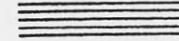


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**Commentary as Cultural Artifact**

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A Commentary on Commentary  
in Boccaccio

The great text of both civil and canon law has grown in bulk throughout generations of human failing, by editorial apparatus from many a doctor. The books of the philosophers also carry with them their commentaries compiled with great care and zeal. The books of medicine are filled with marginal notes from countless pens that resolve every doubt, and so with sacred writings, and their numerous expositors; so also with the liberal and the technical arts—each has its own commentary, from which anyone may select on occasion according to his preference. Poetry alone is without such honor.

—Giovanni Boccaccio

**T**he term “commentary” designates an extremely broad spectrum of literary practices.<sup>1</sup> In the ancient Roman context, a *commentarius* was either a private memoir, a public record, an expository treatise, or a notebook; and the verb *commentor* referred to the bringing to memory of materials by means of study, composition, or teaching (with intimations of artificiality, ingenuity, and even fictitiousness).<sup>2</sup> In late antiquity and the Middle Ages,

*commentare* described not only the methodology of most of prescholastic Christian philosophy, but also the engagement of vernacular texts with their Latin predecessors, and the interplay of images, marginalia, rubrics, and glosses with so-called "primary" texts. And although unfashionable today, the word "commentary" continues to stand for a diversity of editing practices as well as acts of reading, teaching, vulgarization, exegesis, and transcription, all fundamental to the university as an institution of cultural reproduction.

At first glance such a list, covering as it does the entire gamut of "secondary" literary forms, may seem excessively broad. But it may also be too restrictive. Much of Western philosophy after Plato is founded, after all, on the notion that the phenomenal world constitutes something of a "commentary" on a primary noumenal realm of which it is the unfolding in space and time. The principle informs Aristotle's attempt to refound science and philosophy on the analysis of phenomena, whether sensate data, ordinary speech, or the writings of prior philosophers. Science and philosophy thus become for Aristotle a sort of commentary upon commentary whose aim is to "save" the evanescent world of everyday appearances and texts by fixing and ordering it within the domain of logic.

Although an inquiry of this sort would take one far from Boccaccio and the fourteenth century, it may prove instructive to follow Aristotle's lead a bit further, at least to the extent that, however understood, commentary always seems embedded within a web of temporal issues. From its earliest manifestations, that is, commentary arises as a solution to and symptom of anxieties concerning temporal succession, present decline, and loss. Indeed, it would be tempting to trace the origins of commentary back to some mythic break within the regime of Western sacred texts. In the context of Christendom, for example, one might invoke the dual specters of Christ's empty tomb and of the ever-deferred second coming as initial spurs for Christianity's vast production of commentaries. The scandal of history's emptiness, marked by the unfulfilled promise of the empty tomb, simply had to be filled in and covered up: a task first accomplished via the compilation of a sacred text that is but an appendage to and commentary upon the Hebrew holy book. But as the later volume itself became either ancient, illegible, or unusable, and as

the Christian promise of an immediate end to history receded into an ever-more distant future, the primitive Church instituted itself by giving rise to a full-blown culture of commentary: a culture that "salvages" the sacred Book by inscribing all knowledge, all present laws and institutions, into its margins. The scriptural text thus becomes something of a "controlled substance" far too dangerous to be encountered face to face without the elaborate prescriptions and proscriptions of the Fathers bridging and controlling the growing gap between the era of Christ and the present.

Similarly, in the case of ancient Israel, one might cite the destruction of the Temple and the subsequent outpouring of commentaries in the Haggadic tradition, commentaries in which the archaic law was brought into harmony with the needs of an increasingly metropolitan, urbane, and Hellenized Judaic culture. Or in the setting of Greek antiquity one might, instead, evoke the Homeric poems and the crisis of meaning they underwent with the decline of the aristocratic era. Here grammatical glossing and allegoresis would place the sometimes errant morality of Homer's heroes and gods in the service of the new public ethos required by the emerging institutions of the *polis*.

Whatever the perils of following any of the above-named routes, one of its heuristic virtues is that it helps to isolate some key features of commentary as a cultural artifact. In all three scenarios, a consecrated text arises that, fundamentally at odds with the requirements of present readers and institutions, is made to speak in the voice of the present through the act of ventriloquism that is commentary. Commentary, in other words, reanimates the otherwise hollow sacred book; it throws its voice into the empty tomb. But in order for commentary's ventriloquism to "work," in order to persuade its reader that the book is indeed full and the tomb indeed pregnant, it insistently places itself in a secondary, subservient role. To the primary text it attributes an always already consecrated authority, an inexhaustible semantic reserve all the more miraculous because of the work's finitude. To itself it assigns the potentially infinite devotional task of plumbing these depths, of honoring and commemorating them, of linking the ancient monument to the present moment.

Commentary is thus a discourse concerned with cultural memory, monumentality, and, ultimately, mourning. It erects a modern edifice

around the predecessor text in what amounts to an elegiac gesture that at once commemorates, recalls, reactivates the dead primary text and monumentalizes it, distances and frames it, engulfs it and introjects it, ultimately displacing and erasing it in the act of consecration. It builds a funerary monument that entombs the very thing it claims to resurrect. Otherwise stated, commentary invariably supplants the very text whose primariness it attempts to stage. Under the guise of secondariness, commentary permits the present to obliquely assert its primacy over the past.

