

2014

## Boccaccio as a Scribal Editor: Book Concept, Language Innovation, Cultural Intermediation

Michelangelo Zaccarello  
*Università di Verona*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/heliotropia>

---

### Recommended Citation

Zaccarello, Michelangelo (2014) "Boccaccio as a Scribal Editor: Book Concept, Language Innovation, Cultural Intermediation," *Heliotropia - An online journal of research to Boccaccio scholars*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/heliotropia/vol11/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Heliotropia - An online journal of research to Boccaccio scholars by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@library.umass.edu](mailto:scholarworks@library.umass.edu).

## Boccaccio as a Scribal Editor: Book Concept, Language Innovation, Cultural Intermediation

The recent centennial celebrations have drawn greater attention to an important aspect of Giovanni Boccaccio's literary profile, his extraordinary activity as a scribe of both his own and other authors' texts, work that is documented by a large number of extant autograph manuscripts. Among the many events organised for 2013, two in particular concentrated on this aspect, and both were directly promoted by the Ente Boccaccio within the framework of the official seventh centennial celebrations (<http://www.boccaccio2013.it>): the conference *Boccaccio editore e interprete di Dante*, held in Rome (Casa di Dante / Centro Pio Rajna 28–30 October 2013), and the exhibition held at the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, *Boccaccio autore e copista* (Florence, 11 October 2013–11 January 2014).<sup>1</sup> Focussing on the various material aspects of his autograph manuscripts, such events have re-established the paramount importance of the book concept in Boccaccio's poetics and in his strategy of scribal publication, especially in the wake of Rhiannon Daniels' important book (2009), which dealt with this topic in the broader context of Boccaccio studies in the English language. The present essay aims at offering a concise introduction to the topic by way of an assessment of the specific linguistic implications of Giovanni's scribal activity as documented in holograph witnesses of his own literary works.

In the manuscript era, an author could be entirely responsible for the editing, scribal execution and diffusion of his text, at least in its first stages. In the writing or dictating of his work, he not only monitored the text's integrity in the form that he intended for publication, but also defined its structure (including different forms of paratext: preface, rubrics, titles, etc.) and, in some cases, even oversaw some of its related formal and linguistic aspects. Certain authors defined their books more carefully than

---

<sup>1</sup> The former's proceedings are expected for 2015, and will be published by Salerno Editrice; the latter's catalogue was published prior to the opening of the Florentine exhibition: *Boccaccio autore e copista* 2013.

did others and paid careful attention not just to the volumes' contents, but even to "external," material issues of book type, page layout and calligraphy.

However, the definition of such factors also depended on the nature of the text itself, on issues of genre and style and on the expectations of readers and patrons, that is, on factors that ultimately resulted in different book typologies and reading practices. In less general terms, some texts were consulted more often than read, thus necessitating a more defined structure and a system of paragraph or unit indicators to guide the reader's eye; others demanded a continuous, linear reading, possibly with the narrative thread interwoven with a certain set of illustrations. Thus, in a way, each literary work possessed its own dedicated container for public circulation, one whose coordinates could be determined in great detail by either the author or an editor.

Particularly in Tuscany, between the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries, the widespread literacy and a greater circulation of written texts became factors that prompted an increased awareness of how important scribal work was in bridging the gap between what the author intended to say and what specific readers were prepared to understand. At various levels of sophistication, copyists who were not mechanically reproducing their exemplar were engaged in a multifaceted task of cultural mediation between the original text(s) and their framework of references and the expectations, often varying geographically and chronologically, of their patrons and readers. A good case in point is the manuscript transmission of hagiographic collections, in which even a widely known text such as the *Legenda aurea* could be freely abridged or interpolated to meet the religious practices of a certain community, adding lives of popular saints who enjoyed local devotion and subtracting others who were less popular.<sup>2</sup>

In an age of great regionalism, such cultural mediation became particularly difficult whenever scribal editing was carried out on linguistically heterogeneous texts. Some authors and scribes were particularly aware of the various aspects of such problematic operations (interpretation, spelling, punctuation etc.). In Beinecke MS. 688, for instance, the scribe Giovanni Tolosini apologetically points out the difficulties he had in dealing with a manuscript written in Puglia:

---

<sup>2</sup> See Maggioni 1995 (109–39), in which the range of extant variants is broadened by authorial variants. A similar manuscript transmission is evidenced in the *Specchio di vera penitenza* by Jacopo Passavanti. See Auzzas 2004.

Questo volume e scritto e conpiuto per mano di me, Giovanni Tolosini, a di (quart) o d'aprile 1409 a 'stanzia di [...] e in su una chopia d'uno scrittore pugliese che forte tiene la loquela co(n) la penna, sicché, se io no-lla avessi bene rechata alla nostra loquela, mi schuso a' lettori, etc.

