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Boccaccio on Readers and Reading

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Abstract

Boccaccio's early work as an entertaining storyteller and his later activity as an encyclopaedist and commentator seem to have little in common. But both depend on a well-developed idea of the relationship between writing and reading. This article looks at the surprisingly consistent and explicit views Boccaccio held about literal and allegorical levels of meaning, and how readers could be assisted to interpret text reliably.

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Boccaccio on Readers and Reading

Boccaccio's role as a serious theorist of reading has not been a particularly central concern of critics. This is surprising, given the highly sophisticated commentary on reception provided by the two authorial self-defenses in the *Decameron* along with the evidence furnished by the monumental if unfinished project of his Dante commentary, the *Esposizioni*. And yet there are some very interesting statements tucked into his work, from his earliest days as a writer right to his final output, about how to read, how not to read, and what can be done to help readers.

That Boccaccio was aware of the way genre affected the way people read texts is evident from an apparently casual remark in the *Decameron*. Having declared that his audience is to be women in love, he then announces the contents of his book:

intendo di raccontare cento novelle, o favole o parabole o istorie che dire le vogliamo. (*Decameron*, Proemio 13)

The inference is that these are precisely the kinds of discourse appropriate for Boccaccio's intended readership, lovelorn ladies. Attempts to interpret this coy list as a typology of the kinds of narration in the *Decameron* have been rather half-hearted, especially in commented editions. Luigi Russo (1938), for instance, makes no mention of the issue at all, and the same goes for Bruno Maier (1967) and Attilio Momigliano (1968). Maria Segre Consigli (1966), on the other hand, limits herself to suggesting that the three last terms are merely synonyms used by the author to provide a working definition of the then-unfamiliar term 'novella'. Vittore Branca (1980) provides a more detailed treatment, suggesting that *novella* is a generic term, whereas *favola* should be linked to the *fabliaux* tradition, *parabola* to didactic intent, and *istoria* to material with a historical or legendary subject matter. Coverage in book form is little better. Perhaps the most complete treatment is to be found in Francesco Bruni, *Boccaccio: L'invenzione della letteratura mezzana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1990, pp. 47–50). Bruni's concern, however, is with the evolution of Boccaccio's ideology, and for him the main issue is the value attached to the term *fabula*, and whether the quadripartite definition of grades of fable, according to levels of truth, advanced in the *Genealogie* (XIV, 9) is valid for the earlier Boccaccio. He comes to the conclusion that Boccaccio's eventually fairly elaborate concept of *fabula* was not well developed at the time of writing the *Decameron*. As the opening phrase of its title suggests, Victoria Kirkham's *Fabulous Vernacular: Boccaccio's Filocolo and the Art of Medieval Fiction* (Ann Arbor: Michigan U.P.), 2001, pp. 1–13 and 58–59) concentrates on the Macrobian distinction (*Commentarii*, I, 2, 9) between serious-minded 'narratio fabulosa' [serious story-telling clothed in fiction] and idle 'fabula' [mere invention with no ulterior purpose]. Kirkham's task is to emphasize the allegorico-didactic aspects of a work too often dismissed as hypertrophied narrativity. The *Decameron* list of story-types is referred to only in a footnote. None of these commentators consider the question of genre in relation to reader-

ship or reading technique, yet there are many pronouncements in Boccaccio's work to show that it was a central and enduring concern.

One of the very last distinctions Boccaccio makes in the 'Author's Conclusion' to the *Decameron* is between reading for work and reading for pleasure. The distinction is of course an old one, memorably summed up by Horace's dictum on the role of poets:

Aut prodesse uolunt aut delectare poetae
aut simul et iucunda et idonea dicere uitae.
Quicquid praecipies, esto breuis, ut cito dicta
percipiant animi dociles teneantque fideles. (*Ars Poetica*, 333–36)

[Poets mean to be useful or to delight, or to say at one and the same time things which are both amusing and practical for life. Whatever you teach, be brief, so that ready minds can grasp what you say swiftly, and remember it accurately.]

Boccaccio had already referred to Horatian 'utile' and 'diletto' in the *Decameron* proem (14). In the *Conclusion* dell'autore, Boccaccio develops this Horatian idea further, but in an unexpected direction (it is a trait we shall see repeated elsewhere). The Roman theorist had gone on to warn against excessive length, purely on the grounds that, overwhelmed by verbal excess, readers would find it was difficult to remember. Boccaccio, instead, takes up the second thread in his source, that of delight, systematically teasing out Horace's implied opposition between work and play. The texts needed for work, says Boccaccio, ought ideally to be short, the texts for pleasure, by contrast, should be as long as possible:

[...] a chi per tempo passar legge, niuna cosa puote esser lunga [...]. Le cose breui si conuengon molto meglio agli studianti, li quali non per passare ma per utilmente adoperare il tempo faticano. (*Decameron*, *Conclusion* dell'autore, 20–21)

In part, this is a question of economy of effort for 'utilitarian' readers, to be contrasted with maximization of pleasure for those interested in 'diletto'. But it is also, as Boccaccio claims, a result of the different degree of training of the two kinds of readers, university educated males and untaught females:

per ciò che né a Atene né a Bologna o a Parigi alcuna di voi [donne] non va a studiare, più distesamente parlar vi si conuiene che a quegli che hanno negli studii gl'ingegni assottigliati. (*Decameron*, *Conclusion* dell'autore, 21)

In other words, training makes readers autonomous, able to deal with texts offering little help. Other, less equipped readers (such as women) require generous guidance, which if incorporated, makes the text longer. It is a tenet Boccaccio will repeat years later, towards the end of the *Genealogie*:

Ut breuia habent intelligentium exercere ingenia, sic et ampliora minus intelligentium revocare (*Genealogie* XV, 12, 5)

[Just as brief texts are there to exercise the minds of the knowledgeable, so, too, longer texts are there to summon the minds of the less knowledgeable.]

The familiarity of the author easing the path of his readers, expressed in the later, erudite works as a master/pupil relationship, is easily metaphorized in the earlier fictional works as erotic intimacy. The amorous subtext of such a helper/helped relation is highlighted by the author's dedication of the *Decameron* to women in love. It has been subtly investigated as a persistent but dynamically evolving theme within Boccaccio's fictional output in Janet Levarie Smarr's seminal *Boccaccio and Fiammetta: the Narrator as Lover* (Urbana: Illinois U.P., 1986). By and large, even though Boccaccio's focus gradually changed during his career between creative and instructive writing, he was always heartily in favor of providing the maximum amount of help. Such assistance was not only for his obsessively imagined ladies but also for the far less seductive readers, students of literature and budding poets, both categories implicitly male. Such help required explicit justification or explanation, and this allows us to trace Boccaccio's approach directly, rather than by extrapolating imaginatively from his fictional output.

