Boccaccio’s Women Philosophers:
Defining Philosophy, Debating Gender in the Decameron and Beyond

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates the ‘woman philosopher’ in the works of fourteenth-century Italian author, Giovanni Boccaccio. Across his literature, Latin and Italian alike, Boccaccio demonstrated an ongoing interest in both philosophy and women, concepts that were at the center of various intellectual debates in fourteenth-century Europe. I use variations and commentaries found in the manuscript tradition to historically ground my literary analysis, showing how scribes, translators, and early readers drew attention to the relationship between gender and knowledge in Boccaccio’s works. While women have not been absent from critical studies of Boccaccio, existing interpretations often limit their discussion to the feminism or misogyny of his works. Drawing on thinkers who problematize the relationship between women and knowledge, I shift the scholarly discourse away from feminism/misogyny. Each chapter situates one or more Boccaccian figures within textual and material networks and shows how they employ “philosophy,” exploring distinct but related definitions of the term as outlined by Boccaccio. I contend that Boccaccio, in his vernacular masterpiece the Decameron and other works, presents not just one model of a woman philosopher but several, a plurality that challenges our inherited notion of what constitutes philosophy, to whom it belongs, and how we encounter it in our lives.
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Introduction

“What is a woman philosopher?” asks Alain Badiou in a 2017 interview, “[W]hat do creative politics, poetry, music, cinema, mathematics, or love become—what does philosophy become—once the word ‘woman’ resonates in tune with the power of symbol-creating equality?”¹ Badiou’s concerns are largely contemporary; he writes for young people struggling to make sense of a changing, twenty-first century world. But these questions—what, or who, is a woman philosopher? And, by the same token, what is philosophy?—reflect a long and contentious history of women’s place within philosophical discourse.² Across centuries female thinkers fit uneasily in Western philosophy’s bounds: from Plato’s enigmatic representation of Socrates’ female teacher, Diotima, to Simone de Beauvoir’s reluctance to identify as a philosopher.³ Badiou, instead, searches for a future in which philosophy is free of limiting, gendered distinctions. Yet this pursuit is not solely the product of twenty-first century life. Writing

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nearly seven hundred years before Badiou, fourteenth-century Italian author Giovanni
Boccaccio similarly attempted to imagine a woman philosopher.

Across his works, Latin and vernacular alike, Boccaccio demonstrates a profound
interest in women and philosophy – and their connection to one another. Like Badiou,
Boccaccio reflects on the two together, recognizing the concepts of womanhood and
philosophy as related rather than distinct, isolated entities. I examine this relationship in
Boccaccio’s literature by posing two questions: How does Boccaccio critique
‘philosophy’ to develop his own definition of the term? To what extent, given this
reframing, do his texts represent women as philosophers or as capable of
philosophizing? I start with Boccaccio’s reflections on Dante’s placement of women
alongside philosophers in Limbo in *Inferno* IV. Analyzing Boccaccio’s explanation for
why honorable women shall be seated “coi filosafi” [with philosophers] in the afterlife, I
pursue these questions in *On Famous Women, Decameron, Eclogues*, and *Genealogy of the
Pagan Gods*. The final chapter considers adaptations by three women writers: Christine
de Pizan, Giulia Bigolina, and Moderata Fonte. Through a close reading of Boccaccio’s
literary oeuvre, situated within textual networks and the manuscript tradition, I show
how Boccaccio envisioned a new kind of philosophy and explored women’s moral and
intellectual agency in order to create models of women philosophers.

Understanding the portrayal of women as philosophers in Boccaccio sheds new
light not only on Boccaccio’s works but also on the study of women and on the history of
philosophy. Scholars of Boccaccio will notice a new approach to Boccaccio’s texts that brings together ongoing discussions about gender and philosophy in the Decameron and beyond. For those interested in the question of gender, or the status of women, in medieval and early modern literature, this project proposes leaving aside categories like “feminist” and “misogynist” in favor of exploring the intricacies of gendered representations in their historical and cultural moments. Rather than evaluating the amount of agency granted to women in these texts relative to present standards, I ask how a writer in the fourteenth century might conceive of women as ethical and intellectual subjects. Finally, returning to Badiou, this study suggests that we should think critically about women and philosophy not only now and in the future but also historically. Boccaccio offers a counter narrative to the story of women’s marginalization from philosophy. His portrayals encourage us to find other such counter narratives and to ask why his vision of women and philosophy has remained obscure.

Bringing together debates from Boccaccio studies, gender studies, and the history of philosophy, this study of Boccaccio’s literary production bridges disciplines to rethink the relationship between women and philosophy in the Western cultural imaginary. I begin with an overview of Boccaccio’s literary and cultural contexts, followed by an outline of several relevant trends in Boccaccio studies. Next, I consider Boccaccio’s

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4 A number of scholars working on earlier periods have embraced such an approach. See, for instance, Valerie Traub, *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).
philosophical sources and the state of medieval philosophy more broadly in order to better position our author within the history of philosophy. I then turn my attention to scholars and feminist thinkers who have theorized women’s exclusion from philosophy and the consequences of that exclusion. Finally, I provide an overview of my methodological approach and individual chapter summaries, positing some preliminary conclusions that will be illuminated in the chapters that follow.

**Situating Boccaccio: Literary and Cultural Contexts**

Boccaccio belonged to an era of significant historical, cultural, and intellectual change as the Middle Ages gave way to the Renaissance. At this pivotal moment, Boccaccio stood at the intersection of several literary traditions: classic and scholarly Latin met new, burgeoning vernaculars developing across France and Italy. For the most part, the vernacular, or the *volgare*, was an informal and lowly language compared with noble, scholarly Latin. However, Dante’s *De volgari eloquentia* [On Vernacular Eloquence] had sought to establish a *volgare illustre*, an illustrious vernacular, noble in its right, while in the *Divina Commedia* he proved that Italian could treat topics both high

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and low. Deeply influenced by Dante, Boccaccio composed numerous works in Italian, including the _Amorosa visione_, which followed Dante’s own _terza rima_ scheme, and the _Expositions_, a series of public lectures on the _Comedy_. While Boccaccio spent the majority of his mature years writing in Latin, he also continued to labor over copies of the _Decameron_, his vernacular masterpiece, even in the final years of his life. The texts explored in this dissertation reflect the linguistic diversity of Boccaccio’s world and literary production. I read his Italian works (_Decameron, Expositions on Dante’s Comedy, The Filocolo, Elegy of Madonna Fiammetta_) alongside his Latin ones (_On Famous Women, Genealogy of the Pagan Gods, Eclogues_), recognizing that the literary culture of fourteenth-century Italy “found its expression simultaneously in Latin and in the respective vernacular languages.” The final chapter also takes into consideration subsequent generations of women writers who adapted those Italian and Latin texts: Christine de Pizan, an Italian by birth who lived in France and wrote in French, and Italian authors

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Giulia Bigolina and Moderata Fonte. The persistence of Boccaccio’s works points to a linguistic and cultural fluidity, rooted in the Trecento but enduring across centuries.

Along with recognizing Boccaccio’s various linguistic contexts, fully understanding his female figures requires a survey of the representations of women that preceded his own vivid and complex portrayals. The texts available to Boccaccio treated women in numerous and various ways, providing the author with models that he often reimagined or transformed. Misogynist attitudes were widespread, particularly in Latin works by church fathers, such as Jerome’s *Adversus Jovinian*. R. Howard Bloch has proposed that from these Christian ideologies a double bind emerged for women: the feminization of the flesh as the root of evil (as seen through Eve), and the idealization of virginity as a path to salvation (as seen through Mary). Bloch refers to these two views of woman as the “Devil’s Gateway” and the “Bride of Christ,” a sort of medieval Madonna/whore complex. He posits these two positions for women, not as opposites, but as two ideological absolutes they were expected to embody simultaneously. These ideas about women, however, were not limited to Christianity nor to Latin. Works by the Roman satirist Juvenal as well as the thirteenth-century French romance *Roman de la

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Rose also made use of such misogynist topoi. Boccaccio was intimately familiar with these concepts and texts. In fact, he copied common misogynist rhetoric in his zibaldone, notebook, now preserved in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana (BML) in Florence, and he rehearsed – and undercut – these misogynist arguments in his final vernacular work, the Corbaccio.¹¹

Despite the strict, and perhaps oversimplified, ideals of woman identified and elaborated by Bloch, medieval Christian women were active participants in monastic and intellectual life. Heloise, for instance, proved not only to be a successful abbess in the twelfth century, but also demonstrated philosophical and theological knowledge in her intellectual correspondence with Peter Abelard, a well-known scholar.¹² Katherine of Alexandria, a scholar-saint, known for her erudition as well as her devotion, enjoyed a large cult following in medieval Europe.¹³ Although none of these women appear in Boccaccio’s works, he likely knew their stories. St. Catherine of Siena, writing shortly after Boccaccio, offers yet another example of a woman who engaged in theological debates. She was eventually canonized and recognized as a doctor of the church. These

examples show that even within the strict dictates of medieval religious discourse, women carved out space for themselves as thinkers.¹⁴

Boccaccio also inherited stylized and idealized gender roles from the courtly love tradition. The Occitan poetry of the troubadours and romances like *Lancelot du Lac* portrayed a conventionalized love between a man, usually a knight, and an unattainable noblewoman. Love, in this case, was an ennobling passion, rarely consummated, though not devoid of eroticism. Andreas Capellanus’s twelfth-century *De amore* outlines the guiding principles and appropriate behaviors within the courtly love system through a dialogue.¹⁵ Within this dynamic, critics have argued that women are objectified or serve only as a means for a man to sublimate his desire.¹⁶ Others have noted that subject and object roles for women seem to shift within the poetry of the troubadours rather than remain static, as well as the fact that Guinevere, the quintessential courtly lady, actually violates the established behavioral codes of courtly love by giving in to her desire for

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Lancelot.\textsuperscript{17} Despite these seemingly limiting gender roles, the courtly love tradition included women writers: about forty surviving poems attest to the existence of troubaritz, female troubadours.\textsuperscript{18}

Poets like Dante, and later Boccaccio, thus navigated moralistic, anti-courtly ideology alongside the vestiges of the courtly love tradition. The result, according to Teodolinda Barolini, is that these poets created new portrayals of women that departed from the typical courtly lady or a misogynistic trope.\textsuperscript{19} In the \textit{Convivio}, for instance, Dante specifies that women are among the intended audience for his didactic, philosophical text (1.9.5). In the \textit{Vita Nuova}, “donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore” [ladies who have intellect of love] are called upon to read and judge his poetry. Other poems such as Guido Cavalcanti’s enigmatic \textit{Donna me prega} [A Lady Asks Me] acknowledge women as interlocutors in philosophical discourse, even if only as a pretext for the poem’s construction.\textsuperscript{20} Antonio Pucci, a contemporary and friend of Boccaccio, rehearses the debate of women’s virtues and vices by providing historical examples (most of which can be found in Boccaccio’s own \textit{On Famous Women}) in dialogue form in the poem


Il contrasto delle donne. This shift in the Italian literary tradition has been noted by Ilaria Tufano, who argues that female figures across several fourteenth-century literary works “rappresentano, in modi e misure diverse, una devianza rispetto al tipo duecentesco della donna angelicata, e ne vengono a costituire la faccia oscura e ardente, talvolta pericolosa e inquietante” [represent, in different dimensions and ways, a deviation with respect to the thirteenth-century model of the angelicized woman, and they constitute the side of woman that is obscure and passionate, at times dangerous and unsettling].

In other words, these representations do not easily fit the Eve/Mary dichotomy, nor are they the kind of one-dimensional allegorical depictions analyzed by Joan Ferrante in Woman as Image.

Other scholars contest that this moment represents any kind of rebirth for women. Joan Kelly’s groundbreaking 1977 essay “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” presents a less optimistic analysis of this period’s female figures. Kelly identifies a loss of agency for women thanks to historical and social changes as well as literary ones.

According to Kelly, Dante’s sterilization of courtly love poetry robbed woman of her agency as a sexual being just as marriages became key in forging alliances, and women’s

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chastity and virginity became of the utmost importance. However, Barolini provides a competing interpretation of Dante’s treatment of women, and of fourteenth-century literary production more broadly. In the Divine Comedy, Beatrice retains some features of the courtly love object, but she also speaks, reasons, and instructs. Other women in the Commedia are responsible for the choices that bring them to damnation or salvation. The moralizing tone could be perceived as misogynistic yet Barolini shows that this goal of instructing women necessarily relies on an understanding of women’s capacity as moral and intellectual agents. This new literary tradition, which also includes Boccaccio, is one whose “hallmark is a stress on the utility of discourse” for women.

The Decameron is one such literary work that presents itself for the use and enjoyment of a female audience, as Boccaccio famously designates ladies as his readers in the Proem. Although the historical veracity of women readers in the medieval period is a point of contention, D.H. Green has pointed to a literate female population across England, France, and Germany. In a similar vein, Helen Solterer’s The Master and Minerva demonstrates that although medieval women were sometimes considered literal readers, that is, unable to grasp allegorical meanings, a number of female figures in

24 Barolini, Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture, 376.
French texts disrupt this stereotype. In the Italian context, Alison Cornish, Joan Ferrante, and most recently Elena Lombardi have considered the active role of women as readers and interlocutors in vernacular texts and their production. Even works contemporary with Boccaccio, such as Francesco da Barberino’s *Del reggimento e de’ costumi delle donne* and Giovanni Villani’s *Nuova Cronica* suggest that at least some women were taught to read and write. This evidence attests to the fact that while Boccaccio’s women readers are perhaps an anomaly, they are not a historical impossibility.

My project enters into the discussions about Boccaccio’s works and their place in this shifting linguistic, literary, and cultural landscape. I ask not only how Boccaccio constructed women as moral and intellectual agents – rejecting, adopting, and reimagining the models he inherited – but also how he envisioned women’s ability to access philosophical knowledge in both Latin and Italian. Analyzing Boccaccio literature reveals that, even in the Trecento, ideas about knowledge and who could wield its power were often gendered.

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Boccaccio has been characterized as “an author for whom women and their place in society are never peripheral.”\(^{30}\) The sheer volume of criticism concerning gender in Boccaccio’s works attests to this fact. In recent decades, scholars have placed gender at the center of their analyses of his texts. Marilyn Migiel’s *A Rhetoric of the Decameron* (2003) explicitly announces its feminist slant, and the 2006 collection *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism* gathered, for the first time, essays that “valorize gender as an analytical category in thinking about Boccaccio’s writing,” although many of the articles had been previously published.\(^{31}\) Other critics, such as Guyda Armstrong, Tobias Foster Gittes, Susan Hagedorn, Millicent Marcus, Regina Psaki, and Deanna Shemek have also grappled with Boccaccio’s multifaceted, and sometimes confusing, attitude toward women.\(^{32}\)

\(^{30}\) Barolini, *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture*, 376.


Still others have confronted the reception of his female figures in later centuries.\textsuperscript{33}

Even prior to the recent surge of interest in gender, scholars concerned with Boccaccio’s moral positioning and development as an author had to reckon with his treatment of women. In \textit{Boccaccio e l’invenzione della letteratura mezzana} (1990), Francesco Bruni draws a distinction between Boccaccio’s two phases of literary production - the first extending through the writing of the \textit{Decameron} and the second containing the later works composed under the influence of Petrarch.\textsuperscript{34} For those who ascribe to this narrative of Boccaccio’s moral conversion driven by his meeting with Petrarch, these two literary phases seemingly correspond neatly with a characterization of the early vernacular works as philogynous, that is, empathetic to women and their viewpoints, and the later Latin works and the \textit{Corbaccio} as misogynist. However, the division between a ‘philogynous’ and ‘misogynist’ Boccaccio remains contested, and is, at best, an extremely generalized categorization.\textsuperscript{35}


\textsuperscript{35} Vittore Branca’s rediscovery of the Hamilton 90 manuscript, which suggests Boccaccio copied the \textit{Decameron} even late in his life is one piece of evidence. See also: Martin Eisner, “A Singular Boccaccio:
In the past five years, several edited volumes have endeavored to offer a more holistic view of Boccaccio’s literary production. Two 2015 collections, *The Cambridge Companion to Boccaccio* and *Boccaccio: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works*, blur the lines between a first and second Boccaccio, or a vernacular and Latin Boccaccio. Although the treatment of gender by some articles in these compendiums is still colored by the feminist/misogynist binary suggested by the primo/secondo Boccaccio, many compellingly demonstrate that the category of gender functions throughout Boccaccio’s works in intricate and involved ways. In *Reconsidering Boccaccio* (2018), the editors propose thinking about the author and his works in even broader contexts and networks: “it is vital to recognize both the multilayered complexity of his approach, the number of different systems and domains from which he draws, and that Boccaccio’s works themselves also take part in and contribute to a complex system of interconnected networks.” I similarly reject the feminist/misogynist binary and the primo/secondo


Boccaccio, seeking instead to situate his literature – and his portrayals of women – within textual networks and the manuscript tradition. Analyzing Boccaccio’s ongoing interest in philosophy and the category of woman, I emphasize continuity rather than rupture across his works, Italian and Latin alike.

In addition to the studies discussed above, two scholars have brought questions of gender in Boccaccio into dialogue with philosophical texts. These analyses, undertaken by Michael Sherberg and Timothy Kircher, rely primarily on comparing and contrasting Boccaccio’s representations of women with specific ideologies of the Trecento. Sherberg’s *The Governance of Friendship: Law and Gender in the Decameron* uses an Aristotelian framework to examine the interaction of, as its title suggests, governance and friendship in Boccaccio’s masterpiece.\(^\text{38}\) Sherberg grounds his analysis in Aristotle’s notions of friendship as outlined in *Nicomachean Ethics*, examining how the gendered social order espoused by Aristotle pervades all levels of Boccaccio’s text – the *novelle*, the brigata, and the Author’s interventions. At times, Sherberg’s conclusions overlook how Boccaccio’s stories might be in conversation with, or even resist, Aristotle’s theories, rather than being beholden to them (a potential pitfall for any scholar engaging in this type of work). Ultimately, his interpretation focuses on the male brigata members’ revenge and the law’s restrictions on women, thereby undermining the presence of

female voices and actors. Yet by foregrounding gender as a philosophical problem, Sherberg highlights the centrality of both women and philosophy in the *Decameron.*

Kircher, in *The Poet’s Wisdom: The Humanists, the Church, and the Formation of Philosophy in the Early Renaissance,* recasts interpretive problems—among them the question of relations between men and women—in Boccaccio and Petrarch through a philosophical lens. By situating Boccaccio’s and Petrarch’s writing among a semi-literate, vernacular culture rather than a Classical, Latin tradition, Kircher claims that both authors challenge philosophical notions of unchanging epistemological and ethical truths. His chapter on gender dynamics underscores the extent to which representations of women are intimately tied to these philosophical issues.

In sum, Kircher and Sherberg’s interpretations provide models for thinking through issues of gender in relation to particular philosophical systems. Building on this important work, I propose considering the gendered implications of philosophy, not only as rooted in specific debates about the nature of the feminine, woman, or gendered social hierarchies, but also in the very notion of philosophy itself.

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**Boccaccio’s Philosophy**

Boccaccio’s philosophy has received significantly less critical attention than his engagement with gender. This may be due to the fact that Boccaccio’s works, compared with Dante’s *Commedia* or Petrarch’s *Secretum*, appear, at least on the surface, as less engaged with serious subject matter. Similarly, Boccaccio’s less-than-explicit statements on philosophy and, in some cases, his own distancing from it (as in the Author’s Epilogue of the *Decameron*), makes teasing out his philosophy more difficult. However, Boccaccio’s philosophical sources were substantial, and a number of scholars have begun to analyze the philosophical resonances in his texts.

Interpretations focusing on philosophy in Boccaccio suggest he was familiar with the Stoics and the Epicureans, as well as individual thinkers like Aristotle, Averroes, Boethius, Cicero, and Plato, and that he had access to the Latin version of Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives of the Philosophers*. Scholars tend to analyze the extent to which Boccaccio embraces or rejects a particular school of thought (not unlike the works of Sherberg and Kircher). Marco Veglia, for instance, argues for an “Epicurean” Boccaccio by examining his Latin eclogue “Phylostropos” and Boccaccio’s interest in the bucolic.\(^\text{40}\) Antonio Gagliardi, on the other hand, casts Boccaccio as “poeta, filosofo, averroista,” through an evaluation of intertextual resonances of Aristotle, Boethius, and Averroes that appear

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\(^{40}\) Marco Veglia, “*La vita lieta*: una lettura del Decameron” (Ravenna: Longo, 2000).
throughout his works. Gur Zak, through an analysis of Decameron IV.1, has recently argued that Boccaccio pits himself in opposition to the Stoics. And Michaela and Robert Grudin propose that the relationship between nature and reason in the Decameron is the result of Ciceronian influence. A number of scholars, like Sherberg, have considered Boccaccio’s use of Aristotle, which was an especially influential source for Boccaccio; he copied the entirety of Aquinas’ commentary on the Ethics (the manuscript in Boccaccio’s hand is housed today at the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan). Taken together, these studies establish the plurality of Boccaccio’s philosophical influences and raise questions about the extent to which Boccaccio’s own works might be considered philosophical.

Recent research also explicitly casts Boccaccio as a philosopher. In Boccaccio the Philosopher: An Epistemology of the Decameron (2017), Filippo Andrei argues that although not a “traditional” philosopher, Boccaccio can still be considered as such. Andrei focuses on how the Decameron, situated alongside Boccaccio’s minor works, contains “the

41 Antonio Gagliardi, Giovanni Boccaccio: Poeta, Filosofo, Averroista (Soveria Mannelli (Catanzaro): Rubbettino, 1999).
44 Victoria Kirkham identifies Aristotle and Aquinas in the Decameron, citing Pampinea’s warning in the frame narrative that the brigata should not “trapassare... il segno della ragione.” Kirkham argues that this reflects Boccaccio’s own philosophical credo and reads the text as a championing of Aquinas’ concept of ratio in The Sign of Reason in Boccaccio’s Fiction (Firenze: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1993). Susanna Barsella argues that Aristotle is key to reading Boccaccio’s Decameron, especially to the notion of a harmonious civic life. See “I marginalia di Boccaccio all’ «Etica Nicomachea» di Aristotele,” in Elsa Filosa and Michael Papio, eds., Boccaccio in America: 2010 International Boccaccio Conference, American Boccaccio Association (Ravenna: Longo, 2012).
capacity or raise epistemological questions through the imaginative power of its language.”

According to Andrei, if philosophy is tied to the production of knowledge, then the Decameron is philosophical in that it produces a particular kind of knowledge and thus a certain worldview for its readers. The final chapter, “Practical Philosophy and Theory of Action in the Decameron,” argues that “in the Decameron ethics can become practical philosophy,” filtering Boccaccio through Aristotle’s divisions of theoretical and practical philosophy. In this section, Andrei, like others before him, narrows his analysis to the relative influence of particular philosophers.

As we come to a tentative definition of Boccaccio’s philosophy, I would like to briefly consider one final philosophical source: Boethius. In Genealogy of the Pagan Gods, Boccaccio proposes that poetry offers one medium through which to express philosophical ideas. This understanding of the bond between poetry and philosophy derives, at least partially, from Boethius’ sixth-century Consolation of Philosophy, a text that remained popular throughout the Middle Ages. In the Consolation, Boethius recounts, through a mixture of poetry and prose, how Lady Philosophy appeared to him and offered him consolation during a time of great sorrow and fear. Although Boethius dismisses the Muses of poetry at the beginning of the text in favor of the Muses of philosophy, his work undoubtedly brings philosophy and poetic form together.

46 Andrei, Boccaccio the Philosopher, 197.
Moreover, Boethius depicts the text as consolatory, a stance Boccaccio adapts in the *Decameron* when he offers his stories as comfort to ladies in love. Michael Papio has highlighted the connections between Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* and Boccaccio’s notions of poetry, theology, and philosophy as expressed in the *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*, but I propose that these connections reach across to Boccaccio’s other works as well.\(^{47}\)

Having recognized Boccaccio’s many philosophical influences, I would like to return to one of the core questions of this project: What does Boccaccio mean when he says “Philosophy?” The tentative answer that emerges from the chapters that follow doesn’t argue for Boccaccio’s adherence to a single thinker or school of thought, rather it gestures toward a broad philosophy unchained from contemporary limits of a rigid academic discipline and unbound from the classical distinctions of theoretical and practical philosophies.\(^{48}\) I propose that philosophy, for Boccaccio, is the knowledge that enables us to live an ethical life, a life shaped by both a moral code and our compassion for others. Such knowledge is not only found in formal centers of learning, but also in poetry and literature, in the stories told by old women, and in the hearts and minds of


men and women alike. If we are discerning, this philosophy can even be encountered and understood within the banalities of our daily lives. While Boccaccio does not degrade the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake (Aristotle’s metaphysics, or “first philosophy”), his reflections on philosophy question the value of such a pursuit if it does not result in a greater good. Philosophy, therefore, is not exclusive, it is available to all men and women willing to seek it out.

Sketching, even roughly, Boccaccio’s definition of philosophy is useful for thinking about the shifting and unstable boundaries of philosophy in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. It’s accepted that the medieval understanding of philosophy differed significantly from the clearly defined academic discipline of our own day. Pierre Hadot, for example, explains that like ancient philosophy, medieval philosophy was not just contemplative, but active. It called upon the philosopher to seek truth and to do good in daily life. Chris Celenza echoes this sentiment in his contextualization of Renaissance Philosophy, arguing that one explanation for the lack of scholarship on fifteenth century

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Italian philosophy may be due to the fact that philosophers of the epoch do not fit easily within contemporary notions of the discipline. Stephen P. Marrone has also pointed to the various strains in philosophical thought during the medieval period, particularly in the fourteenth century. While the “intellectual quest for wisdom” already constituted a crucial part of philosophical discourse in the medieval period, a number of other issues pervaded the discipline, such as tension between formal and informal study and the relationship between philosophy and theology. Boccaccio’s philosophy was thus engaged with the crucial questions of its historical and cultural moment, intervening in these key debates.

**Women and Philosophy: From the Fourteenth Century to the Twenty-First**

Despite a robust critical tradition concerning women and gender in the medieval and early modern periods, studies of women and medieval philosophy remain scarce. As early as 1992, Joan Gibson attempted to collect a bibliography and organize a panel on the topic. But, as she outlines in her article “Women and/in Medieval Philosophy,” it proved nearly impossible. She lamented both the paucity of written sources and her inability to cobble together enough speakers for the panel. Why, she wondered, are there so few scholars studying the relationship between women and medieval philosophy?

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Her essay posits some potential explanations. First and foremost, Gibson acknowledges that the problem is both historic and contemporary. Women philosophers she notes, “fit especially uncomfortably in a discipline which for centuries offered norms for rationality while holding that women are not fully rational.”

On the subject of medieval philosophy specifically, Gibson provides three oft-cited reasons for the lack of scholarship concerning women: “a) there were no recognised medieval women philosophers; and that b) women weren’t even well-educated and certainly not scholastic; and that c) medieval (male) philosophers seldom, and in some cases, never discussed women.”

Gibson challenges these reasons and rightfully so; the answer, she insists, must be more complex.

Not yet available to Gibson was Prudence Allen’s two-volume work *The Concept of Woman* which explicitly confronts how philosophers, male and female alike, conceived of women, tackling the third objection outlined above. Allen analyzes the various understandings of women’s bodies and minds, as outlined by thinkers throughout Western philosophy, from 750 BC to the Humanist revolution of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Her survey is truly exhaustive. She meticulously traces different strains of thought with regards to women, demonstrating how conflicting and

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contradictory viewpoints often existed within the same epoch, as well as how they were interpreted and reworked by later authors. The importance of Allen’s work cannot be overstated. She gives scholars an unparalleled starting point for a more in-depth inquiry into the concept of womanhood and the relationship between medieval women and philosophy.

The first two objections posed by Gibson, however, remain largely unresolved. Yet rather than resigning ourselves to the fact that “there were no recognised medieval women philosophers,” Gibson’s work encourages us to probe the assumptions undergirding both ‘women’ and ‘philosophy.’ A woman philosopher of the Trecento might not look exactly like one of the twentieth or twenty-first century. If women’s exclusion from university spaces barred their access to philosophy as an academic discipline, were there other means by which they could engage with philosophical knowledge? Given that erudite authors such as Dante never formally attended university, surely there were still ways in which one could be considered a philosopher outside institutions.

Still, for women to be considered philosophers, philosophical discourse would have to recognize their potential to be moral and intellectual agents – an issue that has troubled feminist thinkers for decades and remains one still today. In Hipparchia’s

Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, etc., Michèle Le Dœuff takes up the question of women’s relationship to philosophy; she interrogates what philosophy is and why it is prestigious, as well as why women’s exclusion from it matters.\(^5\) Although Le Dœuff does not provide a single, unequivocal answer to these questions, she explores how Philosophy constructs its own prestige by deeming only some worthy of its knowledge. Women, typically, are not. Exploring the relationship between Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Paul Sartre, Le Dœuff shows that women’s access to philosophical discourse is almost always determined and mediated through male figures. Sartre, for instance, serves as Beauvoir’s connection to the philosophical even if Beauvoir herself could be considered a philosopher. A medieval example – the tumultuous, passionate, and profoundly intellectual relationship between Peter Abelard and Heloise – gives this phenomenon its name: the “Heloise Complex.”\(^6\) In the “Heloise Complex,” a woman’s philosophy, if it is called philosophy at all, is predicated on the model of a male, god-philosopher figure who grants a single woman, deemed worthy, this philosophical


knowledge. This, however, does little to ameliorate women’s general marginalization from the philosophical realm.

While both Gibson and Le Dœuff concentrate their analyses on the figure of the woman philosopher, Luce Irigaray’s feminist critique of Western philosophy focuses instead on the fundamental assumptions that undergird philosophy. Driven by her theory of sexual difference, Irigaray views philosophical discourse as the primary culprit in woman’s oppression: “It is indeed precisely philosophical discourse that we have to challenge, and disrupt, inasmuch as this discourse sets for the law for all others, inasmuch as it constitutes the discourse on discourse.”\(^{59}\) For Irigaray, philosophical discourse, on which all other discourses are founded, makes claims about a universal subject, when, in fact, that subject is always male. Irigaray suggests that if we could create a different philosophy or if we could construct a different history of philosophy, we would also construct a different image of woman and the feminine.

Adriana Cavarero draws upon Irigaray’s analysis in her reading of philosophical texts. She seeks better understand how philosophy marginalizes women in order to challenge the phallocentric code of the patriarchal symbolic order. In *In Spite of Plato*, Cavarero focuses on the figure of Diotima, Socrates’ teacher. She shows how, in the *Symposium*, Plato appropriates feminine characteristics – anything connected to

childbirth and motherhood—and repurposes them for a patriarchal system of knowledge from which women are excluded. By privileging homosexual love over heterosexual love, the metaphor of childbearing is adopted to speak about men giving birth to ideas (philosophy) which will live on forever, while what women can give birth to will only ever die. According to Cavarero: “men generate Man, thus giving birth as they had planned to something eternal and universal, at least in its pretensions. Men are necessarily finite. They die, but their neutral/masculine essence endures, eternalized in Western culture.” Like Irigaray, Cavarero lays bare the gendered nature of knowledge that claims to be universal.

Le Dœuff, Irigaray, and Cavarero each point to the crucial role philosophy plays in women’s oppression by denying women participation as full subjects in the pursuit and production of knowledge. These feminist thinkers remind us why it matters to interrogate women’s place within Western philosophy. Thus, rather than consider how Boccaccio’s portrayals of women fit within contemporary notions of “feminist” or “misogynist” (which, in and of themselves, are contested and multivalent terms), I ask how Boccaccio conceives of women as intellectual authorities and moral agents, how he portrays them as humans endowed with the same potential for virtue and vice as men.

These feminist thinkers also make us eager for an alternative philosophical discourse which does not exclude women. In reconsidering the history of philosophy—

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Adriana Cavarero, In Spite of Plato, 107.
and women’s place within it – I turn to Boccaccio as an alternative. His portrayal of women as philosophers can help us conceive of a new philosophy that includes women among its followers – both in the fourteenth century and today.

**Methodology and Chapter Overview**

Each of the following chapters takes a slightly different critical approach to thinking through the relationship between women and philosophy in Boccaccio’s texts. As a work of literary criticism, this dissertation foregrounds Boccaccio’s literature, situating it in relevant textual and material networks. Close reading techniques form the backbone of my analysis, but I dedicate significant attention to intertextuality, paratextuality, and materiality. In this respect, I draw from scholars such as D.F. McKenzie and Gerard Genette who have demonstrated the significance of the forms in which texts circulate. I am further indebted to a rich tradition of manuscript study in the field of Italian literature as it has developed in Italy and which is becoming increasingly influential within the Anglophone Academy. The conclusions that come to

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light in these chapters not only complicate and enhance existing interpretations of Boccaccio’s literature, they also contribute to our understanding of the history of women and philosophy in the fourteenth century and beyond.

The first chapter, “Domesticating Philosophy: Dante’s Women in Boccaccio,” brings together two Boccaccian texts from the latter half of his literary production: the public lectures, *Expositions on Dante’s Divine Comedy*, and the Latin collection of biographies, *On Famous Women*. Placing these works in conversation with one another, I analyze the five women from antiquity – Lucretia, Julia, Lavinia, Penthesilea, and Camila – who appear in Dante’s *Inferno* and in both Boccaccian texts. This chapter thus reconsiders the relationship between these two works of Boccaccio’s and their place within his literary corpus. The first half of the chapter evaluates Boccaccio’s claim in the *Expositions* that the women in the *Inferno* shall be seated alongside philosophers in the afterlife. I show that through these women Boccaccio connects the domestic sphere with philosophical knowledge, undermining the idea that philosophy is only for erudite men in schools and disrupting distinctions of practical and theoretical philosophy. The second half of the chapter looks at Boccaccio’s portrayals of the same female figures in *On Famous Women*. Examining how their representations in the Latin compendium

compare – and, at times, conflict – with Boccaccio’s writing in the *Expositions*, I consider how Boccaccio problematizes what constitutes virtuous behavior and philosophical knowledge for women. He reveals that philosophy is available in the hearts and minds of men and women alike in various settings, and that praiseworthy women exist both within the domestic space and beyond it.

The focal point of the second chapter, “Ghismonda and Titus Translated: Philosophy Between the Vernacular and Latin (*Decameron* IV.1 and X.8)” is a fifteenth-century manuscript found at the Biblioteca Angelica in Rome. This manuscript, Angelica 141, places Latin translation of two *Decameron* tales (IV.1, X.8) side by side among other philosophical tracts and orations. Embracing materiality as a critical approach, this chapter asks how Angelica 141 shifts our understanding of these *Decameron* novellas by encouraging us to read them in Latin and in dialogue with one another. Given Latin’s status as the erudite language of the period, these versions suggest that the translators recognized the scholarly value and philosophical language of the novellas. Taking into consideration the Latin as well as the Italian text, I analyze the shared subject matter of Ghismonda and Titus’ orations to show that Ghismonda, a woman without formal education, proves herself to be a philosopher, while Titus, a man formally trained in philosophy, reveals that knowledge can be corrupted and used for self-serving purposes. This chapter thus provides another example of a kind of philosophy that reaches beyond the walls of universities or schools and touches the hearts and minds of
women. A transcription of the Latin translation of X.8, which is not available in print form, can be found in Appendix A.

The third chapter, “Poetesse [Female Poets] and Filosofe [Female Philosophers]: Erudite Models in On Famous Women,” moves away from examples of philosophy within the domestic realm, and instead analyzes classically learned female figures found in On Famous Women. Expanding upon Boccaccio’s discussion of poetry and philosophy in the Genealogy of the Pagan Gods, I explore how these women engage with philosophical knowledge while also challenging its traditional bounds. This chapter’s critical approach centers on reception but considers it in two distinct ways. First, I examine how Boccaccio himself transformed existing sources to make new, radically erudite female figures. Second, I investigate the presentation of those figures in the surviving manuscripts of Boccaccio’s works. I analyze how scribes and translators, who were near-contemporaries of Boccaccio, emphasized the erudition of his female figures by adding information to and adjusting their biographies. Like the first chapter, this chapter also traces a figure across multiple Boccaccian texts. Analyzing Sappho as she appears in the On Famous Women and in Boccaccio’s twelfth Latin eclogue, “Saphos,” this chapter proposes that Boccaccio self-identifies with Sappho, presenting her as an author and intellectual authority.

