Boccaccio’s Three Venuses

On the Convergence of Celestial and Transgressive Love in the Genealogie Deorum Gentilium Libri

DAVID LUMMUS

Transgressive love is a familiar commonplace in the works of Giovanni Boccaccio, in which he constantly pushes the boundaries of the morally and socially acceptable with his representations of erotic desire. The playful stories of debauchery and tragic stories of love gone wrong that fill the Decameron and the songs of concupiscent nympha and the laments of betrayed lovers that populate some of his other works have long led scholars to question the nature of his poetic employment of scenes of transgressive sexuality. In response to the pervasive idea that Boccacio’s poems and stories were all written in praise of earthly love, Robert Hollander forcefully argued, in his book Boccaccio’s Two Venuses, that Boccaccio’s depiction of love was based upon the dualistic separation of the celestial and the earthly varieties and that his depiction of carnal love was entirely ironic.1 Such a reading results in a moralist Boccaccio, the ambiguity of whose literary works is flattened in the name of moral clarity. If nothing more, however, Hollander’s division of Boccaccio’s concept of love into the two Venuses balanced out the naturalist Boccaccio, and put the author of the Decameron back into play as a poetic thinker. He was no longer the jolly hedonist that readers had for so long read with a scandalous smile, but a writer who engaged in a moral discourse in the vein of a Dante or a Chaucer.

Since Hollander’s provocative reading of Boccaccio’s “minor” works, scholars have continued to probe Boccaccio’s ethical engagement with questions of love both in the Decameron and elsewhere.2 Although there is scarcely a reader of Boccaccio’s oeuvre today who would not admit a greater amount of ambiguity in Boccaccio’s fictions, the nature of his ethical engagement remains a fundamental question, especially in

those moments dedicated to carnal love. A moral middle ground is still in the course of being cleared for Boccaccio; in his recent book, *Boccaccio’s Naked Muse*, Tobias Foster Gittes puts it well, when he writes that “Boccaccio’s ideal society is not an orgiastic colony dedicated to serving the senses . . . nor is it found on the upper reaches of Mount Asinaio where Filippo Balducci preaches his austere creed of abstinence from all worldly pleasures” (29). In one alternative to an unambiguous moralist reading, Giuseppe Mazzotta, in his classic study, *The World at Play in Boccaccio’s Decameron*, argues that Boccaccio’s tales go beyond the limits established by society in order to reform those very limits; literature transgresses and lives in the margins, always challenging the boundaries that seek to contain it. Playing with the literature’s relationship to life, Boccaccio dramatizes the transgression of public morality in order to expose the instable moral and linguistic foundations of the historical world. What Mazzotta calls the “process of degradation of literature into pornography” (70), which is familiar from the stories across the Decameron and from other works such as the *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine* is, in fact, Boccaccio’s way of engaging with the question of the nature of the truth, as he probes the possibilities that literature offers to mediate between a fixed metaphysical reality and a historical world in constant flux.

In making Boccaccio a moralist, Hollander was effectively arguing against the critical understanding of the writer as a naturalist, who—to quote Aldo Scaglione—was reacting to societal convention “in the name of a return to the wholesome purity of” a natural state of things (2). Gregory Stone, in his book *The Ethics of Nature in the Middle Ages*, has reconstructed Boccaccio’s moral universe in order to show how his so-called naturalism must be considered not in opposition to the stricures of culturally imposed morality, whether Nature be a positive or a negative reality. Not the Epicurean naturalist that Hollander sought to eliminate nor a jaded realist for whom human society was opposed to the harshness of the reality of nature, Stone points out that Boccaccio “is a naturalist in the sense that, for Boccaccio, it is natural, it is our most essential nature, that we are ‘caused to become’ in the unfolding of human history” (37), if we consider as “Nature” as the “universe of all things” (15). As for Boethius, the Chartistians, and Dante before him, for Boccaccio the cosmos, both moral and physical, was ruled by a hierarchy of forces that begins with divine love, as the force that moves all things. Beneath it fell Nature, as the locus of materiality, followed by “all things,” or the materiality of the world, and finally *physis* and *ethos*, the physical and moral effects of Nature. Thus, Boccaccio conceives of human society, its mores, and the process of human history within the
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To approach the question of Boccaccio’s ethics of love, then, we must first of all address the status of love as an effect of Nature that unfolds within human history; this is to say, we must trace the lines of convergence between love as ethos and the Love that moves the stars.

I would like to address this question from such a theoretical perspective by examining the three different Venuses that Boccaccio delineates in his humanist tome, the *Genealogie Deorum Gentilium Libri*. Here Boccaccio is engaged with the question of how poetry, as a polysemous product of the human imagination, can bridge the gap between cosmic forces and the behaviors of human beings. When viewed from the perspective of their interrelationship, the three figures of Venus, which represent three levels of cosmic love’s actualization in history, will be seen to link in a poetic synthesis the ethical world of man with the transcendent power of cosmic love. The first two Venuses are sisters who were invented as figures for love in the transition between the age of gold and the age of silver. The first is *Venus magna*, the planet and celestial Venus *genetrix*; the second Venus is a poetic representation of *voluptas*, the corporeal reality of the first Venus, and of the impulse to procreate; the third, collocated in the decadent generation of the third Jupiter, is both a poetic figure for *lascivia* and the historical Cyprian Venus *meretrix*, the founder of prostitution. My goal here is to elucidate Boccaccio’s treatment of the relationship between celestial and transgressive love in the *Genealogie*, and to suggest that he insinuates that any poetic representation of Venus, as a figure for love, must implicate the celestial power with the transgressive historical body of love. The result of such an implicit theory would be that each Venus and all poetic representations of Venusian love have the potentiality of being celestial or transgressive. It is a poetic theory of love according to which myths, and by extension any poetic narrative, may bridge the historical and the ideal, creating the possibility of a convergence between the representation of transgressive sexual practices and the moral sublime.

When Boccaccio first confronts the stories of Venus in Book Three of the *Genealogie*, among the progeny of *Coelum*, he tries to hold to a criterion of historical precision based on the information available in Cicero’s *De Natura Deorum*:

Venus magna ut ubi *De naturis deorum* scribit Cicero, Celi fuit filia et Diei, et cum preter hanc tres alias fuisset demonstret, hanc primam omnium asserit exstitisse. Attamen cum figmenta plurima circa Veneres indistincte comperiantur, his sumptis quae ad hanc spectare videbuntur, reliqua reliquis relinquemus, non quia hiuc adaptari non possint omnia, sed postquam alius attributa sunt, illis, dum de eis sermo fiet, apposuisse decentius est. (III.22.1, 7:336)
This is to say that the poetic record about Venus neglects to distinguish properly between the various instances of the goddess. For poets like Ovid and Virgil there was only a single Venus; they had melded stories about the three individual figures into a single poetic confusion. Boccaccio seeks to solve this poetic ambiguity through a process of historical separation of the myths’ allegorical layers, which does not take as its point of view the classical poets, but that of an unnamed primitive imagination.\textsuperscript{13} When added to his genealogical approach, such a process of division allows him to separate the three instantiations according to a diachronic and transcultural development.\textsuperscript{14} According to Boccaccio, the first Venus was born in the human imagination as a figure for the morning star and as the daughter of \textit{Coelum} and \textit{Dies}, figures for the heavens and daylight respectively. Having given the name Venus to the planet and invested it with a divine will later poets attributed to it a series of other meanings that were transmitted to the poets of classical antiquity: for Ovid she was the mother of the twin Loves (\textit{geminorum mater amorum});\textsuperscript{15} for Homer she was depicted with a belt, which meant that she intervenes in legitimate marriages (\textit{legitimis intervenire nuptiis}). Boccaccio says that these poetic inventions were for the most part derived from the astrological properties of the planet Venus, or “a proprietatibus Veneris planete sumpta” (III.22.4, 7:338), but these very characteristics of the planet will later give license to the poetic imagination to transgress its celestial nature.