The question of assistance to readers and the distinction between reading for work and reading for pleasure can, indeed, be found much earlier than the *Decameron*, as well as, as we have just seen, very much later. In his very earliest writing in Latin, in the group of letters dated to circa 1339 contained in the *Zibaldone Laurenziano*, Boccaccio refers to the boredom and nausea occasioned by reading his canon law set texts, and begs for an annotated copy of Statius' *Thebaid* as the only antidote. The annotations (presumably the commentary by Lactantius Placidus) were essential, as otherwise the inexperienced student was simply incapable of understanding the text:

sed cum sine magistro vel glosis intellectum debitum non attingam
(*Epistola* IV, 29: 'Sacre famis')

[but since without a master or commentaries I may not attain the proper understanding]

It is noteworthy that the glosses are equated, in terms of their usefulness and impact, with the role of a flesh-and-blood teacher guiding his pupil. It is an early hint of what was to become a persistent theme in the later erudite works. Boccaccio, like Petrarch, comes close (indeed perilously close, as we shall see shortly) to personifying books. In the same letter of 1339, the balancing of reading for pleasure against reading for work is more energetically championed. Boccaccio is sick of putting his head down to swot through his papal letters, and needs some compensating distraction:

[...] pietate motus micteres absque mora, cum mihi nullum solatium remanserit amplius, nisi, visis meis decretalium lectionibus, me ab eis quasi fastiditus extollens, alios quaerere libros (*Epistola* IV, 31: 'Sacre famis')

[that, moved by pity, you send it without delay, since there shall remain for me no other relief than, having looked through my readings of the *Decretals*, and getting up from them almost in disgust, to seek out different books]

Reading for pleasure, however longed for, demanded a certain self-discipline. Boccaccio, strangely, does not dwell on this aspect in his commentary on the episode of Paolo and Francesca (*Inferno* V), the obvious place for such a discussion. Instead, he prefers to indulge in a

bravura exercise of narrative gap-filling to explain the implausible family dynamics of the couple (marriage by proxy), to provide a forensic analysis of the mysterious 'one death' (clumsy joint skewering by a very long sword), and to expound for his audience the aetiology of erotic passion itself (a distinctly creative paraphrase of Dino del Garbo's commentary on Cavalcanti's canzone 'Donna me prega').

He clearly had the Paolo and Francesca episode in mind, nevertheless, when sketching the aberrant reading approach of the widow in the *Corbaccio*. She, like Fiammetta in the *Elegia* (VIII, 7), is an avid consumer of French romances:

[...] le sue orazioni e i suoi paternostri sono i romanzi franceschi e le canzoni latine, ne' quali ella legge di Lancelotto e di Ginevra e di Tristano e d'Isotta e le lor prodezze e i loro amori e le giostre e i torneamenti e l'assemblee; e tutta si tritola, quando quando legge Lancelotto o Tristano o alcuno altro con le lor donne nelle camere segretamente e soli ragunarsi, sì come colei alla qual pare veder ciò che fanno, come di loro immagina, così farebbe, avvegna che ella faccia sì che di ciò corta voglia sostiene. (*Corbaccio*, 441–50)

As Boccaccio defends himself in the *Decameron* (Conclusion dell'autore, 11): 'niuna corrotta mente intese mai sanamente parola'. The widow's reading is essentially pornographic, in that she confuses her own feelings with those of the literary characters, and employs literature selfishly as a tool for physical arousal. Furthermore, if Boccaccio's playful parallel between erotic and readerly pleasure is maintained, the widow, in her impatience to put the written word into practice, has translated the *literary* emphasis on laudable length associated with reading for 'diletto' into a *literal* emphasis on brevity appropriate for a spot of hasty fornication 'per utile'. The widow is a parodically deromanticised Francesca, therefore, and her kisses would definitely be on the 'bocca' and not the 'disiato riso'. She has read the text 'factually' rather than 'fictionally'. In that sense she is quite different from the members of the *Decameron* brigata, preternaturally able to preserve the distinction between literature and life:

[...] quantunque liete novelle e forse attrattive a concupiscenzia dette ci sieno e del continuo mangiato e bevuto bene e sonato e cantato (cose tutte da incitare le deboli menti a cose meno oneste), niuno atto, niuna parola, niuna cosa né dalla vostra parte né dalla nostra ci ho conosciuta da biasimare (*Decameron* X, Conclusion, 4)

This ideal readerly temperance is then described in a memorable phrase: the members of the brigata are not 'pieghevoli per novelle' (*Decameron* X, Conclusion, 7).

Perhaps the most imaginative reworking of part of this Paolo and Francesca episode occurs in the early *Filocolo*. Much of the interminable intrigue of this sprawling novel is occasioned by King Felice's complex stratagems to keep Florio and Biancifiore apart once they have fallen in love. Their childhood enamourment is occasioned by a re-run of Dante's depiction of the two lovers reading the *Lancelot en Prose*. But this time, the text which acts as a go-between is the technically much more informative manual, Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*. The text has been set as a primer by the schoolmaster Racheio, and the two children are left on their own to do some unsupervised revision and reading practice:

Taciti e soli lasciò Amore i due novelli amanti, i quali riguardando l'un l'altro fiso, Florio primieramente chiuse il libro, e disse: – Deh, che nuova bellezza t'è egli cresciuta, o Biancifiore, da poco in qua, che tu mi piaci tanto? Tu non mi solevi tanto piacere; ma ora gli occhi miei non possono saziarsi di riguardarti! – Biancifiore rispose: – Io non so, se non che di te poss'io dire che in me sia avvenuto il simigliante. Credo che la virtù de' santi versi, che noi divotamente leggiamo, abbia accese le nostre menti di nuovo fuoco, e adoperato in noi quello già veggiamo che in altrui adoperarono -. – Veramente – disse Florio – io credo che come tu di' sia, però che tu sola sopra tutte le cose del mondo mi piaci -. – Certo tu non piaci meno a me, che io a te – rispose Biancifiore. E così stando in questi ragionamenti co' libri serrati avanti, Racheio, che per dare a' cari scolari dottrina andava, giunse nella camera e loro gravemente riprendendo, cominciò a dire: – Questa che novità è, che io veggio i vostri libri davanti a voi chiusi? (*Filocolo*, II, 4, 1–4)

The parallels with *Inferno* V are obvious, but what is fascinating is the shift of functions. Firstly, the entertainment book which Dante's lovers stopped reading ('quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante', *Inferno* V, 138) has now become a school text, whose close reading is the object of stern classroom discipline, requiring it to remain open. In that sense, paradoxically, it is reading 'per utilità' rather than 'per diletto' (which had been Paolo and Francesca's kind of reading, *Inferno* V, 127). Secondly, Francesca's husband, destined for 'Caina', who is presumably the one who leads the lovers to a common death, and who in Boccaccio's Dante commentary memorably bursts in on the tryst, is here replaced by the threadbare schoolmaster Racheio, suddenly come to give them a lesson. Thirdly, the all-important kiss, which in the Dante episode *precedes* the interruption in reading, in Boccaccio's re-write is reserved for an add-on, *after* Racheio has found them neglecting their homework:

ma più ferma esperienza della verità volle vedere, prima che alcuna parola ne movesse ad alcuno altro, sovente sé celando in quelle parti nelle quali egli potesse lor vedere senza essere da essi veduto. E manifestamente conoscea, come da loro partitosi, incontanente chiusi i libri, abbracciandosi si porgeano semplici baci, ma più avanti non procedeano, però che la novella età, in che erano, non conoscea i nascosi dilette. (*Filocolo* II, 4, 6–7)

The '*più avanti non procedeano*', referring here to unrealised lovemaking, is in fact a verbal echo of Francesca's 'quel giorno *più non vi leggemmo avante*', but it has cleverly inverted the original meaning. Dante suggested full intercourse (Boccaccio's interpretation, certainly, *Esposizioni* V, litt, 184) by incomplete reading, whereas Boccaccio proclaims instead incomplete intercourse (consummation has to await *Filocolo* IV, 122). In their innocence and immaturity, both as consumers of text and as lovers, the youngsters are trapped in a feedback loop, cycling between incomplete reading and incomplete *jouissance*. That such shifts are programmatic can be seen in the parallel redeployment of the Dante pair's reading 'per *diletto*' into the Boccaccio pair's physiological ignorance of the adult pleasures of 'nascosi *dilette*'. Again, there has been a diametrical inversion between reading and sex.