The final chapter, “Women Rewrite Boccaccio: Female Figures in Christine de Pizan, Giulia Bigolina, and Moderata Fonte,” examines adaptations by later women
writers of the texts and female figures created by Boccaccio. Reading the adaptations and transformations in light of their sources provides a way to think critically not only about the later texts but also about Boccaccio’s works. This chapter reveals that across centuries, languages, and genres, Boccaccio proved to be valuable source material for women who were interested in writing defenses of women and exploring ideas about knowledge and gender. The section on Christine de Pizan carefully details her reworkings of three Boccaccian figures from *On Famous Women* in order to consider how she constructs Boccaccio as a literary and intellectual authority from which she derives her authority. A reading of Giulia Bigolina’s *Urania* shows how she blends numerous Boccaccian figures and texts to create a unique romance whose brave, erudite, and chaste female protagonist is beyond reproach. I also identify concealed philosophical concerns in *Urania*, noting how, like Boccaccio, Bigolina at times positions herself in opposition to formal philosophy. The final section considers Moderata Fonte’s *On the Worth of Women*, including her brief but meaningful invocation of Boccaccio’s erudite exempla from *On Famous Women*, as well as her citation of *Decameron* V.1 as a critique of men’s philosophical pursuits. Bringing together these three diverse examples sheds light on the lasting significance of Boccaccio’s texts as women themselves began writing and demonstrating their intellectual prowess.

Joining Boccaccio studies, gender studies, and history of philosophy, these chapters offer a tentative answer to Badiou’s question: What is a woman philosopher?
Across Boccaccio’s works, Latin and vernacular alike, emerge a plurality of women philosophers and a new vision of philosophy. A woman philosopher is not one; she is many: from figures who read and write, like Sappho and Carmenta, to those who live and act ethically, like Camila and Ghismonda. And what then, as Badiou inquires, does philosophy become? Boccaccio suggests that philosophical knowledge is found not only through formal learning, but also through poetry, literature, and even everyday life. In this sense, it belongs equally to women and men. This conception of philosophy also indicates that perhaps medieval and Renaissance philosophy were not so strictly bound by distinctions of theoretical and practical; rather, the ethical and the metaphysical were entangled, forming a philosophy that was more inclusive than exclusive. As these chapters demonstrate, Boccaccio’s literature creates the space for a multiplicity of women philosophers and for an accessible philosophy. His works continued to resonate with women writers of Quattro- and Cinquecento. And, still today, his reflections on gender and philosophy are valuable as we insist on the importance of woman as philosopher.
Chapter 1: Domesticating Philosophy: Dante’s Women in Boccaccio

Introduction

In the autumn of 1373, Florentines hurried down via Proconsolo to the humble sanctuary of Santo Stefano. As their eyes adjusted to the candlelight cast across the nave, the audience whispered in anticipation of Giovanni Boccaccio’s next lecture. With several public lessons on Dante’s *Divine Comedy* behind him, Boccaccio must have expounded upon the fourth canto of the *Inferno* with ease. This series of lessons, now known as the *Expositions on Dante’s Comedy*, were the beginning of the ongoing canonization of Dante by the intellectual and political elite of Florence. This was Boccaccio’s moment as *lector Dantis* – reader and interpreter of Dante – to establish his own position as an intellectual authority in a tradition of Italian and Latin literature.

When the time arrived, Boccaccio, after reflecting on the consecrated intellectual lineage invoked by Dante – Homer, Ovid, Aristotle, and Plato – made an unusual move. Reaching the end of his commentary, he turned his attention to the canto’s women:

> What more will the philosopher teach to her in school, what will he show her in his ethics, in politics, and in economics? Nothing at all. Women who have acted and who act worthily according to their station in life, therefore, shall be seated alongside philosophers, for they will have earned praise and enduring fame. The author, then, did well to portray famous men of arms and virtuous women in the company of venerable philosophers.¹

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¹ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Boccaccio’s Expositions on Dante’s Comedy*, trans. Michael Papio (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 251 (Inf4.all.67). All English quotations of the *Expositions* are from Papio’s translation; translation modified.
Che <il filosofo> leggerà più a costei nella scuola, che nella sua etica, che nella politica, che nella iconomica le dimosterrà? Niuna cosa. Dunque, quelle, che così hanno adoperato e adoperano, non indegnamente, secondo il grado loro co’ filosafi sederanno, di laude e di fama perpetua degne. Non dunque fece l’autor men che bene a discrivere i famosi uomini in arme e le valorose donne in compagnia de’ solenni filosofi.²

Boccaccio asserts that women are equally capable of accessing and pursuing philosophical knowledge, even within their domestic spaces. His final words elevated Dante’s female figures to the same status as eminent poets and philosophers.

Despite its uncommon stance, Boccaccio’s brief but remarkable reading of Dante’s text has received scant scholarly attention.³ Boccaccio’s interpretation of Dante provides a starting point for an analysis of five of Dante’s women, specifically, the Inferno’s female figures from Antiquity – Camilla, Penthesilea, Lavinia, Lucretia, and Julia – in two of Boccaccio’s works: the Expositions on Dante’s Comedy and the Latin collection of 106 biographies, On Famous Women. Across the two texts, Boccaccio articulates a novel vision of philosophy and womanhood. Locating the philosophical both beyond and within a sphere traditionally conceived of as feminine, Boccaccio

³ Christopher S. Celenza, “Philology, Philosophy and Boccaccio,” MLN 134 Supplement (September 2019): S-126-S-137. Martin Eisner reads this moment as Boccaccio’s claim that philosophy can be found outside of schools and books, see Boccaccio and the Invention of Italian Literature (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 67-68. Marco Veglia considers this passage representative of Boccaccio’s interest in the mondo femminile [feminine universe]; see Il reggimento di Pampinea e l’esperienza giuridica del Decameron (Firenze: L.S. Olschki, 2008).
grants women intellectual authority, ultimately constructing multiple models of a *mulier sapiens* – a woman philosopher.

Underscoring Boccaccio’s interest in the relationship among gender, philosophical knowledge, and ethical behavior in both *On Famous Women* and the *Expositions on Dante’s Comedy*, this chapter challenges two critical commonplaces. First, it refutes an interpretation of the second half of Boccaccio’s literary production as demeaning toward the female sex. Both texts belong to the later phase of his writing: *On Famous Women* dates to 1361-1362, with revisions up to 1371, and the lectures of the *Expositions* to 1373-1374, whose delivery was interrupted by Boccaccio’s illness and subsequent death in 1375. Undeniably, the mature texts, including the *Expositions* and *On Famous women*, contain more explicit moral messages than the ambiguous language of his vernacular masterpiece, the *Decameron* (1348). However, in the words of Teodolinda Barolini, Boccaccio remained throughout his life “an author for whom the

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issues of women and their place in society are never peripheral.” 6 Like their precursors, these works present women as moral and intellectual agents. Qualifying the later literary production as misogynist, then, is at best over-simplified. 7

Second, the critical reception of On Famous Women comes to the fore. Reading the collection of biographies in conversation with the Expositions shifts the scholarly discourse away from discussions of the text’s feminism or misogyny. The compendium has been described as both “the founding text of Renaissance feminism” 8 and one that “finds women in general to be constitutionally flawed.” 9 These contrasting viewpoints, although seemingly irreconcilable, reveal the central tension of On Famous Women. On the one hand, Boccaccio adheres to medieval stereotypes about gender – that women lack the strength (both mental and physical) of their male counterparts; on the other, he praises women for their extraordinary achievements, claiming that they are just as competent as men. Some critics grapple with this paradox, but others tend to grant more

7 A number of authors have noted connections between works that belong to various phases of Boccaccio’s works. On connections between the Decameron and On Famous Women see Elsa Filosa, Tre studi sul De mulieribus claris (Milano: LED, 2012). Attilio Hortis, writing in the nineteenth century couldn’t help but consider On Famous Women through the lens of the Decameron, even as he wondered if their author could be one and the same; see Studj sulle opere latine del Boccaccio con paticolare riguardo alla storia della erudizione nel Medio Evo e alle letterature straniere. (Trieste, J. Dase, 1879).
9 Deanna Shemek, “Doing and Undoing: Boccaccio’s Feminism” in Boccaccio: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works. Although Shemek’s broader point is that the complexity of the text represents Humanist anxiety regarding women’s power, she is unequivocal in her reading of its misogynist values.
validity to one of these features, largely ignoring the other. For instance, scholars contend that Renaissance feminists, namely Christine de Pizan and Laura Cereta, drew on Boccaccio’s female figures as inspiration for their own works, erased his sexist sentiments, and transformed his ambivalent portrayals of women into models of unsullied feminine virtue. Such analyses have reduced Boccaccio’s text to its chauvinist elements, branding it as regressive and misogynist in comparison to the works that followed. This chapter, instead, resituates the text within Boccaccio’s literary corpus. A careful reading On Famous Women alongside the Expositions brings out Boccaccio’s preoccupation – throughout his career – with the relationship between gender and knowledge.

Studies of the links between the Expositions and On Famous Women are limited. Using a meticulous linguistic analysis, Giorgio Padoan identified instances where Boccaccio translated large chunks of his Latin works, including On Famous Women, into

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10 For a feminist reading see Benson, The Invention of the Renaissance Woman (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992). For other misogynist interpretations see, Diana Robin, “Woman, Space, and Renaissance discourse” in Sex and Gender in Medieval and Renaissance Texts: the Latin Tradition (Albany: State University of New York, 1997). Margaret Franklin, Boccaccio’s Heroines: Power and Virtue in Renaissance Society (Routledge, 2017), confronts the so-called “contradictions” of the text by claiming that it doesn’t have any. Nuanced readings have been developed by Filosa (cited above) and Stephen Kolsky, The Ghost of Boccaccio: Writings on Famous Women in Renaissance Italy (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005).


Italian for the *Expositions*. However, Padoan also noted that in other passages Boccaccio selectively translated or chose not to incorporate material from his earlier works. For this reason, the discrepancies between *On Famous Women* and the *Expositions* are not casual. They represent Boccaccio’s decision to forgo translating the biographies of Camilla, Penthesilea, Lavinia, Lucretia, and Julia from *On Famous Women* in favor of crafting a new representation of these same women in the *Expositions*. Scholars have not reflected on the implications of these differences or how the *Expositions* might offer a new perspective on *On Famous Women* – a lacuna this chapter seeks to fill.

We will begin with Boccaccio’s allegorical commentary on *Inferno IV* in the *Expositions*, in order to demonstrate how he calls attention to women’s domestic roles while simultaneously recognizing their philosophical knowledge and their right to be seated alongside canonical, male philosophers in Limbo. Boccaccio formulates a new definition of philosophy – one that is both in sync with fourteenth-century notions of the term and broadens its scope. Philosophy, for Boccaccio, is a logical understanding of the world and the reason necessary to live an ethical life. A subsequent examination of the stories of Lucretia, Julia, Lavinia, Camila, and Penthesilea, as told by Boccaccio in *On Famous Women*, reveals that he praises them for a variety of behaviors. Rarely are they lauded solely for the domestic duties cast upon them in the *Expositions*. I conclude that
Boccaccio redefines what philosophy is, to whom it belongs, and how it manifests, introducing the possibility that women, too, are philosophers.\(^\text{13}\)

**Domesticating Philosophy: Boccaccio’s Expositions on Dante’s Comedy**

Commenting on the virtuous pagans that Dante names in *Inferno* IV, Boccaccio appeals to a potentially skeptical reader: “One could here raise a doubt, asking, ‘What do men of arms and women have to do with those who are famous for philosophy?’” [Ma puossi qui muovere un dubbio e dire: «Che hanno a fare gli uomini d’arme e le donne con coloro li quali per filosofia son famosi?»].\(^\text{14}\) With this rhetorical move, Boccaccio grants himself the opportunity to analyze the female figures of the canto who might otherwise go unnoticed. In posing the question, Boccaccio not only creates space in his commentary to discuss the women of the canto, but he also creates a unit based on gender where Dante’s text lacks such a distinction. In the *Inferno*, Dante intersperses women with other honorable pagans: “I saw Electra with her many comrades,/among whom I knew Hector and Aeneas,/and Caesar, in his armor, falcon-eyed./ I saw Camilla and Penthesilea/and, on the other side, saw King Latinus,/who sat beside Lavinia, his daughter./I saw that Brutus who drove Tarquin out,/Lucretia, Julia, Marcia, and Cornelia,/and, solitary, set apart, Saladin.” [I’ vidi Eletra con molti compagni,/ tra’ quai

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\(^{13}\) The idea of disrupting masculine and feminine spheres in the *Decameron* is a central idea in Barolini, “Le parole son feminine e i fatti sono maschi: Towared a Sexual Poetics of the *Decameron*” in *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture*.

\(^{14}\) Boccaccio, *Expositions*, Inf 4.all.62.
conobbi Ettòr ed Enea,/ Cesare armato con li occhi grifagni. /Vidi Cammilla e la Pantasilea; /da l’altra parte vidi ‘l re Latino/ che con Lavinia sua figlia sedea./Vidi quel Bruto che cacciò Tarquino, /Lucrezia, Iulia, Marzia e Corniglia; e solo, in parte, vidi ‘l Saladino]. Boccaccio, building on Dante, implies that these women share a reason for their placement in Limbo.

Boccaccio’s imposition of the categories of women and men of arms on the pagans of *Inferno* IV also contrasts with the interpretations of his near contemporaries. Other commentators usually provide biographical information for each noble man or woman from Antiquity without addressing the women as a group. For instance, although Jacopo Alighieri notes the presence of women in the canto, he doesn’t suggest that their inclusion requires an explanation. After identifying the figures individually, he simply concludes “The aforementioned men and women, as you saw before, have been graced with goodness” [i quali sopradetti uomini e donne, come di sopra si conta, di molta bontà ebber grazia]. Other commentators who demonstrate interest in the female figures tend to focus on specific women. Benvenuto da Imola, for example, writing

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shortly after Boccaccio, acknowledges that his reader might be surprised at the position of Electra: “Know, reader, that you should not be amazed if the author sets this single woman before all the exceptional men named here, because she was the root of the most noble plant, namely, the Trojan and Roman race” [Ad quod nota, lector, quod non debes mirari si autor praemittit hanc unam feminam omnibus viris insignibus hic nominandis, quia ipsa fuit radix nobilissimae plantae, scilicet trojani et romani generis]. Da Imola had heard Boccaccio’s lectures, and it’s likely he adopted Boccaccio’s rhetorical move of appealing to an imagined reader’s doubts. Nonetheless, da Imola concerns himself with Electra alone. His defense of her placement relies on her distinct characteristics, not those she shares with other women. Boccaccio’s commentary differs significantly in its interest in the collective traits of the women in *Inferno* IV.

While Boccaccio distinguishes women from the other figures in *Inferno* IV on account of their gender, his reasoning for the female figures’ placement in Limbo links them to the virtuous, male pagans. The honor shared by the women, warriors, poets, and philosophers in Limbo comes from their praiseworthy acts, which Boccaccio identifies as stemming from an understanding of philosophy: “None of our laudable acts could be carried out without philosophical teaching” [Non essere alcun nostro atto

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This connection between philosophy, ethics, and honorable behavior is one found throughout the
*Expositions*. For instance, in the *Accessus*, which functions as the introduction to his
commentary, Boccaccio explains that the *Comedy* primarily instructs its readers in moral
philosophy: “The third principal question that, as I said, must be investigated pertains to
which branch of philosophy the present work belongs. In my opinion, it belongs to the
moral or ethical philosophy” [La terza cosa principale, la quale dissi essere da
investigare, è a qual parte di filosofia sia sottoposto il presente libro; il quale, secondo il
mio giudizio, è sottoposto alla parte morale, o vero etica]. 20 Jason Houston interprets
this passage as Boccaccio’s note to his audience that he “intends to treat ethics, not
philosophy or theology.” 21 However, Boccaccio does not reject philosophy, as Houston
implies. Instead, he identifies ethics and the quest to pursue a moral life as a branch of
philosophy itself.

The nexus between philosophy and ethics outlined by Boccaccio in the
*Expositions* intimates that philosophical knowledge extends beyond formal centers of
learning and into the lives of many, including women. This vision of philosophy
corresponds with fourteenth-century conceptions of the term, yet it also introduces a

21 Jason M. Houston, *Building a Monument to Dante: Boccaccio as Dantista* (Toronto: University of Toronto
Press, 2010), 135.
new element: an explicit recognition of women. Pierre Hadot, analyzing texts and trends from the ancient world, has demonstrated that the pursuit of wisdom associated with the term “philosophy” was not limited to the study of treatises or discourses but provided reasoning that was crucial to leading an ethical life. Although Hadot argues this attitude toward philosophy faded with the rise of Christian theology and a Christian way of life, he identifies surviving strains of this mode of thinking in Italian intellectuals of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, particularly Petrarch, a contemporary and friend of Boccaccio’s. Christopher Celenza, seeking to understand precisely what constituted philosophy in the Italian Renaissance, makes a similar claim: “[I]t was precisely to ethics, dialogue, and the marriage of literary ideals with social practice that the most creative minds in the Italian fifteenth century turned.” Although predating the development indicated by Celenza, Boccaccio’s reasoning in the Expositions accordingly falls in line with this broad understanding of philosophy.

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This conception of philosophy elaborated by Boccaccio in the *Expositions* could be interpreted as an illustration of Aristotelian practical philosophy and true opinion.

Aristotle distinguished theoretical philosophy, the “first philosophy,” including disciplines such as metaphysics and mathematics, from practical philosophy or politics and ethics.\(^{26}\) Theoretical philosophy sought knowledge for its own sake, while practical philosophy was concerned with the behavior of individuals and societies. Women could participate in such practical matters via true opinion, that is, the ability to grasp what is true or virtuous. They could, therefore, behave ethically.\(^{27}\) However, while men reach truths through reason, women must encounter them by experience. Women thus only had access to intuitive knowledge which would exclude them from the logical reasoning that Aristotle deemed necessary for theoretical philosophy. Boccaccio’s emphasis on the domestic space, as well as women who “adoperano” [labor] – a verb that specifically calls to mind action rather than contemplation – could seem to reinforce such a distinction between practical and theoretical philosophies.

However, Boccaccio disrupts the division between experience/reason and practical/theoretical knowledge in this passage. His question: “Che <il filosofo> leggerà più a costei nella scuola, che nella sua etica, che nella politica, che nella iconomica le


27 For an analysis of this concept as it regards women in Aristotle Allen, *Concept of Woman*, vol. 2, 102-103.

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dimosterrà? Niuna cosa” [What more will the philosopher teach to her in school, what
will he show her in his ethics, in politics, and in economics? Nothing at all.] sheds doubt
on the value of theoretical, philosophical knowledge. Boccaccio declares that the
philosopher has nothing theoretical to teach the woman who already understands
philosophy from her domestic pursuits. He thus blurs the boundary between theoretical
and practical, demonstrating that they are not so easily divorced from one another.
Women might, in fact, have the same kind of knowledge as men who study philosophy
in schools.

This perception of philosophy – that it is a type of knowledge just as present in
ethical behavior as in scholarly discourse – suggests that it might be available and
accessible outside formalized spaces of erudition. Boccaccio entertains this possibility
not only in the Expositions, but across his works. The vision of philosophy expressed in
the Expositions therefore is not an anomaly but part of Boccaccio’s ongoing negotiation of
the concept and its relationship to women. In the Author’s Epilogue of the Decameron,
for instance, Boccaccio ventriloquizes critics who censure his novellas on the grounds
that they are inappropriate. Just as Boccaccio invokes a dubious reader in the Expositions
in order to discuss the Inferno’s women, here, he creates critics in order to remind the
audience that the stories “were told neither in a church… nor in the schools of
philosophers, in which, no less than anywhere else, a sense of decorum is required, nor
in any place where either churchmen or philosophers were present” [non nella
chiesa... si trovino... né ancora nelle scuole de’ filosofanti, dove l’onestà non meno che in altra parte è richiesta dette sono; né tra cherici né tra filosofi in alcun luogo]. The ironic tone Boccaccio employs in this response reveals that his stories are as worthy as anything the reader might discover in Paris, Bologna, or Athens—three centers of formalized learning enumerated in the text.

Sonia Gentile implicitly draws attention to the philosophical content in the Decameron by juxtaposing Boccaccio’s text with Dante’s philosophical, didactic work, the Convivio. Explaining each author’s motivation for writing his text, she claims “Boccaccio, in justifying the Decameron with the same sentiment that guides the Dante of the Convivio, doesn’t say anything substantially different [than his predecessor]. That is, both write out of compassion for the unhappy, in one place oppressed by passion [the Decameron], in the other by ignorance [The Convivio]” [Nulla di sostanzialmente diverso dice Boccaccio giustificando il Decameron con il medesimo sentimento da cui è guidato il Dante del Convivio, cioè dalla compassione degli infelici, qui oppressi dalla passione, là dall’ignoranza]. Both texts will provide consolation to their readers. Although Dante’s text will do so with an explicit discussion of philosophy (in the vein of Boethius’ The


Consolation of Philosophy), Boccaccio’s will through a complex exploration of human behavior in its novellas. Through this parallel, Gentile subtly encourages the reader to consider the Decameron’s engagement with philosophy. In addition to the Author’s Conclusion, stories across the Decameron reflect on the nature of philosophy. The erudite characters in the Decameron, particularly the scholar of VIII.7 and the philosophers of X.8 prove themselves to be fools on at least one occasion, demonstrating that even men of letters can behave imprudently.\footnote{For a reading of Decameron VIII.7 see Kircher, The Poet’s Wisdom. The philosophers of X.8 are treated at length in Chapter 2.} And, in his defense of poetry in the Genealogy of the Pagan Gods, Boccaccio avers that any storyteller, even an old woman inventing ostensibly frivolous tales, cannot help but feel the truth beneath her fiction.\footnote{Giovanni Boccaccio, Boccaccio on Poetry; Being the Preface and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Books of Boccaccio’s Genealogia Deorum Gentilium in an English Version with Introductory Essay and Commentary, trans. Charles Grosvenor Osgood (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1956), 54. Book XIV, Chapter 10.}

If Boccaccio hints at the possibility that women have access to philosophical truth in the Decameron and in the Genealogy, he renders this claim explicit in the Expositions. He reminds the reader that, next to the poets and philosophers, it should not be surprising to find “women who live chastely and honestly and pursue their domestic duties in an intelligent and organized fashion, for without the teachings of philosophy such a life would be impossible. We must recognize that the reading and studying of philosophy is not something confined to universities, schools, and disputationes, it can oftentimes be found and learned within the hearts of men and women” [Cosi ancora le donne, le quali
castamente e onestamente vivono e i loro offici domestici discretamente e con ordine
fanno, sanza filosofica dimostrazione non gli fanno. E dobbiamo credere non sempre
nelle catedre, non sempre nelle scuole, non sempre nelle disputazioni leggersi e
intendersi filosofia: ella si legge spessissimamente ne’ petti delli uomini e delle donne.]³³

Philosophy is thus necessary to women’s project of living “chastely and honestly” and
forms the foundation of their “domestic duties.” Boccaccio not only emphasizes the
presence of philosophy outside universities but clearly places it within reach of the
average woman. There is no distinction between men and women in the sense that both
very often [spessissimamente] have philosophy in their hearts. At the same time,
Boccaccio reinforces a division between the domestic sphere, which he presents as
feminine, and what lies beyond it, a presumably masculine space.

With the eyes of twenty-first century reader, we might be tempted to interpret
Boccaccio’s claim as an acceptance of misogynistic values that relegate women to a
particular domain. However, the expansion of philosophy and Boccaccio’s subsequent
elevation of the domestic space by insisting on the philosophical knowledge required to
live ethically within it radically recasts both philosophy and the feminine. This stringent
view of women’s behavior may also appear to contrast with the Decameron’s
unconventional female figures, but the dismissal of official centers of learning -
“universities” “schools” and “disputations” – in the Expositions clearly echoes the

³³ Boccaccio, Expositions, Inf4.all.64.
Decameron’s Conclusion. Ultimately, despite the articulation of the strict arena of the “domestic” for women, Boccaccio also asserts that they are just as capable of knowing and embracing philosophy as men.

In the remainder of his commentary, Boccaccio more precisely delineates women’s “domestic duties” and how they might perform them honorably, sketching a detailed portrait of a woman who knows, uses, and teaches philosophy. Boccaccio begins with the scene of a woman in her room: “In her room, a wise woman may contemplate her position and her nature. From this contemplation, she may conclude that her honour [sic] derives above all else from her chastity, the love of her husband, her feminine seriousness, thriftiness, and her attention to the family” [Sarà la savia donna nella sua camera, e penserà al suo stato alla sua qualità: e di questo pensiero trarrà l’onor suo, oltre ad ogni altra cosa, consistere nella pudicizia, nell’amor del marito, nella gravità donnesca, nella parsimonia, nella cura famigliare]. In using this image, Boccaccio nods to the women found in the Decameron’s Proem, enclosed in their chambers while their male counterparts roam freely: “they remain most of the time limited to the narrow confines of their bedrooms, where they sit in apparent idleness, now wishing one thing and now wishing another, turning over in their minds a number

34 Boccaccio, Expositions, Inf 4.all.65-66. The concept “gravità donnesca” also appears in the Corbaccio, in a portrayal of a woman quite contrary to the one we see here: “Essa con questa sua vanità, e con questa esquisita leggiadria (se leggiadria chiamar si dee il vestirsì a guisa di giocolari, e ornarsi come quelle che ad infiniti hanno per alcuno spazio a piacere, sè concedendo per ogni prezzo), e con l’essere degli occhi cortese e più parlante che alla gravità donnesca non si richiedea, molti amanti s’avea acquistati.”
of thoughts” [il più del tempo nel piccolo circuito delle loro camere racchiuse dimorano, e quasi oziose sedendosi, volendo e non volendo in una medesima ora, seco rivolgon diversi pensieri]. But in the Expositions, the room is no longer a space of confinement but one of reflection and growth. The “number of thoughts” of the Decameron have become one: the woman’s contemplation of “her position and her nature.” Although these reflections are in service of the traditionally feminine values of chastity and care of the home, Boccaccio nevertheless highlights women’s ability to think and reason in this passage by labeling the woman as “wise.” While Boccaccio champions values which constrain women to a domestic space – love of one’s husband and management of the household – he notably does not impose an inferior status upon women nor does he replicate any medieval ideas of women’s subordination to man. Rather, Boccaccio inventively domesticates philosophy by proposing that these feminine spaces also partake in the philosophical.

The allegorical exposition of Inferno IV closes by accentuating women’s wisdom:

“What more will the philosopher teach to her in school, what will he show her in his ethics, in politics, and in economics? Nothing at all. Women who have acted and who act

35 Boccaccio, The Decameron, 2.
36 Dante uses the word “savi” [wise] to describe the group of poets who welcomes him in Inferno IV (110).
worthily according to their station in life, therefore, shall be seated alongside philosophers, for they will have earned praise and enduring fame.” In this remarkable statement, Boccaccio affirms that the knowledge women have and employ in their lives is equal to that of philosophers. The repetition of the verb “leggere,” translated here as “teach,” recalls the previous passage in which Boccaccio declares “the reading [leggersi] and studying of philosophy is not something confined to universities, schools, and disputations, it can oftentimes be found and learned [si legge] within the hearts of men and women.” Boccaccio thus reinforces the parallel between women’s philosophical knowledge and what is found in the classical centers of learning. Celenza points out the scholastic resonances of the verb “leggersi” which would remind a medieval reader of “lectio, the particular form of classroom teaching.” Although there is a practical aspect to women’s philosophy, it is not degraded with respect to the philosophy taught in schools.

In these final lines, Boccaccio also implies a physical proximity between the women and the philosophers in *Inferno* IV, and, by extension, an equivalence that isn’t present in Dante’s text. In the canto, the philosophers sit separately, because they are placed above the other honorable souls. Dante must lift his eyes in order to see them: “When I had raised my eyes a little higher,/I saw the master of the men who know [Aristotle]/seated in philosophic family” [inanalzai un poco più le ciglia/vidi ‘l maestro

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38 Celenza, “Philology,” S-134.
When Boccaccio says that the women of *Inferno* IV will be seated “*with philosophers*” [*coi’ filosafi*] he softens the distinction made by Dante. Reading Boccaccio’s text, we could imagine Camila, Penthesilea, Lavinia, Lucretia, and Julia seated beside the “venerable philosophers” [*solenni filosi*], rather than below them.

In conclusion, Boccaccio’s allegorical exposition of *Inferno* IV makes a few crucial moves. First, he groups the women of *Inferno* IV together on account of their gender, an unprecedented choice. Second, he attributes to them – and the warriors found alongside them – philosophical knowledge that is indispensable for carrying out praiseworthy acts and living an ethical life. Finally, he outlines women’s most honorable activities – those which require “philosophical knowledge” [*filosofica dimostrazione*] – as those which take place in the domestic sphere. The women of *Inferno* IV, however, as represented in *On Famous Women* will present some contradictions to the vision of a domestic woman who uses philosophy merely in service of the love of her husband and her household.

**Beyond Domestic Bounds: On Famous Women**

As outlined in the introduction, Boccaccio’s varying attitudes toward the female sex have been the subject of much critical debate. Still, the relationship between the *Expositions* and *On Famous Women* presents a unique occasion to examine how Boccaccio

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arrives at different conclusions about the same women. A number of female figures repeat across Boccaccio’s works – for example, several of his protagonists bear the name Fiammetta, and Dido memorably appears in a number of texts. Yet the overlap between the Expositions and On Famous Women is noteworthy because of the texts’ temporal proximity – just two years separate the final revisions of On Famous Women (1371) and the composition of the Expositions (1373) – as well as their numerous linguistic connections. Of the eight women named by Dante in Inferno IV, five appear in Boccaccio’s collection of famous women: Camilla, Penthesilea, Lucretia, Julia and Lavinia. Although Dante’s text mentions the women by name, it does not provide any details about their backgrounds. Boccaccio, however, recounts their stories in On Famous Women and, in some cases, in the literal commentary of the Expositions. The stories of Lucretia and Julia arguably fit the description of women who carry out praiseworthy acts within the domestic realm that Boccaccio outlines in the Expositions. Conversely, those of Lavinia, Camilla, and Penthesilea contradict the idea that women must behave honorably within a domestic space in order to be praiseworthy and – if we recall Boccaccio’s claim that “None of our laudable acts could be carried out without philosophical teaching,” – demonstrate their knowledge of philosophy.

42 Boccaccio, Expositions, Inf4.all.62.
brief overview of the biographies of Lucretia and Julia to consider how they align with Boccaccio’s assessment in the Expositions before turning to the three more contentious figures.

Lucretia famously kills herself after being raped in order preserve her honor and that of her family.⁴³ In this way, she presents the perfect example of a chaste woman as sketched in the Expositions. Not only does Boccaccio paint her as a dutiful wife spinning wool at home – “a leading example of Roman modesty” [romane pudicitie dux egregia], he also praises her for “parsimony” [vestuste parsimonie] in On Famous Women, one of the qualities of women who employ philosophy in the allegorical commentary of the Expositions. Julia, analogously, provides an exemplar of a profound “love of one’s husband” [amor del marito]. Although her story in On Famous Women contains some of the tragic, morbid features that liken it to the Decameron Day IV tales that recount loves that end tragically, Julia incarnates the value of marital love.⁴⁴ Boccaccio tells us that Julia “loved ardently” [ardenter amavit] her husband, Pompey. Upon seeing his bloody clothes – stained from an animal at a ritual sacrifice – she suddenly dies. Boccaccio tells us that, believing her husband to be dead, she simply could not bear to live without

⁴³ Lucretia has been the subject of significant critical attention. See Maureen Quilligan, “Rewriting the City” in The Allegory of Female Authority: Christine de Pizan’s Cité Des Dames (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991). Filosa, Tre studi, identifies similarities between Lucretia of On Famous Women and Zinevra of Decameron II.9. ⁴⁴ Zaccaria admires the narrative quality of this story.
The discernable resonances between the biographies of Lucretia and Julia and the declaration in the *Expositions* that philosophical knowledge allows women to honorably carry out domestic duties, suggests a conscious effort on Boccaccio’s part to connect the stories of *On Famous Women* with the *Expositions*.

Given that Dante included these superb exemplars of domesticity, why does Boccaccio elaborate a justification for their placement in *Inferno* IV that applies obviously to their cases but far less obviously to *all* the women named there? I suspect Boccaccio takes advantage of Dante’s invocation of these specific female figures to make claims about the abilities of women as a group more broadly – not only those of *Inferno* IV. Still, the *Expositions*’ declaration that the women of *Inferno* IV engage with philosophical knowledge in the domestic realm is challenged by the fact that these same women, as presented by Boccaccio in *On Famous Woman*, live ethical lives beyond the bounds of domesticity. Creating a single group out of such diverse women, Boccaccio raises questions about what kind of behavior can truly be categorized as ethical and consequently how women can know and use philosophy in their lives.

If Lucretia and Julia are undeniable exemplars of domesticity, Lavinia presents a model which is not entirely domestic but perhaps represents its logical expansion.

Boccaccio tells the same story of Lavinia in the literal commentary of the *Expositions*.

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45 The detail that Julia is pregnant is particular to *On Famous Women*. Boccaccio omits it in the Boccaccio in the literal exposition of *Inf.* IV. Here it seems to add an element of suspense or tragedy to the tale.
(which proceeds the allegorical explanation in which he discusses philosophy) as he does in *On Famous Women*. As the daughter of King Latinus, Lavinia became the wife of Aeneas, conceived a son by him, but fled to the woods after his death out of fear of Ascanius, her stepson. Ascanius, however, leaves Lavinia her father’s kingdom rather than keeping it for himself. From this point forward, Lavinia not only raises her child, but she also undertakes the care and maintenance of the kingdom of Laurentum, eventually passing it to her son when he comes of age.\(^{46}\) While Margaret Franklin has argued that women in *On Famous Women* are lauded only when they serve the male figures in their lives, the story of Lavinia demonstrates that a woman can serve both in a domestic role – in this case, the raising of her son – and have her own crucial place in history.\(^{47}\) Although Lavinia cares for her son, Boccaccio imbues her story with its own significance and attributes actions to her which undoubtedly require an engagement with philosophical knowledge.

Of the women of *Inferno IV*, Lavinia’s Latin biography from *On Famous Women* contains the most linguistic resonances with Boccaccio’s allegorical commentary. Even the literal exposition of the *Inferno IV* anticipates these similarities: “She remained strong in the face of adversity and there was such great regal courage in her breast that she succeeded in managing the whole of her realm until her son reached the age at which,

\(^{46}\) Quilligan, *Allegory*, 103, reads Lavinia’s story as a testament to the benefits of exogamy.

possessing reason, he was able to assume power.” [La quale, non essendo dalle cose avverse rotta, tanto reale animo servò nel petto femminile che senza alcuna diminuizione guardò il regno al figliuolo, tanto che egli fu in età da sapere e da potere regnare.] 48

Boccaccio’s description of Lavinia’s strong spirit within “her breast” [petto femminile] resonates with his statement in the allegorical exposition that philosophy is to be found in the “hearts” [petti] of men and women. This image also appears in On Famous Women.

Lavinia is a steadfast woman who derives her honor from within: “She carried the spirit of ancient nobility in her breast and so lived honorably and virtuously, administering the realm with the utmost care until she turned it over intact to Silvius, now a young man.” [quod Lavinia, veterem pectori generositatem gerens, honeste atque pudice vivens summa cum diligentia tenuit illudque tam diu servavit donec Silvio pubescenti resignaret in nichilo diminutum.] 49 Here, Lavinia’s spirit is cast as “ancient nobility” but, again, these qualities are found within her heart. Boccaccio uses the Latin noun “pectori,” which clearly aligns with the Italian “petti” and “petto” found in the allegorical and literal expositions, respectively. The portrayal of Lavinia as a woman who “so lived honorably and virtuously” [honeste atque pudice vivens] unmistakably corresponds with the allegorical expositions’ claim that women of Inferno IV “live honestly and chastely” [castamente e onestamente vivono]. The connection comes to

48 Boccaccio, Expositions, Inf4.lit.219.
light clearly in the parallel between the Latin “honeste” and the Italian “onestamente” – both of which translate to “honestly.” Similarly, both “pudice” (Latin) and “castamente” (Italian) imply sexual modesty or chastity. Finally, Lavinia’s actions are characterized by diligence. In the *Expositions*, Boccaccio uses the word “diligenzia” to describe the care and raising of children, while her biography the Latin equivalent “diligentia” describes her care of the Kingdom of Laurentum.\(^5\) By equating child rearing and ruling, this final juxtaposition unambiguously associates Lavinia’s actions with the domestic sphere while simultaneously pushing the bounds of that space.\(^6\) These parallels clarify that the actions undertaken by Lavinia in *On Famous Women* are precisely the kind described in the *Expositions* which require philosophical knowledge.