When he goes on to describe what he calls the “physiological” qualities of the planet, there is a correspondence between them and the ethical qualities that will be associated with later, human Venuses, as is clear from the list of her properties that he offers:

\begin{quote}
Volunt igitur Venerem esse feminam complexione flegmaticam atque nocturnam, acute meditationis in compositionibus carminum, apud amicos humilem et benignam, periuria ridentem, mendacem, credulam, liberalis, patientem et levitatis plurime, honesti tamen moris et aspectus, hylarem, voluptuosam, dulciolumque maxime, atque aspernatricem corpore fortitudinis et animi debilitatis. (III.22.5, 7:338)\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

Already in this description there is a convergence of opposing attributes: she has honest manners and yet she is a liar, she is phlegmatic and yet cheerful. Boccaccio recounts that recent astrologers have found the planet Venus to hold sway over certain physical bodies and, citing his teacher Andalò del Negro as a source of scientific truth,\textsuperscript{17} he names a few of those powers, which the planet was given by God, in order to explain why it is no surprise that she is the mother of twin loves:\textsuperscript{18}

\begin{quote}
amorem, amicitiam, dilectionem, conjuctionem, societatem et unionem inter animalia . . . et potissime ad procreationem prolis spectantia, ut esset qui segnem
\end{quote}
The description of the physical powers of the planet Venus over men complicates her celestial qualities. Because the metaphysical unity of love has become embodied in part by the physical entity of the planet, however rarified this conceptual unity may be in the spheres of the heavens, the celestial Venus is nonetheless a physical embodiment of that *Amor che move il sole e l’alte stelle*. Boccaccio works his way from this unity of love embodied by a planet to the individual actualizations in the world of men, concentrating on the astrological influence of the planet Venus over procreation, from which Venus’s association with sexual pleasure derives, and thus the transgressive lascivious practices associated with her alter egos.

As the celestial power gradually becomes embodied by living beings and incorporated into a social order, the confusion about its limits and boundaries grows and must be remedied by positive law. For example, the belt that is a sign of Venus’s oversight of legitimate weddings is a figure for such a legal limit. Commenting on Homer’s description of Venus’s belt in book fourteen of the *Iliad*,20 Boccaccio writes:

> Cingulum Veneri quod vocavere *ceston* insuper esse dixere, quod illi minime a natura datum fuerat, nec a poetis fuisset ni sanctissima atque veneranda legum autoritate illi fuisset appositum, ut aliquali cohertione vaga nimis lascivia frenaretur. (III.22.9, 7:342)21

By introducing a distinction between what is socially acceptable and unacceptable, positive law sets the stage for the divergence of celestial and transgressive love. The figure of the belt found in Homer’s description of Venus is a sign for Boccaccio that the division between the kinds of love is determined by historically contingent human practices and the cultural reactions to those practices, not by an a priori metaphysical division of the celestial and the earthly forms of love. This line of reasoning leads him to believe that there is actually only one Venus and one Love, as he declares when he tries to reconcile his interpretation of Venus and Love with Ovid’s description of her child *Amor as geminus*, or twin:

> “Credo ego amorem tantum unicum esse, sed hunc totiens et mutare mores et novum cognomen patremque acquirere, quotiens in diversos sese trahi perlicit affectus” (III.22.8, 7:342).22 If there are three (sometimes four) Venuses and two (sometimes three) *Amores*,23 Boccaccio tells us, it is because each instance denotes a specific kind of behavior in relation with the one Love.

The descent into history of the power represented by the planet *Venus magna* continues in time as separate qualities of the planet are given the
same name. At the beginning of his explication of the second Venus, Boccaccio recounts how he understands her existence in relation to the first: “Nam pro Venere hac ego voluptuosam vitam intelligo, et in omnibus ad voluptatem et libidinem pertinentibus cum superiori unam et eandem esse” (III.23.3, 7:352). The celestial and the earthly Venuses are only distinct in so far as the second is an aspect of the first that was embodied by human culture through the creation of a name and a narration—in sum, by virtue of a myth. Boccaccio focuses on the physical interpretation of the story of her birth from the blood of the testicles of Coelum when he was castrated by Saturn. According to his interpretation of the story, the second Venus signifies the procreative quality of love that arose when time (i.e., Saturn) mixed with the material of the heavens (i.e., Coelum). This narrative seems to be related typologically to the story of the creation of the world narrated in the first five chapters of the first book of the Genealogie, in which the Demogorgon (a figure for Natura naturans) fathers the Fates (figures for the progression of historical time) and Pan (a figure for the earth and Natura naturata) when he mixes with Eternity (a figure for limitless temporality) within the belly of Chaos (a figure for gross materiality, or hyle). This connection is clearly behind Boccaccio’s interpretation when he writes of Macrobius’s version of the tale in the Saturnalia:

Ex sanguine autem testiculorum a Saturno desectorum ideo natam, quia, ut ex Macrobio sumi potest, cum chaos esset, tempora non erant; et sic a celi circuizione [sic] natum tempus, et inde ab ipso Caronos natus, qui et Cronos est, quem nos Saturnum dicimus, cumque semina rerum omnium post celum gignendarum de celo fluenter, et elementa universa que mundo plenitudinem facerent ex illis seminibus fundarentur, ubi mundus omnibus suis partibus atque membribus perfectus est, certo iam tempore finis est procedendi de celo semina; et sic genitalia a Saturno, id est tempore, decisa videntur, et inde ab ipso Caronos natus, qui et Cronos est, quem nos Saturnum dicimus, cumque semina rerum omnium post celum gignendarum de celo fluenter, et elementa universa que mundo plenitudinem facerent ex illis seminibus fundarentur, ubi mundus omnibus suis partibus atque membribus perfectus est, certoiam tempore finis est procedendi de celo semina; et sic genitalia a Saturno, id est tempore, decisa videntur, et in mare deiecta, ut appareret gignendi atque propagandi facultatem, que per Venerem assumenda est, in humorem translatam coitu maris et femine mediante, qui per spumam intelligitur; nam uti spuma ex aquarum motu consurgit, sic et ex conficacione venitur in coitum, et ut non facile solvitur, sic et libido brevi delectatione finitur. (III.23.4, 7:352–354)

This Venus, then, can be understood as the embodiment of the generative power of the first Venus, which was itself an astrological actualization of the creative power of Love. Although Boccaccio had already linked the pleasures of mankind to the first Venus, he presents her twin sister as a figure for the sexual drive in human bodies, and interprets the story of her birth in terms of the humors that govern the body during coitus. If the first Venus governs the distribution of desire, pleasure, and generation, along with her other celestial influences in the macrocosm, the
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second similarly governs the dynamics of pleasure and desire within the microcosm of the human body.