Nevertheless, one of the most striking images in Dante's original is apparently missing in the *Filocolo* re-working, namely Francesca's declaration that 'Galeotto fu il libro e chi lo scrisse', a line Boccaccio cherished to the point of later using it as the sub-title of the *Decameron*. But Boccaccio rarely throws things away, especially when they are vivid fragments from well-thumbed Dante passages. The text as go-between resurfaces somewhat later in book two of the *Filocolo*, once Florio has been sent off to university to study in Montoro (with the clear understanding that he forgets Biancifiore). Poor old Biancifiore realises she is eliminated from this academic equation, but finds, in her wishes at least, a consonant way of entering the world of Florio's studies. The book, from go-between, becomes the lover in person, promising a veritable, if hardly Barthesian, 'jouissance du texte':

Né fia per te fatto alcuno studio che io similmente imaginando non studii, disiderando più tosto di convertirmi in libro per essere da te veduta, che stare nella mia forma da te lontana. (*Filocolo* II, 17, 14).

Here, then, we have that Petrarchan personification of books elevated (or lowered?) into a narrative stratagem. Eroticism apart, providing a go-between for difficult poetic texts gradually became Boccaccio's principal scholarly occupation. Such a concern can already be identified in the fictional works. Perhaps in homage to the Lactantian apparatus for the *Thebaid*, Boccaccio provided substantial self-penned glosses for the *Teseida*, whilst much of the external architecture of the *Decameron* can be seen, in this light, as a highly developed structural aid to guided reading. More importantly, Boccaccio would furnish a programmatic series of works to form an encyclopaedic reference shelf for readers. The *De Casibus* and the *De Mulieribus* dealt with human history, the *Genealogie* covered pagan divinities and mythology, whilst the *De Montibus* provided the universal gazetteer covering where all this mytho-historical interaction took place. Boccaccio's justification for such secondary literature can be found in a passionately worded passage from the *Genealogie*:

Habent enim civiles et canonice leges preter textus multiplices, hominum nequitia semper auctos, apparatus suos a multis hactenus doctoribus editos. Habent philosophorum volumina diligentissime commenta composita. Habent et medicinales libri plurimorum scripta, omne dubium enodantia. Sic et sacre lictere multos habent interpretes, nec non et facultates et artes relique glosatores proprios habuere, ad quos, si oportunum sit, volens habet, ubi recurrat, et, quos velit, ex multis eligit. Sola poesis, quoniam perpaucorum semper domestica fuit, nec aliquid afferre lucri avaris visa sit, non solum per secula multa neglecta atque deiecta, sed etiam variis lacerata persecutionibus a se narrata non habet! (*Genealogie* XV, 6, 13)

[Civil and canon laws have alongside their many primary texts, constantly having to be enlarged in order to embrace sheer human wickedness, accompanying apparatus published by what are by now large numbers of academics. Philosophical volumes too have their commentaries, most carefully composed. Even standard medical textbooks have the supplementary writings of many to unravel every doubt. The same goes for sacred letters, which have many interpreters, and also for the remaining professions and trades, which have their commentators too.

Anybody who wants to can turn to them where appropriate, and, if so inclined, can pick from many. Only poetry (because it was always the handmaid of the exceedingly few, and was not seen by the mean-minded as bringing in any money) has not only been neglected and dismissed, but, flayed by various persecutions, has had nothing at all written about it.]

One of the key tenets in Boccaccio's defense of literature was that obscurity (in modern parlance, perhaps, 'difficulty') was something to be striven for. It enhanced enjoyment. The art of the poet was to make the reader work hard, and it was the effort that the reader put in which provided the reward of sweetness. This line, which closely follows Petrarch's essentially Augustinian (*De Doctrina Christiana* 2.6.7–8) pronouncements in the *Invective contra medicum quendam* (III), is fully laid out in the impassioned twelfth chapter of *Genealogie* XIV. Central to the achievement of desirable obscurity is the concept of veiling. The real meaning of a text is deliberately hidden by the writer, it is 'obscured' by a covering. The idea of the covering veil, or *integumentum* is that of a narrative fiction which is plausible but not factual (so technically 'fabulous'), and which conveys a secondary meaning which is true at a higher level. The most sophisticated enunciations of this 'literary' branch of critical reading were to be found in the Vergil commentary attributed to Bernardus Silvestris and William of Conches' readings of Boethius and Macrobius. Such secular definitions of polysemy differed from theological practice only in that, for the latter, allegory proper applied to the Holy Scriptures, whose surface or historical level, being divinely inspired, was also incontestably true. Some writers kept the same term for both kinds of text, but distinguished (as Dante effectively did, *Convivio* II, 1) between the allegory *in verbis* of the poets (where the *integumentum* is fabulous) and the allegory *in factis* of the theologians (where there are simultaneous truth-values for the literal and the derived meanings). Dante's own position, if the *Convivio* passage and the announcement in the letter to Can Grande (*Epistola* XIII) are taken together, seems to hover tantalisingly somewhere between the allegory of the poets and that of the theologians. It is an ambiguity Boccaccio will exploit to the full when elevating Dante's status, in the *Trattatello* and the *Esposizioni*, as a divinely inspired poet.

What is important to understand is Boccaccio's take on Dante's status as 'allegorizable'. There is a helpful clue hidden in Boccaccio's interpretation of the maternal dream in the *Trattatello*. Reworking the birthing dream contained in Donatus' biography of Virgil, Boccaccio declares that Dante's mother, on the point of bringing the future poet into the world, imagines that her son is brought up as a shepherd beneath a laurel tree, where he drinks from a spring and attempts to feed off the laurel berries. Unable to reach the berries, he dies, and is transformed into a peacock. The allusions to poetic inspiration (the spring) Dante's failed crowning (the berries) are obvious, but the peacock needs more explanation. Boccaccio equates the bird with Dante's masterpiece, the *Comedy*. Like the peacock, the poem is beautiful (one hundred cantos, like the eyes on the peacock's tail), but with a harsh voice (it contains admonitions), ugly feet (vernacular verse), and, most important of all, it is incorruptible (it contains eternal truths). In the midst of this explanation, Boccaccio announces:

Dico che il senso della nostra *Comedia* è simigliante alla carne del paone, perciò che esso, o morale o *teologo* che tu il déi a quale parte più del libro ti piace, è semplice e immutabile verità. (*Trattatello*, 1^a version, 222)

In other words, Boccaccio seemingly attributes to Dante's poem levels of interpretation based on the 'higher' anagogical sense (though tellingly 'teologo' and 'morale' are not fully differentiated) only applicable to sacred texts whose literal vehicle is normally true. Dante represents for Boccaccio, then, the extreme, quasi-sacral example of the poet-theologian. The consequence for reading is made clear many years later in Boccaccio's opening pronouncements in the accessus to the *Esposizioni*, where he invokes God's aid in interpreting the polysemy of Dante's poem:

E se Platone confessa sé, più che alcuno altro, avere del divino aiuto bisogno, io che debbo di me presumere, conoscendo il mio intelletto tardo, lo 'ngegno piccolo e la memoria labile, e specialmente sottentrando a peso molto maggiore che a' miei omeri si convegno, cioè a spiegare l'artificioso testo, la moltitudine delle storie e la sublimità de' sensi ascosi sotto il poetico velo della Comedìa... (*Esposizioni*, accessus, 3)

The phrase 'poetico velo' seems to imply that the literal vehicle is 'fabula', but Boccaccio's interpretative strategy in terms of higher ('sublimità') levels of polysemy suggests an approach akin to the allegory of the theologians. The solution to this apparent contradiction lies in Boccaccio's essentially Platonic concept of artistic inspiration. Other poets, such as Virgil, may have been serious minded, and may indeed have hidden the truth behind beautiful fables. Dante, unlike them, was one who as a Christian had truly been inspired by the Holy Ghost, whereas his pagan predecessors had merely 'avere imitate, tanto quanto a lo 'ngegno umano è possibile, le vestigie dello Spirito Santo'. These pagan poets, in Boccaccio's terms (taken from the chapter title of *Genealogie* XV, 8), are to be considered 'mythical theologians', or theologians of myth. Dante's inspiration, on the other hand, coming from revealed religion, was innately superior.