This book was completed by my hand, Giovanni Tolosini, upon request of [*the following name is erased but partly legible under UV light: Chirico di Piero ...*] and after an exemplar copied by an Apulian writer, who uses many colloquialisms in writing; thus, should I have failed to render some in our own language, I apologize to the readers, etc.

When the only available training in written language concerned Latin, *loquela e penna*, orality and writing, could become seriously antagonistic. Particularly during the “internal” dictation of texts, the scribe’s pronunciation and spelling habits could severely interfere with his rendering of the original, and thus copying from an exemplar written in a third area could complicate such interaction even further, creating issues of conflict at various levels of a text’s understanding (scribe-text, scribe-readers, text-exemplar, scribe-exemplar) in the ultimate, effective interaction between a text and its readers.

Among late Trecento authors, Boccaccio’s works offer evidence of great attention to editorial aspects, both internal (i.e., related to the literary invention and linguistic construction of the text) and external (i.e., related to the presentation of the text in the material context of the book, including issues that had direct bearing on the text’s articulation: page layout, paragraph division, paratext). His “unusually large legacy of autograph manuscripts” (Daniels 2009, 16; for a list and descriptions, see Auzzas 1973) offers extensive evidence of his scribal work, and — in a period of intense transformation of the Florentine vernacular — his careful handling of language issues in his vernacular works stands as proof of such an awareness.

In the case of the *Decameron*, whilst much of the dialogue reflects an in-depth understanding of the social and pragmatic context of spoken language and often features the intentional imitation of certain dialects, all narrative parts reveal a deliberate, consistent effort to single out forms validated by literary usage. Where phonetic or morphological alternatives were available, those that bore regional and/or social connotations were carefully discarded, unless a specific expressive function could be devised for them (e.g., within a dialogic context).

Such an accurate command of linguistic aspects explains the complete absence of innovative traits in speculative/historical works such as both autograph redactions of the *Trattatello*. In the *Decameron*, however, despite the late date of his holograph (Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Hamilton 90: c. 1370–73), Boccaccio’s handling of appar-

ently marginal phono-morphological issues shows remarkable continuity, to the extent of excluding several innovative traits that will soon be accepted in literary language and, hence, in modern Italian.<sup>3</sup>

Such an outline is consistent with what we already know about Boccaccio being an accurate, often meticulous author in defining the (linguistic, material, visual) context of his works. Scholars have often noted his forward-looking sensitivity to the editorial implications of authorship and to the granular range of semantic values that material issues can convey, an awareness that built a tight bond between the text-contained and the text-container.

Such editorial concerns are undoubtedly related to Boccaccio's careful handling of punctuation, spelling and language issues, highlighted by recent studies.<sup>4</sup> In the framework of book circulation and reception, such aspects have been investigated in great detail by Daniels, who points out that: "Often acting as the rubricator and illuminator, as well as the scribe, Boccaccio was in a position to exercise direct control over material and presentational features such as the size and style of the script adopted, and the layout of the text, and he reveals that he is conscious of, and appreciates, the relationship between material support and content in the text of several works" (2009, 16).

Recently examined in its paratextual and material aspects, the autograph of the *Teseida* is arguably the best example of how Boccaccio conceived each of his works as an articulated project in which the textual semantics had to be integrated with many other aspects. Paragraph divisions, page layout and punctuation are all carefully arranged by the author who personally oversaw the text's illustrations, although the execution of the drawings is interrupted before the middle of the poem (see Malagnini 2006 and 2007). In guiding the reader through his text, Boccaccio relies greatly on a sophisticated system of paragraph markers, initials and punctuation. As later holographs confirm, Boccaccio stands out for offering detailed instructions to his readers in his remarkably modern tendency toward textual disambiguation and his careful treatment of related aspects, such as word divisions and spelling or text partitions.

The same meticulous attention is discernible in several codices written in Boccaccio's hand, either in editions of other authors' works (especially Dante's) or in his own literary creations. Even though Boccaccio's role in

---

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of Boccaccio's usage in some sensitive areas in the development of the Florentine vernacular, see Zaccarello 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Corradino 1996 and Rafti 1996–2001, to name just the most detailed studies.

establishing a canon for Dante's *Rime* has now been restricted (and the so-called *Silloge Boccaccio* of the 15 canzoni attributed to an earlier stage of the manuscript transmission<sup>5</sup>), the impact of his editorial work on Dante's *Comedy* remains pivotal, to the extent of disfiguring, in Giorgio Petrocchi's view, the reception of the *antica vulgata*.<sup>6</sup>

