resolved to flee, either because she was warned to do so in a dream (according to some sources) or because it was her own idea. Womanly weakness was cast aside and her spirit hardened to manly strength; for this she later earned the name of “Dido,” the Phoenician equivalent of the Latin *virago*.

Boccaccio denies that Dido’s escape resulted from anything but her own decision-making. The idea that a dream pushed her to act is weakened by reference to other sources among which Boccaccio offers his own text as the one that provides the truth. He does not provide any otherworldly sense of help that could diminish Dido’s achievement in deciding to travel. Although an extraordinary woman, she can hardly be said to be divinely endowed with particular skills that enable her actions. Rather, she accomplishes greatness through her own merit.

It is at the moment in which Dido decides to travel that Boccaccio christens her with her new name, highlighting the importance of the journey to her narrative. Dido travels with full consideration of her gender and does not attempt to disguise herself, travelling instead with “virile [...] animo” (42.5). She blurs the boundaries between male and female comportment, emancipating herself from the understanding of women as immobile and passive. Like Giletta, Dido must trick the men who surround her in order to travel, but as in Argia’s biography, Boccaccio’s insistence that a woman adopts masculine strength when travelling is undermined by the resourcefulness with which Dido protects herself. She does not dress as a man, nor does she assume command of her brother’s ship in an open challenge that might be interpreted as a masculine response. Instead, she convinces the sailors that they have lost the king’s jewels and must therefore follow her into exile to escape punishment (42.5–6).

What makes Dido transgressive are the choices she makes once her boundary-crossing is complete. She heads for the African coast where, diverging considerably from Giletta’s story and her limited rebellion, she begins to redefine ideas of space. Agreeing to the constraint that she may buy only what land can be comprised by an ox’s hide, she cuts said hide into strips that then encircle a far more extensive area than those who sold it to

her had envisaged. Compelling people around her to rethink how they understand space, she takes full control of it in her own right rather than in that of a husband. Dido begins to construct Carthage, giving it walls and temples: “surrexere illico menia, templa, forum et edificia publica et privata” ‘there sprang up city walls, temples, a forum, and public and private buildings’ (42.8). She identifies varying uses for the space around her and, crucially, emancipates herself (and thus Carthage) from the patriarchal system. She governs independently of a king, and when the elders of Carthage propose to bring her back into the domesticated fold by marrying her to the king of the Muxitani she refuses to travel unless on her own terms. Indeed, her final act is framed as a journey of her own volition, as her wordplay reveals she will go to her dead spouse rather than accept a new one: “prout vultis cives optimi, ad virum vado” (“In accordance with your wish, my people, I go to my husband” (42.15). What follows is a prolonged exhortation to Christian women to follow Dido’s example in not remarrying, which of course is typical of the patriarchal pressure to remain chaste. However, the biography’s last words focus on the prosperity of the kingdom that Dido leaves behind:

Didonem igitur exanguem cum lacrimis publicis et merore cives, non solum humanis, sed divinis etiam honoribus funus exercentes magnificum, extulere pro viribus; nec tantum publice matris et regine loco, sed deitatis inclite eisque faventis assidue, dum stetit Cartago, aris templisque excogitatis sacrificiis coluere. (42.26)

And so Dido’s countrymen, amid public mourning and grief, honored her in death as best they could and staged a magnificent funeral at which she was accorded both human and divine honors. While Carthage stood, they venerated her with altars, temples, and special sacrifices, not only as their common mother and their ruler, but also as an illustrious goddess and their constant protector.<sup>14</sup>

In this separate, final paragraph Boccaccio demonstrates that, outside of his Christian world and in Dido’s own mythological one, it is not chastity for