Boccaccio goes on to contextualize the myth anthropologically by locating it within the cultural context of primitive Cyprus. The second Venus, a personification of erotic desire and coitus, was associated with the people of Paphos because they were naturally prone to lasciviousness and voluptuousness. The astrological influence of the planet over Paphos seems to converge historically with the generation of the second Venus in the imagination of its citizens:

Quod autem cives Paphos apud se e mari emersisse Venerem volunt, bona cum pace maiestatis tue, rex optime, dicturus sum, quod nisi te equum etiam in maximis rebus noscerem, nonauderem. Est autem Cyprus insula vulgata fama, seu celo agente, seu alio incolarum vicio, adeo in Venerem prona ut hospitium, officina, fomentumque lasciviarum atque voluptatum omnium habeatur. Quam ob causam Paphiis concedendum est primo apud eos ex undis Venerem emersisse. (III.23.7-8, 7:354–356)

The result of the anthropological focus of this description is to embed even further the psychological and physiological immanence of the second Venus within human culture. Not only an embodiment of a microcosmic aspect of the celestial Venus, the second instance was first actualized in a specific location within a specific social context. Furthermore, in an autograph marginal addition to a later manuscript, which he never had the chance to incorporate into a new copy, Boccaccio further contextualizes the historical embodiment of the goddess by reporting Tacitus’s description of the statue and temple of the Paphian Venus and the sacrificial rites performed in her honor:

Verum hoc potius ad historiam quam ad alium sensum pertinere ex Cornelio Tacito sumi potest. Qui velle videtur Venerem auspicio doctam armata manu conscendisse insulum bellumque Cynare regi movisse; qui tandem, cum inissent concordiam, convenere ut ipse rex Veneri templum construeret, in quo eidem Veneri sacra ministaret, qui ex familia regia et sua succedent. Confecto autem templo, sola animalia masculini generis in holocaustum parabantur, altaria vero sanguine maculari piaculum cum solis precibus igneque puro illa adolerent. Simulacrum vero deo nullam humanam habere dicit effigiem, quin imo esse ibidem continuum orbe latiorem initio et tenuem in ambitu ad instar methe exurgentem, ex qua re hoc nullam haberi rationem. (III.23.8–9, 7:356)

Even more than the earlier discussion about the character of the people of Paphos and their propensity toward lasciviousness caused by the influence of the planet Venus, this marginal narrative shows how Boccaccio’s focus is directed toward the historical embodiments and institutionalizations of mythic figures. He has abandoned all pretense to the textual commentary on the poems of Ovid, Virgil, and others, that had occupied
mythographers before him. Instead, he reads the myths as indicative of a historical cultural tradition that is connected, by the ambiguities of a poetic figure, to the celestial concepts that first gave rise to them. In this specific case, only from the stories, traditions, and rituals of people does love (under the guise of Venus) become transgressive. It is human law and tradition that make the boundaries that human beings cross in their embodiment of the generative power of love.

Boccaccio’s operation in separating Venus into different entities actually allows him to claim that there is only one love and only one Venus. The equivocatio of the goddess’s name, thus, depends on the different cultural contexts and on the meanings attached to the name in a given social order. It is a matter of interpretation of the poetic record that Boccaccio is seeking to reconstruct historically. The third Venus is the figure most recognizable from the classical tradition, in which she was the wife of Mars, the adulterous lover of Vulcan and Adonis, the mother of Aeneas, and the founder of prostitution to whom, according to St. Augustine, the Phoenicians would offer their daughters in prostitution before marrying them (XI.4.1–2; 7:1084). Because of geographical proximity, however, the stories of this Venus merged with those of a radically transgressive embodiment of love, a historical Venus meretrix, as Boccaccio suggests when he writes:


Although he himself believes these two Venuses to be separate, he treats them as one and continues his historical investigation, exploring this third Venus as an institutionalization of the transgressive behavior that the second instance had embodied psychologically and physiologically, and that was already potential in the celestial Venus. He traces her identity back to a period that predates the poetic record to the historical woman who had founded the institution of prostitution (“instituisse meretricium questum,” XI.4.2, 7:1084), describing her story in morally unambiguous terms further down:

Aiuntque cum hec viro fuisset superstes, tanto ferbuisse pruritu, ut fere in publicum declinaret lupanar, et ad suum palliandum scelus, dicunt eam cypris mulieribus suasisse meretricium, et instituisse ut facerent vulgato corpore questum, ex quo subsecutum ut virgines etiam ad litora micterentur, Veneri virginitatis et future pudicitie libamenta dature, atque ex coitu advenarum sibi exquisiture dotes. Theodontius autem superaddit, dicens tam scelestum facinus non solum in Cypro diu servatum, sed in Ytaliam usque deductum. Quod autoritate Iustini firmatur, qui dicit apud Locros ex voto aliquando contigisse. (XI.4.4, 7:1086)
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Whereas with the first Venus Boccaccio had focused on the abstract moral and physical properties of the planet and its astrological powers, and with the second, he had connected those powers with bodily functions and behaviors—both physical and moral—explaining how they had become institutionalized, in the explanations of the third Venus Boccaccio’s focus is entirely historical. In this brief narration he progresses from the stories men tell each other (\textit{aiunt}) to the account of an expert glossator (\textit{Theodontius ... superaddit}) to the authority of Justin’s epitome of Pompeius Trogus’s \textit{Philippic History} (\textit{autoritate Iustini firmatur}), moving geographically from the profession’s origins in Cyprus to its continuation in southern Italy.\footnote{39}

Considering those who believe that the third Venus is a single person, he explains her relation to the others by referring to the cultural institutions of Cyprus:

\begin{quote}
dicunt ... ob eximiam formositatem celestem Venerem a Cypriis arbitratam, dea dicta est, et tanquam dea sacris honorata, eique apud Paphos templum et ara fuit, camque aram solo thure et floribus redolentem faciebant, eo quod Venus ex variis causis odoribus delectetur. (XI.4.3, 7:1086)\footnote{40}
\end{quote}

Based upon a process of combination that breaks down historical barriers and fuses contradictory levels of meaning, the act of mythopoesis not only merges the Venus \textit{meretrix} with the daughter of Jupiter and Dione, but with the celestial Venus as well. The process of mythmaking, as it unfolds over time and across space, has allowed for the combination and confusion of the different Venuses, but Boccaccio’s method of de-allegorization separates them into their historical embodiments, revealing how they are connected. The story that he recounts by separating the three Venuses from one another, however, concerns the poetic relationship between the historically contingent embodiments of love and the celestial power. In fact, Boccaccio posits, following Cicero and the classical tradition, that the god \textit{Amor} was the son of the third Venus, after she had been poetically fused with \textit{Venus magna}, as he writes in the initial phrase of this chapter: “Amorem Iovis et Venerisuisse omnes volunt, quod ego non hominum credam sed planetarum” (XI.5.1, 7:1086).\footnote{41}

This \textit{Amor}, the figural son of the third Venus, who is now also the planet, is not concupiscent love, but the ennobling love “quo convivimus, quo amicitias iungimus,” which was invented “ut intelligamus quoniam ex convenientia complexionum et morum inter mortales amor et amicitia generetur” (XI.5.1, 7:1086).\footnote{42} Taken together, Boccaccio’s three Venuses present a theory of love by which the conceptual unity first embodied by the power of the planet Venus includes both the potentiality of its own transgression and the promise of sublimity. The planet is the astrological...
sign that connects the metaphysical and historical realities, both physical and ethical; it is a means by which the creative power of Love becomes actualized in history. Once it is embodied by an individual or common will, as is the case with the second and third Venuses, limits are drawn and intentions are formed, so that transgression becomes possible. The transgressive body and the celestial power become fused across the history of the figure, so that in the poetry of classical antiquity the stories of the lascivious and meretricious Venus can represent celestial love and give birth to a morally sublime Love.