If Lavinia embodies a logical extension of the feminine and domestic spaces heralded by Boccaccio in the *Expositions*, Camilla and Penthesilea challenge the very category of ‘woman’ outlined by Boccaccio in the same allegorical commentary.\(^7\) They disrupt the idea that women’s laudable acts and their use of philosophical knowledge must necessarily be connected to a domestic, feminine sphere, as the *Expositions* indicates. First, both Penthesilea and Camilla occupy a space between the two groups outlined by

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\(^5\) The story of Lavinia also resonates with *Decameron* III.9, which tells the story of woman Giletta, who manages a kingdom in her husband’s absence.

\(^6\) A similar expansion of the feminine sphere can be found in another fourteenth-century text: Francesco da Barberino’s *Del reggimento e de’ costumi delle donne* (Milano: G. Silvestri, 1842). Barberino claims that a certain class of noble women must be educated in the case that they must oversee the management of a realm on their own.

\(^7\) Glenda McLeod, *Virtue and Venom: Catalogs of Women from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1991), discusses the paradox of ‘manly’ women in a number of authors.
Boccaccio in his commentary on *Inferno* IV: men of arms and women. Second, because Camilla and Penthesilea fail to align with Boccaccio’s explanation that praiseworthy women are those that we would find inside their rooms, ruminating on their chastity, and caring for their husbands and children. Instead, in *On Famous Women* Camilla and Penthesilea are lauded for actions that Boccaccio codes as masculine; however, in the *Expositions* he ascribes domestic duties of the feminine sphere to them in order to justify their place among philosophers.

Penthesilea’s biography in the *On Famous Women* clearly problematizes her position between the categories of warriors and women by casting her actions in terms of their masculinity. Boccaccio claims she “scorned her great beauty and overcame the softness of her woman’s body; that she began to wear the armor of her ancestors, to cover her golden tresses with a helmet, to wear a quiver at her side, and to mount chariots and horses not like a woman but like a soldier” [Hanc aiunt, oris incliti spreto decore et superata mollicie feminei corporis, arma induere maiorum suarum aggressam; et auream cesariem tegere galea ac latus munire faretra; et militari, non muliebri, ritu currus et equos ascendere.] 53 The distinction between women and soldiers is highlighted by Boccaccio’s syntactical choice which pits “like a solider “ [militari] against “like a woman” [muliebri]. Rather than simply portraying Penthesilea as a man, the image is a striking one which opposes her feminine characteristics – great beauty,

53 Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, Ch.XXXII, 1.
soft body, golden tresses – against her masculine actions – wearing armor and a quiver, mounting chariots and horses.

Although Boccaccio mentions Penthesilea’s virginity (a virtue extolled in the *Expositions*), it is her love for Hector, in addition to her great military skills, to which he devotes the most attention in her biography. Yet even in describing her love for Hector, Boccaccio’s portrait contrasts her femininity and masculinity. It notably does not shift focus to her chastity: “In fact, Penthesilea accomplished in manly fashion so many and such illustrious deeds that she gained the admiration of Hector who would sometimes watch her. One day this valiant woman was fighting against concentrated enemy forces, and, more than usual, proving herself worthy of so great a lover” [*et tot tanque grandia viriliter agere, ut ipsum spectantem aliquando Hectorem in admirationem sui deduceret. Tandem dum in confertissimos hostes virago hec die preliaretur una, seque ultra solitum tanto amasio dignam ostenderet, multis ex suis iam cesis.*] These details demonstrate that Penthesilea’s story is not one of the triumph of masculinity in a feminine form but the ongoing negotiation of traits coded as either masculine or feminine. The use of the word *virago*, used for female warriors, or a ‘man-like’ woman, highlights this friction, and as such, it offers a foil to the image of unequivocal domesticity and femininity presented in the allegorical commentary of the *Expositions*. Moreover, the question of Penthesilea’s virginity seems to be of little concern to

54 Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, Ch.XXXII, 4-5.
Boccaccio in *On Famous Women*. Rather, he proclaims her as “worthy of so great a lover,” emphasizing that she earns Hector’s love. The concern about living chastely, voiced so prominently in the *Expositions*, carries little weight in Penthesilea’s biography.

Camilla also problematizes the space of the masculine versus the feminine and the latter’s relationship to philosophy.\(^{55}\) Tensions arise within the biography itself, as well as in its juxtaposition to Boccaccio’s reasoning in the *Expositions*.\(^{56}\) In the literal exposition of *Inferno IV* in the *Expositions*, Boccaccio says little about Camilla except that “She is here, additionally, for her virile courage, for she lived and died not like a woman, but like a man.” [per lo suo virile animo, per lo quale non feminilmente, ma virilmente adoperò e morì.]}\(^{57}\) The verb “adoperò” – translated here as “lived” – recalls the end of Boccaccio’s allegorical exposition, in which the same verb is used to describe those women who behave honorably within a gendered space: “Women who have acted and who act [hanno adoperato e adoperano] worthily according to their station in life, therefore, shall be seated alongside philosophers, for they will have earned praise and enduring.”\(^{58}\) The repetition of this verb highlights the contradiction at play both within the *Expositions* itself and between the allegorical commentary and *On Famous Women*.

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\(^{55}\) Camilla shares characteristics with both Penthesilea and Lavinia in that she is a queen, and, like Penthesilea she is a warrior who is killed in battle: “Camilla lost her life in the midst of the pursuits she had loved” [et sic inter amata exercitia expiravit] (Ch.XXXIX, 6).

\(^{56}\) Boccaccio’s version of Camilla’s story in the literal exposition of Canto 1 (Inf1.lit.137-141) does not contain the mention that she disdains womanly work nor does it invoke her as an example of chastity.


Moreover, it underlines yet another inconsistency within the biography itself. Boccaccio represents Camilla as a figure who has not behaved as a typical woman would, yet she comes to represent ethical behavior for all women.

As a warrior queen promised to the service of Diana, Boccaccio recounts that Camilla spends her life freely roaming, hunting, and ruling her father’s Kingdom. While he praises her chastity (one of women’s virtues in the *Expositions*), he also portrays her non-domestic pursuits in a positive light. As she matured, Camilla began to “hurl the spear, use a slingshot, string the bow, wear a quiver, chase and catch deer and wild goats, and disdain all womanly work…” Strengthened by her physical pursuits, Camilla was summoned back to her father’s kingdom but remained inflexible in her resolve

Much of the biography in *On Famous Women* follows the same story that Boccaccio tells in the literal exposition of *Inferno I* in the *Expositions*. Yet in *On Famous Women*, he includes a stress on the distance between Camilla’s actions and the norms of femininity, evidenced by the fact that she “disdain[s] all womanly work” [*labores femineos omnes despicere*]. However, when she is “strengthened by her physical pursuits” [*quibus exercitiis durata virgo*], Boccaccio still

59 Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, Ch. XXXIX, 5-6.
refers to her as a *virgo*, a maiden. The emphasis on classically masculine traits that permeates her biography in *On Famous Women*, does not appear in the literal exposition of the first canto (although it does in the literal exposition of *Inf IV*). Rather, Boccaccio simply claims that Camilla was “an amazingly talented woman” [fu maravigliosa femina.] Camilla thus emerges as a conflicted figure since on the one hand, she exemplifies masculine behavior but, on the other, she is classified as a woman who performs her domestic duties in the allegorical *Exposition*.

Another paradox arises within Camilla’s biography in *On Famous Women*. In the final paragraph, Boccaccio offers a moralizing digression to young women waiting to be married, exalting Camilla as a behavioral model, particularly in terms of her chastity: “I wish that the girls of our time would consider Camilla’s example. When they imagine this mature and self-possessed young woman…steadfastly rejecting not only the embraces but even the conversation of young men.” [Hanc intueantur velim puellule hodierne… et dum sui iuris virginem adultum…et constantissimo animo coevorum ivenum, non dicam amplexus, sed verba etiam respuentem viederint]. Still Boccaccio’s choice to return to this aspect of Camilla’s story fits uncomfortably into the narrative arc of the biography, which carefully traces her childhood, youth, and finally her participation in the war between Aeneas and Turnus which ends in her death. With the exception of the final wayward paragraph, Boccaccio devotes only a single sentence of

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60 Boccaccio, *Expositions*, Inf.I.lit.140.
the biography to discussing Camilla’s virginity: “Especially concerned to preserve her
virginity, she mocked youthful lovers and rejected outright the offers of marriage from
many princes” [virginitate pre ceteris inviolatam servare, iuvenum amores ludere et
connubia potentum procerum omnino respuere ac sese totam Dyane obsequio cui pater
deoverat]. Her chastity, motivated by a personal, pagan choice, to remain devoted to
the goddess xDiana becomes representative of appropriate female behavior for
Boccaccio’s Christian audience.

The strangeness of casting Camilla as an exemplar is apparent if we compare her
actions to the prescribed behavior for young women of Boccaccio’s day. Camilla
maintains a relative freedom and independence; Boccaccio describes her “wearing a
quiver and running freely through the open fields, forests, and the lairs of animals”
[nunc silvas et lustra ferrarum accintam faretra discurrentem] and dying “in the midst of
the pursuits she had loved” [inter amata exercitia]. This contrasts forcefully with the
picture Boccaccio paints of young Christian women who should embrace proper
comportment “in their parents’ homes, in churches, and in theaters” [quid eas in domo
patria, quid in templis, quid in theatris] as they chastely await marriage.\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Templis}, which
could be translated as either churches or temples, highlights the distance between
Camilla’s pagan life and the Christian life of Boccaccio’s female readers. How can

\textsuperscript{61} Boccaccio, \textit{Famous Women}, Ch.XXXIX, 5.
\textsuperscript{62} Boccaccio, \textit{Famous Women}, Ch.XXXIX, 7.
\textsuperscript{63} Boccaccio, \textit{Famous Women}, Ch.XXXIX, 7.
Camilla, an unmarried warrior who delighted in running freely, provide inspiration for Boccaccio’s women confined to the domo patria – their domestic spaces?

This odd parallel also recalls, once more, the ladies of the Decameron. As we noted, the female readers addressed in Boccaccio’s Proem are confined to the piccolo circuito delle loro camere. But the stories in the Decameron show women who move well beyond their domestic spaces. The Expositions also portray a woman “nella sua camera,” but this “savia donna” learns and reflects without ever crossing the boundary created by those walls. And yet, Boccaccio’s lauded female figures still push against domestic confines, proving themselves to be as capable as men at nearly anything.

The perplexing juxtaposition between Camilla’s representation and the moralizing passage at the end of her biography is analogous to the recasting of Inferno IV’s women as domestic exemplars in the allegorical commentary of Inferno IV. In both cases, Boccaccio makes the female figures representative of a particular attribute or trait which they do not precisely, or unproblematically, exhibit. What do we make, then, of the women of Inferno IV and On Famous Women? Should we view all of these female figures as unproblematic examples of domesticity? Are they praiseworthy for their adherence to traditional values or for their challenges to them? What precisely binds these five women – Lucretia, Julia, Lavinia, Penthesilea, and Camilla – together?
Conclusion

In the tension created by the comparison of these two texts, Boccaccio indicates that women’s actions are laudable both when they adhere to their domestic roles, as in the Expositions, as well as when they venture beyond them, as in the case of Penthesilea and Camilla in On Famous Women. Through his analysis in the Expositions, Boccaccio uses Dante’s women to craft a new definition of philosophy – one that breaks out of the confines of the university and into the everyday spaces in which men and women labor. Boccaccio implies that theoretical philosophy is not superior to practical philosophy; rather, they are intimately connected. At the same time, in On Famous Women, Boccaccio acknowledges and celebrates women who defy domestic norms to live their lives independently as they desire. Boccaccio’s texts thus present a complex and ongoing negotiation of the relationship between philosophy, ethics, and women. By refusing to provide a single, undisputed model of a woman philosopher, Boccaccio’s text actually grants us many models of women who may be considered philosophers. Various women, in the domestic space and beyond, who act honorably with “philosophical teaching” [dimostrazione filosofica] earn their seats alongside philosophers.
Chapter 2: Ghismonda and Titus Translated: Philosophy Between the Vernacular and Latin (*Decameron* IV.1 and X.8)

*Introduction*

Of the surviving manuscripts of Boccaccio’s works, a petite, unadorned volume at the Biblioteca Angelica looks unremarkable – at least, at first glance. Its clean parchment pages, stitched into a dull brown cover, contain neither illustrations nor comments. Designated only by its inventory number, Angelica 141 doesn’t include the first or only copy of any Boccaccian text. Scholars know little about its origins and the scribe (although the meticulous hand rarely errs). So the little book remains largely unexamined, tucked away in the frenetic center of Rome.¹

Copied and compiled in the late fifteenth century by a student of the *Studium Urbis*, Rome’s university, the manuscript contains laudations, orations, epitaphs, epistles, and excerpts from various authors. Across these rich and varied works, the compiler’s organizing principle remains elusive. It is not chronological or topical. Light epigrams interrupt philosophical treatises, and scholastic Latin mingles with the

¹ Most studies of Angelica 141 are concerned with particular texts preserved in the codex: Bruni’s commentary on the pseudo-Aristotelian *Economics* (Soudek). F. Novati, “Gli scolari romani ne’ secoli XIV e XV,” in *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 2, 1883, pp. 129-140, argues that the codex was written in Rome and attributes it to a student named Petrus Angelus who was from Sicily. While letters of a Petrus Angelus appear in the collection, there is no other indication that he was the owner or the scribe of the manuscript. For a full bibliography of articles which cite Angelica 141 as well as further details about the texts contained in the manuscript, see the Manus catalog: [https://manus.iccu.sbn.it/opac_SchedaScheda.php?ID=42643](https://manus.iccu.sbn.it/opac_SchedaScheda.php?ID=42643)
occasional work in Italian. The best conclusion, put forth by Anna Esposito, is that the compendium was likely “compiled for personal use or destined for a young man with objectives that were only partially educational and utilitarian, probably a Tuscan – maybe an Aretino, who was a resident for some time in Rome and who was connected with Roman academic environments.”  

The codex was both academic and personal, a collection whose contents were most likely deliberately chosen, copied, and ordered by its scribe.

Halfway through the enigmatic compendium, nestled between an oration to Florentine merchants and an exposition on Cicero’s De officiis, are Latin translations of two stories from Boccaccio’s Decameron: IV.1 and X.8. Leonardo Bruni translates the story of the Prince of Salerno (Decameron IV.1) quite faithfully. His version finds an unlikely pair in the story of two philosophers, Titus and Gisippus (Decameron X.8), translated by Jacopo Bracciolini, who takes a few liberties with Boccaccio’s text. The first novella (Decameron IV.1) recounts the tragedy of Ghismonda, whose father, the Prince of Salerno, disapproves of her affair with the lowly-born Guiscardo. Boccaccio contrasts Ghismonda’s rational discourse in defense of her love with the irrational behavior of her

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3 MS 141, Manoscritti, Biblioteca Angelica, Rome, ff. 131r-137v, 137v-136r.
father, whose cruelty leads to her untimely death. The second tale (*Decameron* X.8) tells of the friendship of two men trained in philosophy, Titus and Gisippus. In the first half of the story, the men manipulate Sophronia into marrying Titus, although she has been promised to Gisippus. In the latter half, Gisippus finds himself impoverished in Rome, where he encounters Titus, who saves his life. On the surface, *Decameron* IV.1 and X.8 appear to share little, if anything, in common.

Angelica 141 offers a fresh take on these two novellas by inviting us to read them together and in Latin translation. Critics often interpret *Decameron* tales by placing them in conversation with one another, noting connections created by the characters of the frame narrative or the novellas’ shared subject matter. But a coupling of *Decameron* IV.1 and X.8 has not been proposed in contemporary criticism – perhaps on account of the sixty-six stories that separate them or their seemingly different subject matter. Angelica 141, however, asks us to consider the productive dialogue that emerges when we read these two tales together. Given the number of orations that appear in Angelica 141, the scribe’s interest in these two stories was likely related to their elaborate rhetoric – the speeches given by Ghismonda and Titus – which are preserved, yet modified, in the translations. By transmitting these speeches and the tales in Latin, the language of

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4 My approach to Angelica 141 here draws from Laura Banella: “Se un testo è un insieme coerente di segni in grado di trasmettere un messaggio informativo, allora il libro nel suo insieme - vale a dire il libro costituito dalla sua materialità e da ciò che contiene nelle sue pagine - può essere interpretato come un testo.” *La Vita nuova del Boccaccio. Fortuna e tradizione*. (Roma-Padua: Editrice Antenore, 2017), 109. For more on materiality as a critical approach, see Introduction.
erudition, the codex also highlights their scholarly value. Although the *Decameron* would hardly be considered philosophy by today’s relatively narrow academic definition, IV.1 and X.8 find their place alongside canonical thinkers such as Cicero and Aristotle, underscoring the philosophical resonances of Boccaccio’s vernacular masterpiece.

Embracing the critical lens provided by Angelica 141, this chapter juxtaposes the orations of Ghismonda (IV.1) and Titus (X.8), revealing that Ghismonda demonstrates an appropriate command over philosophical knowledge while Titus does not. Ghismonda, a woman untrained in philosophy and presumably without formal education, proves to be a philosopher through an honest and logical defense of her actions. In contrast, Titus, a trained philosopher, reveals that philosophical knowledge can be corrupted and used for self-serving argumentation. This reading intersects two critical discourses within *Decameron* scholarship: an established practice of analyzing gender dynamics and a more recent, but robust, philosophical inquiry. If the *Decameron* is part of a tradition of early Italian literature “in which female interlocutors are not just tropes,” then its female characters actively contribute to the “undercurrent of

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5 I intend a broad medieval definition of philosophy, encompassing a wide range of studies and practices, from metaphysics to ethics (discussed in the Introduction and Chapter 1). Angelica 141 also reinforces this reading, as the inclusion of the Latin translations of *Decameron* IV.1 and X.8 alongside philosophical tracts and orations confirms their resonance with fourteenth-century notions of philosophy.

6 For other considerations of gender, see Marcus, Migiel, Psaki, Smarr. On philosophy see Barsella, Gagliardi, Papio, Veglia. See the Introduction for a more detailed discussion of these trends.

7 Teodolinda Barolini’s “Notes Toward a Gendered History of Italian Literature, with a Discussion of Dante’s Beatrix Loquax,” *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (Fordham University Press, 2006), 376.
philosophical discourse that emerges from the tales.” Critics have previously identified specific influences – such as Aristotle, Boethius, Cicero, or Epicurus – on Boccaccio. Yet my reading of the Decameron considers the stories of Ghismonda and Titus within a broad medieval definition of philosophy, encompassing a wide range of studies and practices, from metaphysics to ethics (discussed at length in the Introduction and Chapter 1). This understanding of philosophy dovetails with Boccaccio’s reflections in the Genealogy of the Pagan Gods and the Author’s Conclusion of the Decameron, both of which insinuate that philosophy is not just found in formal centers of learning, but in the everyday lives of men and women alike. Analyzing the stories of Ghismonda and Titus together brings to the fore the meaningful connections between Boccaccio’s reflections on women and philosophy.

The tale of Ghismonda, and her father, the Prince of Salerno, is one of the Decameron’s most popular stories and has been the subject of numerous analyses. Read in light of the Author’s Introduction to Day IV and the story of Filippo Balducci, as well as its intertextual relationship with the condemned love of Dante’s Francesca in Inferno V, scholars have often interpreted the story as a defense of love and desire or natural

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8 Filippo Andrei, Boccaccio the Philosopher: An Epistemology of the Decameron (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2017), 3. However, I disagree with Andrei’s conclusion that Boccaccio is not a “traditional philosopher.” For more, see Introduction.

9 See Chapter 1.
law. Guido Almansi, on the other hand, emphasizes Tancredi’s excessive love for Ghismonda, and argues that the story is an allegory of incest. Most critics also recognize the reasonable nature of Ghismonda’s defense of her love affair with Guiscardo. Richard Kuhns, for instance, argues that she speaks “as a philosopher” while other critics have located echoes of Boethius and Cicero in her oration. I shift the analysis of Ghismonda’s speech to consider how her rational and logical argumentation proposes a philosophy of equality. By comparing her oration with Titus’ in X.8, the shared subject matter of their speeches come to light. The integrity of Ghismonda’s oration is reaffirmed when read alongside Titus’ self-interested, circular, and manipulative argumentation.

Decameron X.8 has had a more muted reception. Despite the Decameron’s complexities, the tale of Titus and Gisppus is often taken at face value as an expression


of the virtue of friendship. I reject this interpretation, aligning myself with skeptical readers who challenge the novella’s status as a moral exemplum. Robert Hollander and Courtney Cahill provide one such reading as part of their critique of Day X as a spiritual high point in the Decameron. Cahill and Hollander argue that like Cimone of V.1, Titus and Gisppus, despite being trained in philosophy, succumb to bestial behaviors. Similarly, Teodolinda Barolini proposes that this story is a display of friendship and compassion gone awry, rather than the highest expression of those values. Comparing X.8 and IV.1 further elucidates the failure of Titus’ and Gisppus’ philosophical reasoning while simultaneously shedding doubt on the sanctity of their friendship. The philosophers emerge not as erudite examples to be emulated, but as foolish men capable only of compassion for themselves.

Decameron in Latin Translation

Despite Dante’s efforts to raise the status of the vernacular, Humanism, spurred on by the rediscovery of Greek and Latin texts in the late fourteenth century, reelevated the venerated Classics. Although the study of Latin authors such as Ovid and Virgil was standard in Italy as early as the twelfth century, this renewed interest affirmed Latin’s

privileged position as an erudite language in contrast with the vernacular (not until Pietro Bembo’s *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525), would Italian undergo further standardization and advancement). The translators of IV.1 and X.8, Leonardo Bruni and Jacopo Bracciolini, were deeply engaged with this intellectual movement of *studia humanitatis* (although they belonged to different generations: Jacopo’s father, Poggio, was a contemporary of Bruni). Vittore Branca describes Bruni as a man who was genuinely committed to the study of Latin, but was “convinced, thus, that also in the vernacular one could write outstandingly; it would difficult however, to treat high themes, the philosophical, and the tragic.” Bruni’s choice to translate the tragic story of

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17 Leonardo Bruni’s life would have just overlapped with Boccaccio. Born in 1370, a young Bruni could have never known Boccaccio who died in 1375, but Boccaccio’s works and those of his friend Petrarch would be hugely influential for Bruni, who wrote the first modern history *Historiae Florentini populi*. Jacopo Bracciolini was the son of Poggio Bracciolini, a contemporary and friend of Bruni’s and another Humanist. Poggio was best known for his re-discovery of Lucretius’ *De rerum natura*, among other things. It is little surprise then that his son, Jacopo, born in 1442, was educated in the *studia humanitatis* of his father. Like his father, Jacopo was in touch with some of the major intellectual and political figures of his day, including the philosopher Marsilio Ficino. Jacopo translated many Latin texts into Italian, therefore his choice to translate Boccaccio out of Italian into Latin was an unusual one, perhaps influenced by Petrarch’s Griselda.

Ghismonda into Latin, implies a recognition these ‘high themes’ in Boccaccio’s vernacular work. Jacopo Bracciolini also appreciated Boccaccio’s masterpiece; in his introductory letter to the translation of X.8, he calls Boccaccio “another Cicero in the vulgar style” [alterum Ciceronem in stilo vulgari]. The Latin translations in Angelica 141 can be understood as both an attempt to ennoble the vernacular Decameron and a demonstration of reverence for the material and quality of Boccaccio’s text.

Bruni and Bracciolini followed in the footsteps of Petrarch, who was the first to translate a novella of the Decameron into Latin. Petrarch chose the story of Griselda, who endures a number of inhumane acts committed by her husband, Gualtieri. Boccaccio’s narrator, Dioneo, memorably problematizes the brutish behavior of Gualtieri upon the conclusion of the tale: “Who else but Griselda could have endured so cheerfully the cruel and unheard of trials that Gualtieri imposed on her without shedding a tear?” [Chi avrebbe, altri che Griselda, potuto col viso non solamente asciutto ma lieto sofferir le rigide e mai più non udite prove da Gualtier fatte?] Giuseppe Mazzotta argues that “Dioneo opens a breach in the moral statement of the story, and, as he alludes to

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different turn that the story might have taken, he unmake the story he just told."20 Yet in his introductory letter to the translation, which removes the frame narrative, Petrarch identifies a lesson to be garnered Boccaccio’s story. He urges women, if not to imitate Griselda’s patience, then to imitate her constancy in their relationship with God. This moral, absent in Boccaccio’s tale (or at least up for debate), recasts the Italian novella as a Latin exemplum.21 According to Branca, the success of Petrarch’s version was probably due precisely to this recasting. No longer a contentious tale with an ambiguous end, Griselda could be enjoyed by readers as a Latin exemplum. Branca maintains the same logic – that is, that the stories work well as exempla – for Ghismonda (IV.1) and Titus and Gisippus (X.8), which, after Griselda, are the most commonly Latinized tales of the Decameron.22 Bruni and Bracciolini do not make explicit moral claims in their introductory letters to the tales. However, occasionally they change features of

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20 Mazzotta, The World at Play, 128.
Boccaccio’s stories or his language, presumably to better conform to the dictates of Latin and the exemplum, or perhaps their own visions of the novellas.

Although placed together in Angelica 141, the translations of IV.1 and X.8 have had quite diverse receptions. Bruni’s translation has received some critical attention and is found in several print editions of his works. Bracciolini’s version of X.8, on the other hand, has not been edited or printed; it survives in only two manuscripts: Angelica 141 and Plut.89.inf16 at the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence. The two translators also approach Boccaccio’s text differently. Bruni is quite faithful to the Decameron, making just a few adjustments that Branca deems ‘classicizing.’ Branca highlights Bruni’s removal of any references to a Christian god and the elimination of the setting in Salerno, an Italian town. Analyzing several of the changes made by Bruni, this chapter will consider their implications for understanding the philosophy of Ghismonda’s speech. In contrast, Bracciolini’s translation takes substantial liberties with Boccaccio’s text. Bracciolini inserts whole phrases, removes whole phrases, and at times obviously modifies the rhetoric of Titus and Gisippus. I will explore the consequences of some of these choices, considering in particular how they impact the flaws of Titus’ argumentation. Studying the Latin translations alongside Boccaccio’s text can reveal

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24 See Appendix A for the transcription of Bracciolini’s translation of X.8. In the BML manuscript, the Latin translation of X.8 is paired with the vita of Niccolai Piccinini.

25 Branca, “Un ‘lusus’.”
what elements of the stories later generations found intriguing or difficult. At the same time, they draw attention to certain features of Boccaccio’s novellas that might otherwise go unnoticed, helping us more fully understand the original text and its particularities.

**Ghismonda: A Philosopher by Any Other Name**

Boccaccio never uses the word “filosofo” [philosopher] to describe Ghismonda, nor does he employ other terms suited to scholars or sages, like the “scolare” of *Decameron* VIII.7. Still, as I will show through an analysis of her speech, Ghismonda is, in fact, a philosopher. She articulates a philosophy of equality, relying on reasoning and logic to make her case. Her sound and rational defense, as well as her commitment to the truth, contrasts significantly with Titus’ oration, which twists the logic set out in *Decameron* IV.1 for self-serving purposes. My interpretation of IV.1 and X.8 also confirms the argument, developed initially in Chapter 1, that Boccaccio views philosophy as not only within the reach of men who study in Athens, Paris, or Bologna, but as available to women who remain enclosed, as he notes in the Proem, in the “narrow confines of their rooms” [piccolo circuito delle loro stanze].

Daughter of Tancredi, the Prince of Salerno, Ghismonda is widowed but has not yet been remarried by her father, who bears the duty of finding his daughter a suitable husband. Filled with longing (like other widows in the *Decameron*), she falls in love with Guiscardo, her father’s most valued and trusted servant, a poor man but one of great virtue. Tancredi discovers this love affair because he conceals himself – in a manner
more akin to a lover than a father – in Ghismonda’s bedroom one afternoon. Incensed by what he observes – Ghismonda taking her pleasure with Guiscardo, Tancredi has him arrested and confronts Ghismonda about her transgression. Ghismonda refuses to apologize for her affair; instead, she gives a lengthy oration defending her actions. Tancredi kills Guiscardo and sends Ghismonda his heart in a chalice. Knowing that her lover is dead, Ghismonda pours poison into the chalice and drinks it, killing herself so that she might be united with Guiscardo in death.

The climax of the story is the impassioned defense given by Ghismonda. She demands Tancredi recognize her not as a subject or as a daughter but as a human, an equal, deserving of compassion not clemency. Although Ghismonda admits that she may have erred in taking a lover, her speech rejects a discussion of chastity in favor of other ethical, and philosophical, questions: the quality of truth and the nature humanity. She refuses to lie to absolve herself in Tancredi’s eyes. She is determined, rather, to be true to her word and to reflect the truth with her words. Tancredi, however, refuses to confront the truth and to see Ghismonda as an equal. His love for his only daughter is not only excessive, but it is also bound to the idea that she belongs to him. In contrast to Ghismonda’s claims that humans share the same virtues, abilities, and desires, Tancredi cannot accept a truth which would force him to recognize his daughter as a full, autonomous being.
Tancredi’s objectification of Ghismonda is evident from his first confrontation with Guiscardo after his discovery of the affair: “Guiscardo, my benevolence towards you deserved a better reward than the shameful deed I saw you committing today, with my own eyes, against that which belongs to me” [Guiscardo, la mia benignità verso te no avea meritato l’oltraggio e la vergogna la quale nelle mie cose fatta m’hai.]\(^26\)

Tancredi’s statement resonates with a line from an earlier story on the second day, that of Madam Beritola (II.6). In *Decameron* II.6, the nobleman Currado rebukes Giannotto for sleeping with his daughter: “how great an injury you have done to me in the person of my own daughter” [la ’ngiuria la qua tu m’hai fatta nella mia propria figliouola.]\(^27\) But in Currado’s rendering, the injury has been done to him via his *figliuola*, his daughter, whereas in IV.1, Tancredi laments an affront to his *cose*, literally, his things. In the fourteenth century, the word *cosa* was frequently used to indicate one’s goods, possessions, or merchandise to be sold.\(^28\) Tancredi therefore equates Ghismonda with his property, material or otherwise. Certainly, daughters in fourteenth-century Italy were, to some extent, a father’s property; that is clear from the fact that both men view the perceived violations of their daughters as affronts to themselves.\(^29\) Yet, Currado’s

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\(^{26}\) *Decameron*, trans. McWilliam, 295; *Decameron*, 476.

\(^{27}\) Branca notes the linguistic similarities between these two lines in his edition of the *Decameron*, 476n5.


reprimand maintains his daughter’s sense of humanity while Tancredi’s strips Ghismonda of even the basic human relation that bonds her to him. Bruni renders Boccaccio’s *cose, “meis rebus*” in Latin, underlining this treatment of Ghismonda as an object. Although *rebus* has numerous definitions, it is commonly used for both “things” as well as “property.” In contrast to *cose*, however, *res* also underscores Tancredi’s status as a sovereign since *res* and *respublica* would be used to convey the power of the state. Bruni’s version thus suggests a potential conflation between Tancredi’s power as sovereign and his role as father. Nevertheless, the Latin maintains Tancredi’s objectification of his daughter. Ghismonda’s defense will respond to this objectification by arguing for her full humanity via a philosophy of equality.

At the opening of her oration, Ghismonda states that she will not deny what her father says, nor beg for his forgiveness. Instead, she makes an appeal to logic, reason, and truth: “I propose to tell you the whole truth, setting forth arguments in defence of my good name, and afterwards I shall act unflinchingly in accordance with the promptings of my noble heart” [ma il vero confessando, prima con vere ragioni difender

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30 I have compared the printed version of Bruni’s translation in Domenico Maria Manni’s *Istoria del Decamerone* (Firenze: Antonio Ristori, 1742), 246-256, with the text of Angelica 141.

la fama mia e poi con fatti fortissimamente seguire la grandezza dell’animo mio].

Ghismonda also implies that she has acted and will act according to her words, creating an alignment between words and deeds. These connections are highlighted by Bruni’s Latin translation: “sed factum plane confitendo, verbis efficacissimis, verissimisque rationibus purgare famam meam primo deinde pari magnitudine animi facta verbis consentanea ostendere.” She will explain her actions with her verbis efficacissimis, extremely efficacious words, and verissimis rationibus, most true reasoning. Bruni parallels these two features of her speech by describing each one with a superlative, efficacissimis and verissimis. The facta, her future actions, will unfold in harmony with her verbis, her words. The use of facta also harkens back to factum of the first clause of the sentence, which refers to the things that have already happened and that she will confess plane: clearly, plainly, completely. Thus, not only will Ghismonda recount the truth, she will also continue to live it based on the reasoning she articulates.

In response to her father’s accusations, Ghismonda makes a memorable declaration concerning human nature: “You are made of flesh and blood, Tancredi, and it should have been obvious to you that the daughter you fathered was also made of flesh and blood and not of stone or iron.”

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33 On the relationship between words and deeds in the *Decameron* see T. Barolini, “‘Le parole son femmine e i fatti sono maschi’ Toward a sexual poetics of the ‘Decameron’ (‘Decameron’ II 10),” *Studi Sul Boccaccio* 21 (January 1, 1993): 175.
34 Manni, *Istoria*, 252.
di carne, aver generata figliuola di carne e non di pietra o di ferro]. In this appeal, Ghismonda argues for her own humanity and claims equality with her father: they are made of the same flesh and blood, *di carne*. Her reasoning obliterates any recognition of his role as sovereign or the power that may grant him. Even when Ghismonda acknowledges their difference – that their desires and experiences are separated by age and that the whims of youthful are swayed more easily than those tempered by maturity – she returns to the similarity of the human experience across stages: “you should nonetheless have realized how the old and the young are alike affected by living in comfort and idleness” [non dovevi di meno conoscere quello che gli ozii e le dilicatezze possano ne’ vecchi no che ne’ giovani]. Ghismonda consistently makes a bid for equality and the shared experience of humanity, regardless of Tancredi’s supposedly superior status based on sovereignty, gender, or age. This appeal to equality is precisely what Titus will undermine in his oration in X.8.

As Ghismonda continues, she bases her reasoning in her understanding of equality: “As I have said, since you were the person who fathered me, I am made of flesh and blood like yourself. Moreover, I am still young. And for both of these reasons, I am full of amorous longing…” [Sono adunque, si come te generata, di carne e si poco vivuta, che ancor son giovane, e per l’una cosa e per l’altra piena di concupiscibile

35 *Decameron*, trans. McWilliam, 296; *Decameron*, 479. Boccaccio also uses this phrase to highlight Dido’s *resistance* to such desires in *On Famous Women* (XLII.16); see Claudia Zudini, “«Carnea non ferrea sum» : il corpo femminile nel *De mulieribus claris*,” Arzanà 18 (2016), https://doi.org/10.4000/arzana.975.

36 *Decameron*, trans. McWilliam, 296; *Decameron*, 479.
Boccaccio places no specific emphasis on Ghismonda’s womanhood (besides the obligatory gendering of vivuta and generata), and, in fact, a number of interjections in the text mention Ghismonda’s ability to overcome la feminile fragilità, womanly frailty. But Bruni chooses to emphasize Ghismonda’s womanhood by translating this line: “Sum igitur femina, ut pote a te gemita etiam aetate invenis et utraque de causa concuscibilis desiderii plena...” The Latin identifies her as femina, instead of di carne [of flesh]. Bruni must have also rejected choices like homo, more generally used for men or humankind, or mortalis or humanus, adjectives which stress human nature. Reading the translation in conjunction with Boccaccio’s Italian makes it clear that Ghismonda argues for an equality based on a shared flesh, a shared humanity – one that is not undermined by womanhood nor requires a rejection of it. In this way, Bruni and Boccaccio, despite different linguistic choices, underscore that a woman is capable of employing logical, philosophical arguments.