For ordinary mortals, however, the allegory *in verbis* of the poets is an honorable enough profession. Boccaccio, whose enthusiasm for the allegory of the poets is surprisingly consistent in his pre-*Decameron* fictional works, right from the days of the *Caccia di Diana*, gives a technical account of how the literal and allegorical levels coexist textually in two separate places in his scholarly output. He does this once in the *Genealogie* and once in the *Esposizioni*. The passages bear marked similarities, not only to each other, but also to the account given in Dante's *Convivio* and his letter to Can Grande (*Epistola* XIII). Boccaccio knew this latter document in an incomplete, and almost certainly unattributed form, which is also quoted from (and equally not attributed to Dante) by other fourteenth century commentators such as Guido da Pisa, Jacopo della Lana, the Ottimo, Pietro Alighieri, Francesco da Buti, and Benvenuto da Imola. But there are notable divergences too, as we shall see. The *Convivio* account, however, seems to have been known in detail by Boccaccio, and he clearly knew it was by Dante. Given the long gestation of the *Genealogie*, and the perennial interest in Dante shown by Boccaccio before giving his public lectures in the church of Santo Stefano in Badia, it is impossible to state with any confidence whether one account predates the other. They may both derive, indeed, from a common source, no longer available to us.

The four levels of interpretation outlined by Dante had recently received an acute systematization from Thomas Aquinas (*Summa* I, 1, 10), but their origin as a hierarchy can be traced back at least as far as Cassian's *Conferences* (early fifth century). That the distinction into four levels (but minus exemplification) was commonly accepted in the schools of the

Late Middle Ages can be seen in, for instance, in the widespread mnemonic verse (Walther, 13899):

Litera gesta docet,
Quid credas allegoria,
Moralis quid agas,
Quo tendas anagogia.

[The letter teaches the history, allegory what you should believe, the moral what you should do, and the anagogy where you should strive for]

It is a bare mnemonic which Pietro di Dante will use, paraphrased, in the *accessus* to his Dante commentary (third redaction, 1359–64). Boccaccio's explanations, however, come equipped with examples. The first account of polysemy occurs in book one, chapter three of the *Genealogie*, where Boccaccio is explaining to the king of Cyprus the origins and myth of unruly Litigius, the first of the sons of Demogorgon. The story of Litigius' mother, Chaos, and of her protracted cthonic labour, prompts Boccaccio to exclaim:

Habes, rex inclite, ridiculam *fabulam*, verum eo ventum est ubi oportunum sit a veritate amovere fictionis corticem (*Genealogie* I, 3, 5)

[There you have it, your highness, a ridiculous fable, but now the time has come to remove the covering of fiction from the truth]

The term 'fable', which Boccaccio uses here, is not simply a synonym for story, as some commentators on the *Decameron* have alleged. Indeed Boccaccio's use of 'favole' in the author's defense in the Introduzione alla quarta giornata (37–38) clearly indicates something more serious. Rather it comes directly from the tradition of allegorical reading expounded by Macrobius in his commentary to the *Somnium Scipionis* (I, 2, 9). Macrobius' account is slightly ambiguous, because he contradicts himself, using the same term (already ambiguous in Latin) for two different concepts. *Fabula* is essentially of two kinds: one is merely gratuitous fiction, for gratification, unworthy of credence. The other leads people, by its admittedly false inventions, to serious ends. This latter kind must be distinguished from the former: Macrobius calls it 'narratio fabulosa non fabula' [fabulous telling, not fable]. *Fabula*, in this serious acceptance then, is the 'poetically' invented vehicle, which can in certain circumstances (as 'narratio fabulosa') carry the burden of higher truths. The adjective 'ridiculous' is tucked in only to make the contrast between the vehicle and the tenor more powerful. Boccaccio goes on to quote directly from Macrobius to illustrate the point:

non frustra se, nec ut oblectent ad *fabulosa* convertunt, sed quia sciunt inimicam esse nature apertam undique expositionem sui, que sicut vulgaribus hominum sensibus intellectum sui vario rerum tegmine operimento subtrahit, ita a prudentibus arcana sua voluit per *fabulosa* tractari. (*Genealogie* I, 3, 6, deriving from Macrobius on *Somnium Scipionis* I, 2, 17–18)

[poets don't just idly resort to fables, or to have fun. Rather it is because they know that it is contrary to Nature to be openly expounded everywhere. Just as, through divers manners of concealment, She has with-

held understanding of Herself from the common senses of mankind, so
She has desired that her secrets be treated by 'fabulous' means.]

But then, just as he had done with Horace's dictum about the pleasure and utility of poetry, Boccaccio proceeds to draw an extra distinction. The truths beneath the fable can be multiple, not just singular. To explain this to the king, he moves from Macrobius to Dante:

Insuper, rex precipue, sciendum est his fictionibus non esse tantum unicum intellectum, quin imo dici potest *polisenum*, hoc est multiplicium sensuum. (*Genealogie* I, 3, 7)

[Furthermore, your majesty, it is important to know that there isn't just one meaning for these fables. Indeed it can be said to be 'polysemic', that is to say of many meanings.]

This is a reprise of the opening of Dante's explanation of the levels of reading in the letter to Can Grande, as the expression '*polisemos hoc est plurium sensuum*' (*Epistola* XIII, 20) [polysemic, that is to say of several meanings] shows. Dante's explanation of the levels, 'ut melius pateat' [so that it is clearer], then uses the example of psalm CXIV (113), 'In Exitu Israel de Egypto' (the psalm actually reads 'Cum egrederetur Israel de Aegypto'). Boccaccio chooses instead a pagan myth, more consonant with the subject matter of the *Genealogie*, though his Christian mindset breaks through when dealing with the final, doctrinally awkward anagogical level, technically improper for pagan allegories. The illustration he gives is the beheading of Medusa by Perseus:

Et ut quid velim facilius assumatur, ponemus exemplum. Perseus Iovis filius figmento poetico occidit Gorgonem, et victor evolavit in ethera. Hoc dum legitur per licteram hystorialis sensus prestatur. Si moralis ex hac lictera queritur intellectus, victoria ostenditur prudentis in vicium et ad virtutem accessio. Allegorice autem si velimus assumere, pie mentis, spretis mundanis deliciis, ad celestia elevatio designatur. Preterea posset et anagogice dici per fabulam Christi ascensum ad Patrem, mundi principe superato, figurari. (*Genealogie* I, 3, 7-8)

[And so as better to take in what I want to say, let us posit an example. Perseus, the son of Jupiter, in the poetic fiction killed the Gorgon, and soared away victoriously into the sky. When one reads this literally, the historical meaning presents itself. If the moral interpretation is sought from this literal meaning, it shows the victory of the prudent man against vice, and his approach to virtue. If however we desire to take it allegorically, then it stands for the raising of the pious mind to heavenly things, once it has despised worldly pleasures. Furthermore, one can even say anagogically that it figures the ascent of Christ to the Father, having defeated the prince of the world.]