The problem of the ambiguity of the poetic record makes Boccaccio’s critical labor of historical distinction difficult if not impossible, as he often notes throughout the *Genealogie*. He had warned in his description of the first Venus that all of the stories about her could have been reduced to the celestial Venus, but his historical and narrative interests bring him to seek out the historical embodiments of the celestial concepts. Through historical deduction and conjecture Boccaccio is able to separate their figures into the temporal and cultural contexts that reveal the nature of the relationship between the three Venuses and ultimately to the one Love. As a poetic figure for love, however, be it transgressive or celestial, Venus always contains the ambiguous potentiality of being transgressive, ennobling, or both.

In conclusion, I would like to return to the terms of engagement with which I began and to explore the possibility of a link between Boccaccio’s earlier vernacular production in the *Decameron* and my reconstruction of this poetic theory of Venusian love in the *Genealogie*. Although the question of the relationship between the *Genealogie* and Boccaccio’s other works is problematic, I suggest a link between them in terms of reading and communication strategies. In the *Genealogie*, mythic figures function as transmitters of culture from a primitive Hellenic Arcadia to a modern Italy whose only connection with the past is a series of broken fragments. What saves ancient culture from the ravages of time for Boccaccio is the belief in a *translatio* of culture between antiquity and modernity across high and low forms of discourse. This transferal of meaning is evident in many of the myths across the work, such as those of Jupiter, Mercury, and the Earth, which begin in the East and often travel westward assuming new names, bodies, and stories at varying levels of discourse, from the poetic reflections of theological poets and the beliefs of common people to the poetry of classical antiquity and humanist modernity. The myths of the Venuses function in this manner, beginning in the Hellenic world with stories about an astrological phenomenon and ending in Cyprus and finally in Italy with
the introduction of prostitution and the worship of a morally transgressive Venus, only to return to a sublime astrological sign with the birth of Amor as a celestial body in the poetic imagination.

For Boccaccio, popular stories, customs, and beliefs, such as those that deified Venus *meretrix*, are key to the transmission of narratives that will later assume again an allegorical meaning. The myths of the *Genealogiae*, of which the three Venuses are but a single example, are indicative of Boccaccio’s penchant for the popular as a medium of cultural transmission and of his openness toward texts of all kinds as allegorical.47 In his defense of poetry, in Book Fourteen of the *Genealogiae*, he claims outright that even the tales of old maids have *some* meaning:

Taceant ergo blateratores insci, et omutescant superbi, si possunt, cum, ne dum insignes viros, lacte Musarum educatos et in laribus phylosophic versatos atque sacris duratos studiis, profundissimos in suis poematibus sensus apposuisse semper credendum sit, sed etiam nullam esse usquam tam delirantem angulum, circa foculum domestici laris una cum vigilantibus noctibus fabellas orci, seu fatareum, vel Lammirarium, et huismodi, ex quibus sepsissime inventa conficiunt, fientem atque recitantem, que sub pretextu relatorum non sentiat aliquem iuxta vires sui modici intellectus sensum minime quandoque ridendum, per quem velit aut terrorem incutere parvulis, aut oblectare puellas, aut senes ludere, aut saltem Fortune vires ostendere. (XIV.10.7, 8:1422)48

If such old wives’ tales should hold a veiled meaning, then it should not be surprising that the scope of the tales of the *Decameron* might go beyond pleasure, parody, and social commentary. A philosophical depth to the *Decameron*’s tales for women is further suggested by his use of the term *anicula* here to refer to an old woman, which he had employed in the previous chapter to refer to the old woman who recounts the tale of Cupid and Psyche in Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses*:49

Fabulis laborantibus sub pondere adversantis fortune non nunquam solamen inpensum est, quod apud Lucium Apuleium cernitur. Quem penes Carthiæ, generosa virgo, infortunio suo apud predones captiva, captivitatem suam deplorans, ab anicula fabule Psyche lepidditate paululum refociillata est. Fabulis labantium in desidiam mentium in meliorem frugem lapsus iam novimus. (XIV.9.13, 8:1418)50

The ostensible purpose of the tale within the narrative economy of the ancient novel was to restore hope to Charis in her time of need, yet the tale itself, a narrative within a narrative, escapes the consolatory intentions of the old woman when it is interpreted as a philosophical allegory for the flight of the soul.51 Although the Apuleian tale openly demonstrates the allegorical intentions of the author more than any tale in the *Decameron*, Apuleius’s use of narrative strategies to embed different levels of interpretation is a historical model for the ambiguity
of the meaning of the stories of the *Decameron*. Boccaccio, however, goes much further than his predecessor by embedding his stories, which are of a much more popular nature, within multiple narrative levels. In this way, the distance created by the frame of the *Decameron* acts not only to detach Boccaccio’s authorial intentionality from the often morally questionable subjects of the tales so that the intentions of the ten fictional storytellers are separated from those of the author, but it also allows the reactions of the *brigata* to exist on a separate plane from those of the *Decameron*’s readership. Like the tale of Cupid and Psyche, told by a drunken old woman to console a captive girl, the popular stories of the *Decameron* can take on philosophical meanings in different interpretative contexts.

As the author of the *Genealogie*, Boccaccio is a cultural critic who deduces the figural laws and cultural contexts that allow him to separate the chaotic mixtures constituted by classical mythic figures. In the case of Venus, his theory of allegory functions by dividing the different mythic functions of the goddess into separate temporal and geographical contexts in which the power of love has become embodied. When employed poetically, however, such a theory of allegory applied to Venus, or any Venusian type-character, would allow a reader to combine the celestial and the transgressive qualities of love. So when we look back at his stories of transgressive love, which have either scandalized readers or provoked radical moral apologies, we might read them in the way Boccaccio himself read the ancient poetic record that so inspired him, as allegorically polysemous and capable of signifying both transgressive behavior and celestial concepts. The narrative levels of the *Decameron* function as a mise-en-scène of these multiple levels of interpretation, from the popular to the sublime. Boccaccio seems to suggest just this when he writes in his self-defense, in the introduction the Fourth Day of the *Decameron*, that he was not ashamed “di dover compiacere a quelle cose alle quali Guido Cavalcanti e Dante Alighieri già e messer Cino da Pistoia vecchissimo onor si tennero, e fu lor caro il piacer loro,” because 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 dovrebbero piacere . . . per che, queste cose tessendo, né dal monte Parnaso né dalle Muse non mi allontano quanto molti per avventura s’avisano. (IV Intro., 33 and 35–36; 350–51)

Boccaccio is asking us to read his stories of love, however parodic they might be on the surface, alongside the erotic myths of antiquity and the stilnovistic cult of love, as poetic reflections on the relationship between the human and the divine.
If the tales of Venus become removed from the intentions of their creators over time and are reused in both the popular and the philosophical poetic imagination, linking the celestial and the earthly forms of love across high and low levels of discourse, then the female figures associated with erotic love in the *Decameron* may likewise bear a poetic ambiguity similar to that of the third Venus, despite the popular style of the narratives. Boccaccio’s tales of bodily transgression, which are well removed from authorial intentionality, could be reinserted into a philosophical continuum that leads back to a phenomenology of love similar to that of the stilnovist poets. In the context of Boccaccio’s comparison of the narrator of the *Decameron* to Guido, Dante, and Cino, the last of the Calandrino tales, told by Fiammetta, seems a particularly pertinent example of the Venusian type-character. The tale’s primary female protagonist, Niccolosa, is a prostitute whom Calandrino confuses with a noble lady of courtly love poetry, similarly to the way in which the third Venus was confused with the celestial Venus. The tale unfolds in a typical courtly fashion: a public encounter, a greeting, communication through a go-between, and a missed consummation. When they finally meet in the courtyard and then move to the barn to consummate their love, their verbal exchange is a popularization of the language of the love lyric. Calandrino’s humorous and even disastrous confusion of ennobling love with sex-for-sale establishes the narrative as a clear parody of the poetry of courtly love and its philosophizing heir, the *dolce stil novo*. For example, to Niccolosa’s exclamation,

“O Calandrin mio dolce, cuor del corpo mio, anima mia, ben mio, riposo mio, quanto tempo ho disiderato d’averti e di poterti tenere a mio senno! Tu m’hai con la piacevolezza tua tratto il filo della camiscia; tu m’hai agratigliato il cuor con la tua ribeba: può esser vero che io ti tenga?”