This is the broad horizon within which I wish to examine Giovanni Boccaccio's lifelong use of commentary—and, in particular, self-commentary—as a mode of self-authorization. The term “commentary” here designates an extremely wide range of practices within the corpus of Boccaccio's writings. In its most literal application it includes rather straightforward exegetical works in the vernacular, such as the *Esposizioni sopra la Commedia di Dante*, and the closely related biography of Dante, the *Trattatello in laude di Dante*, both of which commemorate Dante's role as the founding father of a new vernacular poetics. A bit more obliquely, it encompasses the later Latin writings such as the *De mulieribus claris* and the *De casibus virorum illustrium*, but especially the *Genealogiae deorum gentilium*: the immense compilation in which Boccaccio sets out to order the scattered *disecta membra* of ancient poetry and theology so as to rejoin them within a single genealogical tree extending from antiquity down through the present. But perhaps most important to my argument, the term “commentary” also designates Boccaccio's quite unprecedented use of what one might refer to as “third-party devices” to structure, control, and frame the reading of his texts. In literary works such as the *Filostrato*, the *Amorosa visione*, the *Ninfale fiesolano*, and the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*, to name but a few, Boccaccio goes far beyond conventional compositional practices by resorting to the very devices that once characterized the key functions performed within the medieval chain of textual transmission by mediating figures such as scribes, glossators, illuminators, binders, and compilers. He supplements his own “primary” texts with rubrications, marginal glosses, titles, annotations, framing devices, diagrams, summarizing sonnets, prologues and epilogues, introduc-

tory and valedictory sonnet sequences—all composed by the author himself. Moreover, in the case of the *Teseida delle nozze di Emilia*, he even appends a body of lengthy vernacular glosses and comments, some grammatical or rhetorical but most mythographic and allegorical in content; these explicate Boccaccio's vernacular epic in a manner not unlike the later expositions on Dante's *Inferno*, while providing a direct tie-in to the encyclopedic project of the *Genealogiae*.

As should be clear, the topic of commentary has far-reaching implications even within the writings of Boccaccio. Rather than attempting to treat the subject globally, I have chosen instead to build my own monument of commentary around the *Teseida*, its apparatus and self-commentary. Such a monument may appropriately be defined as funereal inasmuch as Boccaccio's post-Renaissance readers have pronounced a near-unanimous verdict that the *Teseida* was stillborn from the moment of conception—and in a sense it was.<sup>3</sup> The American literary historian Ernest Hatch Wilkins merely described it as a “tedious” work,<sup>4</sup> while Francesco De Sanctis, the father of modern *Italianistica*, is more loquacious (and revealing):

Here you find sieges, battles, the conjuring of gods and men, pompous descriptions, ornate speeches, the entire skeleton and surface of a heroic poem; but within [Boccaccio's] bourgeois soul there is no abode for epic grandeur. . . . The weapons, modes of combat, sacrifices, celebrations, all the externals are represented with the diligence and erudition of a scholar; but where is humanity? and where is nature?<sup>5</sup>

The “human” content, the “nature” that De Sanctis finds sorely lacking in the *Teseida* is, as he himself hints, that of a bourgeois subject: “Within [Boccaccio's] bourgeois soul there is no abode for epic grandeur.” But also implicated is the surrounding mercantile culture that Boccaccio scholars have identified closely with the much-vaunted “realism” and “naturalism” of Boccaccio's masterpiece, the *Decameron*. What troubles De Sanctis is that the *Teseida* violates the providential unfolding of Hegelian *Geist*; it is simply the wrong epic for the epoch; it should have been cast in the same mold as the *Decameron*, that “epic of the rising mercantile classes.”<sup>6</sup> Although time will not permit me here to fully challenge these critical common-

places, one major reason for recalling the *Teseida* to memory is the very fact of its resolute evasion of contemporary matters. What I will be sketching out is a symptomatic reading of the *Teseida* that tries to attend to the ambitions and anxieties tied to the composition of an epic in the Tuscan vernacular—ambitions and anxieties that render it a particularly revealing microcosm of the Boccaccian corpus as a whole, the *Decameron* included. Not only does the *Teseida* raise key issues of allusion and imitation, of the relative secondariness of vernacular authors to their primary Latin and pre-Latin sources; but perhaps most important, it is a key work as regards broader developments within the literary system of the fourteenth century, involving as it does a rather explicit act of self-canonization on Boccaccio's part via the accumulation of a complex apparatus of "third-person devices" in and around his poetic text. The *Teseida*, in short, participates intimately in two of Boccaccio's lifelong concerns: first, the problem of clearing and marking out a parallel yet distinctive space for vernacular poetry vis-à-vis antiquity as well as Dante, and second, the social correlative of the first—the fashioning of a socio-cultural identity for the new vernacular *autore* that shields him from the (inevitable) "contagion" of mercantile values.

It goes without saying that to write a martial epic in the fourteenth century was to place oneself in a vulnerable position (something like sitting down today to write the "great American novel"). "Vulnerable" because, from the remotest antiquity, epic had been the most privileged of literary genres and a genre, therefore, in which the weight of literary fathers was felt to be especially onerous. We can gather much about the expectations and anxieties that such an enterprise must have entailed even in antiquity from the famous concluding lines of the *Thebaid*, where Statius insists that, even as it triumphs, his book will follow afar and adore the footsteps of the divine *Aeneid* ("... nec tu divinam Aeneida tempta, / sed longe sequere et vestigia semper adora").<sup>7</sup> Some thirteen centuries later, if we may judge by Francis Petrarch's failure to complete his Latin epic, the *Affrica*, the situation remained much the same. The sole successful contemporary poem that may truly qualify as "epic" is Dante's *Commedia*, a vernacular work in which the conventional motif of the epic journey is tellingly transformed into a journey of literary

apprenticeship under the direct tutelage of Virgil. Moreover, in a passage from the *De vulgari eloquentia* that Boccaccio paraphrases in the triumphal coda of the *Teseida*, the younger Dante had declared unequivocally that "On the subject of arms I know of no Italian who has written poetry" ("Arma vero nullum latium adhuc invenio poetasse").<sup>8</sup> All of this amounts to a definition of the enterprise of the *Teseida* as audacious, as largely if not entirely novel in modern times and, most of all, as potentially illegitimate, especially for a twenty-seven-year-old rhymester.<sup>9</sup>