However, there is strong evidence to assume a similar concern on his part for the semantic value of the textual container of works that do not survive in holograph manuscripts as well. Lucia Battaglia Ricci has drawn scholarly attention to the final part of the *Elegia di madonna Fiammetta*, where the female protagonist bids her writing farewell in the form of a concrete, material *libro*, and provides precise instructions regarding its future circulation among a female readership (Battaglia Ricci 2003). In this way, Boccaccio draws a neat distinction between the typically female courtly texts, transcribed on "polished" parchment leaves and often colourfully illuminated and embellished with fine bindings, and the "scruffy" *zibaldoni* in which merchants recorded transactions and accounts. The writing of his *Fiammetta* would ideally resemble the latter: those shabby paper booklets that were casually penned in a rapid, disorderly script and that were more likely to physically represent the protagonist's state of desperation and grief:

Tu [the book] dèi essere contento di mostrarti simigliante al tempo mio; il quale essendo infelicissimo, te di miseria veste come fa me; e però non ti sia cura d'alcuno ornamento, sì come li altri sogliono avere: cioè di *nobili coverte di colori varii tinte e ornate, o di pulita tonditura, o di leggiadri minii, o di gran titoli*: queste cose non si convengono alli gravi pianti li quali tu porti: lascia e queste e li *larghi spazii e li lieti inchiostri, e le impomciate carte* alli libri felici; a te si conviene d'andare *rabbuffato, con isparte chiome e macchiato e di squallore pieno*, là dove io ti mando, e con li miei infortunii nelli animi di quelle che te leggeranno de-stare la santa pietà.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> See Leonardi 2011, 9–10.

<sup>6</sup> As many will know, Petrocchi conventionally dates Boccaccio's work on Dante's *Comedy* to 1355 and does not consider, in his text's reconstruction, any manuscript that may be attributed to a later date. Well aware of the problems inherent in a stance that equates *codices recentiores* and *deteriores*, Petrocchi explains the difficulties in accessing later manuscripts with a widespread presence of contamination: «il processo di corruzione è avvenuto verticalmente e trasversalmente, in modo così profondo da rendere impossibile qualsiasi rigorosa classificazione dei testi a penna, e in gradazione successiva, onde *i codici tardi consegnano soltanto una serie di lezioni cognite, o quanto meno erranee o remote dall'autenticità*» (Petrocchi 1955, 345), emphasis added).

<sup>7</sup> *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta* IX.4–5, emphasis added. In Boccaccio 1994, 186.

Either through authorial indications within the text or through paratextual elements around it, extant manuscripts seem to suggest that Boccaccio was effective in establishing specific guidelines for the scribal execution of his works. Stefano Carrai has convincingly argued that *Corbaccio's* extant rubrics, read in association with other material indicators such as illuminated initials, may suggest the authorial, original intention of structuring the book as an actual treatise: “le rubriche sono tutt’altro che semplici orpelli, anzi individuano precisamente l’ossatura concettuale ed espositiva del testo boccacciano, il suo originale disegno retorico impostato sul tipo del trattatello in forma di dialogo che culmina, come il *Secretum* del venerato maestro Petrarca, nella ritrattazione del protagonista” (Carrai 2006, 27).

A similar, “intima connessione esistente fra testo contenuto e libro contenente” (Petrucci Nardelli 1998: 511), has been detected for another work whose autograph is lost, the *Amorosa visione*, whose highly elaborated structure appears in itself designed to minimize scribal intervention (as many will know, the three introductory sonnets are all constructed in sequence with the initial letters of each *terzina* of the fifty cantos comprised by the poem). However, the assessment of the text’s authorial characteristics may now enjoy greater appreciation also for the dismissal of the hypothesis that the work was rewritten by Boccaccio. As Petrucci Nardelli’s essay confirms, the so-called “second redaction” has been now firmly attributed to extensive editorial work carried out by Girolamo Clario for his 1521 edition.

For the *Decameron* as well, recent analyses of Boccaccio’s scribal reception have highlighted important material analogies between extant manuscripts and the surviving holograph, starting from book type: Armando Petrucci’s claim that Boccaccio’s choice of the large format of the academic *libro da banco* as an instrument of promoting his work to a culturally higher circle of readers seems now reaffirmed by quantitative analysis of extant manuscripts that seem to share with the Hamilton codex not only the proportions, but also the use of semi-gothic book script, or at least hybrid forms between the latter and the *mercantesca* hand, in a fashion which closely resembles the diffusion of another work that we can assess in direct comparison with Boccaccio’s extant holograph, the *De mulieribus claris*.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Daniels 2009, 173–75. For a comparative analysis of the extant tradition, an invaluable tool now available is the entire section entitled “Lineamenti di un’indagine codicologica” in Corsi 2007, 143–59.

