

# CRITICISM

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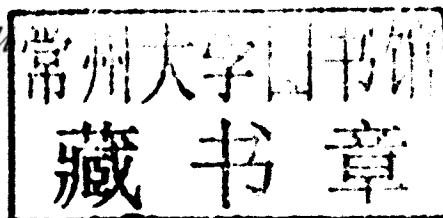
162

# Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works  
of the Most Significant and Widely  
Studied Poets of World Literature*

## Volume 162

*Lawrence J. Trudeau*  
Editor



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## Preface

**P**oetry Criticism (PC) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators.

This series was developed in response to suggestions from librarians serving high school, college, and public library patrons, who had noted a considerable number of requests for critical material on poems and poets. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (CLC), *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (NCLC), *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* (LC), and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* (CMLC), librarians perceived the need for a series devoted solely to poets and poetry.

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PC is designed to serve as an introduction to major poets of all eras and nationalities. Since these authors have inspired a great deal of relevant critical material, PC is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most important published criticism to aid readers and students in their research.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections, book-length poems, and theoretical works by the author about poetry. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. In the case of authors who do not write in English, an English translation of the title is provided as an aid to the reader; the translation is either a published translated title or a free translation provided by the compiler of the entry. In the case of such authors whose works have been translated into English, the **Principal English Translations** focuses primarily on twentieth-century translations, selecting those works most commonly considered the best by critics.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems, poetry collections, and theoretical works about poetry by the

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Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." *Interpreting Blake*. Ed. Michael Phillips. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978. 32-69. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism*. Ed. Michelle Lee. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 34-51. Print.

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# Giovanni Boccaccio

## 1313-1375

Italian poet, novella writer, biographer, historian, and non-fiction writer.

### INTRODUCTION

Best known for his novella collection the *Decameron* (1348-51), Giovanni Boccaccio also made significant contributions to poetry and literary scholarship during the early Italian Renaissance. His poetry has been praised for its philosophical depth, its relationship to classical rhetoric, its inventive epic style, and its reworking of Dantean and Petrarchan themes. In *La caccia di Diana* (1334-37; published as *Diana's Hunt*), Boccaccio constructs a sort of poetic roman à clef of the Neapolitan elite against the backdrop of a mythological motif from antiquity. *L'amorosa visione* (1342-43; may be translated as *The Vision of Love*), which is stylistically dependent on Dante Alighieri's poetry, features an allegorical parade of historical and mythological characters. *Rime* (1374?; may be translated as *Verses*) is a loose collection of short poems in various styles—including sonnets, ballata, sirventes, and madrigals—that treat such themes as courtly love and poetic inspiration. Boccaccio also composed a compendium of mythology and allegorical interpretation, *Genealogie deorum gentilium* (1350-72; published as *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*), whose final two books offer a robust defense of poetry that was greatly influential throughout the Renaissance. His ideas on the theological power of poetry, whether pagan or Christian, were first developed in his biography of Dante. They were applied in his *Esposizioni sopra la Comedia di Dante* (1373-74; published as *Boccaccio's Expositions on Dante's Comedy*), an unfinished study of poetic exegesis of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1307-21?).

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Boccaccio's origins are unclear, in part because of his fictionalized autobiographical references and in part because of a lack of archival evidence. Modern biographers believe that he was born in either Certaldo or Florence in 1313, to bourgeois parents; his father was an Italian merchant, but nothing certain is known about his mother. After spending his early childhood in Florence, Boccaccio moved to Naples in 1327 to work alongside his father for the Bardi bank and eventually to study canon law with Cino da Pistoia, a jurist, poet, and friend of Dante. During these years, Boccaccio experienced the literary and artistic atmosphere of Naples and became acquainted with several prominent lit-

erary scholars, including Paolo da Perugia and Dionigi di Borgo San Sepolcro. In the 1330s, Boccaccio wrote *Diana's Hunt*, *Il filostrato* (c. 1335-40; may be translated as *The Love Struck*), a rewriting of the Trojan War in the courtly-love style, and *Il filocolo* (1336-39; may be translated as *The Love Afflicted*), an epic tale inspired by the alexandrine romance tradition. The latter work contains the poet's first references to Fiammetta, a figure of adoration comparable to Dante's Beatrice and Petrarch's Laura. After returning to Florence in the winter of 1340-41, Boccaccio served in the political office of Florentine state emissary, travelling on behalf of the commune on diplomatic journeys, including a visit to pay symbolic reparations to Dante's daughter in Ravenna and a trip to Padua to convince Petrarch to take a post at Florence's nascent university.