There would be much to say here about fears of illegitimacy in Boccaccio's work. From the biographical datum of his bastard birth, to his willful rejection of a mercantile upbringing, to the many myths concerning his purportedly French purportedly noble mother, to the paradoxical link between his misogyny and his constant projective identification with aristocratic female reader-interlocutors, Boccaccio's entire career is largely shaped by cares of this sort. Yet limiting our scope to the *Teseida*, suffice it to say that Boccaccio's epic addresses the question of its legitimacy by means of two interrelated strategies: *emulation* and *simulation*. Of the latter I will speak in due course, but by "emulation" I understand the many surface signs through which Boccaccio's work signals its historical position as a latecomer vis-à-vis epic predecessors that it imitates, appropriates, and distorts. Via emulative devices, in other words, Boccaccio proclaims that his text follows in the footsteps of its noble predecessors, just as the *Thebaid* trailed the *Aeneid*, whether adoringly or in a revisionary mode. A case in point is the *Teseida*'s title, which performs an act of accommodation between Virgil and Statius while positioning Boccaccio somewhere in the gap between his two Latin *auctores*. Following the precedent of Homer's *Odyssey*, Virgil had named his epic after its hero-protagonist, Aeneas, father of the Aeneadae; while Statius had imitated the title of the *Iliad*, naming his epic after Thebes, the city in which the events of his poem transpire.<sup>10</sup> Boccaccio's title, although it designates the hero of the *Thebaid*, jumps right over Statius, hearkening directly back to Virgil: just as Aeneas was to the *Aeneidos*, so Theseus will be to the *Teseida*. An implicit correction seems to be at stake: Statius's title had not acknowledged the key structural role played by Theseus within the Theban narrative—

the very role of monarch, judge, and peacemaker which the *Teseida* also assigns him. Boccaccio remedies his predecessor's oversight by raising the Statian hero to the titular status of Aeneas and Odysseus.<sup>11</sup>

A final point needs to be made about the work's title before proceeding further. That Boccaccio would have been acutely sensitive to the philological fact that titles such as *Aeneidos* (or *Aeneis*) and *Thebaidos* were latinized forms of Greek nouns may be surmised from two earlier works. Both appear under pseudo-Hellenic titles, the *Filocolo* (or *philo* + *kolos* = weariness of love) in the case of his prose romance, and the *Filostrato* (or *philo* + *stratos* = victim of love) in the case of his Trojan love tragedy; and in both the Greek title reflects a choice of a pre- or non-Roman subject matter. This proves to be of special significance in the *Teseida*, where the adoption of a Greek-patterned title coincides with repeated and emphatic assertions of the extreme antiquity and nobility of the epic tale. Boccaccio tells us in the prose dedication to Fiammetta:

. . . [U]na antichissima istoria e alle più delle genti non manifesta, bella sì per la materia della quale parla, che é amore, e sì per coloro de' quali dice, che nobili giovani furono e di real sangue discesi, in latino volgare e per rima . . . ho ridotto.

(. . . I have transcribed in vulgar Latin and in rhymes a most ancient story and one unknown to most people, beautiful not only because of the matter of which it speaks, namely love, but also because of those of whom it speaks, namely noble youths descended from royal blood.)<sup>12</sup>

The claim resurfaces in the second stanza of the opening canto where the affirmation of antiquity is translated into a virtual denial of any link to Statius and, more obliquely, to texts such as the *Roman de Thèbes* and *Châtelain de Coucy*:

E' m'è venuto in voglia con pietosa  
rima di scrivere una istoria antica,  
tanto negli anni riposta e nascosa  
che latino autor non par ne dica,  
per quel ch'io senta, in libro alcuna cosa.

(I came to wish to write  
an ancient story in pious rhyme;  
a story so remote and hidden in time  
that no Latin author seems to recount it,  
so far as I know, in any book.)

What is striking in both of these passages is the evasiveness of Boccaccio's rhetoric. The superlative *antichissima* in the first passage and the comparative *tanto* in the second distance Boccaccio's tale from the historical present in a manner that at once mimes and exaggerates the usual chronological gap one expects between epic poets and their subjects. The existence of a chronological gap is essential, the *Genealogiae* will insist, because much of the nobility and legitimacy of epic poetry derives from the special access it enjoys to the remotest historical times. (This is perhaps one reason why Boccaccio cites the critical commonplace that Lucan, who wrote an only slightly fictionalized account of relatively recent historical events, is more a "metrical historian" than an epic poet.)<sup>13</sup> So by asserting that no Latin author "in any book" has ever told his story before him, Boccaccio is advancing a rather bold twofold claim. On the one hand he is, in effect, claiming for himself a position similar to that of Virgil and Statius vis-à-vis their sources: like them, he too will treat ancient matters and rely *directly* upon Greek sources.<sup>14</sup> No allusion, therefore, is made to intermediary texts, whether the *Thebaid* or its vulgar Latin counterparts. On the other hand, Boccaccio hints that the belatedness of his poetic medium in no way diminishes its capacity to fittingly recount this most ancient story. On the contrary, it would seem that the former is ennobled by the latter as a function of the vast temporal gap. A natural correspondence between regal heroes and lowly rhymes is seemingly implied.

Emulative play functions on a number of other levels as well, permitting the *Teseida* to constitute itself through a complex process of self-alignment with predecessor texts. Take, for instance, the earlier-noted appropriation of the figure of Theseus from Statius, which corresponds in turn to a wholesale adoption of the structure of Statius's plot in the *Teseida*'s first six books. As in the *Thebaid*, the poem's action revolves around a pair of enemy twins: not Oedipus's sons,

Eteocles and Polynices, but Arcita and Palemone. The two are inseparable friends who fall madly in love with the Athenian princess Emilia in the wake of Theseus's victory over Thebes and the deaths of Eteocles and Polynices—the culminating events of Statius's martial epic. While repeating much of the structural scheme of the *Thebaid*, the *Teseida* puts itself forward as a continuation. Yet it is a continuation with a difference, for Boccaccio's tale of conflict between enemy twins unfolds under the aegis of the Goddess of Love.