Calandrino responds: “Deh! Anima mia dolce, lasciamiti baciare” (IX 5, 58–59; 814–815). The intrusion of the popular register into Niccolosa’s rhythmic list of epithets and into Calandrino’s bodily response makes a caricature of love poetry’s contemplation of the unity of body and soul. The vulgar vocabulary that he uses to describe his love for her to the trickster Bruno, who is acting as go-between, debases the philosophical pretensions of poets such as Dante and Cavalcanti: “Gnaffé! tu si le dirai in prima in prima che io le voglio mille moggia di quel buon bene da impregnare, e poscia che io son suo servigiale e se ella vuol nulla” (IX 5, 27; 810). As David Wallace has put it, Calandrino’s *nuovi atti* “render the lexicon of courtly love suddenly bizarre” and “his oaths and vaunts mix the court with the barnyard” (*Boccaccio* 97). Calandrino literalizes the metaphorical nature of the love lyric,
transforming the ennobling endgame of the courtly narrative into a bodily romp in the hay that is imagined in bestial terms: “ne la farò io accorgere se io le pongo le branca adosso, per lo verace corpo di Cristo, chè io le farò giuoco che ella mi verrà dietro come va la pazza al figliuolo” to which Bruno responds, playing along, “Oh! . . . tu te la griferai: è mi par pur vederti morderle con cotesti tuoi denti fatti a bischeri quella sua bocca vermigliuzza e quelle sue gote che paion due rose e poscia manicarlati tutta quanta” (IX 5, 36–37, 811). The radical embodiment of Calandrino’s experience of love is reinforced by the ending, in which, instead of devouring Niccolosa himself, he is severely beaten by his wife, Tessa. His broken body bears the physical signs of the sbigottimento, dolore, and ira that a poet like Cavalcanti experiences on a metaphorical or existential level.

Calandrino’s literal deformation of the language of love enacts on a narrative level the same unreflective confusion of celestial and transgressive love that led to the deification of the third Venus, but from the distance afforded by the frame, it also suggests a poetic convergence of the two forms of love at the interpretative level of the reader. The humor of the tale derives from two sources: first, from the fact that Calandrino mistakes a whore for a lady and is beaten by his wife for betrayal, along with an appreciation for the ingegno that tricked him; second, for readers who think about love, precisely from the recognition of the ironic distance between the embodied reality of Calandrino’s story and the philosophical pretensions of its lyric source. The laughter that results from this recognition can lead the reader both to reflect on the origin and to seek out points of convergence and divergence, such as in their shared vocabulary and in the narrative’s popularization and even bestialization of that vocabulary. The reader need not seek an easy moral to the story, nor read it as a simple parody—since either interpretative operation inevitably eradicates its complexity, ambiguity, and self-reflexivity. To interpret this tale in the light of Boccaccio’s explication of the three Venuses, however, is to respect its place within a continuum of meaning, as a popular form of narrative that bears signs of relation to its sublime origins and can possibly give rise to future philosophical reflection about love.

The frame of the Decameron dramatizes this relationship between the literal and the sublime readings of love literature, between the transgressive and the celestial. In the conclusion to the Third Day, in which the most licentious and even pornographic of tales are told, Lauretta sings a melancholic song that elicits contradicting reactions from the members of the brigata. The ballad recounts in the first person the misfortunes of
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a woman, who finds love after first being spurned. The voice then tells of her lover’s death and her own subsequent remarriage to a youth, which she regrets, wishing instead to meet with her dead first husband who is “nel ciel . . . davanti a Colui / che ne creò” (III Concl., 17; 342). The lamentation of the singer’s experience of lost and regretted love is preceded by a reference to divine love, which designates the relationship between the woman’s beauty and that of God:

Colui che move il cielo e ogni stella
mi fece a suo diletto
vaga, leggiadra, graziosa e bella,
per dar qua giù a ogni alto intelletto
alcun segno di quella
bítà che sempre a Lui sta nel cospetto.
(III Concl., 13; 341)

The woman’s embodied beauty is related metaphorically to divine beauty, so that love for her would also reflect metaphorically love for the divine Amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle, which Venus also embodied and transgressed in the three instances of her figure. As a conclusion to the Third Day, immediately following Dioneo’s story of Alibech (III 10), which lewdly played with the dangers of embodied metaphors, Lauretta’s song points to a certain convergence of the radically embodied narratives of the Third Day with the celestial love of which they are a deformation. Critical interpretations of the ballad’s meaning have varied from the historical (Boccaccio’s love of widows) to the allegorical (rhetoric, nobility, or poetry), but the response among the brigata signals that its own story of embodied love, together with those that preceed and follow it, are signs that can lead the reader either to the depths of the real or to the sublime heights of philosophy:

Qui fece fine la Lauretta alla sua canzone, la quale notata da tutti, diversamente da diversi fu intesa: e ebbevi di quegli che intender vollono alla melanese, che fosse meglio un buon porco che una bella tosa; altri furono di più sublime e migliore e piú vero intelletto, del quale al presente recitar non accade. (III Concl., 18; 342)

The practical Milanese-style reaction of some of the brigata functions similarly to Calandrino’s literal (mis)performance of the language of the love lyric, and reduces the lyric reflection to its embodied reality. And just as the Cypriotes misguidedly interpreted the first prostitute as an embodiment of the celestial Venus, so the practical-minded listeners sought a historical application of Lauretta’s lyrical conclusion. Others of a more sublime intellect, whose interpretation the author leaves unspoken, would have recognized the poetic ambiguity, connecting the
woman’s story of embodied love with its metaphysical counterpart and origin, like Boccaccio the mythographer in his explanations of Venus.

The relationship of popular narrative with the poetry of philosophical reflection on love, which Boccaccio traces by separating the various instances of Venus in the Genealogie, is dramatized by the frame of the Decameron. Boccaccio’s aesthetic organization of the tales offers the narratives as spaces of intersection, where the high and low can meet in the reactions of the readers. By setting his authorial intentions at such a distance from the telling of the tales, Boccaccio leaves the interpretation, sublime or not, up to the reader. If the misconceptions and games that inform his tales of love are traced back to the origins that they share with, say, the poetry of Dante, Cino, and Guido, then there will be an inevitable reflection on the interrelationship between the radical embodiment of the narrative and the sublime pretensions of the poetic source. The critical operation of the reader of the Decameron would resemble that of Boccaccio the mythographer, when he traced the history of the invention of the different instances of Venus and their subsequent poetic confusion. Like the forces of history and nature that it artistically reproduces, the Decameron separates the embodied historical level of the tales from their sublime origins, asking its readers to recompose them. As the reception history of Boccaccio’s works has taught, some readers will interpret them alla melanese, whereas others will respond to them with a più sublime e migliore e più vero intelletto. Neither reading need be ascribed to Boccaccio himself, since this would only flatten the complexity of his stories into pure hedonism or heavy-handed moralization. By reading the tales of love of the Decameron like Boccaccio did the myths of antiquity, however, we will begin to give shape to their polysemous quality as myths of the modern world.