Boccaccio composed several significant works of prose and poetry during the 1340s and 1350s. *Teseida* (c. 1340-41; published as *The Book of Theseus*), Boccaccio's only work of epic poetry, explores classical themes in ottava rima in an effort to emulate writers like Vergil and Statius while simultaneously ennobling the Italian vernacular. *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta* (1343-44; published as *The Elegy of Lady Fiammetta*) is a prose work inspired by Seneca and Ovid that compassionately explores the psychology of its female protagonist. Its companion piece, *Il corbaccio* (1354-55; may be translated as *The Crow*), has been interpreted both as a misogynistic work and as a parodic attack on antifeminism. Boccaccio's most notable work from the period is his masterpiece, the *Decameron*, a collection of one hundred tales told by ten characters who have retired to the countryside in 1348 to avoid the Black Death. The work is significant for influencing the novella genre and has often been considered the first example of modern European fiction. Later poetic works include *Buccolicum carmen* (1347-70; may be translated as *Pastoral Song*), a series of sixteen allegorical Latin eclogues inspired by Petrarch, Dante, and other classical authors; and *Carmina* (1335-74?; may be translated as *Songs*), a brief collection of Latin verse, including metrical epistles, an elegy, and two epitaphs, one of which was his own.

In his later years, Boccaccio established his reputation as an early humanist. His devotion to Greco-Roman antiquity manifested itself not only in his study of ancient Greek with Leontius Pilatus but also in the historical works he produced after he completed the *Decameron*. Chief among these is *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*, which he claims to have written at the behest of King Hugh IV of Cyprus in order to facilitate the study and interpretation of



ancient myths. This monumental work remained the chief mythological resource for scholars until the Enlightenment. Boccaccio composed a geographical dictionary, known by its shortened title *De montibus* (1355-65?; may be translated as *On Mountains*), which identifies locations mentioned in classical poetry. Other significant works from Boccaccio's humanistic phase include his Latin biography collections *De casibus virorum illustrium* (1355-74; published as *The Fates of Illustrious Men*) and *De mulieribus claris* (1361-75; published as *Famous Women*) and his full-length biographies of Dante, Petrarch, and Peter Damian. His work on Dante, *Trattatello in laude di Dante* (1351-72; published as *Life of Dante*), earned him the reputation of being the first Dante scholar. In the fall of 1373, he was invited to give public lectures on *The Divine Comedy*, which survive in his *Expositions on Dante's Comedy*. Boccaccio died in Certaldo in 1375.

### MAJOR WORKS OF POETRY

*Diana's Hunt*, Boccaccio's first work of poetry, exemplifies his practice of refashioning ancient myths in harmony with late medieval sensibilities. A playful allegory of courtly love featuring thinly-veiled portraits of Neapolitan figures, the eighteen-part poem is based on the well-known rivalry between Diana, goddess of the hunt and of virginity, and Venus, goddess of erotic love. Boccaccio's narrator evokes the rivalry, contemplating the vulnerability of being hurt in love. In the first sequence, Diana's followers hunt men who have been turned into animals: does, tigers, bears, ducks, wolves, and other creatures. After catching their prey, the women prepare to burn the animals as a sacrifice to Diana. When Venus appears, the women refrain and dedicate themselves to the goddess of love. As a reflection of the transforming power of love, the animals are rescued from the flames and changed back into human form. Using Dante's interlocking rhyme scheme, terza rima, Boccaccio presented the recovery and rejuvenation of the men as a reflection of the Christian theme of destroying the old self in order to experience a spiritual rebirth.

In *The Vision of Love*, Boccaccio combined numerous medieval genres, basing the plot on the Roman military triumph motif, the allegory of *The Romance of the Rose* (c. 1225-80), and Dante's vision of historical figures in hell. The poem features a female guide who instructs the dreaming narrator as he sees a vision of large murals depicting triumphs—Wisdom, earthly Glory, Wealth, Love, and Fortune—and ultimately leads him to his lover, Fiammetta. The poem reinforces the importance of contemplating earthly objects with a view toward their spiritual worth; the “triumph,” in this case, is Virtue, represented by Fiammetta, the poet's ultimate reward. Many scholars have criticized *The Vision of Love*, considering it either unfinished or a simple literary exercise. Boccaccio's use of the triumph motif as a vehicle for allegorical experimentation in the

poem was subsequently adopted by Petrarch in his unfinished poem *Trionfi*, which he began in 1338.