Like the Oedipidae, Arcita and Palemone are Theban princes, the sole surviving representatives of the Theban royal line. And as latter-day heirs to the curse of Oedipus, they are fully identical to one another. The absolute parity of their desire, valor, beauty, and nobility, leads, as in the *Thebaid*, to a dangerous impasse: a "mimetic crisis" that presages the annihilation of the collectivity.<sup>15</sup> As Boccaccio describes it in book 3, the effect of love is such that:

Era a costor della memoria uscita  
l'antica Tebe e loro alto legnaggio,  
e similmente se n'era partita  
la 'nfelicità loro, e il dammaggio  
ch'avean ricevuto, e la lor vita  
ch'era cattiva, e lor grande eretaggio;  
e dove queste cose esser soleano,  
Emilia solamente vi teneano.

(Ancient Thebes and their exalted lineage  
had abandoned their memory  
and likewise departed  
was their unhappiness and the injury  
they had received, and their life  
which was base, and their great legacy;  
and where these things used to be,  
they had but Emilia.)

Out of this forgetfulness a violent conflict arises that seems destined to end, once and for all, the Theban royal line. Only the timely intervention of Theseus at the poem's midpoint permits an unblocking of the fatal logjam, yet in a manner that effectively grafts the second

half of Virgil's epic onto the tail end of the *Thebaid*. For, contrary to his Statian counterpart, Boccaccio's Duke of Athens ensures that, instead of dying out, the Theban royal house will merge with that of Athens. To this end he organizes a ritual war game, a battle simulation assembling all the greatest warriors of antiquity and dividing them into two equal armies, each led by one of the Theban princes and each under the sponsorship of either Mars or Venus. To the leader of the victorious army Theseus promises the hand of Emilia: hence Boccaccio's full title—*Teseida delle nozze di Emilia* (or the *Theseid of the Nuptials of Emilia*).

So with the advent of the war games Arcita and Palemone may be said to become less the sons of Oedipus than twins of Aeneas and Turnus struggling over the hand of Lavinia in the second half of the *Aeneid*. Yet here, as well, there lurk numerous divergences beneath the apparent parallelisms, particularly as regards the *Aeneid*'s mythographic/genealogical subtext. The *Teseida*, as its title suggests, concludes with the consummation of Emilia's marriage: an event that marks the overcoming of the earlier structural impasse and the establishment of a new, more productive parity. As the text winds down Palemone rests in the earthly paradise of his nuptial bed and Arcita has been emparadised in the eighth heaven. From a genealogical standpoint this solution reverses the tragic ending of the *Thebaid*, ensuring as it does the continuation of the Theban royal line, while also forging a doubly noble, doubly ancient, Greco-Theban royal bloodline—on this question of blood nobility Boccaccio is characteristically hyperbolic. It also points no less suggestively beyond the conclusion of the *Aeneid*, actually staging a Boccaccian counterpart to the all-important nuptial scene that Virgil had implied but had chosen to omit. For the tale of the rise of Rome and the Roman race to be fully complete, there must be a marriage between Lavinia and Aeneas, so as to join the rustic blood of Latium to the noble blood of Troy. Yet, in a gesture symptomatic of the marginality of love in Virgil's epic, he chooses to end instead on a martial note. So the *Teseida* seems to push each of its epic predecessors beyond the narrow framework of martial epic into a new territory that, knowing Boccaccio, one is tempted to define as both Dantean and Ovidian. To their narratives of war and sacrifice, Boccaccio appends a marriage: a scene

of normalization and harmonization in which Venus triumphs over Mars—the poetry of Love over the poetry of War—in what amounts to a definition of the specificity of vernacular epic. In the context of vernacular epic, that is, the scene of battle is ultimately destined to become the battlefield of love.<sup>16</sup>

If these issues have been surveyed in far too synthetic a fashion, I hope at least to have begun to suggest some of the intricacy of Boccaccio's emulatory gestures. Emulation in Boccaccio always involves an initial act of self-positioning as a latecomer, yet this self-positioning, in turn, authorizes manipulations of historical sequence, emendations of supposed source texts, and, above all, the contamination of literary sources. To this degree it may be fair to characterize the *Teseida* itself as a sort of vernacular commentary on Statius's *Thebaid*, inasmuch as Boccaccio's continuation surrounds and supplants the very poem from which it claims to derive and in whose name it presumes to speak. But the *Teseida* reworks and extends both of its ancient counterparts, constantly affirming its own subaltern role, its position of dependency, but, in the end, it always has the last word—and the word in question is a vernacular word filled with traces of a less distant Romance past.

Earlier I alluded to a second strategy by means of which Boccaccio addresses some of the ambitions and anxieties entailed in the composition of the *Teseida*, referring to it as "simulation." The distinction between emulation and simulation is not always an easy one, but suffice it to say that while emulation always involves the affirmation of imitative distance (or some sort of probing of a historical remove), simulation effectively breaks down all such temporal gaps. Or rather, it creates them, but within a hyperreal space where there is no longer any distinction between the real and the imaginary; where there is only, as Jean Baudrillard puts it, "room . . . for the orbital recurrence of models and the simulated generation of difference."<sup>17</sup> In the context of the *Teseida*, simulation describes a panoply of techniques whose purpose is not simply to "imitate" prior epics, but rather to quite literally transform Boccaccio's text into an ancient epic; or more precisely, to transform it into an improbable, if not impossible, artifact—an ancient (modern) epic.<sup>18</sup>

At the boundary line between techniques of emulation and simu-

lation one might situate a number of Boccaccio's compositional practices. As Vandelli, Branca, Quaglio, and others have shown, there can be no doubt that Boccaccio went to truly extraordinary lengths to mime the length, structure, shape, and appearance of his Latin predecessors' epics. Not only did he respect the standard twelve-book epic structure and exploit the usual break between the narratives of books 1 through 6 and 7 through 12 for his own purposes; but also he carefully distributed his verses between the *Teseida*'s two halves so as to match the 48 percent to 52 percent distribution observed by Virgil and Statius.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the *Teseida* is indeed nearly identical in length to the *Aeneid*, exceeding Virgil's epic by only three or seven verses (depending on Boccaccio's manuscript of the *Aeneid*) and exceeding the *Thebaid* by only 160—this in a poem of 9,904 total verses.<sup>20</sup>

In and of themselves, such meticulous compositional practices would not be worthy of note, but in the *Teseida* they are deployed in tandem with a remarkable arsenal of other devices, all meant to "rusticate" Boccaccio's text, to simulate what one might describe as "the antiquity effect." In a manuscript culture like that of the Florentine fourteenth century, if the book was increasingly evolving into a commodity, it still remained something of a precious object whose mere existence conferred authority upon its contents. So much the more so in the case of any manuscript bearing successive layers of ornamentation, scribal annotation, and textual commentary. The more such geological strata accumulated over and about the primary text in the course of centuries, the greater the latter's presumed antiquity, legitimacy, and power. It is precisely this system that the *Teseida* will short-circuit, simulating the century-long process by means of which texts such as the *Aeneid* entered the cultural memory, accumulated layers of commentary, were commemorated, monumentalized, mourned, and replaced.