Notes

A version of this essay was originally delivered as a part of the panel on “Transgressive Love” at the MLA annual convention in Los Angeles, CA (January 6–9, 2011), organized by the executive committee on Medieval and Renaissance Italian Literature.


2. Besides those discussed below, among those studies that have contributed to a more nuanced reading of Boccaccio’s discourse on love are, to mention only a few: Millicent Marcus, An Allegory of Form: Literary Self-Consciousness in the Decameron (Saratoga, CA: Anma Libri, 1979); Janet Smarr, Boccaccio and Fiammetta: The Narrator as Lover (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986);


7. See the useful discussion and visual representation of Boccaccio’s cosmos in Stone, *The Ethics of Nature*, 6–24 (esp. 15). On the idea of love as a moving force, or power, from antiquity through Chaucer, see Peter Dronke “L’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle,” in *The Medieval Poet and His World* (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1984; repr. of *Studi Medievali* 6 [1965]: 389–422), 430–475.


9. John Mulryan has argued that the three images of Venus in the *Genealogie* (*Caelestis*, *Genetrix*, and *Meretrix*) show that for Boccaccio Venus was “a goddess of power” and that “just as the mythographer used the character of Venus as the receptacle for his synthesis of love ideas, so Boccaccio the storyteller used the love attitudes of his characters to give them depth and focus and to explain, in part, what motivates their actions” (“The Three Images of Venus: Boccaccio’s Theory of Love in the *Genealogy of the Gods* and his Aesthetic Vision of Love in the *Decameron,*” *Romanic Notes* 19 [1979]: 388–394 [388–389]). He limits himself to finding parallels for the various behaviors of the characters of the *Decameron* and the various kinds of love denoted by the three Venuses. He does not discuss in depth the relationship between the various figures of Venus and the philosophy of love suggested by that relationship. For a comparative study of Boccaccio’s Venuses in the *Genealogie* and the account by Natale Conti in the *Mythologiae* (1567), see Mulryan’s article with Steven Brown, “Venus and the Classical Tradition in Boccaccio’s *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium Libri* and Natale Conti’s *Mythologiae,*” *Mediaevalia* 27, no. 2 (2006), 135–156.

10. Tobias Foster Gittes notes that the three Jupiters delineate the ages of gold, silver, and bronze in the *Genealogie* (65–66). The timeline is confused, but there is a general progression in the *Genealogie* from a state of nature in the first book to decadence in the age of the third Jupiter. As the brother of the first Jupiter and the father of the second, *Coelum* marks a period of transition between the two ages.

11. Cicero (*De Natura Deorum* III.59) actually mentions four Venuses, the last two of which Boccaccio combines as the third Venus. On this below.
12. “Venus magna—as Cicero writes in the De natura deorum—was the daughter of Coelum and Dies. He demonstrates that besides her there were three others and asserts that this one existed before all three. Nevertheless, since many fictions about the Venuses are found indistinct of one another, we will take up those that seem to belong to this one and we will leave the ones that remain to the remaining Venuses. This is not because all the stories cannot be adapted to this one, but because they were later attributed to the other Venuses and it is more fitting to locate them where I will speak about those Venuses.” Cicero mentions four Venuses, the last two of which Boccaccio melds into the figure of Venus meretrix, on whom below.


15. He quotes from Ovid’s Fasti IV.1, where the twin loves are Cupido (celestial love) and Iocus (earthly love).

16. “They want it, therefore, that Venus be of phlegmatic complexion, nocturnal, acute in the meditation of composing songs, humble and benign among friends, mocker of perjury, a liar, credulous, patient, liberal and very light-hearted, of honest custom and aspect, cheerful, voluptuous, very sweet in speech, a disparager of bodily strength and of spiritual weakness.”

17. In addition to del Negro, Boccaccio reports the “mores et potentiam” of the planet Venus according to Albumasar. On his use of their natural philosophy, see Antonio Enzo Quaglio, Scienza e mito nel Boccaccio (Padua: Liviana, 1967).

18. Before citing Andalò del Negro, Boccaccio offers a somewhat lengthy apologetic of astrology based on the assumption that God created celestial bodies with certain powers that were useful to living beings. See III.22.6-7 (7:341).

19. “love, friendship, pleasure, conjunction, society and union among animate beings . . . and especially those things that regard procreation, in order that there be someone who stimulated a nature—perhaps a non-energetic one—to continue and to grow. Therefore it can be conceded that the pleasures of men are caused by her.”

20. Boccaccio translates verses III.22.9, 7:342 of the Iliad, "η καί ἀπό στήθεσφιν έλύσατο κεστόν ίμαντα / Ποικίλον, έντα δέ οί θελητήρια [sic] πάντα τέτυκτο / ένθένιμένφιλότης, ένδ' ίμερος, ενδ' όαριστυς / Παρφασις," and translates them as “Et a pectoribus solvit ceston cingulum varium, ubi sibi voluntaria omnia ordinata erant, ubi certe amicitia atque cupidio atque secundia, blandicieque futurate intellectum licet studiose scientium” (“And she loosened from her breast the ceston, the variegated belt, where all things that men want were arranged, and friendship and desire and flirtation were there too, and the flatteries that steal away the intellect even of those who studiously think”) III.22.9, 7:342). As Zaccaria notes, his source for the text mistakenly had “θελητήρια” (voluntaria) for “θελητήρια” (incantamenta) (8:1635n.80). On his limited, though unique inclusion of Greek literature and thought among the sources of the Genealogie, see his own self-defense in this regard at XV.7 (8:1540-44).

21. “Furthermore, they said that Venus had a belt, called a ceston, which had not at all been given to her by nature, nor would the poets have attributed it to her if it hadn’t been imposed by the holiest and most venerable authority
of the law, so that overly volatile lasciviousness would be slowed by some restraint.”

22. “I believe that there is only one love, but that it changes behavior and acquires a new name and a new father, just as many times as it allows itself to be pulled to different affects.”

23. Boccaccio also reconciles Ovid’s twin loves with Aristotle’s three worthy objects of affection (the honest, or good, delightful, or pleasant, and useful) by claiming that Ovid combined the second and the third, because “etiam delectari videatur utilitas” (“utility seems to delight as well,” III.22.8, 7:344).

24. Boccaccio essentially extends across time and space the concepts of equivocatio and multivocatio of the gods by assigning the various instances of a particular god (whether they have the same name or a different one) diachronically and geographically. On Boccaccio’s employment of them via the school of Chartres, see Mazzotta, “Boccaccio: The Mythographer of the City,” 359.

25. “For this Venus I understand the voluptuous life, and in all things pertinent to voluptuousness and desire she is one and the same with the [Venus] above.”


27. See the third proem to the first book and the first five chapters of Book I, on Eternitas, Chaos, Litigium, Pan, and the Parcae (7:68-104) for Boccaccio’s idiosyncratic rendition and interpretation of the pagan cosmogony. Cf. Dronke’s discussion of love as the procreative anima mundi in Bernardus Silvestris’ *Cosmographia* (“L’Amor che move,” 465–470).