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<sup>14</sup> Boccaccio omits this closing section from his *Esposizioni sopra la Comedia di Dante*, emulating the text he comments upon by focusing his discussion of Dido on her relationship to men. For Dante, she is “colei che s’ancise amorosa, / e ruppe fede al cener di Sicheo” (*Inf.* 5.61–62), stripped of the name that she earned through her more political deeds, a fact emphasized by her position in Dante’s text between Semiramis and Helen, two named women (Alighieri 1996). The *Esposizioni*’s analysis of Dido ends with an exploration of the historical veracity of the *Aeneid* in order to decide whether she died for love of Aeneas or of Sychaeus, a discussion which, though it includes the founding of Carthage “fatta da Didone,” (2.82) treats it as a brief aside in an attempt to establish why Dante followed Virgil’s model (Boccaccio 1965).



which she is praised by the Carthaginians. They attribute their continued existence to her and highlight that women can rule without sacrificing their femininity: Dido is both their matriarch and their protector.

For women, transgression as a method of emancipating oneself from an existing system, successfully traversing unfamiliar terrain without coming to harm, is a significant step. Yet as we have seen in Beritola and Giletta's stories, the absence of intentionality can harm the degree to which one successfully challenges a patriarchal system. Dido rules on her own over a plurality of people, doubly contesting both the right of men alone to rule and ideas surrounding the homogeneity of space. Where man wishes to have a totalizing control over his domain, transgressive women prove that this is an impossibility, and that space is fundamentally heterogeneous. As occurs in Dido's Carthage, space is occupied by a variety of peoples and systems. This competition is permitted provided that it occurs within a mythological space where the long-term winner has yet to be decided. In the *Decameron*, Boccaccio reassures his readers that society reasserts the status quo no matter how far one drifts from it. Thus, Giletta fulfils her role as wife whilst Dido refuses reintegration into the patriarchal system.

#### The Heterogeneity of Space: Zinevra and Io/Isis

Defying the homogeneity of space is no small undertaking in the *Decameron*: the fourteenth-century society it reflects separates genders between the public and private spheres while Christianity and Islam divide people into categories of East and West. Meanwhile, finding freedom from patriarchal authority is not as difficult for women of the *De mulieribus claris*' Greco-Roman period, a world where the supremacy of borders and of one religion over another have yet to be firmly established. For the *Decameron*'s Zinevra (2.9), despite intentionally fleeing from her husband's murderous rage, journeying across the sea and becoming a powerful advisor to the Sultan, she can only do so by accepting the homogeneity of the new space in which she finds herself (Morosini 2010, 25). Isis instead exemplifies the possibility of heterogeneity, becoming queen of a land where different peoples integrate harmoniously.

In the tale of Zinevra, her husband Bernabò tells a group of merchant friends that his wife is so chaste that she would never betray him. One of these men, Ambrogiuolo, contests this statement and declares that he will induce her to be unfaithful in return for five thousand florins (2.9.22). The terms of the bet agreed, Ambrogiuolo hides in Zinevra's room, sees her naked while she sleeps and finds a distinctive hidden birthmark that convinces Bernabò of his wife's infidelity when Ambrogiuolo is able to identify it. This

done, Bernabò angrily orders a servant to kill Zinevra, who escapes with her life by dressing as a man and crossing the sea to Alexandria, where she becomes a servant to the Sultan. Her escape appears to be a prosperous one as she gains the trust of the Sultan and acquires great importance. One day, she is sent as his representative to the market where she sees Ambrogiuolo and gets her revenge upon him, bringing him to the Sultan where he confesses to the Sultan what he did and, revealing who she is, Zinevra returns home to her husband. Zinevra's ability to travel has been identified as a way of rewriting the story of Lucretia (48), shamed into committing suicide after being raped by her own Ambrogiuolo-esque assailant (Velli 1995, 233–34; Filosa 2012, 103–07). Mobility is a significant element of Zinevra's story because it allows her to thwart such an unhappy ending, proving that a woman can occupy roles outside of those permitted to her. Ultimately, however, her travel is not transgressive as it is her new male identity, Sicurano, who moves freely in the Sultan's kingdom, and only in strict obedience to the laws that impose the country's homogeneity (Barolini 1993, 287; Morosini 2010, 25).