Boccaccio's example is different from Dante's not only in its illustration but also, inevitably, in his explanations of the different levels of interpretation. A glance at the relative ordering is enough to show this:

Dante	Boccaccio
<i>literal</i> (historical)	<i>literal</i> (historical)
<i>allegorical</i> (Man's redemption by Christ)	<i>moral</i> (discrimination between good and bad)
<i>moral</i> (conversion to grace)	<i>allegorical</i> (sublimation of pious mind)
<i>anagogical</i> (soul's escape from world)	<i>anagogical</i> (ascent of Christ from world)

This illustration, via the fable of Perseus and Medusa, allows us to understand a cryptic remark in one of those early letters of 1339. In his letter addressed to a still unacquainted Petrarch, 'Mavortis miles extrenue' [energetic warrior of Mars], Boccaccio, a self-confessed greenhorn, suggests that, with the help of his new master, he will be able to explore the heavens and the abyss (a very Dantesque programme), and 'Gorgonem precidere vestra spata' [behead the Gorgon with your sword]. At the moral level, Boccaccio is saying, he will learn to shun vice and seek virtue. At the allegorical level, he will now be able to seek out sublime truths. The anagogical level, for obvious reasons, is not explored.

The myth of Perseus and the Gorgon also informs Boccaccio's account of poetic inspiration in the *Teseida*. Boccaccio in his invocation has mentioned the Castalian sisters (the Muses), who dwell around the Gorgonian spring. He glosses this amply:

Scrivono i poeti che una femina fu, la quale ebbe nome Medusa, e era chiamata Gorgone; la quale aveva questa proprietà, che chiunque la vedea diventava di pietra; la qual cosa udendo un giovane, ch'avea nome Perseo, avuto uno scudo di cristallo da Pallade, andò verso questa Gorgone; la quale, come se medesimo vide nel cristallo, fu vinta, e Perseo le tagliò la testa; e delle goccioline del sangue che caddero di questa testa si generarono diversi animali, tra' quali si creò uno cavallo, il quale aveva ali; e questo cavallo volando in sul monte Parnaso, là dove giunto percosse col piè, e uscinne una fonte, la quale si chiama gorgonea, perché fatta fu di colui che nato era del Gorgone. (*Teseida*, gloss to I, 1, 3)

Boccaccio's choice of a pagan example in the *Genealogie*, albeit compromised by a sudden, final Christian intrusion, may well have been inspired by Dante's use of similar material in the other passage where he talks of allegory, namely in the *Convivio* (a text Boccaccio knows about, as he shows in the *Trattatello*). There Dante announces:

si vuol sapere che le scritture si possono intendere e deonsi esponere massimamente per quattro sensi. L'uno si chiama litterale, e questo è quello che non si stende più oltre che la lettera de le parole fittizie, sì come sono le favole de li poeti. L'altro si chiama allegorico, e questo è quello che si nasconde sotto 'l manto di queste favole, ed è una veritade ascosa sotto bella menzogna: sì come quando dice Ovidio che Orfeo facea con la cetera mansuete le fiere, e li arbori e le pietre a sé muovere; che vuol dire che lo savio uomo con lo strumento de la sua voce fa[r]ia mansuescere e umiliare li crudeli cuori, e fa[r]ia muovere a la sua

volontade coloro che non hanno vita di scienza e d'arte: e coloro che non hanno vita ragionevole alcuna sono quasi come pietre. E perché questo nascondimento fosse trovato per li savi, nel penultimo trattato si mosterrà. Veramente li teologi questo senso prendono altrimenti che li poeti; ma però che mia intenzione è qui lo modo de li poeti seguitare, prendo lo senso allegorico secondo che per li poeti è usato. Lo terzo senso si chiama morale, e questo è quello che li lettori deono intentamente andare appostando per le scritte, ad utilitate di loro e di loro discenti: sì come appostare si può ne lo Evangelio, quando Cristo salio lo monte per transfigurarsi, che de li dodici Apostoli menò seco li tre; in che moralmente si può intendere che a le secretissime cose noi dovemo avere poca compagnia. Lo quarto senso si chiama anagogico, cioè sovrasenso; e questo è quando spiritualmente si spone una scrittura, la quale ancora [sia vera] eziandio nel senso litterale, per le cose significate significa de le superne cose de l'eternal gloria sì, come vedere si può in quello canto del Profeta che dice che, ne l'uscita del popolo d'Israel d'Egitto, Giudea è fatta santa e libera. (*Convivio*, II, i, 2–6)

That Boccaccio was working across both texts, the letter to Can Grande and the *Convivio* passage, can be seen in his use of 'polisenum', only present in the letter, and the pagan/Christian exemplification, only present in the treatise.

Dante's pattern here, like Boccaccio's subsequently in the *Genealogie*, wavers between a pagan allegory in *verbis* for the lower levels, coupled with a theological allegory *in factis* for the higher ones. Given Boccaccio's championing of the equivalence of poetry and theology (proclaimed loudly in the *Trattatello*, *Genealogie* and the *Esposizioni*), it is easy to see why he does not wish to differentiate too much between the two kinds. Crucially, Boccaccio is obliged to defend poets against the charge of being *uniquely* 'fabulous' ('*simpliciter* fabulosos') in other words writing for entertainment, without any serious secondary purpose (*Genealogie* XV, 13, Conclusion, 1). To some extent it is a false problem, for humanity in its entirety — and not just the elite — is instinctively programmed to convey serious messages behind fables. Boccaccio (who is at heart an anthropologist *avant la lettre*) offers the example of the old crone spinning yarns and tall stories before the hearth:

Taceant ergo blateratores inscii, et omutescant superbi, si possunt, cum, ne dum insignes viros, lacte Musarum educatos et in laribus philosophie versatos atque sacris duratos studiis, profundissimos in suis poematibus sensus apposuisse semper credendum sit, sed etiam nullam esse usquam tam delirantem aniculam, circa foculum domestic laris una cum vigilantibus hibernis noctibus fabellas orci, seu fatarum, vel Lammiarum, et huiusmodi, ex quibus sepiissime inventa conficiunt, fingentem et recitantem, que sub pretextu relatorum non sentiat aliquem iuxta vires sui modici intellectus sensum minime quandoque ridendum, per quem velit aut terrorem incutere parvulis, aut oblectare puellas, aut senes ludere, aut saltem Fortune vires ostendere. (*Genealogie* XIV, 10, 7)

[Let those ignorant chatterers fall silent, and may the proud also keep quiet, if they can, since it is to be believed that not only famous men, nourished on the milk of the Muses, familiar with the houses of philosophy, and toughened by sacred studies, have always placed most profound meanings in their poems. Indeed, there isn't the slightest old woman, soft in the head, who doesn't make up and tell stories round the hearth, staying up on winter's nights with company, telling of ogres, or fairies or witches and the like, with which such stories are filled, who beneath the surface of her storytelling does not sense something (in as far as she is able with her modest understanding) not in the slightest bit ridiculous, now to put fear into tiny tots, now to delight young girls, now to poke fun at old men, or to show, at least, the power of Fate.]