Boccaccio's mythological and allegorical encyclopedia, *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*, is his most important poetic contribution. While some nineteenth-century commentators criticized his approach and evaluated the work by their own literary standards, other scholars recognized its merit. The encyclopedia gained new appreciation in the twentieth century as an important exploration of early Renaissance mythology (books 1-13) and as a rhetorical defense of poetry (books 14-15). Boccaccio used the work to promote the cultural, historical, and theological importance of poetry within the developing humanistic movement. Synthesizing ideas from classical sources, Patristic writings, and Neoplatonist texts, Boccaccio produced an interpretation of the value of poetry that was subsequently incorporated into prevailing teachings. Like the earliest humanists, Boccaccio was particularly concerned with the negative attitude of certain religious leaders toward the study of the classics. His defense of poetry was intended to rescue the ethical and theological value of pre-Christian poetry for the benefit of Christians. Boccaccio argued that since God and the Holy Spirit had existed since Creation, all truths contained in pagan writings should be considered legitimate, inasmuch as they were inspired in one way or another by the one Truth, God. Following Albertino Mussato's notion that poetry could be a second theology, Boccaccio concluded that the form's distinctive properties—meter in Latin or rhyme in Italian—must have been inspired by a divine being and that its often obscure language must be penetrated in order to arrive at its essential meaning. Like Macrobius, he believed that poetry's most important truths were by necessity always hidden and that the literal interpretation of ancient myths, such as the stories of adulterous gods, should be rejected in favor of their underlying message. Boccaccio developed these ideas one mythological figure at a time in *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*, presenting historical and theological interpretations that reveal the authentic worth of each myth for modern readers. He also systematically explicated Dante's mythological allusions in *Expositions on Dante's Comedy*. This approach was valued throughout the Renaissance, especially for its influence on what Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt called “Christian paganism.”

### CRITICAL RECEPTION

Until the first part of the twentieth century, critics generally offered negative assessments of the quality of Boccaccio's scholarship. Elisabeth Woodbridge (1898), for example, viewed *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods* as a deeply flawed work. It “bears the stamp of a second-rate mind,” she argued, “a mind not philosophically creative, a mind sensitive indeed, and aspiring, but without the power to think fundamentally and therefore consistently.” While Charles G. Osgood (1930) conceded that Boccaccio was not as

scrupulous a scholar as modern critics would like, he added that in *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*, the author's passion for a revival of ancient culture is evident. Osgood contended that Boccaccio's defense of poetry was not a weak performance; he praised the work's warmth, enthusiasm, and focus on beauty. Craig Kallendorf (1983) echoed this view, observing that Boccaccio's rhetorical defense proved to be a major influence on later critics within and outside of Italy, including Coluccio Salutati, Edmund Spenser, and Philip Sidney.

Owing to the difficulty of dating Boccaccio's poems, scholarly opinion varies on the different periods of his poetry and on the influence of his better-known contemporaries. Nicolas J. Perella (1961) argued that Boccaccio's later verse indicates his gradual renunciation of his earlier erotic love poetry and emphasizes repentance and the mutability of earthly pleasures. As evidence, Perella cited a late poem in which the speaker invokes the Virgin Mary, rather than nymphs, for guidance. Other scholars have cautioned against separating eroticism and religion in Boccaccio's works. Giovanni Gullace (1989) noted that Boccaccio's earlier poetry places erotic love within the confines of divine love, while his later writing, including *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*, never completely disavows sensuality. Another misconception about Boccaccio, according to Peter Hainsworth (1993), concerns the poet's position relative to Dante and Petrarch. It has often been assumed, for example, that Boccaccio imitated Petrarch, while Petrarch developed his ideas independent of his contemporary. Hainsworth considered the possibility that Petrarch and Boccaccio's works exhibit a partnership rather than a one-way relationship, with Boccaccio often following Dante and Petrarch drawing from Boccaccio in some of his works.

Michael Papio

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

### Poetry

*La caccia di Diana* [published as *Diana's Hunt*]. 1334-37.

*Il filostrato* [may be translated as *The Love Struck*]. c. 1335-40.

*Carmina* [may be translated as *Songs*]. 1335-74?

*Teseida* [published as *The Book of Theseus*]. c. 1340-41.

*L'amorosa visione* [may be translated as *The Vision of Love*]. 1342-43.

*Il ninfale fiesolano* [published as *Nymphs of Fiesole*]. 1344-46.

*Bucolicum carmen* [published as *Eclogues*]. 1347-70.

*Genealogie deorum gentium* [published as *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*]. 1350-72. (Prose)

*Rime* [may be translated as *Verses*]. 1374?