The short circuit is ensured by Boccaccio's ubiquity. In the opulent autograph Laurentian manuscript of the *Teseida* (Medicea Laurenziana, Acquisti e Doni 325), he is not only author but also scribe, compiler, glossator, editor, mythographer, illuminator, and allegorical expositor.<sup>21</sup> The first of these masks—and I speak of "masks" because, unlike Dante's *Vita nuova*, these functions are not ascribed



to the authorial "I"—is put on following the proem in a sonnet in which the *argomento* of the book is laid out as an editorial aid.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, each of the subsequent twelve books is preceded by a summarizing sonnet and includes extensive rubrications which describe the plot and subdivide it into smaller units.<sup>23</sup> In addition to these, Boccaccio contributes brief glosses and, where justified by more recondite allusions, an abundant self-commentary, always written, like the preceding, as if composed by someone other than the poet.<sup>24</sup> The glosses, in other words, are written in a dislocated voice.

The sonnets speak in the name of Boccaccio's *libro* or *libretto*, describing the actions and fictions it contains; twice they mention its *autore*, in the second case noting that he speaks directly to his book in the final stanzas. The glosses and commentary respect this same fictional split and adopt much the same vocabulary, referring to the poem as a *libretto*, *libro*, and *opera*. As for the matter of audience, they consistently address their interlocutors as *lettori*, a practice at variance with the poem's oscillation between the terms *lettori* and *ascoltatori* (the latter being by far the more prevalent). The disjunction may be of some significance, for it aims to replicate the expected split between the oral conventions of epic and the literate conventions associated with commentary, between an ancient preliterate era represented in and by epic and a subsequent era in which literacy equals commentary. Frequent cross-references to earlier and later passages in the commentary seem to confirm the point, implying that commentary is by its very nature a written/writerly cultural artifact. Moreover, Boccaccio's commentator is always quick to identify himself as a modern, whereas Boccaccio the epic poet occupies an indeterminate temporal position. Not only does the commentary regularly translate ancient words, beliefs, myths, and institutions into present terms, but it even refers its readers to contemporary texts such as Guido Cavalcanti's "Donna mi prega" and Dino del Garbo's glosses, praising them for their insights on the psychology of love.

As for the composer of the *Teseida*, the glosses and commentary always employ the ambiguous term *autore*. His Greek and Latin sources, however, are designated as either *autori* or, much more frequently, as *poeti*. The ambiguity will turn out to be a productive one in the valedictory sonnets, where, his mission accomplished, Boc-

caccio will have himself proclaimed both a *poeta* and a *vate* by the Muses themselves. Embedded within the *Teseida*'s narrative trajectory is thus an elevation of its creator above the ranks of ordinary authors, and his dubbing with what the *Genealogiae* calls "the glorious name of poet."<sup>25</sup> From his humble beginnings as the vernacular *autore* and frustrated lover of the proem, the epic transforms him into the Muses' *vas electionis*—a transformation validated in advance by the work's apparatus and commentary.

As regards the specific content of Boccaccio's self-commentary, it may be briefly resumed as follows. Individual entries, indexed by stanza, serve seven general purposes:

1. They address particular lexical and syntactical questions, clearing up the meaning of archaic or esoteric vocabulary, and paraphrasing difficult constructions. Example: in book 7, stanza 110, Boccaccio had employed the Latinisms *miri* and *diri* as rhyme words, which the gloss translates as *maravigliosi* and *crudeli*.

2. They interpret difficult metaphors and oblique or elliptical rhetorical figures. Example: in book 3, stanza 35, the author had said of Love's irresistible power that only "colui il sa che tal volta fu preso / da lui" (he knows it who has been Love's victim). The glossator makes the point that this impersonal construction actually refers to the author himself: "[colui il sa, ecc.]: che sono io" ("that am I" or "such a one am I").

3. They clarify and cover up authorial intent while also preempting readerly objections and defending the poem's integrity against the attacks of future critics. Example: the notes to book 1, stanzas 10–14, in which Boccaccio defends the necessity of his lengthy rehearsal of the tale of Theseus's victory over the Amazons. Speaking in the first-person, his commentator-persona states: "Dico, e brevemente, che l'autore a niuno altro fine queste cose scrisse, se non per mostrare onde Emilia fosse venuta ad Attene" (I say, in brief, that the author wrote these things to no other end than to show how Emilia came to Athens). This statement masks a deeper authorial motivation: the tale of the Amazons links the scene of battle to the battle of the sexes, martial epic to amatory epic.

4. They explicate epic conventions for readers. Example: when Arcita and Palemone each pray respectively to Mars and Venus before

the ritual combat of book 8, their prayers are personified as messengers, much as Boccaccio defines his vernacular works as *galeotti* or go-betweens. The commentator explains: "Just as between two rulers who are far apart, ambassadors serve as intermediaries to make known the intentions of one or the other, so prayer functions between us and God; and for this reason the author pretends that it has the attributes of a person."