Old women were proverbially demented, a detail Boccaccio had already referred to in *Genealogie* XIV, 9 8: 'delirantium vetularum inventio' [the imagining of crazy little old women]. In other words, there was always the possibility, even in the most unpromising circumstances, of using fiction to convey something else.

Boccaccio's other presentation of a theory of allegory occurs in the *Esposizioni*. The explanation here occurs in a very different context to the one we have seen in the *Genealogie*. Boccaccio is defending a specifically Christian poet, to whom he is offering the status of a lay theologian. He is also giving his lectures before an audience in church, and he wishes his commentary to be taken as the work of a devout and orthodox believer.

Fu adunque il nostro poeta, sì come gli altri poeti sono, nasconditore, come si vede, di così cara gioia, come è la catolica verità, sotto la volgare cortecchia del suo poema. Per la qual cosa si può meritamente dire questo libro essere poliseno, cioè di più sensi. De' quali è il primo senso quello il quale egli ha nelle cose significate per la littera, sì come voi potete aver di sopra, nella esposizione litterale, udito: e chiamasi questo senso 'litterale', e così è. Il secondo senso è 'allegorico', o vero 'morale'; il quale, acciò che voi comprendiate meglio, esemplificando vel dichiarerò in questi versi: 'In exitu Israel de Egypto, domus Iacob de populo barbaro, facta est Iudea sanctificatio eius, Israel potestas eius'. De' quali, se noi guarderemo a quello che la lettera suona solamente, vedremo esserci significato l'uscimento de' figliuoli di Israèl d'Egitto, al tempo di Moisè, e se noi guarderemo alla allegoria, vedremo esserci mostrata la nostra redenzione fatta per Cristo: e se noi guarderemo al senso morale, vedremo esserci mostrata la conversione dell'anima nostra dal pianto e dalla miseria del peccato allo stato della grazia, e se noi guarderemo al senso anagogico, vedremo esserci dimostrato l'uscimento dell'anima santa dalla corruzione della presente servitudine alla libertà della gloria eternale.

The choice of exemplification, the identical paraphrasing of the psalm, and the precise parallels in explanation, this time show quite clearly Boccaccio's debt to the letter to Can Grande (*Epistola* XIII).

Dante	Boccaccio <i>Esposizioni</i>
<i>literal</i> (historical)	<i>literal</i> (historical)
<i>allegorical</i> (Man's redemption by Christ)	<i>allegorical</i> (Man's redemption by Christ)
<i>moral</i> (conversion to grace)	<i>moral</i> (conversion to grace)
<i>anagogical</i> (soul's escape from world)	<i>anagogical</i> (soul's escape from world)

In other words, this explanation in the *Esposizioni* is much more faithful to the Can Grande letter original than the composite one provided in the *Genealogie*. Boccaccio then goes on to justify the use of allegory by quoting in Latin, and then translating from, the proem to St Gregory's *Moralia in Job*, one of the key texts used in the Middle Ages when discussing allegoresis:

E in questa maniera intorno al senso allegorico si possono i savi essercitare e intorno alla dolceza testuale nudrire i semplici, cioè queglii quali ancora tanto non sentono che essi possano al senso allegorico trapassare. E così possiam vedere questo libro avere in publico donde nudrir possa gl'ingegni di queglii che meno sentimento hanno e donde egli sospenda con ammirazione le menti de' più provetti.

We are back to Boccaccio's concept of a dual readership, composed of the erudite and the simple, those who need assistance and those who don't. The same model of differentiated reception, and therefore of layered discourse, was propounded in contemporary manuals on preaching, the 'artes predicandi', which Boccaccio shows he was fully aware of in the famous novella of Frate Cipolla (*Decameron* VI, 10). The problem in such models is that it is difficult to know how much latitude to give to the consumer. Are all interpretations valid, is there *always* a secondary level (or levels) of meaning? Some were not troubled by such niceties: the Dante commentator Iacopo della Lana for instance, in his *accessus* (1324–28), had claimed that the *Comedy* consistently ('universalmente') possesses the four levels of reading:

[...] si è da sapere che universalmente la detta *Comedia* può avere quattro sensi.

Boccaccio, on the other hand, in a short passage added to the end of the allegorical commentary on *Inferno* I, takes a decidedly Augustinian approach, cautiously suggesting that not all the 'literal' text necessitates or allows an allegorical interpretation.

Tuttavia, acciò che più pienamente si creda non ogni parola avere allegorico senso, leggasi quello che ne scrive santo Agostino nel libro *Dell'eterna Ierusalèm* [*De Civitate Dei* XVI, 2], dicendo: 'Non omnia, que gesta narrantur, aliquid etiam significare putanda sunt; sed propter illa, que aliquid significant, [etiam ea que nichil significant], attextuntur. Solo enim vomere terra prescinditur; sed, ut hoc fieri possit, etiam cetera aratri membra sunt necessaria; et soli nervi in citharis atque huiusmodi vasis musicis aptantur ad cantum; sed, ut aptari possint, insunt et cetera in compagibus organorum, que non percutiuntur a canentibus, sed ea, que percussa resonant, huic connectuntur' etc.

E perciò estimo che molto più onesto sia a credere ad Agostino che stoltamente oppinare quello che manifestamente si può riprovare; e quindi prendere certezza, se alcuna cosa allegorizzando è omessa, quella non per negligenza, ma per non conoscere che oportuna vi sia l'allegoria, essere stata intralasciata. (*Esposizioni* I, all, 182–83)

[Not all history is to be thought to mean something; but those things which have no meaning of their own are woven in for the sake of the things which are meaningful. It is only with the ploughshare that the sod is split; but to achieve this, other parts of the plough are required. It is only the strings in harps and other musical instruments which produce musical sounds. In order that they may do so, however, there are other parts of the instrument which are not indeed plucked by those who sing, but are attached to the strings which are plucked, and produce musical notes.]

Boccaccio will hammer home this message when dealing with that famous enigma, Dante's prophecy of the Veltro (*Inferno* I, 101). This time Boccaccio's justification is not explicitly Saint Augustine (though the ideology is the same), but rather narrative expediency, using examples from the text itself:

Possono per avventura essere alcuni, li quali forse stimano, non solamente in questo libro, ma eziandio in ogni altro e ne' divini, ne' quali figuratamente si parli, ogni parola aver sotto sè alcun sentimento diverso da quello che la lettera suona; e però, non essendo nel precedente canto ad ogni parola altro sentimento dato che il litterale, diranno, nell'aprire l'allegoria, essere difettuosamente da me proceduto. Ma in questa parte, salva sempre la reverenzia di chi 'l dicesse, questi cotali sono della loro oppinione ingannati, per ciò che in ciascuna figurata scrittura si pongono parole che hanno a nascondere la cosa figurata e alcune che alcuna cosa figurata non ascondono, ma però vi si pongono, perché quelle che figurano possan consistere, sì come per essempro si può dimostrare in assai parti nella presente opera. Che ha a fare al senso allegorico: 'La sesta compagnia in due si scema?'; che n'ha a fare: 'Così discesi del cerchio primaio?'; che molte altre a queste simili? E, se queste se ne tolgono, come potrà seguire l'ordine della dimostrazione che l'autore intende di fare? Come aconciarsi quelle che per significare altro si scrivono? (*Esposizioni* I, litt., 178–80)

It is a deep-seated conviction on Boccaccio's part. Allegory is, in his view, an intermittent phenomenon, supported on a continuum of 'historical' or 'fabulous' discourse. Indeed, on a number of occasions, the lecturer will announce to his audience in the church of Santo Stefano that the normal cycle of literal followed by allegorical readings will be interrupted because 'questo canto non ha allegoria alcuna' (canto X), or 'in questo canto non è cosa alcuna che nasconda allegoria' (canto XI).