As she continues her oration, Ghismonda turns to the question of Guiscardo’s social status. Tancredi disapproves of her choice of lover because he is of lowly birth. Rather than develop a new line of argumentation, Ghismonda returns to and reinforces the principle of equality. Just as she asserted her sameness with Tancredi by maintaining that they were both made of flesh, here she affirms Guiscardo’s equality of virtue by

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37 Decameron, trans. McWilliam, 296-7, translation modified; Decameron, 479.
38 E.g.: “non come dolente femina” (478); “ma a questo non mi indusse tanto la mia feminile fragilità” (478-9); “senza fare alcun feminil romore” (484)
39 Manni, Istoria, 252.
invoking a shared flesh once more. In crafting this line of reasoning, Ghismonda, once again, begins by insisting on the truth of her logic. She argues that Tancredi, in criticizing her choice of lover, has eschewed this truth: “It seems, however, that you prefer to accept a common fallacy rather than the truth, for you reproach me more bitterly, not for committing the crime of loving a man, but for consorting with a person of lowly rank” […che tu, più la volgare opinione che la verità seguendo, con più amaritudine mi riprenda dicendo].\(^{40}\) Ghismonda maintains that Tancredi errs because he claims that her transgression is rooted in that fact that she chose a man beneath her station. Ghismonda counters Tancredi’s faulty logic by voicing the principle that virtue is not available solely to the noble or rich.\(^{41}\) The way Boccaccio crafts Ghismonda’s oration contrasts her commitment to the truth with Tancredi’s false belief. This juxtaposition is underscored by Bruni’s word choice in Latin: “in eo falsam opinionem vulgis secutus es, nec vides, te non Guiscardum, sed fortunam acusare, quae frequenter indignos ad alta levat dignosque humiles deprimit, atque pebundat.” Bruni changes Boccaccio’s volgare opinione [vulgar opinion] into “falsam opinionem vulgis” [false opinion of the crowd], underscoring its opposition to Ghismonda’s truth.\(^{42}\)

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\(^{40}\) *Decameron*, trans. McWilliam, 297; *Decameron*, 480.


After dismissing Tancredi’s false belief about virtue and social status, Ghismonda elaborates the idea of an equality of virtue. She invokes flesh again, *carne,* employing the same word she used when making a case for her shared humanity with Tancredi. Ghismonda argues for the equality of men and women as well as the equality of virtue between upper and lower social classes. In the Latin, Bruni modifies Ghismonda’s language slightly. The differences between the Italian and the Latin are italicized below, revealing Bruni’s shift in translating this excerpt:

Ma lasciamo or questo, e riguarda alquanto a’ principii delle cose: tu non vedrai *noi d’una massa di carne tutti la carne avere e da uno medesimo Creatore tutte l’anime con iguali forze, con iguali potenze, con iguali vertù create.*

Verum, ut doceamus haec, et principia rerum cognoscamus oportet. Certum est, *nos omnes ab uno homine originem habuisse: virtus sola nos equaliter natos distinguuit et quorum opera excellunt eos nobiles, et claros reddit.*

In removing Boccaccio’s reference to a Christian creator, Bruni also removes Ghismonda’s mention of *carne.* When Boccaccio reuses the word ‘flesh’ in Ghismonda’s oration, he implicitly connects her defense of her desire with her argument for Guiscardo’s virtue. But Bruni severs that connection; in the Latin version, the argument about virtue is divorced from the defense of desire which relies upon “flesh.” Readers of Bruni’s Latin version may have missed these intricacies, but reading Boccaccio in light of Bruni’s changes draws attention to the complexities of Ghismonda’s oration. Ghismonda

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43 *Decameron,* 480.
connects her carnal desire to the truth of the *principii delle cose*, the principle of the things (*rerum principia* in Bruni’s Latin, which recalls philosophical disputations and gives a scholastic quality to Ghismonda’s speech). In doing so, she expresses a belief in a shared human nature, encompassing both desire and virtue, and connecting to a search for the truth – the principle of things.

In the end, however, Tancredi fails to be moved by Ghismonda’s speech. He does not recognize her appeals to humanity and equality. He orders Guiscardo killed and sends Ghismonda her dead lover’s heart in a chalice. Tancredi’s words confirm that he has not been swayed by his daughter’s appeals: “Your father sends you this to comfort you in the loss of your dearest possession, just as you have comforted him in the loss of his.” [Il tuo padre ti manda questo per consolarti di quella cosa che tu più ami, come tu hai lui consolato di ciò che egli più amava]. The Latin also parallels the Italian on this account. Bruni repeats the word “res” in the Latin, as in the first words Tancredi spoke to Guiscardo, demonstrating that he has continued to see Ghismonda as his belonging, unmoved by her appeals to humanity. He refuses to have human compassion for her. Nevertheless, Ghismonda’s reasoned defense demonstrates her command over logical argumentation and her interest in searching for truth, features that characterize the

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pursuit of philosophy. The callous behavior of Tancredi prompts the reader to consider the consequences of eschewing appeals to compassion [*aver compassionem*], logic, and ethics in favor of self-righteous action. Ghismonda’s final act, to take her life, emphasizes her humanity and Tancredi’s inability to fully own her. In X.8, this kind of self-interested behavior displayed by Tancredi will be replicated by Titus, who manipulates philosophical arguments to serve his purposes.

**Titus: A Philosopher Only in Name**

Turning now to *Decameron* X.8, I will examine how the type of arguments proposed by Ghismonda are exploited and twisted by Titus for personal gain. The story is set decidedly in the classical period in contrast to Ghismonda’s Christian world. Titus is a Roman, sent to Athens to study philosophy under Aristippus and alongside Gisippus, the son of his father’s friend.\(^47\) He and Gisippus form a strong bond, but their friendship is tested when Titus falls in love with the woman to whom Gisippus is betrothed, Sophronia. Upon learning of Titus’ secret love, Gisippus proposes they simply swap places and dupe Sophronia into consummating the marriage with Titus. They carry out the plan, but when Titus hears his father has died in Rome, he wishes to take his new bride home with him. Titus must subsequently defend his choice to Sophronia’s family who are incensed upon realizing the trick Titus and Gisippus have

\(^47\) For more on Aristippus see Cahill and Hollander, “Day Ten,” 133. Aristippus was a philosopher mentioned by Diogenes in *Lives of the Philosophers*. He appears as a historical figure in the literal exposition of *Inferno* IV. The same name is given to Cimone’s father in *Decameron* V.1.
played. Titus manages to stifle the complaints of Sophronia’s family, although they are not completely won over. Titus takes Sophronia to Rome, where years later he encounters an impoverished Gisippus. Titus saves Gisippus from being unjustly charged of a crime and gives him his sister as a bride, repaying, in a way, Gisippus’ gift of Sophronia. This section will focus on the oration Titus gives to justify his actions in front of Sophronia’s family, as well as the reasoning he employs in his earlier inner monologue when trying to convince himself of the rightness of his desire.

Reading X.8 alongside IV.1, the flaws in Titus’ logic become patently obvious, as does the failure – on the part of both Titus and Gisippus – to treat Sophronia as a human being, just as Tancredi failed to acknowledge Ghismonda’s humanity. The silent yet substantial presence of Sophronia, whose name invokes the Greek word for judiciousness, raises concerns about the integrity of the philosophers’ schemes. Sophronia is a foil to the voiceless Iphigenia of Decameron V.1; both women are subject to the bestial behavior of an enlightened man who claims to love them. Bracciolini’s Latin translation also provides particular insight into this Decameron tale. Bracciolini digresses from the Italian, shortening lengthy dialogues and adding additional references to philosophy and philosophers. His changes thus obscure some of the more problematic elements of X.8 while also highlighting its philosophical aspects. I will consider the
consequences of these changes, analyzing what they emphasize from Boccaccio’s tale and what they leave behind.48

The first link between the two Decameron IV.1 and X.8 arises in Titus’ inner-monologue upon realizing he is in love Gisippus’ bride. Titus attempts to justify his desire for Sophronia in the following way: “The laws of Love are more powerful than any others; they even supplant divine laws, let alone those of friendship. How often in the past have fathers loved their daughters, brothers their sisters, or mothers their stepsons?” [Le leggi d’amore sono di maggior potenzia che alcune altre: elle rompono non che quella della amistà ma le divine. Quante volte ha già il padre la figliuola amata, il fratello la sorella, la matrigna il figliastro?].49 His invocation of the “laws of Love” would seem to resonate with Guiscardo’s quip to Tancredi: “Neither you nor I can resist the power of Love” [Amor può troppo più che né voi né io possiamo].50 But the problem with Titus’ reasoning is that he first raises the laws of love above the other two justifications he will eventually use to defend his actions later: divinity and friendship.

48 The parts changed by Bracciolini primarily deal with the story’s orations or dialogue. This is particularly interesting as these aspects of the story are entirely Boccaccio’s invention. The plot of the tale is borrowed from ‘A Perfect Friendship’ in the twelfth-century Disciplina Clericalis [A Scholar’s Guide] by Petrus Alfonsi, but Boccaccio changes the story in three key ways. First, he makes the exchange of the bride contentious (it is not disputed nor done in secret in the Disciplina). Second, Boccaccio makes the main characters philosophers rather than merchants and sets the tale in Athens. Finally, he creates several lengthy dialogues that do not exist in the previous version found in the Disciplina. In reducing and modifying Boccaccio’s rhetorical choices in the Latin, Bracciolini highlights what is particular about Boccaccio’s telling of this tale.

49 Decameron, trans. McWilliam, 748; Decameron, 1184.

50 Decameron, trans. McWilliam, 748; Decameron, 1184.
This appeal to the laws of Love also hints at how those laws can go awry – as in the case of Tancredì’s excessive, possessive, and potentially incestuous love for Ghismonda. Tancredi and Ghismonda’s relationship is implicitly invoked by Titus’ musing: “How often in the past have fathers loved their daughters? …These are far more reprehensible than the man who loves the wife of his friend, for he is only doing what a thousand others have done before him” [Quante volte ha già il padre la figliuola amata, il fratello la sorella, la matrigna il figliastro? Cose più monstruose che l’uno amico amar la moglie dell’altro, già fattosi mille volte]. Titus uses the kind of misguided love between Tancredi and Ghismonda, which led to her death, as a justification for his love for Sophronia. Within this logic, Titus’ love is not as reprehensible as Tancredi’s. Although this is true in a certain sense – the story does not end in Sophronia’s death, after all – both men treat the women they claim to love as their possessions rather than as autonomous beings.

The Latin translation of this excerpt reveals the strangeness of Titus’ circular reasoning. Rather than include Titus’ reflection on the fact that many others have loved the wives of their friends, “for he is only doing what a thousand others have done before him,” Bracciolini restates the problematic nature of familial bonds: cur mihi dedecori daturum quenquam aut reprehensurum existimem, quod non filiam, matrem, sororemve, aut sanguine convictam, sed amici uxorem amaverim? [Why should I be reprimanded or disgraced? Since I love not my daughter, mother, sister, or female
relation by blood, but the wife of a friend].\textsuperscript{51} In the Latin, Titus excuses his action \textit{not} because others have loved the wives of their friends, or because fathers have loved their daughters in the past. Rather, he is free from blame because the relationship he proposes is not one that crosses the boundary of blood; it is, therefore, less corrupt. We can’t know Bracciolini’s precise motivation in changing the Italian, but the elimination suggests that he deemed this aspect of Titus’ reasoning as out of place or unnecessary to the broader tale. Making the argument solely about the lack of blood relation between Titus and Sophornia, Bracciolini, focusing on a condemnation of incest, omits the faultiest parts of Titus’ argument.

Titus ends this part of his argumentation with a call to youth: “Besides, I am young, and youth is entirely subject to the power of Love. So wherever Love decides to lead me, I am bound to follow” [Oltre a questo io son giovane, e la giovanezza è tutta sottoposto all’amorose leggi: quello adunque che a amor piace a me convien che piaccia].\textsuperscript{52} Ghismonda, too, referred to youth’s power over lovers, but she mentioned youth in order to remind Tancredi of the immutable laws to which all are equally subjected. Titus, however, uses the laws of Love and youth as a rationalization only as long as they are useful to him. Shortly after this inner monologue, Gisippus will suggest

\textsuperscript{51} The full excerpt reads: Quin potius naturam ducem et voluntatem tuam sequere: cum ea amoris vis sit ut nullis legibus teneatur eiusque impulsu filii nefandos matrum concubitus appetiverint, patres liberis, fratres sororibus, noluerent alioquin privignis invisis se immiscuerint: cur mihi dedecori daturum quenquam aut reprehensurum existimem, quod non filiam, matrem, sororemve, aut sanguine convictam, sed amici uxorem amaverim. Angelica 141, f.139V

\textsuperscript{52} Decameron, trans. McWilliam, 748; Decameron, 1184.
that rather than the laws of Love or youth, those of friendship demand that he give Titus his bride. Titus will too willingly dismiss his former line of reasoning in favor of the new justification proposed by Gisippus. Thus, while Ghismonda’s arguments are perfectly aligned in a logical progression, Titus’ are circular and superficial, ready to be dismissed, or recalled, at a moment’s notice, capitalizing on the expedient rather than the truthful.

As Titus and Gisippus formulate their plan to exchange Sophronia, they regard her as an object to be traded, much the way Tancredi viewed Ghismonda as part of his _cosa_. Gisippus assures Titus: “Just as I have shared my other possessions with you, so I would share Sophronia” [che io alcuna avessi cosa che così non fosse tua come mia]. The repetition of the word _cosa_ between Tancredi’s treatment of Ghismonda and Gisppus treatment of Sophronia, underscores the way in which both men fail to treat the recipient of their supposed love as a subject. Rather, they deem these women possessions for their pleasure, and, in this way, they violate the principles of equality set out by Ghismonda (and, I would argue, by the _Decameron_ more broadly). In the Latin, this treatment of Sophronia is underlined by Bracciolini’s use of the plural, neutral “omnia,” meaning “all things” in place of “alcuna cosa.” As with Bruni’s use of the

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54 Latin: “quod amicorum comunia omnia semper existimavi,” Angelica 141, f.140V.
Latin res, the erasure of Sophronia’s status as a woman, as a human, is preserved in the translation.\textsuperscript{55}

Juxtaposing Ghismonda’s articulate defense with Sophronia’s silence sheds light on the significance of Sophronia’s tacit presence. It’s worth reiterating that “Sophronia” derives from the Greek word for prudence or judiciousness.\textsuperscript{56} By using a flesh-and-blood woman whose name brings to mind the concept of wisdom, Boccaccio alludes to the figure of “Lady Philosophy” which further highlights the foolishness of Titus and Gisippus. In a number of medieval texts, most notably Boethius’ The Consolation of Philosophy and Dante’s Convivio, Philosophy was depicted as a beautiful, chaste woman. The figure thus offered an allegorical representation of that which philosophers were pursuing - wisdom. The exchange of “Sophronia,” an actual woman, between the two men draws attention to their blithe treatment of wisdom. They are hardly acting judicious or prudent at all. On a literal level Titus and Gisippus fail to recognize Sophronia and her humanity; on a figurative one, they fail to grasp what wisdom actually is, neglecting the pursuit of true wisdom.

The Latin translation makes one particularly interesting addition to Gisippus and Titus’ dialogue as they devise their scheme to exchange Sophronia. Gisippus has nearly

\textsuperscript{55} Similarly, when Gisippus makes the case that they should trick Sophronia, he says that wives are easier to find than friends, echoing a common misogynist sentiment about the value of wives, and, again, eliding the personhood of Sophronia.

\textsuperscript{56} Although Boccaccio did not have the opportunity to study Greek in his youth, he was fascinated by the language. He probably had some access to the Greek language thanks to his friend, and Greek scholar, Leontius Pilatus.
convinced Titus to accept the woman as a gift, when Gisippus appeals to him: “Titus, if our friendship is such as to enable me to force your acquiescence in one of my decisions. Or if it can induce you to consent of your own accord, now is the time when I intend to exploit it to the full” [Tito, se la nostra amistà mi può concedere tanto di licenzia, che io a seguire un mio piacer ti sforzi a te a doverlo seguire puote inducere, questo fia quello in che io sommamente intendo d’usarla].\textsuperscript{57} Bracciolini, however, makes a meaningful addition to this appeal, invoking philosophers: “Si sapientissimi philosophi clarissimique Grecie viri legem amicitie eam, Tite, esse noluerunt… necnon ab honesto discedendum iusserunt” [If the wisest philosophers and most famous men of Greece did not wish for this law of friendship, they would have honestly ordered it to be forgotten].\textsuperscript{58} Although the rest of the phrase contains the same sentiment as the original – and even the vocative call to Titus – the citation of sapientissimi philosophi clarissimique is a significant modification. Bracciolini grants Gisppus’ argument an authority derived from philosophers which does not exist in Boccaccio’s text. Bracciolini qualifies these philosophers as sapientissimi and clarissimi, very wise and very famous. The alteration enhances the philosophical nature of the tale – and potentially of Titus’ and Gisispus’ orations – but it also, as we will see later on, enhances the contradictory nature of their argumentation.

\textsuperscript{57} Decameron, trans. McWilliam, 751; Decameron, 1188.  
\textsuperscript{58} Angelica 141, 141R.
Titus and Gisippus carry out their plan to deceive Sophronia. Titus slips into her room on the night of the wedding in the place of Gisippus. Titus asks her if she wants to marry him, and she, thinking he is Gisippus, says yes. They consummate the marriage. For a period of time, this arrangement remains secret. It finally comes to light when Titus’ father dies, and he wishes to take his new bride back to Rome. In fact, Titus even discloses that they would have maintained the charade if not for his father’s death—a strange admission that further sheds doubt on the purity of his and Gisippus’ motives. In order to defend his actions, Titus calls the family of Sophronia to the temple to hear his explanation and justification of the current situation. In his speech, Titus presents himself as superior to his friend, Gisippus, and to Sophronia’s family. He contradicts his earlier reasoning, tells outright falsehoods, and displays no compassion for Sophronia. His faulty reasoning contrasts with Ghismonda’s appeal to humanity, equality, and compassion in IV.1, proving that there are just and unjust ways to use philosophy.

Titus begins his speech by calling on the authority of philosophy: “In the opinion of many philosophers, all human actions conform to the will and decree of the immortal gods, and hence there are those who maintain that whatever we mortals do here on earth, either now or in the future, is inevitable and preordained” [Credesi per molti filosofanti che ciò che s’adopera da’ mortali sia degl’idii immortali disposizione e
provedimento].\textsuperscript{59} However, this declaration of the power of divine laws effectively contradicts Titus’ initial justification of his desire. Titus asserted that he was subjected to the laws of love, which, he averred, superseded divine laws and even those of friendship. The scene in the temple with Sophronia’s family reveals, once more, that the arguments proposed in favor of Titus’ behavior are shifting and inconsistent throughout the tale. Bracciolini’s Latin version interestingly highlights these contradictions. The “very famous and very wise philosophers” that Bracciolini inserted into Gisppus’ previous dialogue granted his argument for the laws of friendship a certain authority. But now, they are in conflict with the “vetus multorum philosophorum” that Titus invokes, who demure to divine law.\textsuperscript{60} Which philosophers are we to believe? Those which support Gisipps’ view of friendship as the greatest law, or those who call upon divine law? This juxtaposition reveals that neither Titus nor Gisippus, so-called philosophers, adheres to a philosophical system; rather, they embrace the most expedient form of reasoning for their purposes.

Titus’ untenable line of argumentation continues as he sets aside divine laws and confines himself to “the logic of mortals” [mi piace di condiscendere a’ consigli degli uomini].\textsuperscript{61} First, he snubs Sophronia’s family by suggesting that he must lower himself (condiscendere) to treat human – rather than divine – reasoning. As the elaborates this

\textsuperscript{59} Decameron, trans. McWilliam, 754; Decameron, 1192.
\textsuperscript{60} Angelica 141, f. 142V.
\textsuperscript{61} Decameron, trans. McWilliam, 755; Decameron, 1193.
argument, Titus further capitalizes on the virtue of friendship but paradoxically disparages his friend Gisippus. He admits: “in the first place I must praise myself a little and in the second I must disparage or humiliate another” [l’una fia alquante me commendare; e l’altra il biasimare alquanto altrui o avvilire].62 If Titus truly considered Gisippus a friend – the Ciceronian alter idem, another self – he would not denigrate him.63 But Titus upholds his choice to degrade his friend by insisting his statements are truthful: “But since I have no intention of departing from the truth in either case, and since this is what the present occasion demands, I shall none the less proceed” [Ma per ciò che dal vero né nell’una né nell’altra non intendo partirmi, e la presente materia il richiede il pur faro”].64 In contrast to Ghismonda’s truth, which aligned her words with

63 “Verus amicus nunquam reperietur; est enim is qui est tamquam alter idem,” cf. Cicero, Laelius de amicitia, 80. Cicero also suggests that you should not speak poorly of your friend, nor should you make or grant disgraceful requests. In the tale, it’s possible that Boccaccio is engaging with other ideas of friendship as well. Although often treated as a tale glorifying friendship, Titus and Gisippus fail to meet the standards of friendship outlined by canonical thinkers of the medieval period with whom Boccaccio was intimately familiar. Their friendship might be categorized as a utilitarian or a pleasurable one, relationships that were, according to Aristotle, based on mutual benefit but not virtue. However, the harmonious, honorable ideal that Aristotle elaborated as the third, fully developed form of friendship, that is, a relationship in which the participants share principles and values, is nowhere to be found in X.8. Like Aristotle, Aquinas believed that friendship was based on virtue, and that it was exemplified by the “constant, effective desire to do good to another.” Titus and Gisippus do seem to care for one another, but their actions are motivated more by self-interest than virtue. Boccaccio had a copy of Aquinas’ commentary on Aristotle’s Ethics, to which he added his own comments, and in this manuscript (Ambrosiana A204 Inf.), we find one of his own reflections on friendship; he defines “philosophi” as “amatores amicorum” [lovers of friends]. This comment links philosophy to friendship, and, in this way, by failing to meet the duties of friends, Titus and Gisippus fail to act as philosophers. See Susanna Barsella, “I marginalia di Boccaccio all’ «Etica Nicomachea» di Aristotele,” in Elsa Filosa and Michael Papio, eds., Boccaccio in America: 2010 International Boccaccio Conference, American Boccaccio Association (Ravenna: Longo, 2012). For more on Boccaccio’s ideas about friendship beyond X.8 see Jason Houston, “Boccaccio on Friendships (Theory and Practice),” in Reconsidering Boccaccio, ed. Olivia Holmes and Dana E. Stewart (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018).
64 Decameron, trans. McWilliam, 755; Decameron, 1193.
her deeds and her actions with a philosophy of equality, Titus’ reasoning and argumentation is based on a notion of superiority, which seeks to reap the benefits of friendship while failing to treat others with the compassion demanded by their humanity.

Next, Titus sets aside the laws of friendship, which are supposedly the backbone of this entire tale, alleging that Sophronia’s kinfolk could not possibly understand them (the same move he used to dismiss the laws of divinity). He relies instead upon the argument that emphasizes his superiority: Gisippus is actually wiser than Sophronia’s family because he gave her to an even better husband, Titus. Yet this reasoning, too, is littered with contradictions. Titus falsely declares that Gisippus did not love Sophronia (he did, although perhaps not as much as Titus). Finally, he fully disregards their friendship by enumerating the ways in which he is better than Gisippus, primarily in nobility and riches, two concerns that were present in Ghismonda’s oration and were key components of her philosophy of equality. Titus thus elaborates a logic that is based in a claim to superiority rather than equality, demonstrates compassion for no one other than himself, and recounts falsehoods. In this way, he completely corrupts the sound, logical, and truthful arguments outlined by Ghismonda.

After Titus declares how noble his family is – not by virtue but by fame – he makes a series of contradictory statements about the value of riches. First, he demurs: “Concerning my wealth, modesty forbids that I should speak, bearing in mind that
poverty with honour has long been regarded by the noble citizens of Rome as a priceless legacy” [Io mi taccio per vergogna delle mie ricchezze, nella mente avendo che l’onesta povertà sia antico e larghissimo patrimonio de’ nobili cittadini di Roma].65 Titus is primed to articulate a view in line with Ghismonda’s claim that poverty does not strip one of virtue or nobility, but he does not accept this viewpoint. Instead, he persists: “But if, after the opinion of the common herd, poverty is to be condemned and riches commended, I have an abundant store” [la quale, se dalla opinione de’ volgari è dannata e son commendati i tesori, io ne sono].66 Titus welcomes the exact belief for which Ghismonda chastises Tancredi if it means he can have Sophronia. Titus commits to no philosophical system, but plays any side, embracing even the “vulgar opinion” when it serves him. The exchange of Sophronia demonstrates that Titus and Gisippus do not share values nor do they have a virtuous friendship. Rather, both friendship and philosophy are corrupted by their self-interest.

In the next section of his monologue, Titus finally turns the focus away from himself, shifting to a series of arguments that consider, instead, Sophronia. However, as before, he twists the truth in order to exonerate himself. Some people, Titus recognizes, may object not to the fact that Sophronia is his wife, but rather to the way she became his wife. To defend his actions, he outlines other scenarios in which lovers hid their

65 Decameron, trans. McWilliam, 756-7; Decameron, 1195.
66 Decameron, trans. McWilliam, 757; Decameron, 1195
relationships, ultimately “leaving their fathers with no alternative but to consent” [hagli fatti necessità aggradire]. He concludes “This was not the case with Sophronia” [quello che di Sofronia non è avvenuto]. In other words, Titus has not forced Sophronia’s family to consent to the marriage. While Titus’ actions are not identical to the those of the other lovers he mentions, his actions have had, in fact, precisely the same result. By conducting the marriage and its consummation in secret, and thereby misleading Sophronia, Titus has forced the hand of Sophronia’s kinsmen – their grudging acceptance at the end of Titus’ speech affirms their lack of choice in the matter.

Titus next broaches the subject of Sophronia’s feelings but only in order to place the blame back upon her: “If she feels deceived, she should not blame me, but herself, for failing to ask me who I was.” [Se esser le pare ingannato, non io ne son da riprendere, ma ella, che me non dimandò chi io fossi]. Even as Titus invokes a potential complaint on her part, he renders it null and void. The oration delegitimizes any feelings Sophronia may have and reinforces her status as an object or property to be traded. Titus’ lack of compassion for the woman he supposedly loves is brought to the fore. Bracciolini’s Latin translation of this section condenses Titus’ argument. In fact, he doesn’t even bother to translate the line, quoted above, which conveys Sophronia’s

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68 Decameron, trans. McWilliam, 757; Decameron, 1196.
69 Decameron, trans. McWilliam, 758; Decameron, 1197.
potential displeasure at the situation.\textsuperscript{70} The exclusion in the Latin silences Sophronia even further by eliminating even the possibility that Titus considers her perspective on the situation. Titus’ suppression of Sophronia and her wishes – in both Latin and Italian – mirrors Tancredi’s failure to accept Ghismonda’s desires. Both Tancredi and Titus fail to recognize the humanity of the female protagonists.

By invoking the possibility that Sophronia may feel deceived, Boccaccio creates an apparent conflict between Titus’ reasoning and canon law. Boccaccio’s characters, living in ancient Greece, would not be familiar with Gratian’s \textit{Decretum}, a twelfth-century work which provided the basis for medieval canon law. Boccaccio, however, would have studied the text extensively, including cases like Sophronia’s.\textsuperscript{71} In \textit{Causa XXIX}, Gratian reflects on an incident in which a woman is tricked into marrying a slave rather than the noble to whom she was betrothed. Gratian admits that the woman has consented to the marriage, yet the question is whether or not that consent is valid. Gratian concludes that since the woman did not consent to bind herself that that particular man, but rather to the man she thought he was, she is not his wife. While Gratian notes that other circumstances do not invalidate consent (i.e. if a man discovers

\textsuperscript{70} It does, however, include the line above that others may object to how she became Titus’ wife: “Insuper quis edolare affici dicunt, non quia Titi uxor sit Sophronia, sed quod furtim tradita ab Egesippo cuius minime intererat,” Angelica 141, f. 143V.

his wife is not truly a virgin, he cannot divorce her), mistaken identity does. Titus’ arguments regarding Ghismonda’s deception are therefore not only illogical and untrue, they also fail to conform to the standards of canon law, as well as Boccaccio’s claim in the Decameron that our humanity demands we have compassion for others.

In the end, Titus’ speech is only partially convincing. Sophronia’s family, the narrator tells us, is just as moved by the threats Titus makes to take Gisippus away to Rome and reclaim Sophronia, as they are convinced by his arguments: “The people he had left behind in the temple, in part persuaded by the force of his arguments in part alarmed by his concluding words, decided of one accord that since Gisippus had turned them down, it was better to have Titus as their kinsman than to have lost a kinsman in Gisippus and gained an enemy in Titus” [Quegli che là entro rimasono, in parte dalle ragioni di Tito al parentado e alla sua amistà e in parte spaventati dall’ultime sue parole, di pari Concordia deliberarono esser il migliore d’aver Tito per parente poi che Gisippo no aveva esser volute, che aver Gisippo per parente perduto e Tito per nemico acquistato].72 In other words, Sophronia’s kinsmen are left with no choice. Bracciolini’s Latin again elides some of Boccaccio’s more lengthy reflections. He concludes with the more succinct: “Illi cum suis verbis territi, tum eius affinitate ducti, quippe qui existimarent melius esse hunc affinem habere quam neutrum, vero etiam inimicum [They were so terrified by his words, and, then, thus led by these marital bonds, they

deemed it better to have Titus as a son-in-law, than to have neither Titus nor Gisippus as a relation and to have Titus as an enemy].

Sophronia’s family are simply territi, terrified, by Titus’ verbis, his words. There is no sense in the Latin of a distinction between his reasoned arguments and his threats. Bracciolini’s choice to use territi accentuates the strange nature of Titus’ speech – he has not appealed to Sophronia’s family nor has he treated them as kinsmen. They are not overjoyed to be bound to him. They act largely out of fear. Bracciolini therefore manages to capture the incongruity of Boccaccio’s text even with his modifications. Ultimately, Titus is victorious in a way Ghismonda is not, but the story leaves us wondering whether or not the ending is actually satisfactory.

The Latin translation makes one more intriguing change: it excludes the final part of Boccaccio’s story which offers a reflection on friendship by the narrator, Filomena. On the one hand, this modification makes sense. Since Bracciolini removed the tale from the frame narrative offered by the Decameron, the story no longer needs a narrator. However, like Dioneo’s reflection at the end of the Griselda tale, the questions posed by Filomena sow even more seeds of skepticism about the virtuous nature of Titus and Gisippus’ friendship. By eliminating Filomena’s reflections, as well as some of the knottier parts of Titus and Gisippus’ speeches, Bracciolini is able to offer a more

73 Angelica 141, f. 144V.
straightforward, if still problematic, story about the value of friendship. But let’s turn for a moment to one of the questions Bracciolini decides not to translate:

Except for the power of friendship, what laws, what threats, what fear of consequence, could have prevented the youthful arms of Gisippus, in darkened or deserted places, or in the privacy of his own bed, from embracing this delectable girl, occasionally perhaps at her own invitation? Except for the power of friendship, what prospect of superior rank, or rich reward, or material gain, could have made Gisippus so indifferent to the loss of his own and Sophronia’s kinsfolk, so indifferent to the slanderous rumours of the of the populace, so indifferent to the jests and jibes of his fellowmen, as to gratify his comrade’s desire?

Quali leggi, quali minacce, qual paura le giovenili braccia di Gisippo ne’ luoghi solitari, ne’ luoghi oscuri, nel letto proprio avrebbe fatto astenere dagli abbracciamenti della bella giovane, forse talvolta invitatrice, se non costei? Quali stati, quai merit, quali avanzi avrebben fatto Gisippo non curar di perdere i suoi parenti e quei di Sofronia, non curar de’ disonesti mormorii del popolazzo, non curar delle beffe e degli scherni per sodisfare all’amico, se non costei?74

While seemingly elevating friendship, this reflection also crafts an alternate tale. What if Gisippus was not motivated by friendship? What if he did secretly visit Sophronia, taking pleasure with her even after giving her to Titus? Did Gisippus know that in giving Titus his bride, he would be owed something in return? What was his true motivation? Like many aspects of the story that might leave us wondering about the appropriate behavior of the two philosophers, this ending leaves the reader full of doubt, not praise, for the friendship and philosophy of Titus and Gisippus.

74 Decameron, trans. McWilliam, 763-4; Decameron, 1203-4.
Conclusion

Why did the scribe of Angelica 141 choose to copy Bruni’s translation of IV.1 followed by Bracciolini’s rendering of X.8? Perhaps he was interested in the tales’ rhetorical quality, since a number of other orations appear in the collection. Perhaps the novellas, existing between the vernacular and Latin culture of the period, were texts to be studied as part of his participation in Rome’s studium urbis. Perhaps he was concerned with the historical details and rationale of the translators found in the introductory letters. Or perhaps he, too, saw the echoes of Ghismonda’s oration in Titus’. As he painstakingly traced each word of each story, it’s hard to imagine that their shared resonances would have gone unnoticed by our meticulous copyist. Nevertheless, whatever his motivations, in placing the two stories side-by-side the scribe of Angelica 141 staged an interpretive problem for readers of his compendium for centuries to come: what dialogue emerges when we read these two tales together?

The scribe’s decision to include the translations of Boccaccio alongside canonical authors like Cicero and Aristotle, respected Humanists like Poggio Bracciolini and Donato Accaiuoli, and compositions authored by Bruni himself, speaks to Boccaccio’s enduring status in the learned, Latinate culture of the Quattrocento. Even as Humanists embraced and elevated Latin, they did not eschew the rich vernacular heritage bequeathed to them by authors like Dante and Boccaccio. The rendering of Boccaccio’s works in Latin by Humanists and their inclusion in a compendium like the one above
therefore reveals that the tales were seen as anything but frivolous; they contained serious subject matter that deserved to be translated into Latin and placed alongside other venerated authors. Through this lens, the philosophical elements of *Decameron* IV.1 and X.8 become even more apparent.

Reading IV.1 in dialogue with X.8 unveils deep connections between the two stories, otherwise potentially obscured within *Decameron*’s elaborate frame narrative. Ghismonda proves herself to be logical and rational, adhering to a philosophy of equality in her words and actions. Tancredi errs because he cannot be persuaded by these appeals, preferring instead to follow the whims of his own anger. Titus, despite being a trained philosopher, warps philosophical arguments for self-serving purposes, betraying both philosophy and friendship. He and Gisippus dismiss Sophronia, judiciousness herself, as incapable of participating in their philosophical debate. The comparison between the two orations reaffirms that Boccaccio portrays women as agents capable of engaging with philosophy, and it recalls his insistence that the philosophical can exist beyond formal spaces of erudition.

In the Author’s Epilogue of the *Decameron*, Boccaccio rebuffs critics who claim the stories are too licentious. He reminds his detractors that the tales “were not told in a church… nor were they held in the schools of philosophers, where a sense of propriety is required no less than anywhere else, nor in any place among churchmen or philosophers” [non nella chiesa…si truovino…né ancora nelle scuole de’ filosofanti,
Yet his ironic tone suggests that his work is as worthy as anything his female readers might discover in the schools of philosophers. The Latin translations by Jacopo Bracciolini and Leonardi Bruni, although they remove the frame and Author’s interjections, suggest as much as well, as does the scribe’s placement of them in Angelica 141. Ghismonda and Titus demonstrate that philosophy is not bound to formal centers of learning but can be found – and sometimes corrupted – in the hearts of men and women alike.

Chapter 3: Poetesse and Filosofe: Erudite Modes in On Famous Women

Introduction

On January 3, 1488, Laura Cereta expressed a sentiment shared by women across centuries: “My ears are wearied by your carping,” [Obuerberant fatigatas aures tuae quaerelae]. Cereta was responding to compliments lavished upon her by a man she referred to as Bibulus Sempronius. But his praise of her erudition, she averred in her letter, was hardly flattering. Rather, it evinced his true misogyny. By expressing surprise at Cereta’s intellectual abilities and extolling her as exceptional, Sempronius revealed a deeper, disturbing belief: women in general could not achieve what she had.