The diversity of characters Zinevra encounters on her journey certainly alludes to a heterogeneous representation of space in this novella. Janet Smarr has even noted that Boccaccio is “in a fairly tolerant end of the spectrum” with respect to his attitudes towards other faiths, observing that differing belief systems appear within the *Decameron* whose practitioners frequently and peaceably interact (1999, 136). Zinevra encounters a Catalonian prior to boarding the ship on which she escapes death, she herself is a Christian woman who comes to live in a Muslim country, and at the port of Acre there is “una gran ragunanza di mercatanti e cristiani e saracini” (2.9.45). They all trade with one another, the paraphernalia they sell suggesting the prosperity of such a varied community. The collision of the Christian and Islamic worlds is encapsulated by the relationship between the Sultan and Zinevra, who renames herself Sicurano da Finale, successfully learning the Sultan's language and becoming an integral part of his government. Both characters appear to respect each other to the degree to which hierarchical power structures will allow and build trust in one another that allows the Sultan to depend upon Sicurano for help running his kingdom and for Zinevra reasonably to expect that the Sultan will deal with Ambrogiuolo in a just manner.

This open-mindedness is superficial, however, when one takes into account the lengths required to compel characters to live together without violence. For example, if the port of Acre is a site of confluence, it is also one of

violence. Zinevra (as Sicurano) is a required presence “acciò che i mercantanti e le mercatantie sicure stessero, era il soldano sempre usato di mandarvi, oltre agli altri suoi ufficiali, alcuno de’ suoi grandi uomini con gente che alla guardia attendesse” (2.9.45). The Sultan, in the event of outbreaks of violence, needs someone he can depend upon to manage potential problems. Sicurano is expected to maintain order despite the apparently harmonious atmosphere that can be found at the market. The use of Acre itself is similarly important to destabilizing the idea of integration within the fourteenth-century reader’s mind, representing the complexity of Christian and Muslim relations. It was first captured in 1104 and, having been in Christian hands for seventy-three years, it was then taken by Saladin in 1187 and became the battleground for the first clash between the two religions in Richard III’s crusade, which was ultimately a failure in that the English king never recaptured Jerusalem. English forces did, however, take back Acre in 1191, only to fall once more a century later in 1291.<sup>15</sup> Although Boccaccio’s marketplace is historically accurate in that trade relations continued even during periods of unrest (France 2018, 4) its inclusion cannot fail to recall to the fourteenth-century mind Acre’s turbulent history fewer than sixty years prior to the *Decameron*’s publication, making it a symbol of an uneasy peace between Christians and Muslims.<sup>16</sup>

The interaction between the Sultan and Zinevra is similarly tenuous, only enduring for as long as the protagonist hides both her gender and her religion, and at the novella’s end the woman returns to her former life unchanged (Morosini 2010, 24). At the novella’s conclusion, the Sultan helps her return home to the exact role that she held at the beginning of the *novella*: “con sommo onore ricevuti furono, e spezialmente madonna Zinevra, la quale da tutti si credeva che morta fosse; e sempre di gran virtù e da molto, mentre visse, fu reputata” (2.9.74). She is not altered by the experience, as evidenced by the use of “sempre” within these concluding lines. Her prominent place in Alexandrian society is facilitated only because her identity has been swallowed by the sea, and the woman named Zinevra remains immobile, affirming gender expectations rather than upending them (Miguel 2003, 84; DeCoste 2004, 60–62). Thus, rather than challenge the homogeneity of space, Zinevra conforms to the idea and becomes whatever the dominant system requires of her. Her respite from the domestic sphere is only temporary and results from her acquisition of masculinity, not her emancipation from the patriarchy. The divide between socially acceptable

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed account of this battle and its military significance, see Hosler 2018.