But what of the dangers of over-interpretation? This was a danger that had exercised the minds of the Church fathers. Saint Jerome eventually came to distrust allegorical reading as a method, and regretted that some of his early writings had relied excessively upon it.

Augustine for his part had offered a solution to this problem by suggesting that the reader interpret and re-interpret until a meaning (or meanings) pleasing to God had been found. Interpretation ultimately depends, in such a model, upon the operation of grace. Gregory's extremely influential *Moralia in Job*, developing Augustine's allegoresis, justified recourse to secondary meanings (which could accumulate) especially when the literal level of the text admitted of contradictions, but warned also against neglecting the letter in favour of the allegorical. Neither Augustine nor Gregory gives a hard and fast rule about when, or how far, to apply such derived senses.

Given such lack of firm guidance, Boccaccio, dealing 'simul simplicibus et eruditus' [simultaneously with the unlettered and lettered], feels he has to reassure the less experienced in his audience that the practical application of polysemic reading is not equivalent to a licence for brazen self-contradiction. The various interpretations, he declares, are not in a stark *either / or* relationship — they merely correspond to justifiably different focus or context. Boccaccio feels prompted to give his reasoning at a point where he feels that just such an apparent self-contradiction has occurred. He has been explaining for the second time the significations of Cerberus, the guardian of the circle of the gluttonous, and suddenly breaks off, realising that his audience may be detecting an inconsistency:

Son certo che ci ha di quegli che si maraviglieranno, per ciò che l'allegoria, la quale io ho al presente data a questo cane infernale, cioè a Cerbero, non è conforme a quella la quale gli diedi nella esposizione allegorica del precedente canto: dove mostrai lui significare il vizio della gola, e qui dimostro io per lui significarsi tre spezie d'avari. Ma io non voglio che di questo alcuno prenda ammirazione, per ciò che la divina Scrittura è tutta piena di simili cose, cioè che una medesima cosa ha non solamente uno, ma due e tre e quatro sentimenti, secondo che la varietà del luogo, dove si truova, richiede: la qual cosa acciò che voi per manifesto esemplo veggiate, mi piace per alcuna figura e per la varietà de' sensi di quella mostrarvelo. (*Esposizioni* VII, all., 30–31)

Boccaccio then goes on to justify the accumulation of secondary senses from the literal by recourse to examples from the *Bible*, referring to Adam and Eve, Moses, the Crucifixion and Apocalypse, and pointing to the concept of *figura*, whereby historical events in the Old Testament prefigure spiritual ones in the New:

E però, senza por più esempli, potete vedere, com'è detto, una medesima cosa avere diversi sensi e diverse esposizioni; il che, come delle figure del Vecchio Testamento adiviene, così similmente adiviene delle fizioni poetiche, le quali significano quando una cosa e quando un'altra.

Again, we can see that Boccaccio's underlying strategy is to claim a similar status for theological and poetic discourse. On the one hand, he wishes to elevate, by association, the serious use of fiction by poets, on the other, he half infers that the Scriptures, in the manner of poets, make creative use of fictions. He then sums up, with a memorably vivid expression, saying that though the senses of a text may be many, they are not haphazard or subject to merely opportunistic interpretation by so-called 'experts':

Ora si suole intorno a queste esposizioni spesse volte dire per li laici la Scrittura avere il naso di cera, e perciò i predicatori e i dottori, secondo che lor pare, torcerlo ora in questa parte e ora in quella. La qual cosa non è vera: per ciò che la Scrittura di Dio non ha il naso di cera, anzi l'ha di diamante, del quale non si può levare né vi si può appiccare alcuna cosa, né si può rintuzare, sì come quella la quale è fondata e ferma sopra pietra viva, e questa pietra è Cristo; ma puossi più tosto dire questi cotali avere il cuore, lo 'ntelletto e lo 'ngegno di cera, e perciò vedere con gli occhi incerati; e come son fatti eglino pieghevoli ad ogni dimostrazione vera e non vera, così par loro sia fatta la Scrittura; non conoscendo che la varietà de' sensi è quella che n'apre la verità nascosa sotto il velo delle cose sacre, la quale noi aver non potremmo, se sempre volessimo ad una medesima cosa dare un medesimo significato.

The two-way process, admitting that much of the surface texture of the Old Testament is fabulous, and simultaneously claiming that the work of poets is serious, has one interesting by-product in the *Genealogie*. If the biblical commentary concept of *figura* justifies the more imaginative passages of the Old Testament because they anticipate the truths come to pass since the Advent, then there is a corresponding pattern at work in Boccaccio's concept of pagan myth. The difference is that myth is a post-factum *fabula* veiling a previously historical event. We have the same elements, but diametrically inverted. Boccaccio is a follower of Euhemerus (whose views he was acquainted with from his reading of Lactantius). According to Euhemerus, the gods and their associated myths were but an amplification, via repeated narration, of the deeds of mankind in remote antiquity. In the same way, some myths are merely 'poetic' descriptions or explanations of physical events: the day and night, the seasons, lightning, etc. It is perfectly possible, therefore, for Boccaccio to seek out the 'truth' behind pagan fables, as long as this truth remains a secular, and not a transcendental one. The two complementary stances, historical and naturalist, can be found together in the first proem to book I of the *Genealogie*:

Ex quibus enucleationibus [Boccaccio's deciphering], preter artificium fingentium poetarum et futilium deorum consanguinitates et affinitates explicitas, *naturalia quedam videbis tanto occultata misterio, ut mireris; sic et procerum gesta moresque non per omne trivium evagantia.* (*Genealogie* I, proem 1, 45)

[From these detailed analyses, in addition to the artifice of the poets as they compose, and the manifest blood-relationships and affinities of the useless gods, you will see natural phenomena hidden by such mystery that you will be amazed; likewise the history and customs of the ancients, not to be found on every street-corner.]

This is what the 'theology of myth' is all about, in Boccaccio's terms. Poets are serious people. Provided readers are also serious, able to go beyond the literal sense (unlike the *Corbaccio* widow), able to keep their reactivity in check (like the members of the brigata 'non pieghevoli per novelle'), and guided by glosses or a teacher (Boccaccio's erudite production),

they will find their exploration of poetic text will provide both sides of the Horatian equation, delight and utility.

So much for the late, scholarly and moralistic Boccaccio. But was the 'delightful' manner of Boccaccio's early writing also meant to be read with an allegorical, or polysemic approach, in other words 'per utile'? There is strong evidence to suggest that this is so, even though the kind of utility is perhaps questionable. Let us take first of all an example *within* fiction. In the *Elegia di madonna Fiammetta* (ca. 1343–44), the two lovers, Panfilo and Fiammetta, are obliged to converse about their feelings and situation covertly, for theirs is an adulterous relationship. To that extent they are like Dante's Paolo and Francesca. If Dante's couple communicate through shared reading of romance, Boccaccio's couple do so by mutual storytelling, but orally.