In crafting her response to Sempronius, Cereta lauded the accomplishments of over twenty women skilled in learning and letters. Among Cereta’s examples, we find Leontium, Nicostrata, and Sappho – the three women whose stories animate this chapter. Over a hundred years before Cereta included them in her letter, Giovanni Boccaccio elaborated their stories in On Famous Women, a collection detailing the


2 Both King and Rabil (81), as well as Diana Robin in Collected Letters, note that “Bibulus Sempronius” is not an identifiable individual. “Bibulus” translates roughly to “drunkard,” so Cereta’s recipient is most likely a stand-in for foolish men in general.
biographies of one hundred and six famous, and infamous, women. Diana Robin has
argued that Cereta overcomes the perceived (and accepted) division between rational
and irrational portraying the ‘irrational’ – female prophets– as able to access the
‘rational’ – literature, philosophy, knowledge, and education. She also claims that
Cereta sees the philosophical journey not as an abstract one, but rather one that takes
place “within a familiar, homely locus.” Cereta’s letter certainly challenges simplistic
dichotomies but Robin’s conclusion overlooks how Boccaccio’s work furnished Cereta
with the material to reject such divisions.

Armed with examples from On Famous Women, Cereta chides Sempronius: “In
case you don’t know the philosopher sees with her mind, she furnishes paths with a
window of reason through which she can ascend to a state of awareness.” [Videt si
nescis animo sapiens: et in subeundam animadvertentiam fenestrat sibi ratione vias.]
Cereta’s Latin syntax creates a striking juxtaposition. Although the first half of the
sentence looks neutral in terms of gender – that is, we could read “sapiens” as either
masculine or feminine – Cereta feminizes the subject in the second half of the sentence
with “subeundam” [ascend] and “animadvertentiam” [state of awareness]. She also
stresses the rational nature of the this thought by including “ratione” [with reason]. The
sentence thus makes a claim for a sapiens that is feminine: a woman philosopher, one

3 Robin, Collected Letters, 73.
4 Robin, Collected Letters, 73.
5 Translation from Robin, Collected Letters, 75.
shaped and molded by the biographies written by Boccaccio more than a hundred years earlier.

This chapter analyzes Sappho, Leontium, and Carmenta as three distinct models of erudite womanhood. Sappho, after suffering unhappiness in love, wrote remarkable poetry and developed her own style of verse. Leontium, a student of literature and a skilled writer, engaged in debate with the philosopher Theophrastus but sullied her reputation with immoral behavior. Nicostrata, later called Carmenta, invented the Latin alphabet as well as the rules that structure its grammar; she also foretold the future. Each of these women, presented as having a command over language and the knowledge produced with it, employs philosophy in its broad sense of “love of wisdom.” While Chapter two demonstrated how women found in On Famous Women and the Expositions extended the boundaries of the philosophical and the domestic, this chapter considers how the biographies of Leontium, Nicostrata, and Sappho, although overtly more traditional in their philosophical undertakings, also challenge commonplaces within philosophical thought of the fourteenth century. Through an investigation of Boccaccio’s transformation of classical sources as well as the scribal modifications and commentaries of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century manuscripts, I

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6 Other erudite women in the text include Cornificia, Hortensia, Nicaula, and Proba, as well as the Sybils: Almathea and Erythraea
7 From the Greek roots philo, “loving,” and sophia, “wisdom.”
argue that the text provides representations of women who challenge the notion that erudition – the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake – is exclusively available to men.

Critical attention has primarily been devoted to the question of the feminism or misogyny of *On Famous Women*. Such interpretations often focus on Boccaccio’s moralizing, dividing the text along lines of what he deems laudable or condemnable. Robin, for instance, categorizes the text as “exaggeratedly misogynist” by maintaining that Boccaccio’s praise of intellectual women is always based upon four key features: a debt to a male figure, a rejection of gender-specific work, a renunciation of sexuality, and finally, a masculine nature or a challenge to the male/female binary. In her reading, Boccaccio’s misogyny is evident in the fact that women’s intellect must serve a man and that women cannot be both intellectual and feminine. She focuses specifically on the biographies of Cornificia, Proba, Hortensia, and Sappho. Although admittedly some of these characteristics appear in Boccaccio’s discussions of Cornificia, Proba, and Hortensia, the generalization is reductive. These traits do not appear in Sappho’s story, nor do they fit the descriptions of other learned women in the text, such as Leontium and Nicostrata. Pamela Benson, on the other hand, counters Robin’s interpretation of *De mulieribus* by arguing that “highly educated women writers are among the most positive

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8 See Chapter 1 for an extended discussion of how rewritings of *On Famous Women* have cast Boccaccio’s text as misogynist.

and least ambiguous examples offered for imitation. For example, Proba and Cornifica, two early Christian women, are praised for their excellence in scholarship and literary pursuits.” **10** This analysis suits Benson’s overall interpretation of the text as “profeminist,” that is, although it doesn’t advocate for the political and social equality of women, it does make a case for their ability to act responsibly and ethically. **11**

Other readings have attempted to deduce a single message from the heterogenous compilation. Margaret Franklin, for instance, asserts that the text provides unambiguous exempla of female behavior. **12** She argues that despite the variety of women treated in the collection, Boccaccio consistently praises women who act out of duty rather than ambition, or those who serve the male figures in their lives. **13** As with most efforts to locate a lone lesson in such a varied and complex work, Franklin’s analysis glosses over biographies which do not align with this interpretation: neither Sappho nor Nicostrata appear in her discussions, for example. **14** Elsa Filosa identifies a model for the *donna umanistica* – a woman versed in the arts, rhetoric, reading, and writing – in the text. However, she relies solely on the women Boccaccio praises, leaving aside similar models that receive censure, resulting in an incomplete picture of


**11** On acting ethically and responsibly as connected to philosophical learning, see Chapter 1.


**13** It is worth noting that Boccaccio’s moralizing is not inherently sexist, if applied equally to men and women: i.e. valuing a sense of duty over ambition could apply equally to both sexes.

**14** Franklin also operates within the assumption that the text’s popularity with the upper and ruling classes means it could not have meaningfully challenged any existing established orders.
Boccaccio’s intellectual woman. Deanna Shemek, on the other hand, concludes her reading of the collection by acknowledging that some aspects of the biographies cannot be reconciled: “[T]he humanist fascination with women also betrayed anxieties about the security of male supremacy, especially as women rose increasingly to positions of real agency and power. Boccaccio’s *De mulieribus claris*, remarkably, is both feminist and misogynist.” The result of this type of interpretation, however, is that the emphasis falls on feminism or misogyny (or both), rather than on the complex negotiations and explorations of women’s capabilities and nature that takes place throughout.

By examining the biographies of Leontium, Nicostrata, and Sappho as intellectuals, I offer one possible mode of analyzing Boccaccio’s treatment of women that does not engage with the binary of feminism/misogyny. I also consider these women beyond Boccaccio’s treatment of them as laudable or condemnable, suggesting that there is meaning in the biographies other than the moral judgments. The stories of these women are not necessarily more representative of Boccaccio’s text than any others. Yet a close reading of individual biographies provides one way to interpret this multifaceted work. Leontium, Nicostrata, and Sappho – although they have not been linked in the critical tradition – all share an exceptional intellect. In fact, Boccaccio’s ongoing interest in the relationship between women and knowledge comes to light in how he adapts his

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Latin sources to recount the lives of Leontium, Nicostrata, and Sappho. Scribes and translators as well as subsequent authors picked up on the particularities of Boccaccio’s biographies, drawing attention to the learned status of these women.\textsuperscript{17}

While I will discuss each biography individually, they share three common facets. First, Boccaccio significantly expands the sources available to him to write these stories. While Virginia Brown’s excellent translation lists potential sources for each of the biographies, Boccaccio’s enigmatic choices have yet to be analyzed by critics. Second, in each case Boccaccio makes an effort to historicize the figures rather than mythologizing or allegorizing their lives – a choice that aligns with his declaration in the Proem that the biographies are intended to instruct female readers “since women are generally unacquainted with history, they require and enjoy a more extended account.”\textsuperscript{18} [que cum, ut plurimum, hystoriarum ignare sint, sermone prolixiori indigent et letantur]. Finally, the reception of the biographies in the manuscript tradition reveals the novelty of these female figures, as we have already seen briefly in the letter by Laura


\textsuperscript{18} Boccaccio, \textit{On Famous Women}, Preface, 8.
Cereta. Leontium, Nicostrata, and Sappho thus not only offer models of women philosophers, but my approach to reading their biographies proposes new critical questions about On Famous Women.

While discussions of philosophy are more explicit in several of Boccaccio’s other works, this chapter also argues that they are present, if subtly, in On Famous Women. Each of the biographies analyzed in this chapter sheds light on Boccaccio’s negotiations of the boundaries of philosophy and existing ideas about what philosophy was and who it was for. This is especially relevant, since On Famous Women dates to around the same time Boccaccio elaborated his thoughts on poetry and philosophy in the Genealogy of the Pagan Gods. In existing studies of Boccaccio’s ideas of philosophy, On Famous Women has remained largely marginal; those debates tend to focus instead on the philosophical nature of the Decameron or of Boccaccio’s other Latin works. Yet in the case of Leontium, Boccaccio invokes and then rejects the medieval allegorical image of Lady Philosophy, while he articulates a new relationship between the disciplines of poetry and philosophy in the biographies of Sappho and Nicostrata. Boccaccio’s writings about women are not isolated from his musings on philosophy; rather, they are an integral part of his literary corpus and its philosophical reflections.

19 Margaret Tomalin in The Fortunes of the Warrior Heroine in Italian Literature (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1982) tries to reconcile Boccaccio’s use of stereotypes with his portrayals of extraordinary women.
20 For a discussion of philosophy within Boccaccio studies, see Introduction.
Sappho

Sappho of Lesbos sang to her stone-hearted lover doleful verses, echoes, I believe, of Orpheus’ lyre or Apollo’s lute.

-Cereta

As Boccaccio labored over On Famous Women, writing and revising the biographies of women whose stories he reimagined and preserved for posterity, he did not know Sappho’s poems. A Greek poet of the sixth century B.C., Sappho was born on the island of Lesbos to a wealthy family, but little else is known about her life. Her works have survived only in fragments, at times painstakingly reconstructed from papyrus or even ceramic shards. Although she remained a well-known figure throughout Antiquity and into the Middle Ages, her poems did not reach Italy’s trecento Humanists. Still, she fascinated Boccaccio. He included her story in On Famous Women and dedicated a poem to her in his collection of Latin eclogues, Bucolicum carmen. By rewriting details of Sappho’s life from Ovid and Isidore of Seville, Boccaccio constructs her as a poet-philosopher and an intellectual authority. Evidence from the manuscript tradition, including miniatures and rubric adjustments, confirms this reading. Finally,

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Boccaccio’s Latin eclogue, ‘Saphos,’ creates a parallel between Boccaccio’s authorial persona and Sappho, corroborating her status as an auctor and auctoritas.

Boccaccio knew about Sappho from two sources: Ovid’s *Heroides* XV and Isidore of Seville’s mention of Sapphic verse. Unlike much of the contemporary criticism (and popular culture) which has focused on the nature of Sappho’s sexual desire – whether it be bisexual, lesbian, or queer – Boccaccio’s text does not engage these questions. Ovid gestures toward Sappho’s previous female lovers, but the *Heroides* primarily concerns her heartbreak over a man. Boccaccio, however, mentions only Sappho’s male lover. Removing any potentially scandalous or contentious desire (which would require censure), Boccaccio can turn his focus to Sappho’s intellect. Sappho’s biography therefore demonstrates that intellect and desire can exist in harmony. Or, at least that a certain kind of a desire can be in line with keen intellect and praiseworthy behavior (we will see a counter example in the biography of Leontium). Ovid’s Sappho feels that she has lost her poetic gifts on account of her unrequited love, but Boccaccio’s Sappho, although dejected, does not lose her talent with her lover. Rather, by mourning her lover, Sappho produces her most famous verses, those that come to be known as “Sapphic.”

Boccaccio also offers his own critique of the young man, proposing a number of reasons why Sappho might have loved him, but he concludes “or better still,

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[she] fell prey to an intolerable pestilence” [imo intolerabili occupata peste].24 The lover is of little consequence. It is Sappho’s brilliance which endures.

For Boccaccio, Sappho’s erudition is wide-ranging and extraordinary: “Spurred on by a wider spiritual and intellectual fervor, Sappho studied diligently and ascended the steep slopes of Parnassus. On that lofty summit with happy daring she joined the welcoming Muses” [ampliori fervore animi et ingenii suasa vivacitate, conscensu studio vigili per abruta Parnasi vertice celso, se felici ausu, Musis non renuentibus, immiscuit].25 Not simply a poet, she is motivated by “wider spiritual and intellectual fervor” [ampliori fervor animi et ingenii]. Additionally, Sappho is so remarkable, her success is quasi mythical, represented by an ascent on Parnassus and a union with the Muses. However, Boccaccio tempers this mythic representation with details about her life. Boccaccio tells us Sappho was from the city of Mytilene, on the Greek island of Lesbos. Her parents were of noble origin. She was spurned in love. In other words, Boccaccio does not contest Sappho’s historical veracity. She is a real woman – and poet – rather than an allegorical representation of an abstract concept (as we will see with Leontium and Carmenta as well).

Closely reading Sappho’s biography sheds doubt on the argument that female figures must be like men in order to be praised. Sappho’s intellect and her poetry are

24 Boccaccio, Famous Women, XLVII.4. The whole sentence reads: Nam, seu facetiae seu alia gratia, cuiusdam iuvenis dilectione imo intolerabili occupata peste.
25 Boccaccio, Famous Women, XLVII.2.
never characterized as masculine. Although, according to Boccaccio, she excels even among men: “this young girl did not hesitate to strike the strings of the resonant cithara and bring forth melodies, something that seems extremely difficult even for the most skilled males” [sonore cithara fides tangere et expromere modulos puella non dubitavit; que quidem studiosissimis viris difficilia plurimum visa sunt]. Unlike the biographies of Camilla or Penthesilea (discussed in Chapter one), which emphasize their protagonists’ virile actions, Sappho’s biography never casts her abilities as masculine. Instead, Boccaccio presents her as an accomplished female poet, whose femininity does not contradict her intellect. This the example of erudite womanhood that Cereta embraced in her letter to Bibulus Sempronius.

This idea of Sappho as a female intellectual authority is cemented in the manuscript tradition. A richly illuminated 1403 manuscript, containing Des cleres et nobles femmes, the popular French translation of On Famous Women, presents Sappho sitting on a dais above three male pupils. In the miniature she appears in the act of reading, or perhaps, teaching. Before her sits an open book. Her right hand gestures toward the text or hovers in midair, ready to turn the page. The volume faces outward, toward the reader, who imagines him- or her- self to be the fifth to join the group. This

26 Boccaccio, Famous Women, XLVII.2.
27 Bibliothèque Nationale de France; Département des Manuscrits. Français 598, ff. 71V (Sappho), 4V (Boccaccio), Digitized. 
https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84521932/f152.zoom.r=%20Maître%20des%20Cleres%20Femmes%20de%20Jean%20de%20Berry.langEN.
representation parallels the authorial portrait of Boccaccio in the same manuscript. Although Boccaccio is alone in the image, rather than surrounded by students, he too, sits upon a dais, volumes laid out before him. Like Sappho, he appears not only in the act of reading, but also instructing, as the book is again turned outward toward the reading audience. In these intricate images, Sappho and Boccaccio parallel each other as authors and teachers.

Figure 1: Sappho, BNF Fr 598, f. 71V
It is not only this particular cycle of miniatures that Sappho’s intellectual authority is affirmed vis-à-vis Boccaccio. Brigitte Buettner, in an excellent study of a similar set of images found in BNF MS 12420, observes that Boccaccio and Sappho are both presented as teachers, with pupils and books before them. Moreover, Sappho’s role as poet and teacher is accentuated by the rubrics as well as the images. Buettner notes that “the chapter heading qualifies [her] as clergeresse, thus authorizing her depiction as if she were a teaching cleric,” despite the fact that “No Sappho would be seen at the
Sorbonne.”  

Like the addition of *clergeresse* in the French tradition, Italian manuscripts at the Biblioteca Angelica (MS 2226) and the Vatican (Ott.lat.1586) as well as Strozziano 93 at the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana add the word “poetessa” to Sappho’s rubric. Although *poetessa* doesn’t convey the same sense of “cleric” as the French *clergeresse*, the altered rubrics point to the exultation of Sappho as a learned figure in multiple geographical and linguistic spaces. These manuscripts highlight how French and Italian scribes and artists, inspired by Boccaccio, envisioned women in formal and informal positions of erudition.

If illuminators created a connection between Boccaccio and Sappho in the manuscript tradition, in his twelfth Eclogue, “Saphos,” Boccaccio himself links his authorial persona to the female poet-philosopher. In this poem, the protagonist Aristaeus, a foil to Boccaccio, goes on a search for Sappho. The spaces associated with poetess in *On Famous Women* – Mount Parnassus, the laurel grove, and the cave of Apollo – all reappear here. As the poem progresses, Boccaccio, through the figure of Aristaeus, addresses the criticisms of Sappho and her work, which parallels the censure

\[\text{28 Brigitte Buettner, } \textit{Boccaccio’s Des Cleres et Nobles Femmes: Systems of Signification in an Illuminated Manuscript}, \text{ vol. 53, Monograph on the Fine Arts (Seattle: College Art Association in association with University of Washington Press, 1996).} \]

\[\text{“Clergeresse” is an interesting choice as well for its religious undertones. This could potentially be connected Boccaccio’s claim in } \textit{On Famous Women} \text{ that Sappho was favored with “Such glory neither the crowns of kings nor the pontifical mitres nor even the conquerors’ laurel can surpass” [quo splendore profecto, non clariora sunt regum dyademata, non pontificum infule, nec etiam triumphantium lauree] XLVII.3. De Pizan mentions a similar example of a woman teaching in } \textit{Le Livre de la Cité des Dames: Novella d’Andrea}, \text{ who was a legal scholar and taught at the Univeristy of Bologna.} \]

\[\text{29 Biblioteca Angelica, MS 2226, Rome, Italy (Fourteenth century), ff.32R. Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ott.lat.1586, Città del Vaticano, Italy (Fifteenth century), ff.125V. Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana, Strozziano 93, Firenze, Italy (fifteenth century), ff. 144V.} \]
of his own works as described in the *Decameron*. The resonances between *On Famous Women*, “Saphos,” and the *Decameron* demonstrate that Boccaccio identifies with Sappho as an author. This portrayal of Sappho concords with Boccaccio’s interest in the nature and status of women (as elaborated in the Proem of the *Decameron* and discussed at length in the Introduction). Furthermore, by identifying with Sappho, Boccaccio brings the intellectual production of the female poet-philosopher into an erudite space typically coded masculine.

By charting Aristaeus’s journey on Mount Parnassus, Boccaccio places himself and Sappho in a network of poets, engaging a debate of the merits of love poetry. The eclogue opens with a demand from the muse of poetry, Calliope, who asks Aristaeus what he’s doing in the grove of Apollo.30 Aristaeus admits that he hopes to find Sappho there, whom he describes as “her who hasn’t been seen,” [quid faciem Formosa tegit renuitque videri], perhaps referring to the impossibility of knowing her poetry, or to the difficulty of reaching her poetic heights.31 The Muse retorts that Aristaeus is not worthy and rebukes his desire to “embrace” [amplexus] Sappho. Calliope must be mistaken, Aristaeus reasons, for he is not as crude as she imagines. She answers by comparing Boccaccio to Critis, a stand-in for Paris who judged Aphrodite to be the most beautiful of

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the goddesses, therefore equating Boccaccio with those who prefer love above all others. Calliope’s comment implies a skepticism about the seriousness of Boccaccio’s literature, perhaps on account of the amorous topics he treated in the vernacular. However, Sappho’s verse, too, is concerned with love and desire. Her ascent on Parnassus, as well as Aristaeus’ attempt to reach her, implies that the literary production of both is not as licentious or base as their critics may argue.

Aristaeus notes that other poets – particularly Minciades (possibly Virgil), and Silvanus (likely Petrarch) – were able to climb the mountain to find Sappho. The poetess is thus elevated as an inspiration not only for Boccaccio, but also for Virgil and Petrarch, canonical poets whose work would certainly not be dismissed as immodest or trite. Calliope finally reveals to Aristaeus that Sappho dwells on peak Nysa of Parnassus, where the Muses attend to her. Aristaeus inquires why she insists on living away from cities, and Calliope responds that Sappho has sought respite from the crowd: “Think you the stupid mob or gabbing throng shearing their long asses would permit her to do these things?” [Anne putas vulgus stolidum seu garrula turba auritos tondens asinos permetteret ista?]. This reasoning which echoes the opening to On Famous Women: “A short time ago, gracious lady, at a moment when I was able to isolate myself from the idle mob and was nearly carefree, I wrote – more for my friends’ pleasure than for the benefit of the broader public – a slim volume in praise of women” [Pridie, mulierum egregia, paullum ab inerti vulgo semotus et a ceteris fere solutus curis, in eximiam
muliebris sexus laudem ac amicorum solatium, potius quam in magnum rei publice commodum, libellum scripsi]

32 In this case, Boccaccio must move away from the crowd in order to produce his literature. A similar use of the pastoral setting also occurs in the *Decameron*, where the brigata finds both safety and space for storytelling in the countryside. Although the move away from cities might seem specific to poets or storytellers, Boccaccio emphasizes that Socrates – “the famous shepherd” – also retreated from crowds to live upon a mountain, thus drawing a parallel between himself, Sappho, and the great philosopher.

After proposing that Sappho provides inspiration for the canonical, male poets, Boccaccio turns to her unjustified censure. He creates a connection between his own authorial persona as outlined in the *Decameron* and the poetess. Calliope explains that Sappho finds peace in this isolated space because of those who “have dared to slander this innocent lady and try to paint with stains her pious brow” [Preterea vultu quidam carpsere minaci innocuam, maculisque piam depingere frontem]. The charges brought against Sappho mirror those mentioned by Boccaccio in the Author’s Introduction to Day IV in the *Decameron*. In the *Eclogues*, Calliope says critics accuse Sappho of distracting young men with inappropriate tales. In the *Decameron*, Boccaccio’s detractors accuse him of loving ladies too much and for telling them scandalous stories. Boccaccio responds to this accusation in the *Decameron* by asserting that the tales were told in a

garden, a pastoral space much like the one in which Sappho takes refuge. Sappho’s critics also condemn her for irresponsibly mixing fact and fiction and misinterpreting history, while Boccaccio confronts the same reproach regarding the “true versions” of the stories recountd in the Decameron.

Finally, some say that Sappho’s writing is driven by greed for wealth and fame, while the detractors in the Decameron say Boccaccio should look for bread instead of wasting his time writing. While these accusations are not identical – Sappho is too avaricious while Boccaccio is not conscious enough of his impoverished state – they both resonate with Boccaccio’s claims about the pursuit of wealth in Genealogy. When dismissing those who make money via the practical sciences, Boccaccio reminds the reader, “But poetry, mindful of its high origin, utterly abhors and rejects such a practice, and if it is to be condemned and despised for this, then Philosophy, mistress of things, who teaches us the causes of all that exists, must sink into low price, or to none at all…I have never heard that these sciences implied zeal for the acquisition of wealth.” This is an instance in which Boccaccio denotes the characteristics shared by the disciplines of poetry and philosophy, and it is refracted, again, through the figures of both Sappho

33 Boccaccio, Decameron, Author’s Epilogue: “non nella chiesa…si truovino…né ancora nelle scuole de’ filosofanti, dove l’onestà non meno che in altra parte è richiesta dette sono; né tra cherici né tra filosofi in alcun luogo.”

and Boccaccio, in *Eclogues* and *Decameron* alike. These corresponding criticisms pair Boccaccio and Sappho as authors who are unjustly maligned. Placing Sappho on Mount Parnassus, Boccaccio vindicates her writing and, through identification with her, his own.

**Leontium**

*Leontia’s Greek and poetic tongue dared to sharply to attack, with a lively and admired style, the eloquence of Theophrastus*

 -Cereta

Of all Boccaccio’s female figures, Leontium (also known as Leontia, Leonzia, or Leontion) undertakes the intellectual pursuits typically recognized as philosophy – both in the fourteenth century and today. Like Socrates, Aristotle, and Plato – as well as Boccaccio and his contemporaries – Leontium read, wrote, and engaged in philosophical debates. She was best known for challenging Theophrastus, a follower of Aristotle. Both classical sources and Boccaccio’s account in *On Famous Women* confirm her participation in these male-dominated philosophical circles.

However, Boccaccio does not describe Leontium with the common Latin words for “philosopher.” She is not a “philosopha” (the feminized form of “philosophus”) or “sapiens.” Furthermore, her status among philosophers is complicated for Boccaccio by the fact that she is a “meretrix,” a courtesan or a whore, which elicits his severe censure. Still, he never denies Leontium’s capacity for reasoned, rational thought. Rewriting the sources from which he knew Leontium’s story – Pliny, Cicero, Diogenes, Boccaccio
creates a unique balance between her intellect and licentiousness. In her portrayal of
Leontium, Boccaccio also eschews the familiar allegorical representation of a Lady
Philosophy, which he would have known from sources like Boethius Consolation of
Philosophy or Dante’s Convivio. In making Leontium a real woman engaged in
philosophical debates, Boccaccio rejects a widely accepted allegorical relationship of
knowledge as an embodied woman. Near contemporary readers of Boccaccio received
and represented Leontium as a philosopher, emphasizing her learned status and
employing specific terminology like “sapiens” and “filosofa.”

Boccaccio would have known the story of Leontium from three authors: Cicero,
Pliny, and Diogenes. From Cicero we discover that Leontium erred when she dared to
counter Theophrastus: “Was it dreams like these that not only encouraged Epicurus and
Metrodorus and Hermarchus to contradict Pythagoras, Plato and Empedocles, but
actually emboldened a loose woman like Leontium to write a book refuting
Theophrastus? Her style no doubt is the neatest of Attic, but all the same! — such was
the licence [sic] that prevailed in the Garden of Epicurus.”35 [Itisne fidentes somniis non
modo Epicurus et Metrodorus et Hermarchus contra Pythagoram Platonem
Empedocelque dixerunt sed meretricula etiam Leontium contra Theophrastum scribere
ausast? Scito illa quidem sermone et Attico sed tamen: tantum Epicuri hortus habuit

University Press, 1933).
licentiae]. Cicero’s admiration of her style – “the neatest of Attic” – is buried amidst his critique of the Epicureans, whom he chastises for their dubious ethics. Pliny, on the other hand, includes no such praise. In fact, he does not even deign to name Leontium, but alludes to her story as a cautionary tale: “But I well know, that even a woman once wrote against Theophrastus, a man so eminent for his eloquence… and that from this circumstance originated the proverb of choosing a tree to hang oneself” [ceu vero nesciam adversus theophrastum, hominem in eloquentia tantum, ut nomen divinum inde invenerit, scripsisse etiam feminam, et proverbium inde natum suspendio aroborem eligendi].* Pliny neglects to mention Leontium’s acumen and stresses Theophrastus’ superiority by implying that her challenge did nothing more than result in her own defeat. Diogenes takes a more neutral tone toward Leontium. While he recognizes her status as a courtesan, he still remarks on how the philosophers admired her intelligence: “He [Epicurus] wrote to Leontion [sic], “O Lord Apollo, my dear little Leontion, with what tumultuous applause we were inspired as we read your letter.”” 37

From these classical sources we learn only that Leontium was a woman of questionable character who wrote against Theophrastus.


Boccaccio elaborates this simple story into a detailed biography. He develops both aspects of Leontium’s story as recounted by the ancient sources, placing an emphasis on her intellect while simultaneously censuring her licentious behavior. In doing so, he creates a tension between that which should be meritorious – a keen intelligence and a knowledge of philosophy – and that which is deserving of the most severe condemnation – impious sexual conduct. This thread runs throughout the biography. Crucially, however, Boccaccio does not use Leontium’s failures to tell a cautionary tale about the dangers of knowledge for women. Nor does he completely discredit Leontium’s intellectual output on account of her sex. Although he attributes her response to Theophrastus as a result of “feminine temerity,” the rest of the biography explores the friction between intelligence and immorality without conceding that the latter undermines the former.38

38 On the question of whether or not Boccaccio’s condemnation of promiscuity is “antifeminist,” I follow Pamela Benson’s thinking: “If one accepts Boccaccio’s assumption that promiscuity is a vice, there is nothing antifeminist” about this specific moralizing (19).

39 A complex network of texts comes to light if we probe the connections mentioned in Leontium’s biography. Leontium famously responded to Theophrastus. While none of Theophrastus’ texts survive, Boccaccio would have still been familiar with his Liber aureolus de nuptiis [The Golden Book of Marriage], at least through Jerome’s Epistula adversus Jovinianum [letter against Jove]. Jerome notes that Theophrastus urges against wise men taking wives because a wife will impede the study of philosophy Boccaccio cites this idea nearly verbatim in his Life of Dante (III.25). Instead of taking wives, philosophers should devote themselves to Lady Philosophy (the exact image Boccaccio disrupts in this biography). Boccaccio proposes this idea yet another time in the commentary on Inf. XVI at Jacopo Rusticucci’s complaint about his wife: “Let those who prepare to take a wife, then, be alert and let them keep an eye on others, for all too rarely does it happen that a man gets a Lucretia, a Penelope, or someone of like ilk. As I have heard many men say, although they seem like angels in the daylight, they are devils in your bed at night” (Inf. XVI.lit.46, trans. Papio). This comment both recalls the story of the sexually voracious Alibech (Decameron II.10), and invokes Lucretia, one of the women cast as a philosopher in his commentary on Inferno IV.
The juxtaposition between genius and reprehensible moral character is the driving force of Leontium’s biography. In the opening of the story, Boccaccio laments “If she had preserved her matronly honor, the glory attached to her name would have been much more radiant for she had extraordinary intellectual powers” [Cuius, si matronalem pudicitiam servasset, cum ingenii eius permaxime fuerint vires, longe fulgidior nominis fuisset Gloria] (emphasis mine). In this hypothetical (which does not discredit the glory already afforded to her), Boccaccio sets up a contrast between the imperfect subjunctive – “servasset” and “fuisset” – used to express an irreality in the past, and the perfect subjunctive, “fuerint,” in a causal phrase with “cum.” The first two verbs express contrary-to-fact possibilities – if she had preserved her honor, she would have been even more famous – yet the matter of her intellectual prowess is not hypothetical: she had extraordinary intellectual powers.

Later, when discussing Leontium’s ancestry, the indisputable nature of her brilliance arises again. Boccaccio insists that she must been of noble birth given her incredible genius: “Since she was so brilliant in such a distinguished field of study, I will not easily believe that Leontium was of humble plebeian origin. It is rare indeed for sublime genius to spring from those dregs” [Et si adeo studiis tam splendidis valuit, non facile credam eam ex plebeia fece duxisse originem; raro quippe ex ea sorde ingenium

40 Boccaccio, Famous Women, LX.1.
sublime surgit].\textsuperscript{41} Not only does this statement grant Leontium “ingenium sublime,” it preemptively divorces her intellectual abilities from her gender, aligning them instead with class. Although exceptionally elitist, this passage, in making a broad statement about the origin of intelligence, uses Leontium, a woman, as representative of genius in society.

At least one fourteenth-century reader also found Boccaccio’s claim about Leontium’s brilliance intriguing. A modest paper manuscript found in the Biblioteca Angelica in Rome contains a manicula, a little hand, in the margin of Leontium’s biography, pointing to the sentence that mentions her “sublime genius,” a common marking indicating that the reader should take note.\textsuperscript{42} While we cannot be sure exactly what aspect of Boccaccio’s claim attracted the person who left the icon, Leontium’s rubric in the same manuscript – adjusted by the scribe – suggests a focus on her intellect. Instead of “Greek woman,” [mulier graeca] – Boccaccio’s original title – the scribe wrote “De Leontio litterata femina,” that is, “Leontium, a learned woman.”\textsuperscript{43} The characteristics of the manuscript and the marginal comments date to the fourteenth century, meaning the scribe and commentator made these choices, at the very latest possible, only twenty-five years after Boccaccio’s death. The altered rubric, and the marginal note, highlight Leontium’s erudition in spite of any ethical failings. Another

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\textsuperscript{41} Boccaccio, Famous Women, LX.3.
\textsuperscript{42} Biblioteca Angelica, MS 2226, f. 141V.
\textsuperscript{43} Biblioteca Angelica, MS 2226 f. 141R.
\end{flushright}
modification in a fourteenth-century manuscript similarly confirms such an interpretation. Donato degli Albanzani, a friend of Boccaccio and Petrarch’s, and the first to translate *On Famous Women* into Italian, also changed Boccaccio’s original rubric. Albanzani added the word, “philospha,” rendering Leontium’s status as philosopher explicit. If contemporary scholarship has tended toward a focus on the misogynist, moralizing aspect of the biography, these pieces of evidence reflect another possible reading – one that recognized the ingenuity of Boccaccio’s reinvention of this figure.

While Boccaccio’s contemporaries highlighted Leontium’s erudition, Boccaccio did not spare her censure in the biography. In the discussion of Leontium’s origins, Boccaccio points out that her comportment does little to preserve, or even demonstrate, her intelligence and the honor of her ancestry: “Yet what true splendor can the noble blood of ancestors impart where there is unbecoming conduct? If we may believe trustworthy sources, Leontium disregarded feminine decency and was a courtesan, or rather, a little trollop” [Sed quid progenitorum generous sanguis, si morum indecentia sit, veri possunt fulgoris inpendere? Si amplissimis fidem prestemus viris, hec seposito

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45 Franklin offers the following interpretation of the Leontium biography: “Boccaccio discerns in Leontium’s life an opportunity to create a confrontation between philosophy and the female libido,” arguing that “her achievements were irredeemably compromised” (50-51). I maintain that the contrast is between philosophy and unvirtuous behavior in general (rather than specifically female libido) and that Leontium’s behavior never undermines her intellectual abilities.
Boccaccio’s disdain for Leontium’s mores is palpable. However, one of the text’s fascinating variations occurs in this passage. Virginia Brown translates “si amplissimis fidem prestemus viris” as “if we may believe trustworthy sources.” While this translation is quite eloquent, it renders “viris,” literally “men,” as “sources,” erasing the gendered dynamics introduced by Boccaccio. In fact, Boccaccio did not add the word until the penultimate redaction of the text. This modification is undoubtedly his as it appears in his autograph manuscript of _On Famous Women_, now kept in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence. Although Boccaccio presumably puts his trust in these “viris” – they are, after all, the sources for his writing – he also introduces the possibility of _not_ believing them. The sentence begins with a hypothetical clause where the verb, “prestemus,” is in the subjunctive, denoting uncertainty. The choice to include the word “viris” also highlights the gendered division between the Leontium’s disregard for “pudore femineo” and the men who accuse her of improper conduct. Boccaccio could have chosen “hominibus” [people] or even “testimonialis” [evidence/witnesses] but, after editing the text a number of times, he inserted the word that refers specifically to men. It is men – even if they are reliable sources –who claim that Leontium is not just a “meretrix” – a whore, but a “meretricula,” an increasingly derogatory term. Boccaccio appears to be acknowledging

46 Boccaccio, _Famous Women_, LX.4
48 Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, MS (Plut) XC sup.98.i.
the gendered dynamics of the philosophical spaces Leontium inhabited; perhaps there were men who would discredit her as she entered their spaces of erudition. Still, Boccaccio retells this story himself, planting only a small seed of doubt.

Boccaccio’s elaboration of Leontium’s status as meretrix also recalls – and ultimately rewrites– a common image of corrupted philosophy as a debased woman, a whore. Earlier works tended to imagine philosophy as a beautiful, chaste woman: the allegorical figure Lady Philosophy. This was, in a certain way, a logical extension of the personification of sophia, wisdom; the Latin word is gendered feminine, so the female form was an obvious embodiment. In turn, to represent corrupted philosophy, the female figure was no longer portrayed as chaste and honest, but as lustful or licentious. For instance, in the Convivio, Dante refers to men who exploit philosophical knowledge as those who have “made a whore out of a woman” [l’hanno fatto di donna meretrice] where the woman in question is Philosophy.⁴⁹ Although Boccaccio most likely did not know this text of Dante’s, a similar idea appears in the Novellino, a collection of short Italian tales from the fourteenth century, which Boccaccio certainly did know. In one story, a philosopher dreams of the goddesses of knowledge in a brothel among base women. Distraught, he realizes that they find themselves in such vulgar company because he has vernacularized important philosophical works, that is translated them

from Latin to Italian, and therefore made knowledge available to those who should not have it. In both of these examples, women do not use philosophical knowledge. They are not writers or readers or thinkers. They serve only as the symbolic incarnation of abstract ideas.