<sup>16</sup> A complete history of the various battles that took place at Acre can be found in France 2018.

behavior for men and women remains the same. At most, Zinevra demonstrates a highly volatile heterogeneity that might collapse at any moment, as with the marketplace at Acre that threatens to descend into anarchy if not carefully controlled. Even if different peoples exist within a space in this novella, the Sultan must police heterogeneous zones to avoid a breakdown of the peace.

In the *De mulieribus claris*, heterogeneous space is more resilient and often endures beyond a character's initial foray across a border. Argia, in crossing the battlefield as a woman, demonstrates how both genders can inhabit a space predominantly occupied by men without renouncing her identity, and she violates the rules set by King Creon, opening up his land to new forms of power. Dido, too, reveals that space can be plural and conceived of in different ways by measuring it using innovative methods, offering an alternative to the homogeneous patriarchal system. She proves that diverse cultures can co-exist harmoniously without one being subsumed by the other. It is generative to add to this discussion to determine the ubiquity of heterogeneity in mythological spaces, and how these more fluid understandings of borders allow true transgression.

Isis, or Io, is comparable to Dido in that she becomes queen of a new land and chooses a new identity. Here, too, Boccaccio diverges from myth; Io is no longer a girl transformed into a cow after being raped by Jupiter. Rather, “cum sint qui asserant a Iove adultero oppressam virginem eamque, ob perpetratum scelus metu patris impulsam, cum quibusdam ex suis conscendisse navim, cui vacca esset insigne” ‘there are those who claim that a virgin was seduced by Jupiter. Then, spurred on by fear of her father because of the sin she had committed, she and some of her friends boarded a ship on whose flag was depicted a cow’ (8.3). In Boccaccio's version of the tale, a woman shamed by a pre-marital affair travels on a boat whose insignia depicts a cow, the mode of travel significant to the propagation of the myth. Io becomes the Egyptian goddess Isis, one woman conflated into the other as the tale from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* becomes much condensed in order to euhemerize the character, giving her journey and her relationship with space greater prominence. Once again, as with Dido, Boccaccio uses the two locations the woman occupies, each firmly associated with a different name, to demonstrate that it is the act of travelling that facilitates a transformation.<sup>17</sup> The character's metamorphosis from Io into Isis differs from that of Zinevra to Sicurano in several significant ways. There is, of

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<sup>17</sup> Chance 2013, 133–57, makes repeated reference to Boccaccio's use of both names, Io and Isis, as compared to Christine de Pizan, who effaces the explicit identity of Io from her work entirely despite drawing from the *De mulieribus claris* as her main source.

course, the obvious matter of gender in that Zinevra chooses to become a mobile man rather than appropriate movement as a feminine quality. More than this, however, is the matter of Sicurano's acquiescence to homogeneity: he must conform to the societal norms around him, where Isis does not attempt to hide her former self but rather introduces elements of her past life to a new society and becomes an integral part of its development. Her personal growth is not representative of a temporary break with her past connections but a durable identity that gives her fame in posterity.

Isis, like Zinevra, views her mobility as a solution to a problem and thus travels intentionally, fearing reprisal for having had premarital sex and using the sea as an escape route, boarding a ship to assert herself and demonstrating the role of choice in her journey. Structurally, Isis's story is the first in which the focus appears to shift from biographies in which the deeds of a great queen such as Semiramis (2) or goddess like Venus (7) are diminished by excessive sexuality. Isis is permitted, via her travel, to escape the judgement of both her father and the narrator for her indiscretions. The biography that follows immediately after, that of Europa (9), serves to underscore the deliberateness and ingenuity of Isis' journey. Boccaccio states that Europa was duped into wandering to the shore, where she was kidnapped and put on a boat whose flag bore a bull, just as Isis' depicted a cow. The majority of Europa's biography is dedicated to ascertaining the specifics of her abduction, allowing Boccaccio to caution: "vagari licentia nimia virginibus et aures facile cuiuscunque verbis prebere" "This is why I consider it highly inadvisable to give maidens too much freedom to stroll about and listen too readily to the words of just anyone" (9.3). He emphasizes that, in the absence of intentionality, women are particularly vulnerable. Where Isis travelled in order to liberate herself from patriarchal judgement, Europa's aimless wandering puts her in harm's way. Nor is her passivity countered at a later point within Boccaccio's narrative; although in their respective biographies he describes what Dido and Isis accomplish upon reaching their new homes, Europa's fame is attributed only to vague "virtutibus" and to a bronze statue that was dedicated to her by Pythagoras (9.7). Such a lack of preparedness in the *Decameron* would not, as we have seen in Beritola's case, have resulted in such a happy ending as it does for Europa, who is able to gain a reputation through no specific personal qualities. The mythological world allows women not only transgressive travel but makes their very mobility a less threatening prospect to their own safety.