28. “[It is said] that she was born from the blood of testicles that had been cut off Saturn, because, as can be deduced from Macrobius, when there was chaos, time did not exist; so time was born from the rotation of heaven, and from it Charonos was born, who is also Chronos, and whom we call Saturn; and since the seeds of all things, which must have been born after heaven, flowed out from heaven, and all of the elements, which would have made plenitude for the world, would have been established with those seeds, when the world was perfected in all its parts and members, in that very moment of time is the end of the process for the seeds from heaven; and thus the genitals seem to have been cut from Saturn, that is from time, and thrown into the sea, so that it would become evident that the faculty of generation and procreation, which much deduced for Venus, was carried over (translatam) to the humors through the coitus of a man and a woman, which means by means of foam; in fact, just as foam arises from the motion of the sea, thus does it come from the friction in coitus, and just as the former easily dissolves, thus desire ends in a fleeting delight.”

29. Boccaccio’s connection of Venus with the creative power of love in Nature is clearly linked to Bernardus Silvestris’ idea of love as a “cosmic fertility,” which emphasizes “the sexual and creative aspects of the universal ordering force;” for Bernardus “creation derives ultimately from an act of love between the highest god and his feminine emanation” (Dronke, 466).

30. See the paragraphs that follow the quotation above at III.23.5-6 (7:354).

31. Boccaccio boldly characterizes the people of Cyprus in a negative light, despite the fact that his patron was King Hugh IV of Cyprus, whom he addresses in the following section.

32. “As for the fact that the citizens of Paphos want that Venus emerged from the sea near them, with all due respect for your majesty, great king, I am about to say what I would not dare if I did not know that you are fair even in the
greatest of things. Cyprus is an island, as is common opinion, either under the influence of heaven or by some other vice of the inhabitants, that is so prone to Venus that it is held as the hospice, workshop, and tinder wood of all lasciviousness and voluptuousness. Therefore it must be conceded to the citizens of Paphos that Venus first emerged from waves near their shore."

33. Zaccaria notes that the quotation that follows is a marginal addition to the manuscript A, catalogued in the Vatican Library as Cod. Lauz. LII 9, which Zaccaria recognizes as the manuscript on which Boccaccio was making additions and edits between 1365 and 1370. On the manuscript tradition of the Genealogia, see Zaccaria’s “Nota al testo” at the end of his critical edition and translation of the text, 8:1587-1605, especially 8:1592-99. On this particular annotation by Boccaccio, see Zaccaria’s note to the text, 8.1636n97. Boccaccio is citing Tacitus’s Historiae II.2-3 from memory, as is suggested by the significant differences between Boccaccio’s annotation and the actual text of Tacitus.

34. "But from Cornelius Tacitus we can deduce that [the meaning] pertains to history rather than another sense. He seems to hold that Venus, who was learned in the arts of divination, attacked the island with an armada and waged war on King Cinyras. Once he had arrived at plan for peace, they agreed that the king would construct a temple to Venus, in which sacrifices would be offered to her and administered by the descendants of the king’s family and of her own. When the temple had been completed, only masculine animals were offered in to burn in sacrifice. It was a sin to spill blood on the altars since they worshipped her only with prayers and pure fire. Tacitus says that the statue of the goddess did not have human form, but rather was a round mass rising on a larger base that gets smaller at the top, like a cone. There is no explanation about this matter."

35. Boccaccio paraphrases Augustine’s De Civitate Dei as stating “Huic oblata a Phenicibus esse dona de prostitutionibus filiarum antequam viris consu-ungement” (cf. De Civitate Dei, IV.10). In a direct address to his patron, King Hugh IV of Cyprus, Boccaccio also mentions Claudian’s Epithalamium de Nuptiis Honorii Augusti (which he misidentifies as the De laudibus Stylichonis): “Claudianus . . . apud tuam Cyprum, rex optime, deliciosissimum describit viridarium, in quo omnia facile possint enumerari spectantia ad suadendam lasciviam” (“Claudian . . . describes a most delightful garden in your Cyprus, great king, in which all the things that pertain to persuading one to lasciviousness can be enumerated”; XI.4.2, 7:1084).

36. “It remains for me to address what is ambiguous. Some think that this Venus is the same as the Cyprian Venus. I think that there were two, and that this was the real daughter of Jove and wife of Vulcan, whereas the other one was the daughter of Syros and Cypria or Dion, and wife of Adonis. Those who think that she is a single person say that she was the daughter of Jove and Dion and that she first married Vulcan, then Adonis."

37. As I noted above, Cicero mentions four Venuses in the De Natura Deorum, and although Boccaccio thinks that the fourth and the third are separate, he nonetheless treats them in the same chapter as a single mythic representation of transgressive love.

38. “They say that she survived her husband and that she burned with so much desire that she almost declined to a public brothel. In order to cover up her crime, they say that she persuaded Cyprian women to become prostitutes and instituted that they earn money by selling their body. Later on virgins were even sent to the shore to make to Venus an offering of their virginity
both for their future chastity and in order to seek a dowry, after having sex with foreigners. Theodontius adds to this when he says that this accursed crime did not belong only to Cyprus, but was taken to Italy as well. This is confirmed by the authority of Justinian, when he says that it happened once at Locri ex voto."


40. “they say that . . . on account of her extraordinary beauty she was thought to be the celestial Venus by the Cyprians, and she was called a goddess and honored as such with sacrifices. At Paphos they say she had a temple and altars, which they perfumed with incense and flowers because Venus enjoys odors of different kinds.”

41. “All have it that Love was the son of Jove and Venus, although I believe not of humans, but of planets.”

42. “by which we live together and make friendships” “so that we may understand that love and friendship are born from the convergence of complexions and customs.” Also connected with the third Venus is Cupid, whom Boccaccio lists as the son of Mars at IX.4 (7:900-08). This Cupid, however, is a passio mentis and represents the bodily functions of desire when confronted with beauty. Amor concupiscibilis is located in the first book of the *Genealogie* as the son of Herebus, where Boccaccio merely cites Cicero’s account in the *De Natura Deorum* and mentions that this love, which is really a self-love recognizable in the desire for wealth, power, and glory, should rather be called hate (I.15, 7:140-142).

43. An example of how this interest in historical exactitude manifests itself in the *Genealogie* can be seen very clearly in the entry on Io. After seeking to reconstruct her chronological position in relation to the different Joves and her possible alter ego, Isis, he associates her with the third Jove and declares his confusion: “Quod quidem tempus satis competit Iovi Cretensi, qui Iupriter IIIus fuit. Quibus tam diversis hystoriographorum opinionibus fere stupefactus, quid teneam de hac Yside nescio. Hoc tamen scio quia temporis conformitas Ysidis Promethei cum Iove et hystoria, que si non vera est, vero tamen similis est, me magis quam ad aliquam aliarum trahit” (“Indeed this time is fitting enough for the Cretan Jove, who was the third Jupiter. I am almost stupefied by the very diverse opinions of the historiographers, and I do not know what to think about this Isis. But I do know that the temporal conformity of Isis, daughter of Prometheus, with Jove—and the history, even if it is not true, it is nevertheless verisimilar—brings me to her more than to any of the others” (VII.22.10-11, 7:762).