Né a questo contento stando, s'ingegnò, per figura parlando, e d'insegnarmi a tale modo parlare, e di farmi più certa de' suoi disii, me Fiammetta e sé Panfilo nominando. Oimè! quante volte già in mia presenza e de' miei più cari, caldo di festa, di cibo e d'amore, fingendo Fiammetta e Panfilo essere stati greci, narrò egli come io di lui, ed esso di me primamente stati eravamo presi, quanti accidenti poi n'erano seguitati, e a' luoghi e alle persone pertinenti alla novella dando convenevoli nomi! (*Elegia di madonna Fiammetta* I, 23)

Note that Boccaccio describes this allusive discourse as speaking 'per figura', a technical definition he will later use repeatedly in the *Esposizioni* to justify likening Dante's poem to the Scriptures. Yet here the vehicle is a mere 'novella', and the tenor is a banal case of adulterous passion. The accuracy of the analogy with biblical figura is, however, incontestable. An ancient tale seemingly 'prefigures' events which then come to pass.

Boccaccio employs the same device extradiegetically in the prefaces to fictional works, when addressing his dedicatee. Take the *Filostrato* (ca. 1334): there the stratagem employed by Panfilo is proffered by the author figure He has been unable to express his heartache, till, suddenly, he has a bright idea:

Né prima tal pensiero nella mente mi venne, che il modo subitamente con esso m'occorse; del quale avvenimento, quasi da nascosa divinità spirato, certissimo augurio presi di futura salute. E il modo fu questo: di dovere in persona d'alcuno passionato sì come io era e sono, cantando narrare li miei martiri. Meco adunque con sollicita cura cominciai a rivolgere l'antiche storie per trovare cui io potessi fare scudo verisimilmente del mio segreto e amoroso dolore. (*Filostrato*, proemio 26–27)

Boccaccio chooses to retell, in Florentine verse, the tale of Troiolo and Criseida as a way of vicariously expressing his emotions. But texts, as Roland Barthes persuasively argued, need not only authors but readers. Readers construct the text. Boccaccio's ideal reader, his beloved, must interpret the text, beyond the literal:

Nelle quali [sc. rime] se avviene che leggiate, quante volte Troiolo piangere e dolersi della partita di Criseida troverete, tante apertamente potrete conoscere le mie medesime voci, le lagrime e' sospiri e l'angosce;

e quante volte la bellezza e' costumi, e qualunque altra cosa laudevole in donna, di Criseida scritta troverete, tante di voi esser parlato potrete intendere. Dell'altre cose che oltre a queste vi sono assai, niuna, sì come già dissi, a me n'appartiene né per me si pone, ma perciocché la storia del nobile e innamorato giovane ciò richiede. (*Filostrato*, proemio 34–35)

Not all of the tale is to be read as having a secondary meaning. Some of it is merely narratively expedient. What is interesting is that Boccaccio here, whether consciously or unconsciously, is expressing the Augustinian notion of discontinuous allegory, held together by 'mechanical tissue' needed for continuity. Already in 1334 or so, therefore, Boccaccio was seemingly using an argument he would later develop explicitly in the *Esposizioni*. But is it possible to be more confident that Boccaccio was thinking 'theoretically' about polysemy this early in his career?

The evidence of the *Filocolo* (ca. 1336–39) is tantalising but inconclusive. There too we have the retelling by a lover of an ancient love story, the tale of Florio and Biancifiore, but without the explicit instructions for reading allegorically. The reason for this coyness is that the retelling has been asked for by the beloved, not proposed by the lover himself. There is a hint, however, that the intention is to provide something more than mere entertainment, in other words to move from *fabula* to *narratio fabulosa*. Fiammetta declares that Florio and Biancifiore's memory and fame have not been:

con debita ricordanza [...] essaltata da' versi d'alcun poeta, ma lasciata solamente ne' fabulosi parlari degli ignoranti. (*Filocolo* I, 25)

The issue at stake is not just aesthetics or cultural preparation, the 'labor limae' of skill. The implied distinction is between what a poet would do with the story, investing it with hidden meanings and moral intent, and merely leaving it at the level of base entertainment, with no ulterior message. The Dantesque phrase 'fabulosi parlari' (*Vita nuova* II, 10) is not therefore the *narratio fabulosa* of Macrobius, but rather the inconsequential production of those easy targets of the *Genealogie*, the empty-headed 'fabulosos [...] homines' (XIV, 1, 2) [men who just tell stories].

The real confirmation that Boccaccio was indeed taking an informed position early on is to be found just a few years later in the *Teseida* (ca. 1339–41). There we have a similar authorial stratagem, with an ancient tale re-hashed for allusive reconsumption. The author has just declared that he has found an 'antichissima istoria' and has turned it into vernacular verse (just as he claims in the *Filostrato*):

E che ella da me per voi sia compilata, due cose fra l'altre il manifestano. L'una si è che ciò che sotto il nome dell'uno de' due amanti e della giovane amata si conta essere stato, ricordandovi bene, e io a voi di me e voi a me di voi, se non mentiste, potreste conoscere essere stato detto e fatto in parte: quale de' due si sia non discuopro, ché so che ve ne avvedrete. Se forse alcune cose soperchie vi fossero, il volere bene coprire ciò che non è onesto manifestare da noi due infuori e il volere la storia seguire ne son cagioni; e oltre a ciò dovete sapere che solo il bomere aiutato da molti ingegni fende la terra. Potrete adunque e qual

fosse innanzi e quale sia stata poi la vita mia che più non mi voleste per vostro, discernere. L'altra si è il non avere cessata né storia né favola né chiuso parlare in altra guisa, con ciò sia cosa che le donne sì come poco intelligenti ne sogliano essere schife, ma però che per intelletto e notizia delle cose predette voi dalla turba dell'altre separata conosco, libero mi concessi il porle a mio piacere. (*Teseida*, proem 'a Fiammetta', latter part of first paragraph)

Here again, the concept of a non-literal sense is put forward, and here again the idea of discontinuous allegory is alluded to ('volere la storia seguire'). But Boccaccio adds one of the key justifications of allegory, namely concealment ('volere bene coprire ciò che non è onesto manifestare'). Most importantly of all, the expression used as an explanation, that the ploughshare only splits the sod when assisted by other mechanical parts, comes straight out of Augustine's *City of God* XVI, 2, from the very passage that Boccaccio will later use in the *Esposizioni* (I, all, 182–83), as we have seen, to elucidate discontinuous allegory:

Solo enim vomere terra prescinditur; sed, ut hoc fieri possit, etiam cetera aratri membra sunt necessaria

[For only with the ploughshare is the sod split, but, for this to happen, other parts of the plough are also needed]

What is however peculiar is that, in both the *Filostrato* and the *Teseida*, Boccaccio is advocating a method of polysemic reading which required sophisticated training. Such interpretative skills, if the author's assessment of the *Corbaccio* widow is anything to go by, are normally in short supply amongst a female readership. As can be seen, in the *Teseida* passage above, Boccaccio draws our attention to this apparent contradiction. Fiammetta is, like the female reader in Italo Calvino's *Se una notte d'inverno*, exceptionally competent: she has understanding and knowledge ('intelletto e notizia'). The author has therefore felt it possible to give free rein to both the literal ('storia') and allegorical ('chiuso parlare') levels of his story.

Abstract: Boccaccio's early work as an entertaining storyteller and his later activity as an encyclopaedist and commentator seem to have little in common. But both depend on a well-developed idea of the relationship between writing and reading. This article looks at the surprisingly consistent and explicit views Boccaccio held about literal and allegorical levels of meaning, and how readers could be assisted to interpret text reliably.

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