Additionally, the temporal distance Boccaccio's reader had from the mythological realm makes it far easier for him to facilitate his female characters' emancipation. He uses the length of time between the narrative and

his own writing of it to eliminate patriarchal figures in Isis' family from her biography. In travelling, she separates herself so completely that Boccaccio admits that "quibus tamen fuerit temporibus, aut ex quibus nata parentibus, apud illustres hystoriarum scriptores ambigitur" 'nevertheless, there is a discrepancy among distinguished historians as to when she lived or who her parents were' (8.1). The details that Boccaccio chooses to omit are as important as those that are included: it is Isis whose story is significant rather than her lineage, which she abandons. Boccaccio will also use the historical ambiguity of Isis' origins to emancipate her from her husband: he remarks that sources do not agree as to his name, and thus the spouse becomes an unconfirmed and so less important part of the woman's narrative, a footnote to her achievements and, as Jane Chance observes, a way of eliminating certain incestuous elements of the story (2013, 136).

When Isis arrives at her ultimate destination, Egypt, "preterea, vagos et fere silvestres in unum se redigere et datis legibus civili more vivere [...] ostendit" 'she also taught those nomadic and almost savage people to live together, and, having given them laws, she showed them how to live as civilized men' (8.4). One might argue that, by imposing laws, Isis enforces homogeneity onto a previously heterogeneous mythological space rather than embracing its existing characteristics. However, instead of a uniform society, emphasis is placed upon how people of different backgrounds come together and render the land culturally productive rather than politically constrained. Unlike Acre, which threatens to collapse into disarray at any moment, Isis creates a mode of operating that functions beyond borders. She is celebrated in both Rome and Egypt, as well as other places in the West (9.5–6), which implies that the laws she instituted were not restrictive but instead allowed her reputation to travel. As with Dido, Isis is celebrated even after her death, demonstrating the longevity of the system she has imposed to contrast with the patriarchal and restrictive one that she left behind.

## Conclusion

Although both texts feature many women who defy society's imposition of norms regarding feminine behavior, including those who do so without ever travelling, there are also women who travel in non-transgressive modes. Genuinely transgressive travel allows women to complicate ideas that exist within the patriarchal system, including those of space. While the journeys undertaken in the *Decameron* warn of dangers posed by (and to) women crossing borders, the *De mulieribus claris* often celebrates mythological journeys for their refusal of traditional uses and interpretations of the land.

The notion of epic destiny and a world in formation allows the mythological women discussed here to travel. This mobility is at its most transgressive in Westphalian terms when intentional, emancipatory and heterogeneous. Given the fragmentary nature of both texts, it is almost impossible to offer an overarching statement on the nature of any one theme that they depict, and thus this essay aligns with a growing body of criticism that undermines the need to establish a consistent and unassailable feminism (or a distinct lack thereof) in Boccaccio's works. A focus on travel rather than women's sexuality or role within the domestic sphere, a methodology that necessarily removes them from their usual backdrop, highlights the intricacies of transgression within a patriarchal society.

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