Boethius, too, uses an allegorical Lady Philosophy as his spiritual and intellectual guide in *The Consolation of Philosophy*. In Boethius’ text, Lady Philosophy is not reduced to the status of prostitute, but she does encounter “meretriculas,” whores, at the beginning of the poem. These whore-like Muses are the Muses of poetry, and they are dismissed by Lady Philosophy who quickly calls upon her own (presumably chaste) Muses to help Boethius instead. The dismissal of poetic Muses is particularly striking as Boethius’ text is written in *prosimetrum* – poems surrounded by prose. Boccaccio puts forward an intriguing explanation for these “meretriculas” in *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*: “they [readers] brawl at the gentle and modest Muses, as if they were women in the flesh, simply because their names are feminine. They call them disreputable, obscene, witches, harlots, forcing the meaning of Boethius’ diminutive, they would push them to the bottom of society, nay in the lowest brothel...” Here, Boccaccio defends the

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50 For a discussion of this Novellino scene, see Cornish, *Vernacular Translation*, 33.
allegorical and figurative meaning of the Muses and Lady Philosophy. However, in Leontium’s biography, Boccaccio does not present Leontium’s position as a “meretricula” as a symbolic one. Instead, his portrayal of Leontium as a historical woman stands in stark contrast to the allegorical use of the female figure as scene in Boethius and others.53

That the relationship between women and philosophy might be one of use and study rather than allegory emerges in Boccaccio’s censure of Leontium. He criticizes her for tarnishing philosophy with her sins: “Living in the brothels among pimps, vile adulterers, and whores, she was able to stain Philosophy, the teacher of truth, with ignominy in those disgraceful chambers” [Inter lenones impurosque mechos et scorta atque fornice versata, potuit magistram rerum phylosophiam inhortes in cellulis et ignominiosis deturpare].54 Significantly, this lewd activity does not taint Leontium’s abilities to reason or think rationally. She is not Lady Philosophy in the brothel, but a

esse proclamant; et eo quod diminutivo utatur Boecius, illas extreme sortis et extremo eciam in lupanari a fece vulgi prostratas existimant]. Some might recognize this as in contrast to Boccaccio’s statement in the Decameron that the Muses are essentially women: “Che io con le Muse in Parnaso di debba stare, affermo che è buon consiglio, ma tuttavia né noi possiam dimorare con le Muse né esse con esso noi; se quando avviene che l’uomo da lor si parte, dilettarsi di veder cosa che le somigli, questo non è cosa da biasimare. Le Muse son donne, e benché le donne quello che le Muse vagliono non vagliano, pure esse hanno nel primo aspetto simiglianza di quelle; si che, quando per altro non mi piacessero, per quello mi dovrebbe piacere” (Author’s Introduction to Day IV).


54 Boccaccio, Famous Women, LX.5.
woman who has carried philosophical knowledge with her into an immoral space. Like any philosopher, man or woman, Leontium must decide how to use her knowledge. Although she fails on an ethical front (and therefore fails to embrace philosophy by the elaborated in Chapter 2), Boccaccio still presents her as capable of making reasoned choices.

Boccaccio ends the biography by reflecting critically not only on Leontium, but also on philosophy itself: “Quite honestly, I do not know whether to say that Leontium was the stronger of the two in that she dragged Philosophy down to so wicked a place, or that Philosophy was the weaker because she allowed an enlightened heart to be dominated by licentiousness.” [Edepol nescio utrum illam fortiorem dixerim, in tam scelestum locum phylosophiam trahendo, an phylosophiam ipsam remissiorem, doctum pectus subigi lasciviis permictendo]. In both cases – an either/or construction initiated by the word “utrum” – Boccaccio suggests that Leontium triumphs over philosophy. It is only a question of her strength or philosophy’s weakness. Still, his depiction presents a woman with a command of philosophical knowledge, despite her most immodest character.

Boccaccio’s reflections on philosophy here are two-fold. On the one hand, he challenges the medieval commonplace that associates women with philosophy only in a metaphorical or allegorical relationship. On the other hand, however, this biography

55 Boccaccio, Famous Women, LX.6.
also criticizes philosophy and those who fail to use it appropriately. While in the
*Expositions* Boccaccio makes a case for an incontrovertible link between ethics and
philosophy (the subject of Chapter 2) – that is, those who behave ethically must draw
upon philosophy – here Boccaccio suggests that philosophy does not necessarily lead to
ethical choices. Navigating the boundaries of ethics and philosophy, Boccaccio implies
that philosophers can be both praiseworthy and condemnable, and, as demonstrated in
the biography of Leontium, they can also be women.

**Nicostrata/Carmenta**

*Nicostrata also, the mother of Evander, learned both in prophecy and letters, possessed such great
genius that with sixteen symbols she first taught the Latins the art of writing.*

- Cereta

As a poet, prophetess, and the inventor of the Latin alphabet, Nicostrata, also
known as Carmenta, is a remarkable example of erudition. In emphasizing her poetic
skills and her creation of Latin letters, Boccaccio rescues a somewhat obscure figure of
Roman mythology to affirm a woman’s ability to participate in male-dominated fields of
knowledge production. The most revered poets, at the moment Boccaccio was
composing *On Famous Women*, were men who wrote in Latin. To grasp the status of
these venerated thinkers, one only need to recall Dante in the *Inferno*, claiming his place
as the sixth among Homer, Horace, Ovid, Lucan, and Vergil as part of his attempt to
legitimize his magnum opus. Carmenta’s poetic achievements as well as her command
over the Latin language imply that she, too, belongs among “such intellects” [contanto
In this section, I analyze how Boccaccio presents Nicostrata as a poet-philosopher who invented the Latin alphabet. In crafting Carmenta’s biography, Boccaccio transformed his classical sources, affirming Carmenta’s humanity and her place within a scholarly, Latinate culture. These changes are underscored and emphasized in the manuscript tradition. I argue that Boccaccio’s portrayal of Nicostrata has implications for broad debates about poetry and philosophy as well as the uses of Latin and the vernacular.

Boccaccio’s rewriting of his sources highlights Carmenta’s genius and her contribution to the history of knowledge in the West. Ovid, Servius, Solinus, and Vergil primarily recount Carmenta’s gift for divination. They recall that she led Evander, her son, into Italy as he fled Arcadia, foretelling that the future greatness of Rome would rise from the Palatine Hill.

In the Fasti, Ovid writes:

> From there came Evander, though of noble lineage on both sides
> Nobler through the blood of Carmentis, his sacred mother:
> She, as soon as her spirit absorbed the heavenly fire,
> Spoke true prophecies, filled with the god.

> hic fuit Evander, qui, quamquam clarus utroque
> Nobilior sacrae sanguine matris erat;

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Boccaccio’s, Carmenta, however, has skills that reach beyond prophecy: “It was not only for the splendor of her reign that she was famous: she also knew Greek very well, and her intellect was so versatile… The Latins changed her name from Nicostrata to Carmenta because at times… she disclosed the future in verse” [Nec regni solum fulgere fuit insignis quin imo grecarum literarum doctissima adeo versatilis fuit ingenii…Que cum querentibus et a se ipsa nonnunquam exprometer futura carmine, a Latinis, quasi primo Nycostrate aboleto nominee, Carmenta nuncupata est]. Her name, Carmenta, derives from the Latin word, carmen, meaning song or poem. To put it simply, Carmenta composed poetry.

A fifteenth-century manuscript, Strozziano 93 at the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, confirms that early readers understood Carmenta to be a poet. After copying Boccaccio’s original rubric for the biography, “De Nycostrata seu Carmenta Yonii regis filia,” [On Nicostrata also known as Carmenta, daughter of King Ionis] the scribe added the word “poetessa.” The copyist most likely felt Carmenta’s designation as “daughter of King Ionis” [Yonii regis filia] did not accurately reflect the account provided by Boccaccio. In this modification, the scribe chose an Italian word to fill a perceived void in Boccaccio’s Latin text, a move that reflects the complex relationship between a burgeoning vernacular language (Italian) and an established scholarly medium (Latin). The scribe must have eschewed the Latin vatis, a word that functions
for both genders and is used to name divinely-inspired poets, in favor of the Italian poetessa. The addition draws attention to Carmenta’s position as a woman and a poet, as well as the inability of Latin to communicate that status. It further deemphasizes the celestial nature of Carmenta’s poetry – so central to her portrait in the Ovidian story – by using a word that was not necessarily connected to prophets or soothsayers. In brief, the change to the rubric highlights two crucial features of Carmenta’s biography: her humanity and her poetic prowess.

The designation of poetessa also links Carmenta’s biography to a contemporary cultural debate about the relationship between poetry and philosophy. In Genealogy of the Pagan Gods, composed concurrently with On Famous Women, Boccaccio argues for an intimate connection between the two. Poets, according to Boccaccio in Genealogy, “should be reckoned of the very number of the philosophers, since they never veil with their inventions anything which is not wholly consonant with philosophy as judged by the opinions of the Ancients.” Boccaccio makes some distinction between the two disciplines, but he reaches the conclusion that they share more than divides them, being, in fact, interdependent: “[W]hile Philosophy is without question the keenest investigator

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59 This choice also highlights the connection between Boccaccio’s Latin text and a literate, vernacular culture, which included numerous vernacular translations of On Famous Women into Italian and French. The mixing of Latin and Italian also points to a fluidity between the two languages, despite Latin’s ongoing scholarly status.
of truth, Poetry is, obviously, its most faithful Guardian... If Philosophy err, Poetry cannot keep in the right path. She is Philosophy’s maidservant, and must follow in the steps of her mistress; so that necessarily the error of the one makes the other deviate.”

As a poet, Carmenta therefore has the ability to communicate philosophical truths via her Latin verse.

Not only did Boccaccio make Carmenta a poet, he also significantly expanded her biography. Most of the sources available to Boccaccio did not mention her invention of Latin letters. Instead, Boccaccio probably learned of this innovation from the seventh-century *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville. But Isidore dedicates only a single line to our poetessa: “The nymph Carmentis first brought Latin letters to the Italians” [Latinas litteras Carmentis nympha prima Italis tradidit]. Boccaccio develops this minute piece of information into the crux of his narrative. As Vittorio Zaccaria and Pier Giorgio Ricci have shown, *On Famous Women* circulated in at least eight different versions, and Boccaccio continued to edit the text even after earlier versions were in circulation. During Boccaccio’s revisions, Carmenta’s biography nearly doubles in length, as

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62 Boccaccio was probably not familiar with Gaius Julius Hyginus, *Fabulae* 277: “Evandrus profugus ex Arcadia in Italiam transtulit, quas [literas graecas] mater eius Carmenta in latinas commutavit ” [The fugitive Evander brought from Arcadia to Italy those Greek characters which his mother Carmenta transformed into Latin ones]. The first print edition of this text appeared in 1535, copied and edited from a single surviving manuscript by the German Humanist Jacob Micyllus.

demonstrated by two manuscripts: Barb Lat 42 at the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana and Plut. 52.29 at the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana. This substantial addition and revision reflects Boccaccio’s investment in the new tale he crafted.

As we have seen, Boccaccio begins Carmenta’s story by extolling her learning and skills as a poet. In the following paragraph, he recalls her guidance of Evander, but returns without much delay to her intellectual accomplishments, a move which contradicts Margaret Franklin’s claim that women’s success in On Famous Women is always linked to service to a male figure. From the outset, as Boccaccio tells the story, Carmenta’s fame is not contingent on her son. In fact, On Famous Women dedicates significantly less space discussing her role as a mother than the detailed story regarding her invention of the alphabet.

Boccaccio recounts that Carmenta, knowing what a magnificent future was in store for the inhabitants of Italy, could not imagine that their accomplishments would be told in a foreign tongue, so she “used the full force of her genius to give them their own alphabet, completely different from that of other nations.” [ivit totis ingenii viribus, ut proprias et omnino a ceteris nationibus diversa litteras exhiberet populis].

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64 For more on this see Zaccaria, “Le fasi redazionali.”
65 The centrality of Carmenta’s accomplishment is visible also in the manuscript tradition. In Strozziano 93, a marginal note comments on the discussion of Latin letters. In other cases, scribes added additional markers or comments on biography to highlight the discussion of Latin (Biblioteca Angelica 2226; Biblioteca Vallicelliana MS C48; Biblioteca Nazionale Napoli MS XIII AA 15). An interesting vernacularizing occurs in Acq e Doni 523 (BML) in which the translator describes the poetess: “Carmenta fu veramente madre del mondo.” [Carmenta truly was the mother of the world].
66 Boccaccio, Famous Women, XXVII.5.
chronicle seems too fantastical, Boccaccio makes two moves to ground it in reality: first, he draws a parallel between Carmenta and the inventor of the Greek alphabet, Cadmus, a familiar figure who was also the King of Thebes; second, he explains that simple people, marveling at Carmenta’s invention, “believed her to be a goddess and not a human being” [non hominem sed potius deam esse Carmentam]. Boccaccio presents Carmenta’s skills not as the result of divine providence but rather the accomplishments of a flesh and blood woman.

The historical value of Carmenta’s tale is also accentuated in a manuscript composed by a near-contemporary of Boccaccio’s (Plut.90.98.sup.iii). The scribe does not leave any traces that suggest he is concerned with Boccaccio’s moral judgments or with Carmenta’s “feminine” role as the mother of Evander. Instead, he highlights the place she holds in the development of knowledge in the Latin West. Near the beginning of the biography, two marginal comments summarize the details of Carmenta’s story and reinforce the connection between Carmenta and Cadmus. The scribe, using red ink,

67 Boccaccio, Famous Women, XXVII.7.
68 This parchment manuscript in a semi-gothic bookhand is rather plain; it lacks historiated initials or illuminations. Still, it is significant for the incredible effort exerted by the scribe, not only in the commentaries on various biographies but also in the creation of an index with rubrics and short summaries of every biography in the collection. These details imply that the scribe studied the text, rather than simply copying it. The copyist includes notes on more than half the biographies in the index, marking them as “notabilissime” “nobile” “satis pulchre” and “elegante.” The biography of Almathea is marked as “notabile” [remarkable, notable] while the biography of Nicostrata is “satis nobile” [quite noble or quite famous]. In nearly all these remarks, the scribe does not draw attention to the moral value of the stories (the one notable exception is that the Lucretia story is referred to as “laudabile” [praiseworthy]). In addition to the index, rubrics, and short synopses, the manuscript also contains notes, typically opinions or summaries, throughout. The manuscript has been digitized and is available online through the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana: http://mss.bmlonline.it/catalogo.aspx?Collection=Plutei&Shelfmark=Plut.90+sup.98%2f3
writes: “Carmenta primo licteras invenit Latinis. Cadmus Grecorum primus Grecis licteras invenit.” [Carmenta first invented Latin letters. Cadmus, the first of the Greeks, invented Greek letters]. Placed about two inches apart, but with perfect vertical alignment, the comments accentuate the parallel introduced by Boccaccio. Although the two phrases are not identical, their syntactic similarities underline, yet again, the similarity between these two inventors. Both subjects appear at the beginning of the sentence, followed by the use of “primo” and “primus” and both close with “litteras invenit.” While today the story of Cadmus is significantly better known than that of Carmenta, the scribe not only accepts Boccaccio’s comparison but emphasizes it with his commentary. Further on, the same scribe provides a shorthand version of the history Boccaccio spells out in the text; in the margin, a short summary of each geographical region’s role in the development of civilization appears. By rehashing these details and drawing a parallel between Carmenta and Cadmus in the marginalia, the scribe gives attention to the historical rather than moral value of the text, a choice that underscores Carmenta’s intellect.

In addition to humanizing and historicizing Carmenta, Boccaccio insists that she invents not only the Latin alphabet but also its grammar – the structure of language. In doing so, Boccaccio shrewdly challenges dichotomies of masculine and feminine as they

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were understood in regards to Latin and the vernacular in trecento Italy. Boccaccio gives Carmenta credit for planting the “first seeds of grammar” [Sic et gramatice facultatis prima dedisse seminar creditum]. His use of the word “gramatice” [grammar] is not indifferent. By crediting Carmenta with the invention of grammar, Boccaccio attributes to her the knowledge of what distinguishes Latin from the vernacular, Italian, and the characteristic that makes it a scholarly language. In De vulgari eloquentia [On Vernacular Eloquence], Dante emphasizes Latin’s distance from Italian: “There also exists another kind of language, at one remove from us, which the Romans called grammatica [grammar]. Latin thus stood in contrast to the feminine vernacular, the language that came from mothers, the so-called madrelingua. In the Vita Nuova, Dante memorably reinforces this division by insisting that the first male poet to write in Italian did so because the woman he wished to communicate with didn’t understand Latin (VN 25). Although these mediations must be understood within the broader context of Dante’s project of codifying the vernacular and raising its status, it is still crucial to note that grammatica was that characteristic that defined Latin and gave it a masculine quality. And Boccaccio credited a woman with its invention. Given that, in the fourteenth century, erudite men used Latin as a scholarly language while the vernacular remained less distinguished (partially because it was read by women),

70 On women as readers of the vernacular see Cornish and Lombardi.
claiming that a woman produced its letters and structure disrupted the notion of Latin as a masculine language of superior status.

Boccaccio also left a certain ambiguity in his description of the language invented by Carmenta. While the gramatica that Carmenta created must be Latin (Boccaccio is, after all, referring to the language of the soon-to-be Romans), he still makes a case, if subtly, for the connection between the vernacular languages and Latin. Boccaccio explains “God so favored Carmenta’s achievements that the Hebrew and Greek languages have lost the greatest part of their glory while a vast area covering almost all of Europe uses our alphabet” [quibus adeo fuit propitius Deus ut, hebraicis grecisque literis parte maxime glorie dempta, omnis quasi Europea amply terrarium tractu nostris utatur]. The glory of the Latin alphabet is the glory of the Italians, and of Boccaccio himself, evident in his use of the word nostris [our] to describe the alphabet created by Carmenta and used throughout Europe. The gesture toward Europe, on the one hand, stresses the prominence of Latin as a language, but, on the other, it illuminates the shared heritage of European vernaculars – they all, by necessity, rely on Latin letters. This connection suggests a shared glory between Latin and the vernacular, rather than elevating one over the other.

Similarly, when Boccaccio lauds how knowledge has been shared with Carmenta’s invention, he does not specify a single language, but rather insists that the

73 Boccaccio, Famous Women, XXVII.13.
wonders of the world have been transmitted through Latin characters: “An infinite number of books on all subjects has rendered the Latin alphabet illustrious: in its letters is preserved a perpetual remembrance of divine and human accomplishments so that with the help of Latin characters we know things which we cannot see.” [Quibus delinita, facultatum omnium infinita splendent volumina, hominum gesta Deique magnalia perpetua servantur memoria ut, que vidisse nequivimus ipsi, eis opitulantibus, cognoscamus.].74 This passage renders Carmenta’s invention – Latin letters, gramatica – the means through which we access knowledge. The development of Latin letters, the creation of grammar, and ultimately, the birth of a language lays very foundation for the production of knowledge in both Latin and the vernacular and the pursuit of truth undertaken by both philosophers and poets.

**Conclusion**

These three extraordinary biographies have offered a glimpse into the complex portrayals that comprise *On Famous Women*. Reading the stories of Leontium, Nicostrata, and Sappho together reveals just how limiting the critical lens of feminism/misogyny can be. The biographies of these women show, instead, how Boccaccio negotiated new ideas about womanhood alongside common stereotypes about the female sex.

Examining their unique portraits reveals how Boccaccio envisioned new kinds of

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74 In writing to Pope Urban V, Petrarch also notes that Latin is the root of all learning. For an extensive discussion of this letter (*Seniles 9.1*) see Celenza, *Intellectual World*, 25-27.
womanhood and expanded the boundaries of erudition. Revolutionizing his sources, Boccaccio represented female figures in traditionally masculine spaces of erudition without ever denying their femininity or historical veracity. Leontium, Carmenta, and Sappho all attest to women’s ability to learn and to share their knowledge with others. These women were also embraced by near-contemporaries, artists, and even writers of subsequent generations. In their own ways, these readers recognized Boccaccio’s enigmatic female figures as authors, poets, teachers, and even philosophers.
Chapter 4: Rewriting Boccaccio: Women and Knowledge in Christine de Pizan, Giulia Bigolina, and Moderata Fonte

Introduction

In a 2019 piece in the New York Times, international literary sensation Elena Ferrante cites Boccaccio as a major literary influence:

I chose to write mainly because, as a girl, I mistakenly thought that literature was particularly welcoming to women. The “Decameron,” by Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375), made a great impression on me. In this work, which is at the origin of the grand Italian and European narrative traditions, 10 youths — seven women and three men — take turns telling stories for 10 days. At around the age of 16, I found it reassuring that Boccaccio, in conceiving his narrators, had made most of them women. Here was a great writer, the father of the modern story, presenting seven great female narrators. There was something to hope for.¹

Ferrante fans may be surprised to find their beloved author, who is most frequently associated with contemporary debates about women writers and feminism, reference a medieval, male source.² While there’s at least one obvious connection between the two — both are Italian after all, Ferrante is just the latest in a long succession of women, spanning centuries, who have found inspiration in Boccaccio’s work.

This chapter considers three earlier women writers – Christine de Pizan (1364-1430), Giulia Bigolina (1518-1569), and Moderata Fonte (1555-1592) – who were inspired by and who reworked Boccaccio’s vivid female figures and ingenious literary production. This group is by no means exhaustive. Other female authors of the same period – including Laura Cereta (discussed in Chapter 3), Marguerite de Navarre, Olympia Morata, and María de Zayas y Sotomayor, to name a few – also transformed Boccaccio’s literature in their writings. However, the works of de Pizan, Bigolina, and Fonte share a crucial feature: they use Boccaccio to explicitly defend the female sex. Both de Pizan’s *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405) and Fonte’s *On the Worth of Women* (1600) explicitly refute misogynist ideas. Bigolina’s defense of women, on the other hand, occupies only a single chapter, “On the Worth of Women,” in her romance *Urania* (1555). Still, the portrayals of women throughout Urania support the points elaborated in “On the Worth of Women.” A key aspect of the defenses put forth by de Pizan, Bigolina, and Fonte is an

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4 Laura Cereta could also be included based on these criteria, but since she was discussed in Chapter 3, I will not return to her here.
exploration of how women access intellectual authority and philosophical knowledge, and they all make a case for women’s status as moral and intellectual agents.

De Pizan, Bigolina, and Fonte, despite their shared subject matter, wrote at different historical moments and in various genres and languages. This diversity reveals the persistent nature of the *querelle des femmes* (recast in Italy as *la questione della donna*) and the enduring relevance of Boccaccio’s texts for women participating in that debate. The range of literary works represented by this grouping also indicates that women writers of later generations did not use Boccaccio in monolithic or static ways. Each writer engages with Boccaccio on her own terms. De Pizan primarily adapts Boccaccio’s biographies from *On Famous Women* as well as a few characters from the *Decameron* into a dream-vision where she builds an allegorical city of ladies. She also cites Boccaccio explicitly, marking him as an authority. Bigolina, like de Pizan, repurposes Boccaccio’s representations of women, but she never mentions his name. Instead, his influence permeates her prose romance in the form of narrative structure (like the brigata of the *Decameron*), literary experimentation (the “Questions of Love” from the *Filocolo*), and plot (from the *Elegy of Madonna Fiammetta* and *Decameron*). Fonte’s text also draws from the *Decameron*’s brigata in its dialogue form, but she, like de Pizan, directly references Boccaccio, invoking stories from the *Decameron*.

This chapter contributes to two growing fields of scholarship. First, identifying Boccaccio’s presence in these fifteenth- and sixteenth-century texts enhances our
understanding of Boccaccio’s legacy in the Renaissance and his continuing influence over Italian and European literature. Scholars have frequently identified Petrarch, Boccaccio’s friend and fellow “crown” of Italian literature, as the dominant literary model of the Renaissance. Recent criticism, however, has sought to reestablish the significance of Boccaccio’s literature in this period, investigating “how Boccaccio himself became a source and… what it meant to follow a Boccaccian model.” Reading these three authors together shows us what is at stake in their embracing of Boccaccio, and what that meant, in particular, for how they defended their sex.


7 Eisner and Lummus, A Boccaccian Renaissance, xviii.
Second, the chapter contributes to a rich body of criticism concerning women writers of the Renaissance and the Reformation. Scholars such as Virginia Cox and Sarah Gwyneth Ross have identified and explored trends in women’s writing and intellectual development in this era. Other studies have considered the works of individual authors, such as Gaspara Stampa and Veronica Franco. This chapter recognizes the individuality of each work, but by linking all three writers, this chapter demonstrates the breadth of the ongoing debate about the nature and status of women in Renaissance Europe. I show that the defenses of women presented by de Pizan, Bigolina, and Fonte were complex literary experiments that engaged with intellectual debates about the status of women in society and the gendered nature of knowledge.

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Christine de Pizan: The Book of the City of Ladies (1405)

Introduction

At the beginning of Book of the City of Ladies, Christine de Pizan, the work’s author and protagonist, finds herself dejected.10 Having read venerated authors who claim women are sinful, fickle, and weak-minded, she begins to believe that this might be the case. Three allegorical figures arrive to save her from this delusion: Reason, Rectitude, and Justice. In this regard, the work follows the rough outline of a medieval dream-vision, in the vein of Dante’s Comedy or Boethius’ Consolation of Philosophy. The three allegorical figures tell Christine she will build a city filled with virtuous, honorable, and intelligent women. When Christine accepts this task, she emphasizes the religious slant of her work by presenting herself as the “handmaiden” [chamberiere] of Reason, Rectitude and Justice, just as Mary presents herself as the handmaiden [ancilla] of the Lord at the Annunciation in Luke 1.38.11 De Pizan thus begins by legitimizing her endeavor and its feminine nature through the invocation of the most virtuous woman, the Virgin.12 Christine’s account of building the allegorical city entrusted to her by Reason, Rectitude, and Justice, is divided into three parts. In the first Book, Christine

10 From this point forward, when I speak of “de Pizan,” I intend the author, while when I mention “Christine,” I intend the protagonist.
12 For more on this connection see Rosalind Brown-Grant, “Introduction,” to de Pizan, The Book of the City of Ladies.
constructs the foundation of her city. In this section, Reason reminds Christine of examples women who contribute to society through knowledge, inventions, and even as rulers. The stories recounted here draw largely, but not solely, from Antiquity. In the second Book of the City, Rectitude helps Christine erect houses and walls. The ladies mentioned here are those who were blessed with the gift of prophecy, those who demonstrated the qualities of chastity, and those who were truly devoted to their families. De Pizan uses a mixture of Christian and pagan women as exempla. The third and final Book has Justice guide Christine to add the finishing touches on her city. Almost all the women mentioned in this last section are saints, including the scholar-saint, Katherine of Alexandria.

De Pizan was an Italian by birth and wrote only thirty years after Boccaccio’s death; in this sense, she was both temporally and geographically close to her predecessor. Although she composed City of Ladies in French, the tongue of her adopted country, her father, once a university professor in Bologna, oversaw her education. Given this background, scholars deduce that de Pizan consulted sources not only in French, but also in Latin and Italian.\textsuperscript{13} Her Italian heritage may have inclined her more toward Boccaccio’s works or simply have given her greater exposure to them. De Pizan even referred to herself as a “femme ytalienne,” another indication she embraced her Italian heritage.

roots. Whatever the reason, her affinity for Boccaccio comes to light in City of Ladies. She
borrows seventy-four women from On Famous Women another four from the
Decameron. Boccaccio’s Latin compendium is thus the primary source for her exempla
from Antiquity. For contemporary Christian examples, de Pizan relied upon Jean de
Vignay’s Miroir historial, a French translation excerpting Vincent of Beauvais’s Speculum
Maius.

De Pizan’s life and works have been studied extensively, and scholars have
dedicated significant attention to City of Ladies, yet interpretations that bring together
City of Ladies and Boccaccio’s On Famous Women generally follow the same approach:
they cast de Pizan’s text as a proto feminist rewriting of Boccaccio. These
interpretations result in an emphasis on the misogynist aspects of Boccaccio’s collection
and a simultaneous reduction of de Pizan’s innovative project to an updated version of

14 Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, “Christine de Pizan and the Political Life in Late Medieval France,” in
Christine de Pizan: A Casebook, ed. Barbara K. Altmann and Deborah L. McGrady (New York, NY: Routledge,
2003), 9.
15 Kevin Brownlee, “Christine de Pizan’s Canonical Authors: The Special Case of Boccaccio,” Comparative
Literature Studies 32, no. 3 (1995): 244–61, p. 245-6. The four women from the Decameron are Ghismonda
(IV.1), Lisabetta (IV.5), Zinevra, who de Pizan calls “the Wife of Bernabò” (II.9), and Griselda (X.10),
although de Pizan’s version was most likely derived from other retellings of the story.
17 Giovanna Angeli, “Encore sur Boccace et Christine de Pizan: remarques sur le De mulieribus claris et le
Livre de la cité des dames (‘Plourer, parler, fîler mist Dieu en femmes’ I,10),” Le moyen français 50 (2002):
115–35. Rosalind Brown-Grant, Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women: Reading Beyond Gender
Simms Holderness, “Feminism and the Fall: Boccaccio, Christine de Pizan, and Louise Labé,” Essays in
Quilligan, The Allegory of Female Authority: Christine de Pizan’s Cité Des Dames (Ithaca: Cornell University
Press, 1991). A notable exception is Lynn Shutters who tries to resist this form of reading: Lynn Shutters,
“Boccaccio, Christine de Pizan, and Marital Affection: The Case for Common Ground,” Comparative
Boccaccio’s compendium. I contend, rather, that the two works, despite their shared subject matter, should be read with their unique aims in mind. While Boccaccio wishes to write a historical collection for the pleasure and use of both men and women – “It is my belief that the accomplishments of these ladies will please women no less than men”\(^\text{18}\) – the purpose of de Pizan’s allegorical dream-vision is an explicit refutation of misogynist ideas about women. In constructing her arguments, de Pizan understandably transforms Boccaccio’s representations of women to suit her objectives. However, Boccaccio remains for her an \textit{auctor} and \textit{auctoritas} from which she draws her own literary authority.\(^\text{19}\) By identifying and analyzing de Pizan’s adaptations of Boccaccio, the multifaceted nature of her text comes to light. \textit{City of Ladies} not only defends the female sex by envisioning women in a new way, it also reconsiders the status of poetry, philosophy, and vernacular languages.

While de Pizan explicitly dismisses a number of writers whose texts who disparage women – Ovid of the \textit{Ars Amatoria}, Jean de Meun’s \textit{Romance of the Rose}, Matheolus, and even Aristotle – she does not reject Boccaccio. From the first Book of \textit{City of Ladies}, de Pizan grants him an eminent status: he is the “great Italian author” [Bocae


l’Ytalian, qui fu grant poete]. Later, when recounting stories of intelligent women, Reason tells Christine: “My dear daughter, see how Boccaccio himself echoes what I’ve been saying and note how much he approves of learning in a woman and praises them for it” [Fille chiere, peus veoir comment cellui aucteur Bocace tesmongne ce que je t’ay dit et comment il loe et appreuve science en femme]. This praise of Boccaccio contrasts with her criticism of other authors. Of the Italian writer, Cecco d’Ascoli, Christine declares “He says some extraordinarily unpleasant things which are worse than anything else I’ve ever read and which shouldn’t be repeated by anybody with any sense” [dit abominacions merveilleuses plus que nul autre et teles que ilz ne font a reciter de personne qui ait entendement]. Similarly, Reason criticizes Matheolus: “You very often see old men such as these going around saying vile and disgusting things, as in the case of your Matheolus, who freely admits that he is just an impotent old man who would still like to satisfy his desires” [Et voit on communement tieulx viellars parler lubrement et deshonnestement, ainsi que tu le peux veoir proprement de Metheolus, qui confesse lui mesmes estoit viellart, plain de voulenté, et non puissance.] Strangely enough, this reproach is one Boccaccio himself claims to have received from his critics in the Decameron: “Others… have said that it is not good for a man of my age to engage in such pursuits as discussing the ways of women and providing for their pleasure”

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De Pizan, having read Boccaccio’s masterpiece and having incorporated some of its characters in *City of Ladies*, would be familiar with this criticism. Nevertheless, she rejects the image of Boccaccio as a lewd, misogynist, old man. Instead, she cites him at length as an author who supports her philosophy of women.

Of the numerous examples de Pizan gives of women capable of governing, learning, and inventing new forms of knowledge, this chapter focuses on three who also appear in Boccaccio’s *On Famous Women*: Cornificia, Sappho, and Carmenta. Transforming these Boccaccian biographies as part of her project of defending the female sex, de Pizan asserts that all women are capable of learning and reaching philosophical knowledge. These biographies also stage questions about the nature of knowledge, language, and the relationship of philosophy and poetry, allowing de Pizan to assert her own intellectual authority as a poet-philosopher.

**Cornificia**

Cornificia, according to Boccaccio, was a poet during the reign of Octavian. De Pizan keeps the main features of Boccaccio’s biography, but makes small adjustments that emphasize Cornificia’s learning and reinforce de Pizan’s arguments about women’s intellectual capabilities. In de Pizan’s retelling, Cornificia “became an excellent and

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25 Boccaccio, *On Famous Women*, Ch. LXXXVI, 352-355
learned poet not solely in the field of poetry itself but also in philosophy, which she just drank in as if it were mother’s milk. She was so motivated to excel in all the different disciplines that she soon outshone her brother, himself no mean poet, in all branches of scholarship” [qu’elle fu souveraine poete, et non pas tant seulement en la science de poesie fu tres flourissant et experte, ains semblait qu’elle fust nourrie du lait et de la doctrine de parfaicte philosophie. Car elle volt sentir et savoir de toutes sciences qu’elle apprit souverainement en tant que son frere, qui tres grant poete estoit, passa en toute excellence de clergie].26 De Pizan’s version insists that Cornificia “outshone” her brother, rather than simply equaling him underscoring that women not only reach the same heights as men but can even surpass them.27

Reworking Boccaccio’s text, de Pizan also expands the field of Cornificia’s learning from poetry to philosophy and finally to “all branches of scholarship.” On the one hand, this broadening of Cornificia’s erudition is a departure from Boccaccio’s account in On Famous Women, where her accomplishments are solely poetic. On the other, however, the connection between poetry and philosophy teased out by de Pizan echoes Boccaccio’s reflections in Genealogy of the Pagan Gods, where poetry and philosophy are judged more alike than different since both strive to transmit truth to

27 In Boccaccio, Cornificia was “just as celebrate as her brother Cornificius” [eque esset illustris in Gloria], LXXXVI.2.
their readers. In adapting Cornificia’s biography, de Pizan therefore does change Boccaccio’s representation from *On Famous Women*, but, at the same time, the elements she draws in from *Genealogy* strengthen her portrayal of the poet-philosopher Cornificia.

De Pizan further underscores Cornificia’s philosophical knowledge through a subtle change to Boccaccio’s metaphor. In *On Famous Women*, Boccaccio writes:

“Cornificia radiated such poetical learning that she seemed to have been nourished not by the milk of Italy but by the Castilian Spring” [tanto poetico effulsit dogmate, ut non ytalico lacte nutrita, sed Castalio videretur latice]. In this rendering, Boccaccio associates Cornificia with a symbol of poetry, the Castilian Spring, stressing her status as a poet over her geographical heritage. De Pizan’s text, however, accentuates the naturalness of Cornificia’s mastery over philosophy (rather than poetry): “not solely in the field of poetry itself but also in philosophy, which she just drank in as if it were mother’s milk” [et non pas tant seulement en la science de poesie fu tres flourissant et experte, ains sembloit qu’elle fust nourrie du lait et de la doctrine de parfaicte philosophie]. The focus of Cornificia’s achievements shifts from poetry to philosophy, highlighting the connecting between the two and women’s ability to excel at both.