44. There is a tendency to view the Latin works as the result of a conversion to Humanism that Boccaccio underwent in the later part of his life, after meeting Petrarch in 1350. This is the narrative recounted by Giuseppe Billanovich in *Petrarca letterato I. Lo Scrittoio del Petrarca* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1947), 104–106. Boccaccio had long been an admirer of Petrarch before they meet when the latter passed through Florence on his way to and from Rome for the Jubilee of 1350. Although their meeting coincides with Boccaccio’s dedication to humanist scholarship in Latin, he never gave up his devotion to vernacular literature. His relationship with Petrarch was often rocky and his own Latin humanism is not necessarily “Petrarchan,” which is especially notable in his dedication to the works and life of Dante. On Boccaccio’s dedication to Dante as a major difference in his humanistic outlook, see Jason Houston, *Building a Monument to Dante: Boccaccio as Dan-
tista (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), especially 64–73, 93–98, and 124–156. Cf. also Mazzotta’s distinction between Boccaccio’s approach to antiquity and that of Petrarch in “Boccaccio: The Mythographer of the City,” 349–350.

45. In the first proem to the work, Boccaccio describes the fragmentary state of ancient culture as if it were a ship broken by a shipwreck upon a reef. He lists a number of causes for the destruction, including time and bigotry. His job is to collect and recompose the fragments for the use of his own age. He figures his work in terms of the myths of Prometheus, Daedalus, Mercury, and Asclepius. Cf. Mazzotta, “Boccaccio: The Mythographer of the City,” 357–358.

46. The first book of the Genealogie recounts the temporal and geographical progression of figures for the Earth from primordial chaos to goddesses of the Earth across multiple names (multivocatio), whereas the figure of Jupiter marks the progression from the Golden Age to subsequent ages of decadence beneath the same name (equivocatio). See II.2, V.1, and VII.22 for the entries on Jupiter. The figure of Mercury best illustrates how mythic names change across place and time, as the six different instances of his name follow the itinerary of the translatio studiorum from Greece to Egypt to France. Almost always beginning with a planet or other natural phenomenon, in time these figures are transmitted by popular stories such as those that surround the figure of Mercury, god of thieves (II.12). Just as consistently, the figures become re-sublimated as astrological phenomena, as in the case of the sixth Mercury (XII.12). For the six entries on Mercury, see II.7, II.12, III.20, VII.34, VII.36, XII.12.


48. “Let the ignorant babblers be silent, and let the arrogant be mute, if they can, since it must be believed that not only great men—who were brought up on the milk of the Muses, frequented the homes of philosophy, and have been hardened by sacred studies—have always placed the most profound meanings in their poems, but also that there is nowhere such a delirious old woman who, around the household fire among the wakeful on winter nights, makes up and recites stories of orcs, or fairies, or nymphs, and the like (from which these inventions are often composed), and does not intend beneath the pretext of the stories, in accordance with the powers of her modest intellect, some meaning, sometimes not at all ridiculous; a meaning through which she would like to cause terror in children, delight girls, or tease the old, or at least show the powers of Fortune.”

49. Boccaccio takes the term anicula, in fact, directly from Apuleius, who also describes the old woman as delira et temulenta (Metamorphoses VI.25), which Boccaccio clearly echoes in his description of an old woman as delirans.

50. “Stories have given solace to those oppressed beneath the weight of an adverse fortune, as we can see in Lucius Apuleius. According to him, Charis, a noble virgin who for her misfortune was captured by thieves, wept about her captivity and was relieved a little by an old woman with the charm of the fable of Psyche. We know still that the slips of minds tottering toward idleness have been called back to better fruit with stories.”

51. For Boccaccio’s allegorical reading of this tale out of the context of its narrative function, see Genealogie V.22 (7:560-68). He reads it as an allegory for the return of the rational soul to the divine. On Boccaccio’s transcription

52. For a reading of allegory in the *Decameron* that sees the frame as a Thomistic allegorical structure that “pits the rational appetite against the lower irascible and concupiscible appetites” in a symbolic “drama whose locus is the human soul,” see Victoria Kirkham, “An Allegorically Tempered *Decameron*,” *Italica* 26, no. 1 (1985), 1–23 (2).

53. “Striving to please the ones who were so greatly honored, and whose beauty was so much admired, by Guido Cavalcanti and Dante Alighieri in their old age, and by Cino da Pistoia in his dotage” and “The Muses are ladies, and although ladies do not rank as highly as Muses, nevertheless they resemble them at first sight, and hence it is natural, if only for this reason, that I should be fond of them . . . and so, in composing these stories, I am not staying as far from Mount Parnassus or from the Muses as many people might be led to believe” (*Decameron*, in *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, vol. 4, ed. Vittore Branca [Milan: Mondadori, 1967]; trans. G.H. McWilliam, *The Decameron*, by Giovanni Boccaccio, 2nd edition [New York: Penguin Books, 1995], 288–289). For quotations the parenthetical notation here and below refers to the numbers of book, chapter, and paragraph, followed by the page number in Branca’s edition. Cf. Gittes, 177–180 and Mazzotta, *World at Play*, 69–70.


56. “Oh, my sweet Calandrino, heart of my body, my dearest, my darling, my angel, how long I have been yearning to have you all to myself and hold you in my arms! You’ve swept me off my feet with your winning ways! You’ve captured my heart with that rebeck of yours! Is it really possible that I am holding you in my embrace?” ‘Alas, my dearest . . . ’Let me up, so that I
may kiss you” (trans. McWilliam 675–676). The English translation cannot capture the popular terminology that Niccolosa ironically employs in her exclamation. Branca notes that it is a “sequenza di appellativi popolareschi tenerissimi, ritmati e rimati, il cui tono caricaturato ricorda particolarmente messer Ricciardo e le sue gaffe insistenti amorose” (1482 n.13). Furthermore, Branca finds that the phrases “tratto il filo della camiscia” and “agratiigliato il cuor” are respectively an “espressione immaginosamente popolare e una ‘voce popolare, armonica al tono enfatico e caricaturale di tutte le parole di Niccolosa” (1483 n.1 and n.2). Cormac Ó Cuilleanáin suggests that their use of the idiom “anima mia” is a parody of the intersection of soul and body (Religion and the Clergy in Boccaccio’s Decameron [Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1984], 233).

57. “Faith! . . . You’re to tell her first and foremost that I wish her a thousand bushels of the sort of love that flattens a girl; then you’re to say that I’m her obedient servant, and if there’s anything she needs.” (trans. McWilliam 671).

58. “And once I lay my paws on her, she’ll know it even better. God’s truth! I’ll sport with her so merrily that she’ll cling to me like a mother besotted with her son’ . . . ‘Ah, yes! . . . You’ll make a proper meal out of her. I can see you now, in my mind’s eye, nibbling her sweet red lips and her rosy cheeks with those lute-peg teeth of yours, and then devouring her whole body, piece by succulent piece’ ” (trans. McWilliam 672).

59. “in heaven . . . before Him who created it.”

60. “He who moves the stars and heavens / Decreed me at my birth / Light, lovely, graceful, fair to see, / To show men here on earth / Some sign of that eternal grace / That shines for ever in His face” (trans. McWilliam 281).

61. See Branca’s final note to the text of the poem, in which he lists the variety of scholarly opinions about its meaning (1195–1196 n.7).

62. “Here Lauretta ended her song, to which all had listened raptly and construed in different ways. There were those who took it, in the Milanese fashion [i.e., literally], to imply that a good fat pig was better than a comely wench. But others gave it a loftier, more subtle and truer meaning, which this is not the moment to expound” (trans. McWilliam 283).