5. They expound on learned references to names, beliefs, customs, or myths of ancient origin. The commentator here speaks as an anthropologist translating ancient terms into their modern counterparts, and demarcating the separation between the reader's present and the remote world embodied in the poem. Example: book 2, stanza 79, which describes the specialized vocabulary employed in antiquity to distinguish various sorts of funeral pyres. The commentator writes: "In antiquity small mountains of wood used to be raised, which today we call *cataste*, ordered in a special fashion; and this mountain of wood, properly built, was called a *rogo*." He later adds that once ornamented and crowned with the body of the deceased, the *rogo* was in turn called a *pira* or pyre.

6. They hold forth at length on the subject of pagan mythology, defining family links and retelling the standard stories from ancient *poeti*—the latter are always designated collectively in order to reinforce the direct link to the myths themselves. Example: in book 1, stanza 1, Boccaccio alludes to Phoebus's "beloved fronds" ("frondi amate"); the gloss tells the tale of Apollo and Daphne, and how the laurel became the prize of triumphant emperors and poets, setting the stage for the ceremony of laureation performed in the valedictory sonnets.

7. They provide lengthy and quite detailed allegorical excursuses on the work's most ornate descriptive passages such as the elaborate ekphrasis in book 7 on the temples of Mars and Venus. Predominantly moral in its orientation, this reading puts itself forward as a vulgarization for women readers: "I know that many more and better things could be said about this matter; I leave them to others who with greater delight will again study and write of them in finer detail; for me it will suffice to have said what appears here, having written *ad instantia di donne*" ("at the insistence" or "in the service" of ladies).

As may be gathered from this synopsis—whose aridity I apologize for—the range of interpretive maneuvers performed by Boccaccio's self-commentary is exceptionally broad. This diversity, however, is subtended by a common goal: that of "explicating" the vernacular epic, bridging the gap between the poem and the readerly present, so as to produce, in the very process of explication, even further simulated differences. Affiliated via commentary with ancient theology, language, beliefs, wisdom, and customs, the *Teseida* claims additional attributes of primacy, authority, and remoteness. Its illusory patina of antiquity deepens and grows. It proclaims itself already dead, telling us it is written in an ancient (modern) language that requires decoding. And in order to place the epic in the highest possible relief, to reinforce as much as possible its distance and masculine reserve, that decoding designates itself as contemporary, immediate, divulgative, loquacious, and written by a third party *ad instantia di donne*. (As always, in Boccaccio, woman is the emblem of modernity, particularly in her link to desire, vernacular language, and the book as amorous contract and gift [*donna* = *dono*].)

Through commentary, rubrications, and summarizing sonnets, Boccaccio builds an edifice around his vernacular epic that establishes his and its authority: a veritable monument to the new vernacular *auctor* and to the enduring value of his work. Inspired by the flourishing commentary tradition growing up around Dante's *Commedia*, this edifice pretends to encourage and to facilitate our access to the treasures contained therein—it pretends to speak *ad instantia di donne*. Yet, authored by Boccaccio himself, it also constitutes itself as a fortress, as a defensive bulwark against both future assailants and the ravages of time, as a guarantee against the text's improper circulation and distribution. The apparatus identifies the *Teseida* with the certain value of the law and ancient philosophy, and against the uncertain values of the marketplace. It protects the poem against those enemies who would reduce it and all poetry (especially vernacular poetry) to mere stories, to eternally repeatable and variable lies, and reduce poets to traffickers in lies. Moreover, it packages, frames, and embalms the poem; it attempts to fix and stabilize it forever; to shield it against misreading, criticism, and continuation; to forestall the effects of scribal corruption, emendation, and expansion. Insis-

tently crafting the work into a discreet and singular object, a kind of self-enacting automaton, a Book almost in the metaphysical sense, it attempts to shut down the relatively free play that once characterized the medieval chain of textual transmission and production.<sup>26</sup> And in its place it inserts an infinitely mobile, ubiquitous author able to sign and control his creations: a poet and *vate*—as the valediction proclaims him—capable of occupying every position along the chain, capable of donning every mask, female and male, ancient and modern.

Perhaps the most telling gesture of all, in this regard, is the *Teseida*'s punning conclusion. Having completed his epic narrative, the poet addresses himself directly to his book ("ma tu, o libro"), praising it for being the first to have sung of Mars in the "volgar lazio" (or vulgar Latin) and the first to have sailed uncharted waters. He then lowers his craft's sail and the poem ends, only to be followed by an exchange of sonnets (of the sort that Cervantes will deliciously mock in *Don Quixote*). The first is from the author himself to the Muses, to whom he presents the book as a pious offering to be relayed to his beloved so that she may dub it. The second simulates a response from the Muses to the author and describes the effect of the gift and the dubbing. Reading of Theseus, Emilia, and the enemy twins, Fiammetta becomes herself: the "flamelet" (*fiammetta*) is rapt in amorous flames and insists that the book must not remain mute. The Muses write:

Teseida di nozze d'Emilia, o vate  
nomar li piacque; e noi con note argute  
darenli in ogni etate fama immensa.  
Così gli abbiam, rorati al fonte santo  
licenziati a gire in ogni canto.

(The Theseid of the nuptials of Emilia, oh poet,  
it pleased her to name it; and with sharp notes  
we will give it immense fame in every age.  
So we bedewed them [the pages] in the holy fount  
and sent them off to rove about in every land.)

If Fiammetta names the book, thereby completing the amorous transaction contracted for in the text's proem, it is the Muses who dub the poet as *vate* and guarantee his fame. It is they who baptize the new

book born with *acute notes* and grant it license to "gire," to circle or circulate confidently in every "canto," in every place, in every song.<sup>27</sup>