By using the comparison of a mother’s nourishment, milk, both de Pizan and Boccaccio also invoke also the mother tongue: the vernacular. This image derives from

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28 For more on this see Chapter 3.
29 Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, LXXXVI.2.
Dante’s discussion of the mother tongue [maternem locutionem] in *De vulgari eloquentia* where the vernacular is presented as a natural language in contrast with the artificial *grammatica* of Latin.\(^{31}\) According to Dante the vernacular is also a language designated for women who do not read Latin.\(^{32}\) As I showed in Chapter 3, Boccaccio disrupts these distinctions between a masculine Latin and a feminine Italian in Carmenta’s biography in *On Famous Women*. De Pizan’s portrayal of Cornificia similarly gestures toward the elevation of the feminine and the vernacular. By reworking Boccaccio’s Latin metaphor, de Pizan suggests that poetry and philosophy could also be accessed through vernacular languages, passed on through mother’s milk. In doing so, she also hints at the nobility of her own project, written in French (her adopted mother tongue), and its ability to transmit philosophical knowledge.

In both de Pizan and Boccaccio, Cornificia serves as an example of what all women can achieve. After describing Cornificia’s accomplishments, Reason tells Christine: “God has given every woman a good brain which she could put to good use, if she so choses, in all the domains in which the most learned and renowned men excel” [Et dieu leur a donné le bel entendement pour ells appliquer, se ells veulent, en toutes

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\(^{32}\) See Introduction and Chapter 3.
les choses que les Glorieux et excellens hommes font]. Although de Pizan does not directly quote Boccaccio, her assertion brings to mind Boccaccio’s statement at the end of Cornificia’s biography: “Yet if women are willing to apply themselves to study, they share with men the ability to do everything that makes men famous” [cum omnia que gloriosos homines faciunt, si studiis insudare velint, habeant cum eis comunia].

Boccaccio frames this as Cornificia’s “rising above her own sex” but he does not suggest that women are inherently incapable of accomplishing what Cornificia has. If women had the appropriate training and study, they too could be like Cornificia. De Pizan does not interpret Boccaccio’s statements as a negative appraisal of women’s abilities as a sex. Instead, she uses his portrayal of Cornificia to maintain that all women are capable of intellectual pursuits and to defend her own philosophical, vernacular project.

**Sappho**

De Pizan further demonstrates women’s intellectual prowess and the connections between poetry and philosophy through the figure of Sappho. As in the case of Cornificia, de Pizan’s recasting of Sappho reflects an interest in and engagement with

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34 Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, LXXXVI.3. This is part of a longer diatribe about women who resign themselves to feminine roles: “How glorious it is for a woman to scorn womanish concerns and to turn her mind to the study of the great poets! Shame on slothful women and on those pitiful creatures who lack self-confidence! As if they were born for idleness and for the marriage bed, they convince themselves that they are useful only for the embraces of men, for giving birth, and for raising children. Yet if women are willing to apply themselves to study, they share with men the ability to do everything that makes men famous.”
themes that reach across Boccaccio’s works – in particular, his blurring of the boundary between philosophy and poetry. De Pizan’s chapter on Sappho begins with admiration for the poet’s “superb intellect” [hault entendement] and an acknowledgment that “she was a great expert in many different arts and sciences” [en plusieurs ars et sciences fu tres experte et parfonde].36 Later, Reason recounts a legend in which Sappho’s poetry was found under the pillow of Plato when he died. These changes, as well as de Pizan’s invocation of “the Greek woman, Leontium, an excellent philosopher” [Leonce, qui fu femme grecque… tres grant philosophe] at the end of the Sappho’s story, effectively connect Sappho’s poetic accomplishments with philosophical pursuits.37

In City of Ladies, de Pizan unambiguously associates Sappho’s poetry with philosophy. In Boccaccio, such a connection could be discerned from an intertextual reading of On Famous Women, Genealogy of the Pagan Gods, and the Eclogue “Saphos,” but it remains largely implicit.38 De Pizan, on the other hand, tells an anecdote that unequivocally asserts Sappho’s philosophical reach. City of Ladies claims that Horace attests that “a book of her [Sappho’s] verse was found under the pillow of the great philosopher Plato, Aristotle’s teacher, when he died” [quant Platon, le tres grant philosophe, qui fu maistre de Aristote, fu trespassé, on trouva le livre des dictiez de

36 De Pizan, City of Ladies, I.30. De Pizan, La città, 159.
37 For an extended discussion of Boccaccio’s portrayal of Leontium, see Chapter 3.
38 For more on Boccacico’s treatment of Sappho, see Chapter 3.
Sapho soubz son chevet. In this pithy account, de Pizan, not unlike Boccaccio in *Genealogy*, articulates an intimate link between poets and philosophers. However, this unusual report is not supported by Horace’s extant texts. The only preserved mention of Sappho in Horace are two debated lines in his Epistle I.xix.28-9.

Still, de Pizan’s anecdote has two crucial consequences. First, it ties two canonical male figures of poetry and philosophy, Horace and Plato, respectively, to the poetessa. Second, this story contradicts Plato’s banishment of poets from the Republic, a well-known facet of Plato’s philosophy in the Middle Age and Renaissance, and the subject of some controversy. Like de Pizan, Boccaccio refutes this idea in *Genealogy* when he aligns philosophers with poets: “If these disparagers still insist in spite of everything that poets are liars, I accuse the philosophers, Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates of sharing their guilt.”

By drawing from various works of Boccaccio’s, de Pizan creates a model of a woman whose intellect, and whose poetic production, penetrates the philosophical realm.

The question of Sappho’s inclusion or exclusion from philosophy is one that has endured across centuries. Page duBois, writing in 1995, highlighted the contentious relationship between Sapphic poetry and Platonic philosophy. What would it mean, she asked:

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To measure Sappho’s absence from the text of Plato, her expulsion and exclusion from the scene of philosophy? Is Sappho’s exclusion necessary? Are her body and its desires intolerable, her speech too lyrical, too hysterical, too caught up in the battles of love, scenes of marriage, physical longing for the beloved to participate in the sober work of philosophy, even an erotic philosophy like Plato’s?42

Yet Sappho’s reception in the medieval and early modern period, in Italy and France, in the texts of Boccaccio and de Pizan, points to a presence rather than an absence. De Pizan’s anecdote envisions a clear relationship between Sappho’s poetry and Plato’s thought. Sappho emerges as both a poet and a philosopher, an image of female intellectual authority crafted by Boccaccio and enhanced by de Pizan.

Through the figure of Sappho, de Pizan also asserts her competence as a reader and interpreter of Boccaccio. Reason describes Sappho by quoting extensively from Boccaccio.43 Then, she provides her own interpretation of the quoted material: “This description of Sappho by Boccaccio should be understood to refer to the depth of her learning and to the great erudition of her works” [Par ces choses que Bocace dist d’elle, doit estre entendu la parfondeur de son entendement et les livres qu’elle fist de si parfondes sciences].44 Thus, de Pizan, through the words of Reason, tells the reader precisely how to understand and interpret Boccaccio’s text. She exercises her literary and

43 On de Pizan’s use of the French translation of De mulieribus claris specifically in this passage see Brownlee, “Christine Transforms Boccaccio,” in Holmes and Stewart, Reconsidering Boccaccio, 249n11.
intellectual authority by rewriting Sappho from *On Famous Women* and accentuating her status as a philosopher.

**Nicostrata/Carmenta**

In addition to the examples of erudition that Cornificia and Sappho provide, Nicostrata, also known as Carmenta, serves as an exemplum of a woman who invented a new branch of knowledge. Boccaccio’s account of Carmenta is shortened by de Pizan, who removes some of his historical information, but enriches other details, increasing Carmenta’s influence over Italy and the Latin language. Where Boccaccio explains simply that Carmenta invented the alphabet and planted the seeds of grammar, de Pizan is more precise: “What she created was the ABC – the Latin alphabet – as well as the rules for constructing words, the distinction between vowels and consonants and the bases of the science of grammar” [c’est assavoir l’a.b.c. et l’ordenance du latin, l’assemblee d’icelles, et la difference des voyeux et des mutes et toute l’entrée de la science de grammaire]. She also places Carmenta at the center of etymological questions, an appropriate choice given that Carmenta’s role as inventor of the Latin language. Boccaccio tells us that the Latins called Nicostrata by the name Carmenta because she disclosed the future in verse, *carmen*. But de Pizan claims: “From this lady’s name, Carmentis, they also derived the Latin word *carmen* meaning “song.””

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dame Carmentis furent nommez dictiez carmen en latin]. De Pizan crafts a thoughtful a reversal of Boccaccio’s own (invented) rationalization for Carmenta’s dual naming, placing her not only at the origin of language but also of poetry.

De Pizan also compellingly attaches the Latin language to the Italians; a sentiment voiced by Boccaccio when he describes the Latin alphabet as the “singular glory” [eximii fulgoris]. Unlike Boccaccio, however, de Pizan shifts the focus of Carmenta’s biography by elaborating a linguistic history:

Furthermore, because ita in Latin is the most important affirmative term in that language, being the equivalent of oui in French, they did not stop at calling their own realm the land of the Latins, but went so far as to use the name Italy to refer to the whole country beyond their immediate borders

Et qui plus est, pour ce que yta en latin, qui vaut dire en François ouyl, est la souveraine affirmation d’icellui lengage latin, ne leur souffit mie encore que ycelle contree feust appellee terre latine. Ains vouldrent que tout le pays de oultre les mons, qui moult est grant et large et ou a maintes diverses contrees et seignouries, fust appellé Ytalye.

Her description concentrates on Carmenta’s enduring fame in Italy, as well as linguistic developments, while Boccaccio situates the Carmenta in a wider history. Boccaccio’s choice is in line with his statement in the introduction to On Famous Women that he wishes to give his readers, especially women, a fuller historical overview. De Pizan’s changes support her project of lauding remarkable women and presenting them as

46 De Pizan, City of Ladies, I.33. De Pizan, La città, 168.  
47 Boccaccio, On Famous Women, XXVII.17.  
48 De Pizan, City of Ladies, I.33. De Pizan, La città, 168.
exemplars to others. De Pizan also notably inserts the French vernacular here, drawing an equivalency with Latin, and alluding to the question of the vernacular’s status – an issue raised in Cornificia’s biography as well.

Despite additions and modifications, de Pizan relies significantly on the details found in *On Famous Women*, which, as we saw in the previous chapter, were not particular to ancient sources, but to Boccaccio’s own renderings. In the previous chapter, I showed that Boccaccio’s representations of erudite women were novel for the way they blended feminine traits with traditionally masculine forms of knowledge. De Pizan embraces Boccaccio’s models and reworks them as she sees fit in order to sustain her argument that these virtues and behaviors are not exceptional. Such potential is latent in all women. Through an analysis of de Pizan’s adaptation of Cornificia, Sappho, and Nicostrata, *City of Ladies* emerges as far more complex than a simple feminist rewriting of *On Famous Women*’s misogynist tone. Like Boccaccio, de Pizan also explores the relationship between poetry and philosophy, and women’s place within these disciplines. She constructs Boccaccio as an *auctor* and derives from him her literary and intellectual authority, envisioning a city of virtuous women capable of commanding knowledge through language, poetry, and philosophy.

**Giulia Bigolina: Urania (1555)**

*Urania* tells the story of a protagonist of the same name, who is devastated upon learning that her beloved, Fabio, has left her for a more beautiful woman. Spurred on by
her melancholy, Urania dresses as a man and leaves her hometown of Salerno. On her travels she meets a group of women, a group of men, and a noble lady named Emilia. Toward the end of her journey, Urania comes to Fabio’s rescue and the two reunite. In the modern, print edition, the text is divided into eight sections.49 The romance opens with a “Dedicatory Epistle,” in which Bigolina explains the aims of her project and dedicates the text to a nobleman, Bartolomeo Salvatico. The next section, “The Letter” briefly sets out the premise of the tale – Urania, having been abandoned by Fabio, writes a letter to him. The “Questions of Love” then recount Urania’s travels and discussion with a group of noblewomen while “The Worth of Women” tells of her encounter and debate with a group of men. “Life with Emilia” describes the strange bond that forms between Urania, dressed as a man, and Emilia. The final three sections tell of the rest of Urania’s journey, her reunion with Fabio, and her ultimate return to Salerno.

As mentioned previously, although Bigolina’s text, like de Pizan’s, defends the female sex, it does so most explicitly in a single chapter (“The Worth of Women”). Still, the romance is attuned to the problem of women’s status in society and their access to knowledge, and Bigolina explores such issues through various Boccaccian texts – not only On Famous Women. While a few of the erudite women from On Famous Women and City of Ladies make another appearance in Bigolina, she also draws on female figures and

49 For the English text I will refer to Giulia Bigolina, Urania: A Romance, ed. and trans. Valeria Finucci (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). Finucci clarifies that seven of the eight divisions are original to the manuscript of Urania. She adds the penultimate one – “The Love Traingle.” The Italian quotations are from Giulia Bigolina, Urania, ed. Valeria Finucci (Roma: Bulzoni, 2002).
literary devices from *Elegy of Madonna Fiammetta, Filocolo, and the Decameron*. Ultimately, by transforming Boccaccian sources and dramatizing gender dynamics, Bigolina’s romance suggests that women are just as capable and rational as men. Her protagonist, Urania, emerges as an erudite woman who persuasively make a case for all women’s moral and intellectual agency.

Bigolina’s texts have only recently become available to both Italian and English-speaking audiences, having been preserved solely in manuscript form for centuries.\(^{50}\) Thanks to the efforts of Valeria Finucci and Christopher Nissen, her surviving works now exist in edited and printed form for scholars and readers alike. Still, the scholarship concerning Bigolina’s literature is scarce, and her relationship to Boccaccio has yet to be considered in-depth.\(^{51}\) Finucci, in her introduction to Bigolina’s *Urania*, gives some starting points for scholars interested in investigating the links between the two. In particular, Finucci notes that a number of Bigolina’s sixteenth- and seventeenth-century critics connected her to Boccaccio. Historian Bernardino Scardenone, writing in 1560, recognized Bigolina’s novellas as Boccaccian, although he specified that hers were more chaste; Pietro Paolo Ribera, in 1609, also mentioned that Bigolina wrote adeptly in a

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\(^{50}\) Valeria Finucci’s edition is based off Ms. 98 at the Biblioteca Trivulziana in Milan, Italy.


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Boccaccian style. In Luca Assarino’s *Ragguagli di Cipro* (1642), Bigolina appears at the court of love in Cyprus where she is called upon to read and decipher a love letter written by Boccaccio for the lady Maria. Assarino grants Bigolina literary authority to be a reader and interpreter of Boccaccio.

The portrayal by Assarino and the assessments of others insinuate that Bigolina’s engagement with Boccaccio was not lost on these early readers and critics of her works. Thus, despite the availability of other literary models – such as Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso* or Baldassare Castiglione’s *Il Cortegiano*, the epistolary tradition of Isotta Nogarola and Laura Cereta, or debates like Tullia d’Aragona’s *Dialogue on the Infinity of Love* – Bigolina turned back to Boccaccio as a source. To demonstrate how Boccaccio permeates Bigolina’s literature, I will first consider how the beginning *Urania* resonates with the *Decameron*. I will then turn to explore the influence of Boccaccio’s *Elegy of Madonna Fiammetta* and *Decameron* II.9 on the figure of Urania. Next, I will analyze Bigolina’s rewriting of Boccaccio’s “Questions of Love” from the *Filcolo*, and I will end with an examination of “The Worth of Women” in which Bigolina invokes several figures from *On Famous Women*.

Neither the *Decameron* nor *Urania* is, on the surface, philosophical. As authors, Boccaccio and Bigolina distance their works from any explicit engagement with

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philosophy. While Boccaccio dismisses formal centers of learning in the Author’s Epilogue, Bigolina confronts the issue in the dedicatory letter that precedes *Urania*. She recalls how Giudizio, a small man with a single eye, appears to her and encourages her to write a composition (rather than paint a portrait) as a way to represent her intellect to the young man she loves. Yet Giudizio also warns her “you are neither Socrates nor Plato and cannot discuss the difficult and obscure steps of deep philosophy nor are you yet one of those celebrated poets such as Horace and Virgil” [già che tu non sei Socrate o Platone, che sì ti convenisse per gli difficili e oscuri passi della profonda filsofia passare, né ancora sei veruno di quei celebrati poeti come furono Orazio o Virgilio]. While Bigolina plays on ideas of feminine humility and the limits of feminine intellect, she also subverts it. She is not yet [ancora] a celebrated poet, but the possibility that she could be one is not eliminated. And, as we will see, Bigolina does not shy away from philosophical ideas, particularly as they impact women, despite this admonishment by Giudizio. Like Boccaccio, Bigolina weaves serious reflections into a text that might seem frivolous. However, unlike him, she presents her text as guided by a force greater than herself. In this sense, *Urania* mimics the opening of de Pizan’s *City of Ladies*. Both de Pizan and Bigolina are led by allegorical figures who sanction their work.

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Boccaccio’s early Italian prose piece, *Elegy of Madonna Fiammetta*, was most likely Bigolina’s only source for a vernacular first-person tale of abandoned womanhood. In *Urania*, Bigolina adopts and transforms elements of *Fiammetta*, blending them with other Boccaccian texts. Bigolina begins with the same premise as Boccaccio: an erudite noblewoman suffers when her lover falls for another. Bigolina maintains some characteristics of Boccaccio’s well-read, literate heroine. *Urania* is described as “properly learned in the vernacular and having the Muses for friends both in prose and in poetry” [nelle volgari lettere fosse assai convenevolmente dotta e che le Muse si nelle prose qual nelle rime le fossero amiche]. She further demonstrates her erudition in the letter to Fabio, through her judgments on the “Questions of Love,” and when she defends the female sex in the “Worth of Women.” *Fiammetta* similarly exercises intellectual authority through her high rhetoric, which is peppered with literary citations and references. *Fiammetta* reveals that she was “raised by a revered teacher from whom I learned all the manners suitable to a young noblewoman” [sotto reverenda maestra, qualunque costume a nobile giovane si conviene, apparai]. Such training probably

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55 She could have also been familiar with Ovid’s *Heroides* – either in Latin or in Italian translation.
56 Although *Urania* is not told in the first-person, its third-person narration focuses significantly on the protagonist’s thoughts and feelings. In fact, *Fiammetta* and *Urania* share an attention to the innerworkings of their protagonists’ minds for which they have both been dubbed “psychological novels.”
included reading and writing in the vernacular. Both Boccaccio and Bigolina create protagonists that are noble, educated women – anomalies, perhaps, but certainly not beyond the bounds of the possible for women in the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Although she embraces Fiammetta’s predicament and her erudition, Bigolina makes meaningful adjustments Boccaccio’s plot line and protagonist. In Boccaccio, Fiammetta is constrained to stay in Naples with her husband, awaiting news of the lover who has abandoned her. Urania, on the other hand, is mobile, traveling from Salerno to Tuscany dressed as a man. As we will see, these travels give Bigolina the opportunity to problematize gender dynamics and re-assert her protagonist’s intellectual capabilities. Bigolina also diverges from Boccaccio in presenting Urania’s virginal love for Fabio as virtuous, in contrast to the passionate and ardent love of Fiammetta for a man who is not her husband. Urania therefore is less controversial than Fiammetta in that she adheres to the traditional feminine value of chastity, potentially rendering her other, less-feminine behaviors more palatable. Moreover, by portraying Urania’s love as honorable rather than carnal, Bigolina anticipates – and avoids – typical critiques that link learned women to licentious behavior. Urania thus provides an uncorrupt example

ninfe fiorentine; Amorosa visione; Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta; Ninfale fiesolano, ed. Mario Marti, vol. 3, Opere minori in volgare (Milano: Rizzoli, 1971), 423.
60 Francesco da Barberino, Guglielmo Manzi, and Federico Ubaldini, Del reggimento e de’ costumi delle donne (Milano: G. Silvestri, 1842). For an extended discussion of women readers and writers in this period see Introduction.
of an erudite woman – much like the virtuous and intelligent female figures who populate de Pizan’s pages.

By blending the aspects of the abandoned Fiammetta of the *Elegy* with the chaste and loyal Zinevra of *Decameron* II.10, Bigolina crafts an intelligent female character who is beyond reproach. In the *Decameron*, Zinevra’s husband, Bernabò, bets Ambrogiuolo that his wife is virtuous. Determined to win the wager, Ambrogiuolo attempts to seduce Zinevra. When she proves unyielding, Ambrogiuolo formulates another plan. He sneaks a glimpse of Zinevra while sleeps and steals her garter and belt. Describing Zinevra’s body in detail and producing the garter and belt, Ambrogiuolo convinces Bernabò that Zinevra has been unfaithful. Bernabò orders her killed. Zinevra escapes and, dressed as a man, she manages to enter into the service of the Sultan. Eventually, she meets Ambrogiuolo again and tricks him into revealing the story of her misfortune before the Sultan and her husband, clearing her name and reuniting with her beloved. Despite the fact that Zinevra’s name invokes the Arthurian ‘Guinevere,’ an adulteress well-known for her affair with Lancelot, Boccaccio’s character is completely loyal and virtuous, as is Urania. In fact, both Urania and Zinevra embrace and protect their chastity. While the imposition of chastity is, in many ways, an exercise of patriarchal power over women, Zinevra and Urania both choose to remain chaste and faithful to their beloveds. In this
sense, they exercise judgment as moral and intellectual agents. They are not coerced; their choices are their own.61

Filtering Urania’s story through Zinevra’s raises questions about female mobility and agency. Concealed in men’s clothes, both Zinevra and Urania are able to travel without threat to their bodies and reputations – a freedom not possible in their female forms.62 Bigolina, expanding upon Boccaccio, dramatizes this reality through the figure of Emilia, a lady who travels with Urania, but believes Urania is Fabio, a handsome young man. When Urania’s true identity is finally revealed, she lies to preserve Emilia’s honor, pretending as though Emilia knew her true (female) identity all along. Bigolina shows us how precarious the chastity, and therefore honor and social status, of these women truly is. When Urania and Zinevra take on their male identities, they are not subject to these restrictions. Their freedom and transformation is even evident in language of the stories, which shifts to using the protagonists’ chosen male names and masculine pronouns.63 Bigolina’s adaptation of Zinevra’s story thus re-posit a question already present in Boccaccio but heightened here: if women need only to change their clothes to be recognized as having the agencies, freedoms, and abilities of men, is there any real difference between the female protagonists and their male lovers?

61 Although, of course, they make the most reasonable decisions within the existing power structures.
62 It’s worth noting that Zinevra flees out of duress, while Urania’s journey is a choice.
Allowing Urania to move throughout Italy also sets the stage for the fascinating
counters of later chapters that give the protagonist the opportunity to demonstrate her
rhetorical and reasoning skills. In crafting these interactions, Bigolina draws from yet
another Boccaccian woman: Fiammetta of the Filocolo (not to be confused with
Fiammetta of the Elegy). The Filocolo is a sprawling epic in which Boccaccio combines a
variety of literary traditions, yet one section in particular, the so-called “Questions of
Love,” has long been recognized as a precursor to the Decameron’s story-telling brigata.
Boccaccio’s protagonist, Florido, joins a group of young people in a garden, and stays
when they begin debating various questions of love. The group elects Fiammetta to be
Queen so that she presides over the inquiries and is responsible for making the final
judgment on each question. While the subject matter of the debate could be seen as
frivolous – it is generally concerned with the dynamics of courtly love– the structure of
the question and answer roughly mimics a scholastic disputation, and Fiammetta
assumes the role of magistra.64 The philosophical and academic nature of this exchange in
the Filocolo is reinforced by its treatment in a fifteenth-century manuscript. In the codex,
each of the questions of love opens with a Latin rubric, rather than the Italian ones used

64 For more on the format of disputations see: Celenza, Intellectual World, 10-15. Alex J. Novikoff, The
Medieval Culture of Disputation: Pedagogy, Practice, and Performance, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia:
throughout the rest of the text, marking them as though they were scholarly debates. Bigolina could have read Boccaccio in manuscripts like this one, and it’s possible that such presentations of the Filocolo influenced her view of the Questions of Love as an exercise in erudition rather than a trivial amorous expression.

The Filocolo surely inspired Bigolina’s own “Questions of Love.” In this chapter, a traveling Urania comes upon a group of women in “a pleasant grove with a lovely fountain protected from the southern rays of the sun” [un piacevol boschetto, dove era una bellissima fonte, la qual da verdi e diritti alberi che la circondavano era da meridionali raggi del sole difesa]. Bigolina, once more, adapts Boccaccian locations, narrative structures, and characters as a way to dramatize gender dynamics and highlight women’s potential for knowledge. The location recalls the locus amoenus of the Decameron, as well as the garden in the Filocolo in which Boccaccio’s Questions of Love take place. As the brigata welcomed Florido in the Filocolo, so the ladies welcome this stranger, Urania, into their group. Passing for a man, Urania calls herself as “Fabio,” and takes on the identity of her lover. She tells the ladies “My profession was wholly placed in the high study of vernacular letters and I enjoyed very much composing rhymes and prose” [la professione mia già tutta fu con sommo studio nelle volgari lettere posta e

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65 The manuscript, MS C199inf. at the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan, Italy, contains only the Filocolo. It is a paper manuscript completed by a single hand. The Latin rubrics are found on ff.99R-121R. For the complete catalog entry see: https://manus.iccu.sbn.it//opac_SchedaScheda.php?ID=31382.

compor rime e prose dillettandomi assai].\textsuperscript{67} The young women entreat her to stay and request her advice on a question they have been debating for some time.

Despite the similar settings, Bigolina’s text departs from Boccaccio’s in order to bring to the fore issues of gender and knowledge. In particular, the group’s gender dynamics shift significantly. In Boccaccio’s text, Fiammetta serves as the authority on love for a group of both men and women, but in \textit{Urania}, our female protagonist, acting as a man, speaks only with women. In a way, Boccaccio’s female queen is supplanted by a king – but one who is secretly a woman. With this new gender breakdown, concerns and questions in \textit{Urania} are less about how men and women navigate issues of love. Instead, they highlight the specific frustrations and perils faced by women. For instance, one of the ladies laments to Urania, “For you men prevent us from exercising the discipline of letters and the beautiful arts in order to keep all the glory for yourselves. Therefore, if love does not awaken our talents somewhat, we spend our unhappy lives empty and devoid of any pleasure and knowledge” [che voi uomini, acciò che la Gloria tutta sia di voi soli, ci impedite che nelle discipline delle lettere ne nelle belle e utili scienze si possiamo esercitare, onde se Amor qualche poco in noi non desta lo ingegno, questa nostra per lo vero infelicissima vita passiamo ignude e prive d’ogni piacere e sapere].\textsuperscript{68} In this unusual assertion, Bigolina plays on the philosophical idea of love that

ennobles – a notion typically applied to men – and relates it to women. On the one hand, this was an old idea inherited from courtly love; on the other, it had been re-elaborated by proponents of Neoplatonism in the Renaissance, like Marsilio Ficino. And just a few years before Bigolina wrote her romance, Tullia d’Aragona, had made a woman a key interlocutor on this question in her Dialogue on the Infinity of Love. Bigolina take the opportunity to link love and philosophy, while simultaneously censuring men who would bar women from intellectual pursuits.

Through her reworking of Boccaccio’s Questions of Love, Bigolina offers another critique of men, particularly those who would claim to wield knowledge when they do not. In the Filocolo, a gentlewoman asks Fiammetta if a woman should prefer a strong man, a courteous one, or a wise one. Fiammetta is unequivocal in her answer: a woman should direct her love to a wise man who will protect her honor and his own. The question reappears with slight variation in Urania – the women debate between young and old men as well as rich and poor men. Yet Urania gives a response rather close to Fiammetta’s: “It does not appear to me that you have to worry about the age, nobility, or wealth of the man you want to select for a lover, but you should be much more concerned that he is graced with the best mores and has some particular virtues” [a me non pare che tanto debbiate aver cura alla età, nobilitade o ricchezza di quello che

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70 Urania, trans. Finucci, 100-2. Urania, 104-5.
elegger per amante vi volete, quanto maggiormente dovete esser bene avvertite che
d’ottimi costumi sia ornato e di qualche particolar virtù si diletti]. As she expands on
desirable qualities in a man, she notes that “the wise young man knows more than the
old ignoramus” [più sa giovine accorto che ’l vecchio ignorante]. She also enumerates
the specific learning a lover should have: “…it would please me most if he were learned
in Greek, Latin, or the vernacular…” [a me più d’ogn’altra cosa aggradirebbe ch’egli
assai dotto nelle greche, nelle latine ed eziandio nelle volgari lettere fosse]. Urania
essentially describes a wise man as the best lover. But both Urania and Fiammetta note
that some men appear to be wise, or pretend to be wise, even when they are not. Urania
identifies those as the most dangerous men to be avoided at all costs. In this aspect of
their responses, both Urania and Fiammetta criticize the kind of men also found in
Decameron X.8 – those who masquerade as philosophers but are self-serving sophists at
best.74

One more crucial nod to Boccaccio occurs in the section of Urania entitled “The
Worth of Women.” The content of this chapter shares much with both de Pizan and
Fonte in its explicit refutation of misogynist ideas. In this chapter, Urania meets a group
of men, all of whom happen to be in love with the women who took part in the
Questions of Love. Still pretending to be a man herself, Urania instructs them on the

74 See Chapter 2 for an extended discussion of Decameron X.8.
value and status of women and men’s role in oppressing them. As with the group comprised solely of women in the previous chapter, the gender dynamic is again dramatized: the men believe they are listening to a man, when it is Urania, a woman, who uses reasoning and logic to convince them of the capacities of the female sex and their own shortcomings. Urania uses a number of examples from On Famous Women to defend women’s abilities and their good nature—just as de Pizan does in City of Ladies and as Fonte will in The Worth of Women. Addressing the belief that women were imperfect men (an tenacious idea first attributed to Aristotle), Urania reminds her male interlocutors “We see that rarely does any noble art, high science, or virtue exist among men that is not also found among women— if not of equal perfection, then at least only a little less perfect— to the degree that it has been permissible for women to be involved” [noi vediamo come tra gli uomini rade volte alcuna nobil arte, alta scienza, ovr’altra sorte di virtù si trovò mai che parimenti tra le donne se non di tanta perfezione almeno di poco minor non se ne ritrovesse ancora, tanto perció quanto a loro è tato lecito di potere entromettersi.] To support this point, Bigolina uses the examples of erudite womanhood that come from Boccaccio:

If you say that there have been in the sciences many learned men of whom there was such a poet, such an orator, such a philosopher, and such a man endowed with such and such virtue, one could answer that there have been a Sappho, a Carmenta, or a Hortensia among women and many others only slightly less

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learned and wise than the men mentioned and that in Athens women taught males in the academies of philosophy.

E se nelle mondane scienze dirette esser stati molti uomini sicenziati dell quali tale poeta, tale oratore, tale filosofo e tale d’altra qualità di virtù dotato si trovò, vi si potrebbe a questo rispondere che tra le donne vi son state una Saffo, una Carmenta, una Ortensia e molt’altre poco men de gli allegati uomini dotte e savie, e in Atene assai di quelle vi furono che nelle accademie di filosofia nelle cattedre a gli uomini scolari leggevano.76

The final point is not Boccaccio’s. But Bigolina extrapolates from the examples he provides, potentially influenced by other female figures in the cultural imaginary such as Diotima, Socrates’ teacher. His works allow her to revisit the problem of women and knowledge while asserting that women, are, in fact, capable of reaching philosophical heights. In Bigolina’s final sentence, we may also locate an echo of the Expositions, where Boccaccio claims: “We must recognize that the reading and studying of philosophy is not something confined to universities, schools, and disputations, it can oftentimes be found and learned within the hearts of men and women” [E dobbiamo credere non sempre nelle catedre, non sempre nelle scuole, non sempre nelle disputazioni leggersi e intendersi filosofia: ella si legge spessissimamente ne’ petti delli uomini e delle donne] (emphasis mine).77 In Bigolina’s imagining, however, women have entered the academies. They are in the cattedre and they can leggere filosofia even to men and so can Urania.

76 Urania, trans. Finucci, 110. Urania, 118.
77 Boccaccio, Expositions, Inf4.all.64.
Moderata Fonte: The Worth of Women (1600)

Moderata Fonte composed *The Worth of Women* shortly before her death in 1592, and it was published posthumously in 1600. Like both de Pizan and Bigolina, Fonte intervenes in what was, by that point, a centuries-old debate regarding the nature and status of women. While de Pizan adopts the dream-vision as her form, and Bigolina the romance, Fonte turns to the dialogue. Although traditionally considered a ‘masculine’ genre, scholars have noted that Renaissance women were portrayed as intervening voices in dialogues and even adopted the genre for their own writings. Fonte, embracing the dialogue as a way to explore and debate ideologies regarding women, “recharges what had, by this time, deteriorated into a somewhat sterile and formulaic academic exercise by bringing it back into contact with the reality of women’s lives.”

Fonte’s dialogue unfolds between seven noble Venetian ladies in a garden. The women, a group of friends from the upper echelons of Venetian society, meet at the home of Leonora. When the recently married Helena arrives, the topic of conversation turns to marriage and men. The ladies elect Adriana, the eldest of the group, to serve as Queen and moderate the discussion. Adriana divides the group into two: those who argue against men (Leonora, Cornelia, and Corinna) and those who will argue in favor

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of them (Helena, Virginia, and Lucretia). Already, some Boccaccian elements are apparent in Fonte’s work: a debating brigata, the locus amoenus, and an elected Queen. Katherine McKenna notes that this composition – seven noble ladies in a garden – mirrors Decameron Day VI, when the female storytellers set off on their own to the so-called Valle delle donne. Similarly, Janet Smarr identifies the Decameron as source material for Fonte’s debating brigata and polyphonic dialogue.

Fonte’s dialogue is ostensibly divided into two parts: on the first day, the women debate the merits of women and the men who wield power over them; on the second, they discuss natural philosophy and aspects of the material world. Cox has identified threads of continuity between the two seemingly distinct sections, demonstrating that the feminist concerns of the first day continue to permeate the second. Silvia Magnanini has shown that the second day is an adaptation of the selva tradition, which allows Fonte to create “a classroom devoid of gender hierarchies,” where the female characters can “explore together fields previously ignored in the female curriculum.” Fonte thus creates a work that not only reflects upon women’s capabilities and eschews misogynist ideas, but also raises questions about the boundaries of knowledge and women’s access to it.

81 Smarr, Joining the Conversation: Dialogues by Renaissance Women, 190-230.
82 Cox, “Introduction,” to Worth of Women, 9-12.
In *The Worth of Women*, Fonte does not use Boccaccio as her principal source. In this respect, her text differs significantly from de Pizan’s *City of Ladies* and Bigolina’s *Urania*, both of which made extensive use of Boccaccian figures or narrative structures. We might attribute this difference, on the one hand, to the wealth of material available to Fonte. On the other, the decision to cite and adapt various sources allows Fonte to display a breadth of knowledge in *The Worth of Women*, arguably her main objective on the debate’s second day.84 Still, as in the case of de Pizan, Fonte explicitly names Boccaccio and references his works as part of her defense of women. Fonte’s embrace of Boccaccio is notable as well, since her near-contemporary, Lucrezia Marinella, called for the destruction of Boccaccio’s thought in her own defense of women, *La nobiltà et l’eccellenza delle donne co’ diffetti et mancamenti de gli uomini* (1601).85 Through the invocation of erudite figures from *On Famous Women* and the tale of *Decameron* V.1, Fonte recasts issues of women and knowledge first raised in Boccaccio in order to present her protagonists, and women more broadly, as intellectual and ethical subjects.

As in de Pizan’s *City of Ladies* and Bigolina’s “The Worth of Women,” the poetesse and filosofe of *On Famous Women* appear as exempla of erudition in Fonte. When the character Leonora argues that women can be both strong and clever, she reminds the

84 Magnanini, “Una Selva.”
other ladies: “of Camilla, of Penthesilea… And what shall I say where letters are concerned… it was a woman, Carmenta, who first invented the alphabet, and poems are called carmina after her. And what shall I say of Sappho, who was counted among the sages of Athens?” [Camilla, Pantasilea… Delle lettere non accade parlarne, poiché si sa prima che Carmente fu inventrice di esse, dal cui nome son chiamati i versi carmi. Di Saffo che vi potrei dire, che fu annoverata tra i savi d’Atene?] While this list may seem cursory, Fonte’s depiction of Boccaccio’s figures is filled with rich details. Sappho, for instance, like her precursor in City of Ladies, is tied to philosophical learning. Fonte’s image of the poetess as “among the sages of Athens” also echoes Bigolina’s portrayal of Sappho and her claim that women taught men in the Greek academies. Fonte thus draws on the tradition, found first in Boccaccio, of presenting Sappho as a bridge between the realms of literature and philosophy. And Fonte herself undertakes an attempt to bridge these realms in her dialogue. Like de Pizan, Fonte also insists that the word for poetry, carmen, derives from Carmenta’s name (a reversal of the etymology presented in Boccaccio), placing a woman at the origin and center of poetic production. Finally, Camilla and Penthesilea appear as examples of notable warriors in this list, but their place alongside the erudite women reminds us that Boccaccio placed these virtuous warriors alongside philosophers in the Expositions.