Boccaccio's work as an author and scribe is an excellent example of how to read medieval and Renaissance texts, both in their confection as material objects and in their reception by a diverse range of copyists, editors and readers. Their reconstruction from extant witnesses ought to be carried out alongside an in-depth analysis of related linguistic problems that arise from peculiar, complex interactions between the author's own usage and the various regional contexts of textual transmission.<sup>9</sup>

Authors were often aware of the multiple way in which their published text would interact with readers, and some of them attempted to draw more stringent guidelines for its reception. In short, it is difficult to underestimate Boccaccio's pioneering use of the book as a meaningful container. In the late Trecento, however, there is a growing, general awareness of its potential as a multi-faceted cultural intermediation processed through the interaction of text(s), paratext(s) and material context(s). A more accurate definition of the physical coordinates in which a literary text was to be published and read seems not just a substantial part of the author's own editorial work, but also a way to direct readers toward a better understanding and a more accurate appreciation of its meaning.

MICHELANGELO ZACCARELLO

UNIVERSITÀ DI VERONA

### Works Cited

- Auzzas, Ginetta. 2004. "Tradizione caratterizzante e interpolazioni di *exempla* nello *Specchio della vera penitenza*." *Filologia italiana* 1: 61–71.
- . 1973. "I codici autografi. Elenco e bibliografia." *Studi sul Boccaccio* 7: 1–20.
- Battaglia Ricci, Lucia. 2003. "Comporre il testo: elaborazione e tradizione." In *Intorno al testo: tipologie del corredo esegetico e soluzioni editoriali*. Atti del Convegno di Urbino (1–3 ottobre 2001). Roma: Salerno. 21–40.
- Boccaccio, Giovanni. 1994. *Elegia di madonna Fiammetta*. C. Delcorno, ed. In vol. 5.2 of *Tutte le opere*. Milano: Mondadori. 1–412.
- Boccaccio editore e copista*. 2013. T. De Robertis et al., eds. Firenze: Mandragora.

---

<sup>9</sup> This arrangement has been aptly described as a *diasistema* (Segre 1979).

- Carrai, Stefano. 2006. "Per il testo del *Corbaccio*: la vulgata e la testimonianza del codice Mannelli." *Filologia italiana* 3: 23–29 [special issue: *Il prestigio storico del textus receptus come criterio nel metodo filologico e nella prassi editoriale*. Atti del Convegno di Verona (30 settembre–2 ottobre 2004)].
- Corradino, Alessandra. 1996. "Rilievi grafici sui volgari autografi di Giovanni Boccaccio." *Studi di grammatica italiana* 16: 5–74.
- Cursi, Marco. 2007. *Il Decameron: scritture, scriventi, lettori. Storia di un testo*. Roma: Viella.
- Daniels, Rhiannon. 2009. *Boccaccio and the Book: Production and Reading in Italy (1340–1520)*. Leeds: Legenda.
- Leonardi, Lino. 2011. "The New Text of Dante's *Rime*." In *Dante in Oxford. The Paget Toynbee Lectures*. T. Kay, M. McLaughlin and M. Zaccarello, eds. Leeds: Legenda. 1–23.
- Maggioni, Giovanni Paolo. 1995. *Ricerche sulla composizione e sulla trasmissione della Legenda aurea*. Spoleto: CISAM.
- Malagnini, Francesca. 2006. "Il libro d'autore dal progetto alla realizzazione: il *Teseida delle nozze d'Emilia*." *Studi sul Boccaccio* 34: 3–102.
- . 2007. "Sul programma illustrativo del *Teseida*." *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 608: 523–76.
- Petrocchi, Giorgio. 1955. "Proposte per un testo-base della *Divina Commedia*." *Filologia romanza* 2: 337–64.
- Petrucci Nardelli, Franca. 1988. "Per una storia del libro manoscritto volgare: i codici dell'*Amorosa visione*." *Rivista di Letteratura italiana* 6: 501–16.
- Rafti, Patrizia. 1996–2001. "«Lumina dictionum». Interpunzione e prosa in Giovanni Boccaccio." *Studi sul Boccaccio* 24: 59–121, 25: 239–73, 27: 81–106, 28: 221–58 and 29: 3–66.
- Segre, Cesare. 1979. "Critica testuale, teoria degli insiemi e diasistema." In *Semiotica filologica*. Torino: Einaudi. 53–70 [a French version had been published in *Académie Royale de Belgique. Bulletin de la Classe des Lettres et des Sciences Morales et Politiques* 62 (1976): 279–92].
- Zaccarello, Michelangelo. 2012. "Il trattamento linguistico rinascimentale delle *Trecento Novelle* di Franco Sacchetti e le relative implicazioni per la scelta del testo base." *Medioevo Romanzo* 36.2: 348–82.