#### Notes

- 1 This essay was first presented in June 1990 at the California Humanities Research Institute at the University of California at Irvine. In the subsequent year, I became aware of Susan Noakes's *Timely Reading: Between Exegesis and Interpretation* (Ithaca, 1988), a ground-breaking study concerned with the temporality of reading whose conclusions regarding Boccaccio (see 68–97) are often similar to my own. The epigraph is from *Boccaccio on Poetry*, trans. Charles S. Osgood (Indianapolis, 1930), 117. All quotations from the *Teseida* are from Salvatore Battaglia's critical edition (Florence, 1938). Unless otherwise indicated, all English translations are mine.
- 2 From an etymological standpoint, words such as *commentarius*, *commentor*, and *commentum* are founded on *con* [= *cum* (with)] + *mens* (mind) and formed from the past participial stem of *comminiscor* (to contrive). Such words' semantic link to purely mental constructs leads to an association with fiction, acts of the imagination, and even lying.
- 3 For a summary of the text's reception, see David Anderson's important study *Before the Knight's Tale: Imitation of Classical Epic in Boccaccio's "Teseida"* (Philadelphia, 1988), 1–23.
- 4 Ernest Hatch Wilkins, *A History of Italian Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974), 104.
- 5 "Qui hai assedi, battaglie, congiure di dei e di uomini, pompose descrizioni, artificiosi discorsi, tutto lo scheletro e l'apparenza di un poema eroico; ma nel suo spirito borghese non entra alcun sentimento di vera grandezza, e Teseo e Arcita e Palemone e Ippolito ed Emilia non hanno di epico che il manto. Il suo spirito è disposto a veder le cose nella loro minutezza, ma più scende nei particolari, più l'oggetto gli si sminuzza e scioglie, sì che ne perde il sentimento e l'armonia. Le armi, i modi del combattere, i sacrificii, le feste, tutta l'esteriorità è rappresentata con la diligenza e la dottrina di un erudito; ma dov'è l'uomo? e dov'è la natura?" (Francesco De Sanctis, *Storia della letteratura italiana* [Milan, 1956], 293).
- 6 The phrase is Vittore Branca's and serves as title of what is perhaps the principal chapter of his authoritative *Boccaccio medievale* (Florence, 1981).
- 7 Statius, *Thebaid*, 12:816–17. The phrase "longe sequare et vestigia semper adora" may well evoke the end of book 2 of the *Aeneid*, in which the disappearance of Creusa is prepared by means of two allusions to her separation from the lead paternal group (and, implicitly, to her marginality vis-à-vis the fulfillment of patriarchal *pietas*): "Longe servet vestigia coniunx" (2.711) and "pone subit coniunx" (2.725). The *Thebaid* would thus identify itself with the tragic figure of the sacrificed mother.
- 8 Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia*, 2.2.8.

- 9 Boccaccio makes the point in the concluding paragraphs of his *Filocolo*: ". . . [S]ince you were created by a humble youth, it is not for you to seek out higher places. So leave the great verses of Virgil to the excellent wits and vigorous minds. . . . And those verses of mighty Lucan, in which the fierce arms of Mars are sung, leave them to martial knights, along with those of Statius from Toulouse" (cited from *Il filocolo* 5.97, trans. Donald Cheney, in collaboration with Thomas Bergin [New York, 1985], 470).
- 10 At least one late medieval prologue to Statius's epic, probably composed between the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, makes the point: "Thebaydos a Thebis civitate, de qua hystoria est, et declinat ur hec Thebays, -dis vel -dos, id est hystoria de Thebis. Et est sciendum quod hystoriarum quedam sunt nomina a loco, ut Ylias ab Ylio et Thebais a Thebis; quedam a persona, ut Eneys ab Enea, Odyssea ab Odiseo" (cited in Anderson, *Before the Knight's Tale*, 245).
- 11 The classification of Lucan not as a poet but as a metrical historian (found in Boccaccio's *Genealogiae deorum gentilium*) may also be indicative, inasmuch as Lucan's epic is named alternately after a place name—Pharsalus—or a historical event—the Roman civil wars. Moreover, that Statius should have entitled his successive work *The Achilleid* may well have encouraged Boccaccio's choice. In his fine discussion of Boccaccio's title (142–44), Anderson also mentions a less illustrious precedent: the *Theseid* of a certain "Codrus" to whom both Juvenal and Servius refer. In his famed prologue to the *Aeneid*, the latter notes: "Titulus est Aeneis, derivatum nomen ab Aenea, ut a Theseo Theseis; sic Iuvenalis vexatus totiens rausi Theseide Codri" (Anderson, *Before the Knight's Tale*, 143).
- 12 Boccaccio, *Teseida*, 262.
- 13 "Nam poete non ut hystorographi faciunt, qui a quodam certo principio opus exordiantur suum et continua atque ordinata rerum gestarum descriptione in finem usque deducunt (quod cernimus fecisse Lucanum, quam ob causam multi eum potius metricum hystorographum quam poetam existimant)" (*Genealogiae deorum gentilium* 14.13, 153–59). Cited in Boccaccio in *Defence of Poetry*, ed. Jeremiah Reedy (Toronto, 1930), 67. Boccaccio is most likely referring to Servius, Isidore of Seville, and John of Salisbury.
- 14 The claim is seconded by a gloss which states that "it has not been translated from Greek into Latin" (12)—a reference which is usually interpreted as an allusion to a Byzantine romance by Diogenes Akritas. If this is the case, the context and the hyperbolic "una istoria antica tanto negli anni riposta" suggests, on the contrary, that this represents a boast.
- 15 The phrase is borrowed from René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore, 1977), 143–68.
- 16 On the blending of martial and love epic in the *Teseida*, one should consult Robert Hollander, *Boccaccio's Two Venuses* (New York, 1977), 53–65.
- 17 "Simulacra and Simulations" in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford, 1988), 167.
- 18 Giuseppe Vandelli was the first scholar to suggest that the function of the critical apparatus was to assimilate the *Teseida* to its Latin epic predecessors ("Un auto-

grafo della *Teseida*," *Studi di filologia italiana* 2 [1929]: 76). The point was further elaborated by Hollander: "To herald the rebirth of epic in a modern tongue it was only fitting that the instant classic be born *cum commento*. . . . (One smiles at Boccaccio's little game somewhat sadly: Had he revealed himself publicly as his own glossator his exertions would have seemed the self-loving effort of a nervous father.)" See Robert Hollander, "The Validity of Boccaccio's Self-Exegesis in His *Teseida*," *Medievalia et Humanistica: Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Culture*, n.s., 8 (1977): 168; and Anderson, *Before the Knight's Tale*: "Boccaccio has effectively reproduced the appearance of the Latin epics in their full regalia of arguments, divisions, subdivisions and learned commentary" (144).