86 Fonte, Worth, 100-101. All Italian quotations are from Moderata Fonte, Il merito delle donne, ed. Adriana Chemello (Mirano-Venezia: Editrice Eidos, 1988), 62.
87 See Chapter 1.
In addition to this implicit reference to Boccaccio’s *On Famous Women*, Fonte explicitly cites two *Decameron* tales: V.1 and V.9. Fonte’s characters presumably mention these stories as evidence to support their assertions in the dialogue: Cimone (V.1) serves as an example of a man ennobled by love for a woman and the story of Federigo degli Alberghi (V.9) proves that a falcon can be delicious. Yet the *Decameron* tales are more complex than the simple points they illustrate for Fonte’s speakers. In fact, the novella of Cimone (V.1) contributes another viewpoint to the dialogue rather than simply confirming the speaker’s argument and closing off discussion. Fonte’s use of this novella has been read as a recasting of the Cimone tale in which she highlights women’s ability to be an enlightening force rather than love’s.88 However, this reading overlooks a crucial aspect of *Decameron* V.1: Cimone might appear to be ennobled, but his brutish behavior persists even after his transformation. I contend that Fonte’s citation of the story illustrates two concerns that are central to her dialogue: men’s mistreatment of women and their monopoly over knowledge – a monopoly Fonte herself challenges on the second day of the dialogue.

In *Decameron* V.1, the oafish Cimone stumbles upon a beautiful woman, Iphigenia, in the forest and falls in love. In a short time “he not only acquired the rudiments of learning but became a paragon of elegance and wit” [non solamente le

Despite Cimone’s new status *tra filosofanti* [among those who study philosophy], he commits horrific acts in pursuit of Iphigenia. He attacks the ship carrying his beloved to her nuptials and ends up imprisoned after the bloody battle. While Cimone remains in prison, a double marriage is arranged for the recovered Iphigenia and the lady Cassandra. Lysimachus, a senator in love with Cassandra, hopes to stop the wedding, so he releases Cimone and enlists his help in disrupting the wedding and stealing the women. After a successful raid, they go to Crete, where they marry before returning to their respective homelands.

The tale’s sense of “all’s well that ends well” is overshadowed by men who exploit power and knowledge for their own use (and the distress of the female characters). Even when Cimone has become *valorosissimo tra’ filosofanti* he still behaves as a brute. His refusal to change his name, which the narrator tells us signified his uncouth nature, implies an enduring brutishness despite the new veneer of a virtuous, well-mannered man. Even with knowledge, Cimone fails to embrace the *Decameron’s* standards of humanity, which would demand he have compassion for others, particularly the woman he loves. Cimone, in this way, recalls the Titus and Gisippus, the misguided philosophers of *Decameron* X.8. The tales are connected by another thread as well: the name given to Cimone’s father, Aristippus, is also given to the philosopher

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89 *Decameron*, trans. McWilliam, 370; *Decameron*, 598.
90 See Chapter 2.
under whom Titus and Gisippus study. Therefore, like Titus and Gisppus, Cimone is the worst kind of enlightened man – one who appears to be virtuous but is not. In fact, he is precisely the type of learned lover criticized by Bigolina in the “Questions of Love” and Fiammetta in the *Filocolo*.

Thus, when the young lady Corinna cites *Decameron* V.1 as an example that “that men study at all, that they cultivate virtues, that they groom themselves and become well-bred men of the world… is all due to women. Just look at the examples of Cimone and many others,” [Così se l’uomo studia, se impara virtù, sa va polito, se diviene accorto, e ben creato… di tutto ciò ne son causa le donne, come avvence (per esempio) a Cimone e a molti altri],

91 she also undercuts the argument. The story is not only about Cimone’s transformation but also his lack of transformation. The tale tells us about knowledgeable men who use philosophy in their own self-serving fashion. Fonte, a keen reader and writer, introduces another possibility into the dialogue when she cites Boccaccio: that men may not be enlightened at all and that their control over knowledge will allow them to continue to treat women as inferiors. The vast and diverse knowledge presented in the second-day dialogue can thus be understood as Fonte’s antidote to men’s monopoly on philosophical knowledge.

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92 This is not unlike Bigolina’s claim that men prevent women from accessing knowledge in the “Questions of Love.”
That women unencumbered by men can pursue knowledge is best exemplified by Fonte’s Corinna: the intellectual of the group who lives and studies happily without a husband. Via this portrayal, Fonte inverts a common notion, elaborated by Boccaccio in the *Life of Dante*, that wise men should not take wives and instead devote themselves to their studies: “Let philosophers leave marriage to the rich and foolish, to nobles and to peasants, and let them take their delight with philosophy, a much better bride than any” [Lasci no i filosofanti lo sposarsi a’ ricchi stolti, a’ signori e a’ lavoratori, e essi con la filosofia si dilettino, molto migliore sposa che alcuna altra]. In his discussion of Dante, Boccaccio seems to be capitalizing on sexist tropes, creating a conflict between the pursuit of knowledge and taking a wife. Yet Fonte finds the possibility that the advice could apply to women as well. Lucretia praises Corinna: “by rejecting all contact with the falsest of creatures, men, you have escaped the tribulations of this world and are free to devote yourself to those glorious pursuits that will win you immortality” [rifiutando il commercio delli fallacissimi uomini, dandovi tutta alla virtù che vi faranno immortale].

Taking the place of the male philosopher who eschews matrimony, Corinna then recites a sonnet on the topic.

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94 Sara E. Diaz, “Authority and Misogamy in Boccaccio’s *Trattatello in laude di Dante*,” in Holmes and Stewart, *Reconsidering Boccaccio*.

While Fonte’s use of Boccaccio is perhaps not as all-encompassing as her predecessors, it allows her to explore ideas concerning women and knowledge that are at the center of her dialogue. Boccaccio’s texts inspire her to imagine a brigata, a garden filled with women, and female storytellers who can debate and discuss a variety of topics. Boccaccio’s *On Famous Women* also offers Fonte examples of erudite women. But these female figures not only give birth to lists and biographies on the pages they give Fonte the starting point for imagining a capable and rational female subject.

**Conclusion**

The three women writers presented in this chapter use Boccaccio on their own terms to pursue to their individual objectives and create new visions of women. Across centuries and languages, Boccaccio’s works remain inspirational for female authors, who engage questions about women’s access to knowledge. From these rewritings of Boccaccio’s literature, emerges the potential to recognize women as moral and intellectual agents and to reconceive of their relationship to philosophy. De Pizan, Bigolina, and Fonte create models of women philosophers within their texts, and, in turn, become women philosophers themselves.
Conclusion

In June 2020, *The Philosopher Queens*, a female-written, critical guide to women philosophers from Hypatia to Angela Davis will be released.1 It is a undoubtedly a product of the twenty-first century: a crowd-funded, Twitter-promoted volume, available in collectible hardcover (for the nostalgic millennial) or simple ebook (for the practical, or impoverished, student). And yet, even as the collection boldly stakes itself as in and of our current moment, it belongs to a long tradition of compendiums of female figures, authored by those seeking to rescue notable women from obscurity. In this sense, one of its forebearers is another compilation including women philosophers: Boccaccio’s *On Famous Women*. And while the women philosophers of Boccaccio’s pages are not the ones we find in *The Philosopher Queens*, they are a key part of the history of women and philosophy.

As the preceding chapters have demonstrated, Boccaccio grappled with the same question that animates the writings of Luce Irigaray and Adriana Cavarero, and even led to the campaign to print *The Philosopher Queens*: what is women’s place within Western philosophy? Too often, the answer has been marginalization and exclusion. Boccaccio, however, presents an alternative.

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In the first chapter, we examined how in his *Expositions*, Boccaccio connects the domestic sphere to the philosophical and undermines the notion that philosophy is only for erudite men. Women take center stage as those able to act ethically and seek truth in their daily lives, disrupting distinctions between theoretical and practical philosophies. Boccaccio also problematizes what constitutes ethical behavior for women, pushing the boundaries of the domestic and feminine. The second chapter revealed how even those lacking formal schooling, like Ghismonda of *Decameron* IV.1, can not only behave ethically, but also demonstrate an understanding of the moral principles that govern our world. In comparison with Ghismonda, Titus, a formally trained philosopher, fails to truly understand the principles of the universe, misusing his knowledge in selfish and destructive ways. The third chapter brought us to consider erudite women, those who engage with traditional learning, like poetry and philosophy. Boccaccio’s poet-philosopher came to light here – a woman able to access knowledge in Latin and the vernacular, through poetry and philosophy, a woman who could also share her knowledge with others. The final chapter illustrated how women writers of later generations transformed Boccaccio to imagine their own examples of women philosophers, making the case for women’s intellectual and literary authority.

Boccaccio’s works thus present not just one model of a woman philosopher but several. Like the multitude of thinkers found in *The Philosopher Queens*, the plurality of
women philosophers in Boccaccio challenges our inherited notion of what constitutes philosophy, to whom it belongs, and how we encounter it in our lives.
Appendix A

Decameron X.8, Titus and Gisippus

Translated by Jacopo Bracciolini

MS 141, ff. 137V-146R, Biblioteca Angelica, (Rome, Italy)

NB: I have transcribed the text as it appears in the manuscript, maintaining line breaks, errors, and scribal markings when possible. Words marked with an asterisk (*) have been transcribed to the best of my ability, but I remain uncertain about their exact form. I am deeply grateful to Brendan McGlone and Jonathan Meyer for their assistance with this transcription. Any errors are my own.

f. 137V
Volenti* mihi pridie Iohannis Boccaccii quedam volumina ut materno sermone eloquentiam hominis decantatam noscerem, ac ut populi verbis loquar, alterum Ciceronem vulgari stilo in omni dicendi genere perspicerem, forte eius fabule ad manus venerunt: ex his unam T. Quintii et Egesippi, que aperienti librum prima occurrerat, legere incepi: et uno, ut ita dicam, spiritu percurri. Subit statim cupidio latinam faciendi, cum exercendii* ingenii gratia tum ut rem lectione dignam pluribus legendam tra- derem: qui fortasse illam legere respiciunt. Nec turpe

f. 138R
existimavi, quemadmodum peregrina et graeca nobis legenda dantur, sic quoque hec patrio sermone scripta, in quibus aliqua inest vel voluptas vel doctrina, latius cognoscenda dari. Territus tamen detrahentium et eorum, quibus aliena industria labori simul et dolori
est, invidia, quorum magna est copia, partim existiman-
tium operam in re tam tenui non esse ponendam tamquam
viro indigna: partim ducentium, etsi impendi utile sit,
tamen a me non suisse tentandum: supersedere statueram,
memoria postmodum repetens eundem ipsum Boccaccium
et Leonardum Aretinum, viros clarissimos, nonnullas
convertisse, nec illis egregiis viris dedecori suisse. Ego
quoque timendum non iudicavi, non quod* me assecuturum
 sperem, quod ipsi adepti sunt, nec mihi idem licere, ut
de Socrate scribit Cicero: neque enim is sum qui talibus
viris me comparare velim; sed quod videam voluptate
maledicendi captos, nisi nium impudentes esse velint,
quieturos, nec mihi vitio daturos quod illis honoris fuit.
Tibi vero, pater amplissime, has meas ineptias dicavi, cum
ut ex viri auctoritate maior sit libello gratia, tum quod
detractores in tantam obloquendi licentiam haud descen-
suros arbitror, sed in tuo nomine acquieturos: presertim
cum ea lege lucubrationem hanc ad te missam noverint:
ne in lucem edas nisi dignam que a ceteris legatur indi-
caveris: et quamquam nil nisi expolitum et viro doctum dignum
ad te deferre debere scio, tamen humanitate tua in
familiam nostrum* fretum habeo, utcunque erit,
gratissimo animo te accepturum: cum ab homine ami-
cissimo et tuis maximis virtutibus deditissimo pro-

Octavio, qui postmodum Augustus cognominatus est, tri-
umviro rempublicam Romanam regente, erat Rome vir nobilis,
P. Quintius Fulvius, qui cum T. filium* indolis magne
adolescentem haberet, illum ut philosophie operam dare, Athe-
nas misit: Chremetique, eius urbis civi inclito, et ob vetus
hospitium sibi familiaritate coniuncta, commendavit. Ab
eo susceptus domi Titus Aristippo phylosopho in disciplinam
traditus est, et una secum filius Egesippus. Hos inter cum propter*
frequentem domi et foris consuetudinem tum etiam
morum similitudinem ea amicitia contracta est, quam preter mortem casus nullus dirimere potuerit. Accedebat his studiorum equalitas, quibus ita operam dabant, ut parem gloriam ex illis assequi velle viderentur. Sic igitur cum triennium sub Aristippo vixissent Chremetique ita charus esset Titus ut non facile discerneretur, quorum alterum magis diligeret aut filium existimaret, Chremes vita functus est: cuius mortem tantum meroris et luctus attulisse Tito quantum filio amici omnes et propinqui facile indicarunt. Haud multo post rebus suis compositis Egesippus amicorum et Titi cohortationibus uxorem cepit: eximia forma virginem eius urbis nobilem atque opulentam nomine Sophroniam. Cum autem nuptiarum tempus appropinquaret, rogatus ab Egesippo Titus secum ad eam videndam: nondum enim illam conspexerat: pro-

fedum execrandumque pretermitte." His et simillibus in hanc sententiam aciescenti, ratione appetitum superante, voluptas contraria inimicaque rationi alimenta igni suggerens, animo dubio atque maximis tempestatibus exagitato diversa suadens, in huiusce modi verba vocem erumpentem miser audire videbatur: "Verum quid ex agis? Quid moraris, Tite? Cur ea consilio regere tentas que consilio carent? Quin potius naturam ducem et voluntatem tuam sequere: cum ea amoris vis sit ut nullis legibus teneatur eiusque impulsi filii nefandos matrum concubitus appetiverint, patres liberis, fratres sororibus, noverce aliquin invisis* se immiscuerint: cur mihi dedecori daturum quemquam aut reprehensurum existimem, quod non filiam, matrem, sororemve, aut sanguine convictam, sed amici uxorem amaverim? Et hanc presertim que cuicunque nupta foret ob eius egregias virtutes ac praclare faciam amari digna erat. Fata culpanda sunt, que eam Egesippi quam alterius esse maluerunt. Ea est preterea etas mea que facile amori obnoxia est, et in qua multo plus illius faces quam ratio possint, omniaque errata non difficile veniam consequantur. Quare que cuicunque amor vult, ea mihi placeant necesse est. Severiores mores etati maturiori conveniunt." Hec aliaque eiusmodi alternantem, cum plurimos dies ac noctes amor in varias partes ageret, ita ut nec alimeta corpori preberet, nec vero* unquam quiesceret, debilitate vires superante, in morbum incidit. Egesippus cum primo victus abstinentiam, deinde vecloriam quandam ac vultus mutationem in eo notasset, postmodum quoque egrotum videret, moleste id ferens et nunquam ab eius latere discedens, sedulo illum consolari nitebatur, causam valitudinis adverse et tantarum cogitationum summis precibus sibi aperiri postulans. Plurimas Titus cum simulasset et veluti inanes Egesippus exigeret reiiceret, vehementius instare cepit. Quamobrem eius assiduis

f. 139V

agis? Quid moraris, Tite? Cur ea consilio regere tentas que consilio carent? Quin potius naturam ducem et voluntatem tuam sequere: cum ea amoris vis sit ut nullis legibus teneatur eiusque impulsi filii nefandos matrum concubitus appetiverint, patres liberis, fratres sororibus, noverce aliquin invisis* se immiscuerint: cur mihi dedecori daturum quemquam aut reprehensurum existimem, quod non filiam, matrem, sororemve, aut sanguine convictam, sed amici uxorem amaverim? Et hanc presertim que cuicunque nupta foret ob eius egregias virtutes ac praclare faciam amari digna erat. Fata culpanda sunt, que eam Egesippi quam alterius esse maluerunt. Ea est preterea etas mea que facile amori obnoxia est, et in qua multo plus illius faces quam ratio possint, omniaque errata non difficile veniam consequantur. Quare que cuicunque amor vult, ea mihi placeant necesse est. Severiores mores etati maturiori conveniunt." Hec aliaque eiusmodi alternantem, cum plurimos dies ac noctes amor in varias partes ageret, ita ut nec alimeta corpori preberet, nec vero* unquam quiesceret, debilitate vires superante, in morbum incidit. Egesippus cum primo victus abstinentiam, deinde vecloriam quandam ac vultus mutationem in eo notasset, postmodum quoque egrotum videret, moleste id ferens et nunquam ab eius latere discedens, sedulo illum consolari nitebatur, causam valitudinis adverse et tantarum cogitationum summis precibus sibi aperiri postulans. Plurimas Titus cum simulasset et veluti inanes Egesippus exigeret reiiceret, vehementius instare cepit. Quamobrem eius assiduis

f. 140R

instigationibus coactus Titus lachrimis obortis in hunc
modum respondit: “Egesippe, si ita diis immortalibus vi-
sum esset, satius mihi mori fuisset quam vivendo eo me
deductum a fortuna cernere ut, cum virtutis et pro-
tatis mee periculum facere necessarium fuisset*, vinci eam*
maximo* meo dedecore videam. Exspecto tamen, quod cito
futurum spero, dignum tanto sceleri premium: extre-
mum vite mee scilicet diem. Mihi hac misera inhone-
staque vita certe erit iucundior.” Omnibus deinde ordine
expositis, aperit salutem suam omnem in Sophronia
positam esse: sed cum cognoscat quantum hoc suum deside-
rium ab honestate atque ipsorum amicitia alienum sit,
cecum reliquum saluti sue esse remedium optare [quam]
mortem: quam propediem affuturam speraret, ut tanti
sceleris penas daret. Egesippus his* auditus, ut qui amore
virginis captus erat, cogitabundus primo aliquantulum
substitit: tamen cum pluris amici vitam, quam* in discri-
men adductum videbat, quam femellam unam faceret,
“Si tu,” inquit, “charissime Tite, consolatione ad presens non
indigere, vehementer de te ipso tecum conquererer:
tanquam* qui me tamdiu tuum gravissimum dolorem ce-
lando amicitie, que maxima inter nos est, vincula pol-
lueris: que turpia pariter atque honesta aperire eos inter
se vult, ut ex honestis voluptatem una capiant, tur-
pia vero alterius consiliis animo evellantur; quamvis* quod
tu tantopere doles nec turpe sit nec reprehendendum.
Nam si Sophroniam ardenter amas, nulla me admiratio
tenet: cui et illius pulchritudo et tui magnitude […]
perspecta est. Verum quo equius eam amas, eo ini-

f. 140V
quiui fortunam accusare tacite visus es, quod mihi il-
lam concesserit: quasi tibi persuaseris cuicumque alii nupta
foret, eam honestius abs te amari potuisses: cum nec
melius ab eadem ferior potuerit, quam eam mihi in uxorem
dari, quod* amicorum comunia omnia semper existimavi.
Quod certe si alteri nupsisset, desperandum erat, cum
is eam sibi maluisset, et suum amore quam tuo quamvis iu-
stissimo pretulisset. Quare cum humano ingenio ista
fieri melius non potuerint, hos tuos questus lamentatio-
esque cohibe: pristinam valudinem revoca: tibique per-
suade, Sophroniam, cuius nuptias tanquam amate* libens expectabam, non nisi tuum cubile et coniugem ingress-Suram. Nam quid tibi mea amicitia grata esse debeat*, non video, neque quo tempore ea uti posses, si in re honesta et salutari et que vitam condonatura sit, non satisfe-
cero. Itaque ut valeas da operam: ad id tantum animum intende: letissimumque amoris tui exitum expecta.” Titus etsi libenter amici verba audierat, ut qui preter Sophr-
niam, cuius amore incensus erat, nihil cuperet: tamen quo liberalius Egesippus pollicebatur, eo magis verecundia ductus assentiri verebatur: quare lachrimis compressis cum primus fari potuit: “Tua,” respondit, “Egesippe, vera amicitia, quid mea agere intersit, mihi ostendit: quapropter* dii prohbeant, ut quam tibi concesserunt, ego abs te re-
cipiam: quos, si me ea dignum indicassent, nulli preterquam mihi fuisse daturos, scire te non dubito. Illorum igitur electionem destinatique fati donum sequere haud contem-
nendum: et ego in lachrimis et squalore, que mihi velut tante rei indigno preparavit, sine ut consumar

f. 141R
oro: ea vel vincam, quod tibi spero erit gratissimum, vel iis opprimar, summaque molestia nec minori pena liber ero.” Ad hec Egesippus, “Si sapientissimi philosophi clarissimique Grecie viri legem amicitie eam, Tite, esse no-
luerunt, ut utilitatis maxime et commodi assequendi causa vis amicho afferenda esset, necnon ab honesto 
discendendum iusserunt, si ea re questus uberrimus nec minor voluptas acquiescis importaretur, nunc est pro-
fecto tempus quando tu precibus meis iustis non acquie-
scis, neque voluntati honeste pares cum te ea, in qua in amicos uti licet, impellere decrevi: ut optata Sophro-
nia tua potiare. Ego enim quantum amoris vires va-
leant, probe novi, et quotiens perditos amantes variis 
modis ad miserabiles deflendosque exitus perduxerint. Te vero ita irrestitum eius laqueis video, ut desperandum sit ab incepto desistere atque eius ignibus absistere posse: quin potius longius progridiendo ut caderes fore necessarium: cuius morti haud multo post ego superessem. Vive igitur, et si te cura tui non tangit, amici saltem vita moveat:
cumque Sophronia vitam te ducturum existima: quoniam que tibi, ut ista est, cordi esset, non facile invenies. Ego vero in aliam amorem converso: utrique nostrum satisfactum abunde putabo, satis intelligens difficilius multo esse amicos quam uxorres invenire. Cum autem mulieres complures, amicum neminem reperturum me confidam, Sophroniam apud te esse malo, quam amico probatissimo carere. Quare si preces meae aliqum valent, oro obtestorque te, ut hunc tantum merorem deponas, et una tecum me consoleris, ac speres eam te animo iucunditatem aedepurum quam

f. 141V

venit: celebratisque de more nuptiis magno apparatu

f. 142R
magnaque civium frequentia, adveniente nocte, Egesippus cubiculum, in quo Sophronia erat, tanquam cum uxore dormiturus ingreditur. Sed cum omnes illis simul relictis abiissent, extinctis luminibus ad Titum tacitus proficiscitur, cuius cubiculum suo coniunctum erat, et ex uno in alterum facilis transitus, rogatque eum* ut cum Sophronia cubitum eat. Verecundia Titus motus, quod maxime optaverat, primo exequi recusabit: postremo ab Egesippo coactus, eo se conferens, cum ea concubuit, ut que se cum Egesippo iacere arbitraretur; eodem semper errore decepta donec Publio vita functo Titus Romam revocatus secum eam duducere instituit, diffideretque id se facere posse nisi Sophronie rem, ut gesta erat, narraret. Igitur ea et quem unum* credit in secretiori domus parte advocata, a principio exor sus omnia exponit: et quo facilius dictis suis fidem ahibet, multa que inter se acciderant enumerat. Illa his auditis, cum indignabunda et tacita aliquandiu utrunque oculis perlustrasset, lachrimas de Egesippi dolo paucis questa, talamum egressa domum ad parentes rediit, isque Egesippi dolos aperuit, asserens se non eius, ut credebant, sed Titi uxorem esse. Pater ut in atroci facinore perturbatus, statim rem ad cognatos defert: qui graviter et acerbe nimium pluribus invicem conquisti, cuncta Egesippi necessariis retulerunt: cui omnes infensi palam clamitabant, non reprehensione sed castigatione huius-modi inauditum per tot secula scelus dignum: ipse vero* cum multo nobiliior quam ipse sit eam nuptui tradiderit, gratias ingentes ab omnibus sibi agi debebant praedicabat. At Titus, cui omnia nota erant, cum animadverteret preter

f. 142V
equum eos provehi, nec ignoraret Grecorum moris esse ver bis et vanis rumoribus, quibus solis valent, obstrepere: at cum invenerint, qui eorum loquacitati obviam eat, tunc eos nedum humiles, sed abiectissimos fieri: ratus eorum inanem iactantiam et fandi largam copiam contundi oportere nec ulterior ferendos viro* Romano
et ingenio et animo, quo commodius fieri potuit, con-
vocatis in templo Egesippi et Sophronie cognatis in hunc
modum eos allocutus est: 'Vetus multorum philosophorum* sen-
tentia est: omnia que mortales operantur, queque sub
celo sunt, fatis et deorum providentia fieri et regi: ideoque
ea, veluti multo ante provisa sint, et suis coniuncta
causis necessitate quadam agi et finem sortiri arbitrantur,
etsi quidam sint qui necessitatem illam peractis rebus
imponant: que si omnia animadversa diligenter erunt,
luce clarius apparebit, nihil aliud esse, que acta sunt,
culpare, quam velle se diis nedum parem sed superiorem
esse, quos credendum est ratione perpetua nos nostraque
omnia disponere atque gubernare. Quare quam sint arro-
gantes, qui eorum operationes reprehendunt, et simul
quam stulti, qui eo temeritatis labantur, indicare facilli-
mum est. Quorum in numero, ni fallor, vos estis: Nam
quid aliud sibi vult Sophroniam mihi ab Egesippo
traditam damnare, quam deorum culpare providentiam?
qua statutum erat, ut ex eventis indicare possum,
ea meam, non alterius, uxorem futuram. Verum
omissa hac fatorum serie, quam multis, ut credant,
persuadere difficile est existimantibus deos huma-
narum rerum curam minime habere, recte ab Egesippo

f. 143R

factum pluribus rationibus ostendam: qua in re siquid
de me ipso superbius dixisse videbor, aut vos depres-
sisse, id non mee nature sed tempori, quod ita requirit,
tribuat velim. Vestre iste querele, continue insuper
lamentationes, a furore magis quam ratione ducte Egesip-
pum vituperant: quod is suo consilio mihi uxorem de-
derit, quam vos illi dederatis, cum summa laude dignus
sit iudicandus: primum quia, ut amicum decuit, fecit,
deinde quod vobis sapientius. Quid autem leges amicitie
velint, inpresentiarum non explicabo: illud tantum dicam,
amicitiam consanguinitatis vinculo potiorem esse: quo-
niam amicos eos habemus quos ipsi nobis elegimus, pa-
rentes vero* et cognatos quales fortuna largitur: quare
nulla vos admiratio tenere debet, si is amicitiam meam
vestre pretulit affinitati. Sed iis pretermissis, que vobis

f. 143V
uxor sit Sophronia, sed quod furtim tradita ab Egesippo cuius minime intererat, insciis iis quos equum fuerat non ignorasse, equo animo ferendi non sunt: cum recordati* liceat, quot nedum ignaris, sed etiam invitis parentibus sibi viros sumpserint: queve* falsa

f. 144R
sub coniugii spe cum amatoribus auffugerint: et quarum dolos partus prius quam lingua aperuerit: que singula ut cognatis placerent*, necessitas effecit. Quorum nihil Sophronie accidisse certum est. Ex innumeris quoque signis et plurimarum rerum eventu cum prospereret liquido* valeamus fortunam suos certos statutosqe fines variis modis deducere instituisses et consuevisses semper, quis, quod optime factum sit, ab Egesippo potius quam quo quovis altero factum esse egre ferat? Que vincula, quas cruces Egesippo dignas indicaretis, si corrumpi vel violari a me eam passus foret? Quid in illum faciendum fuit, si servo, si fugitivo tanquam latroni rapiendam dedisset: cum quia occulte solum, sed ut nobilem et ingenuam virginem decuit, hanc Tito concessit, Romano et ex senatorio ordine et qui eam ardentissime amaret, tam infesti estis? Sed his omissis, cum tempus instit*, quo Romam redire et Sophroniam ducere propositum sit, statui ordine vobis omnia aperire, que pro vestra summa prudentia (certus sum) bono letissimoque animo feretis: cum percipere possitis eam expleta libidine a me vobis violatam relinqui* potuisse maximo familie vestre dedecore, si injuriam vobis inferre voluissem, aut aliquam inurere maculam. Quorum cum nil factum esse videatis, ut optimis consulo amicis, omnes ut irarum causas abolere velitis, Sophroniam vita mea acceptiorem gratioremque mihi restituere: cui deorum consensu, virtute denique et summo Egesippi studio debetur: ut hinc vobis amicus summus, cognatus optimus discedam: et imposterum* vivam.
In Egesippum autem, ut vester is animus sit, qui esse

f. 144V
debet, eumque Titi loco habeatis, rogo et hortor, cum quicquam*
admiserit, quare sibi succensere debeatis: que si facere recusabis, ac conceptum virus effundere proseque-
mini, vobis invitis ac repugnantibus Egesippum hinc abducam: et cum Romam applicaver, eam, que mihi me-
rito debetur, restitui curabo, et infuturum quid indigna-
tio in animo Romano concepta possit, experiundo ut co-
gnoscatis efficiam.” His dictis Titus tanquam illos parvi* faceret*
relictis in templo omnibus, minabundus cum Egesippo di-
cessit. Illi cum suis verbis territi, tum eius affinitate
ducti, quippe qui existimarent melius esse hunc affinem habere
quam neutrum, Titum vero* etiam inimicum, comuni consen-
su eum adeuntes, pluribus de his que fecerat excu-
satione habita, Sophroniam illi tradidere: que amorem
omnem quo Egesippum amplectebatur in Titum trans-
ferre coact, petita de more licentia, paulo post cum viro
Romam navigavit. Egesippus vero, cum Athenis ab om-
nibus spretus viveret, haud molto* post ob civiles sedi-
tiones cum omni familia pulsus, in exilium abiit: quare
omnibus bonis spoliatus, ac ad summam inopiam re-
dactus, ita ut cibum indies querere cogeretur, necessita-
te ur gente Romam venire statuit, periculum factu-
rus, an que quondam beneficia in Titum congesisset,
e memoria illius excidissent. Igitur cum ad urbem ve-
nisset, illumque magna gratia apud suos esse cognoscet,
eius reditum expectaturus quadam di e edes
consedit. Redeunti tamen propter* eam in qua erat mise-
riam se offerre hominemque salutare ausus non est:
sed omni studio nixus est ut ab eo videretur, sperans

f. 145R
primo cognitum, deinde vocatum domum deduci cura-
turum. Verum Titus magno suorum comitatu re-
versus, cum illum pertransisset Egesippus visum
se, sed vitatum arbitratus, recordatus eorum que
quondam pro Tito fecisset, indignabundus ac melio-
rem fortunam desperans discessit. Nocte adventante
egestate oppressus, ignarus miser quo diverteret aut
cuius amplius auxilium imploraret, mortis quam vite
cupidior, in specum quandam, quam in solitudine urbis
errabundus invenerat, concessit: in qua humarum*

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rerum sortem ac fata sua infelicia culpando median
erme noctem cum transegisset, pre lassitudine dor-
mire cepit. Eo forte latrones duo confugientes cum
de prede divisse primo dissiderent, postremo ad gla-
dios tanquam ad arbitros rem redegissent, alter socio occiso
preda potitus abiit. Apparitores paulo post furti au-
tores querentes, speculam ingressi Egesippum, qui* aditum
ad mortem se invenisse ratus, inde non discesserat, ab-
straverunt, et ad pretorem: is M. Varro erat: dedu-
xerunt: a quo confessus in crucem tolli iussus et. Ade-
rat tunc casu in pretorio Titus: et audita damnatio-
nis causa reum quem diligenter intuebatur Egesip-
pum esse cognovit. Eius fortunam casumque admiratur,
et quatenus eo venisset animo volutans, simul quo
pacto amico summo auxilio esse posset, nec in re tam
dubia certaque ulla ei relictam viam cerneret, qua
salutae consuleret, nisi si se ipsum accusaret, confe-
stem magna voce exclamans Varro* inquit: “Damnna-
tionem huius miseri et innocentis revoca: ego enim

f. 145V
satis hoc uno crimine me deos immortales offendisse ar-
bitror: cum eum occidi quem tuu apparitores in specula
mortuum invenere, nisi verum huius insontis morte eos-
dem ledere perseveravero.” Varronem admiratum primo
dolor tenuit: quod in tanta hominum frequentia Titus hec
loquutus esset: deinde cum legibus parere cogeretur, evocato
Egesippo coram Tito inquit: “Quem te dementia cepit, ut
ultimo que nunquam admisisti fatereris? Cum hic illum a se oc-
cisum dicat, et tu non ignorares hanc confessionem mort-
tis supplicium manare.” Egesippus satis intelligens hec a
Tito pro salute sua agi, et susceptorum beneficiorum haud
inmemorem cupere suis meritis gratias referre, lachrimis
abortis, Varro* respondit: “Certe hunc occidi: Titi vero
pietas iam vae mea sera est.” Titus contra Egesippum ex-
cusans pretori persuadere conabatur, facinus a se commis-
sum coniectura affirmans: inermem et advenam in specu-
la somno oppressum profundo inventum, probabilem vide-
ric ratione insontem culpe illum esse. Manifesto etiam
posse perspici summam hominis calamitatem et fortu-
ne varietatem, suo arbitrio res humanas vertentem, ap-
petende mortis causam iustam ei prebere: quamobrem liberum*
dimiteret, in se vero animadverteret. Pretor altercatio-
nes horum admiratus, ac perspiciens neutrum patrati
facinoris esse conscium, quo pacto ambos absolvere posset
excogitabat: cum ecce P. Ambustius spei perdite ado-
lescens, famousque fur, innocentum motus misericordia,
ad Varronem veniens inquit: “Mea me malefacta, pre-
tor, cogunt, ut durum hanc questionem absolvam: nam
deus nescio quis me stimulat, meum tibi aperire facinus:

f. 146R
quare qui illum occidi me esse scito: hunc autem, cum socium
interfectissem, in specula dormientem a me conspectum. Titi
ad hanc diem vita acta satis excusat huiusmodi flagiti
expertem esse. De me ergo ut libet supplicium sume.” Iam
ad Augusti aures rei fama pervenerat, qui illis se adire
iussis et omnibus perceptis, ut Athenis Titus educatus esset,
ut ab amicissimo Sophroniam accepisset, ut extorris
Romam venisset, insontes verbis pluribus laudatos, Amb-
 gusta eorum causa liberos dimisit. Titus Egesippum
inreptitum quod ita de sua amicitia desperasset, domum
letus deduxit: ubi benigne humaniterque a Sophronia
susceptus, indutus quoque ut nobilitati eius et amicitie
conveniens erat. Soror Titi Fulvia cum dimidia bonorum*
suorum parte illi copulatur. Post hec Titus, “Egesippe,”
inquit, “tuum nunc est Romene esse velis, an Athenas
reverti, utcunque tibi commodum duxeris: mihi certe
iucundissimum erit, cum eque ac tu felicitate tua gau-
deam.” Sed Egesippus, cum hinc patrie caritas, ad quam liber
per Augustum reditus erat, hinc gratissima Titi amici-
tia eum detineret, Romae manere statuit: ubi iisdem
in edibus iucundissime ut eorum decebat amicitiam,
concordibus animis ad extremum usque vite diem vixere.
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Biography

Alyssa Madeline Granacki received her BA, magna cum laude, in History (with Honors) and Italian Studies from Duke University in 2011. She was selected as a member of Phi Beta Kappa and was the recipient of the Guido Mazzoni Award for Outstanding Italian Major. After graduation, Alyssa worked as a middle school teacher with Teach for America (2011-2013) and later taught English in Melfi, Italy as a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant (2013-2014). During her graduate studies, Alyssa was a James B. Duke fellow and her piece “Molti e molte: Gendering Knowledge in Dante’s Convivio,” won the Charles S. Grandgent Prize for best graduate essay from the Dante Society of America. Alyssa’s dissertation is supported by a Mellon-CES Dissertation Completion Fellowship, awarded by the Council for European Studies. Her research and writing have also been supported by various entities and projects at Duke University, including the Graduate School, the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, the Franklin Humanities Institute, the Romance Studies Department, and Mellon Humanities Writ Large grants.