- 19 Leaving to one side questions such as the precise length of the principal Latin epics in medieval editions or the *Teseida*'s length in its original redaction, the following scheme may be proposed (following contemporary critical editions):

Text	First half	Second half	Total
<i>Aeneid</i>	4,755 verses (48.0%)	5,141 verses (52.0%)	9,896 verses
<i>Thebaid</i>	4,726 verses (48.5%)	5,015 verses (51.5%)	9,741 verses
<i>Teseida</i>	4,712 verses (47.6%)	5,192 verses (52.4%)	9,904 verses

- 20 Since the medieval text of Virgil's epic often included four prefatory verses (probably a Carolingian addition), Boccaccio's epic would diverge from the *Aeneid* by a mere quatrain (see Anderson, *Before the Knight's Tale*, 141–42).
- 21 Although both text and commentary seem complete (after decades of labor, if we are to judge by the manuscript tradition), Boccaccio envisaged an elaborate program of miniatures in his autograph edition. Only the first image in this program was realized: "Il Boccaccio lasciò nel corso del testo numerosi spazi bianchi destinati alle illustrazioni, di cui una sola, gravemente dilavata e forse solo abbozzata a penna e colori, si intravede a c. 1 r, con l'autore inginocchiato che porge il libro a una donna, presumibilmente Fiammetta" (cited in *Mostra di manoscritti, documenti e edizioni: I—Manoscritti e documenti*, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, 22 maggio–31 agosto [Certaldo, 1975], 32).
- 22 As noted by Susan Noakes, it is worth recalling that in his edition of the *Vita nuova* the author of the *Teseida* had relegated Dante's *divisioni* to the margins of his text: "Maraviglierannosi molti . . . perchè io le divisioni de' sonetti non ho nel testo poste, come l'autore del presente libretto le pose; ma ciò respondo . . . che le divisioni de' sonetti manifestamente sono dichiarazioni di quegli: per che più tosto chiosa appaiono dovere essere che testo; e però chiosa l'ho poste, non testo, non stando l'uno con l'altre ben mescolato. Se qui forse dicesse alcuno—e le teme de' sonetti e canzoni scritte da lui similmente si potrebbero dire chiosa, con ciò sia cosa che esse sieno non minore dichiarazione di quegli che le divisioni—dico che, quantunque sieno dichiarazioni, non sono dichiarazioni per dichiarare, ma dimostrazioni delle cagioni che a fare lo 'ndussero i sonetti e le canzoni . . . per che meritamente testo sono, e non chiose" (cited in *Vita nuova*, a cura di Michele Barbi [Florence, 1932], xvi–xvii). On Boccaccio as transcriber of Dante,

one may consult *Giovanni Boccaccio editore e interprete*, ed. Società Dantesca Italiana (Florence, 1979); and Noakes, *Timely Reading*, 80–87.

- 23 In the exhibition catalog for the six-hundred-year anniversary of Boccaccio's death, the manuscript is described as follows: "Rubriche rosse; iniziali a colori su fondo blu a cc. 1 r e 3 r; iniziali degli altri 11 libri blu con filigrana rossa o blu e rosse con filigrana bicolore analoga, dell'altezza di un'intera ottava; iniziali di sezione (ossia di seguito a ciascuna rubrica) alternativamente blu e rosse con fregi rispettivamente rossi e blu, dell'altezza di tre versi; segni paragrafali alternativamente rossi e blue; maiuscola toccata di giallo al-l'inizio dei vv. 1 e 7 di ciascuna ottava" (*Mostra di manoscritti, documenti e edizioni: I—Manoscritti e documenti*, 32–33).
- 24 Salvatore Battaglia describes the layout of the Laurentian manuscript as follows: "Il testo è corredato di un triplice ordine di note: chiose brevissime, interlineari, sovrapposte alle parole di cui si vuole dichiarare il senso o suggerire l'esatto valore grammaticale o sintattico; note succinte, scritte a fianco del verso, quasi addossate all'ottava, come piccole appendici delucidative, per lo più con un piccolo segno di richiamo; commento dispiegato, organico, che si rifà al contenuto della poesia, integrando, allargando, parafrasando; esso si dispone lungo i quattro margini della pagina, attorno al testo poetico, ma con regolare e bella simmetria" (xiii).
- 25 "Certissimum enim est, ut post hec suo loco monstrabitur, hanc, ut cetera discipline, a deo, a quo sapiencia omnis, inicum habuisse; et, uti relique, ab effectu nomen sortita est, a quo demum celebre poetarum nomen derivatum, et inde poematum a poetis" (*Genealogiae* 14.6.19–24; cited in Reedy, ed., *Boccaccio in Defence of Poetry*, 37).
- 26 Compare Petrarch's polemical stance against "quella cultura tradizionale, arrociata nelle università e indifferente alle nuove esigenze filologiche, che aveva creato e codificato ormai da un secolo un anonimo ed uniforme sistema di produzione del libro scolastico, affidato alle mani di artigiani differenziati per competenze e sostanzialmente estranei alle finalità ed alla utilizzazione del prodotto finito, cioè del libro stesso" (Armando Petrucci, "Libro e scrittura in Francesco Petrarca", in *Libri, scrittura e pubblico nel Rinascimento: Guida storica e critica* [Bari, 1979], 13). Petrucci adds: "Si trattava, insomma, del contrasto di fondo che divideva due opposte concezioni del libro: da una parte il libro prodotto in modo quasi meccanico da uno sperimentato sistema artigianale ed offerto, come strumento di una cultura professionale e tecnica, ad un relativamente largo pubblico; dall'altra il libro come disinteressato prodotto letterario perfetto in ogni sua parte e volto al godimento ed alla educazione di una ristretta élite di uomini colti" (14).
- 27 It goes without saying that Boccaccio is playing on the double meaning of the phrase *argute note*: meaning both acute musical notes and acute annotations.