### Other Major Works

*Allegoria mitologica* [may be translated as *Mythological Allegory*]. 1332-34. (Prose)

*Il filocolo* [may be translated as *The Love Afflicted*]. 1336-39. (Prose)

*Commedia delle ninfe fiorentine* [may be translated as *Comedy of the Florentine Nymphs*]. 1341-42. (Poetry and prose)

*Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta* [published as *The Elegy of Lady Fiammetta*]. 1343-44. (Prose)

*Decameron* [published as *The Decameron*]. 1348-51. (Novellas)

\**Trattatello in laude di Dante* [published as *Life of Dante*]. 1351-72. (Biography)

*Il corbaccio* [may be translated as *The Crow*]. 1354-55. (Prose)

*De montibus, silvis, fontibus, lacubus, fluminibus, stagnis seu paludibus et de diversis nominibus maris* [may be translated as *On Mountains, Woods, Springs, Lakes, Rivers, Ponds, Swamps, and Different Names of the Sea*]. 1355-65? (Nonfiction)

*De casibus virorum illustrium* [published as *The Fates of Illustrious Men*]. 1355-74. (History)

*De mulieribus claris* [published as *Famous Women*]. 1361-75. (Biographies)

*Esposizioni sopra la Comedia di Dante* [published as *Boccaccio's Expositions on Dante's Comedy*]. 1373-74. (Commentary)

*Tutte le opere* [may be translated as *Complete Works*]. Ed. Vittore Branca. 10 vols. Milan: Mondadori, 1964-98. (Poetry and prose)

### Principal English Translations

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*Boccaccio on Poetry, Being the Preface and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Books of Boccaccio's Genealogia deorum gentium*. Trans. Charles G. Osgood. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1930. Print. Partial trans. of *Genealogie deorum gentium*.

*The Fates of Illustrious Men*. Trans. Louis Brewer Hall. New York: Ungar, 1965. Print. Partial trans. of *De casibus virorum illustrium*.

*Nymphs of Fiesole*. Trans. Joseph Tusiani. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1971. Print. Trans. of *Il ninfale fiesolano*.

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- The Corbaccio*. Trans. and ed. Anthony K. Cassell. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1975. Pub. as *The Corbaccio*; or, *The Labyrinth of Love*. Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1993. Print. Trans. of *Il corbaccio*.
- The Decameron*. Trans. and ed. Mark Musa and Peter E. Bondanella. New York: Norton, 1983. Print. Trans. of *Decameron*.
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- Theseid of the Nuptials of Emilia*. Trans. Vincenzo Traversa. New York: Lang, 2002. Print. Trans. of *Teseida*.
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- The Latin Eclogues*. Trans. David R. Slavitt. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2010. Print. Trans. of *Buccolicum carmen*.
- Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*. Trans. and ed. Jon Solomon. 1 vol. to date. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2011-. Print. Trans. of *Genealogie deorum gentilium*.

*Decameron*. Trans. Wayne A. Rebhorn. New York: Norton, 2013. Print. Trans. of *Decameron*.

\*Also known as the *Vita de Dante Alighieri* [may be translated as *Life of Dante Alighieri*].

## CRITICISM

### Elisabeth Woodbridge (essay date 1898)

SOURCE: Woodbridge, Elisabeth. "Boccaccio's Defence of Poetry; as Contained in the Fourteenth Book of the *De genealogia deorum*." *PMLA* 13.3 (1898): 333-49. Print.

[In the following essay, Woodbridge suggests that the disorganization and long-windedness of *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods* can be attributed to the manuscript being distributed before Boccaccio had the chance to revise it.]

The work in which his Defence of Poetry occurs, the *De Genealogia Deorum*, was first suggested to Boccaccio while he was yet a young man, by Hugo, king of Cyprus. Hugo sent to the young poet, asking him to write a work upon the mythology of antiquity, there being no such book then in existence. Boccaccio seems to have been by no means eager for so tremendous a task, but urged on by his royal patron he at last began it, and continued to work on it at intervals, though the king who had originally set him the undertaking did not live to see its completion. Completed, indeed, it never really was, and it was without the author's knowledge and against his wishes that the manuscript passed out of his hands before it had undergone revision. This accounts in part for the desultory character of the work, its diffuseness, its repetitions, its lack of arrangement and subordination; only in part, of course, for something of all this—that, namely, which corresponds with the essentially indiscriminating, non-selective mind of the author himself—could not have been eliminated by any amount of revision.

The work is written in Latin prose, and the main part of it treats of the heathen myths, with special reference to their allegorical significance. In the fourteenth chapter, however, he attempts to defend his work against the accusations which he foresees it must encounter; and, since, as he says, his work is "wholly poetical,"<sup>1</sup> he is naturally involved in a defense of poetry in general.

He opens his defense by describing his accusers—the jurists, the doctors, the theologians—with such satire as his rather placid nature could command. Having thus oratorically disposed of the least worthy of his opponents, he passes to the more formidable of the accusations themselves. "What is this poetry?" its maligners clamor; "it is simply a nullity, not worth the attention of a rational being; it is a collection of lies; it is either mere foolishness, or it is morally baneful, or it is so obscure that no one can understand it; at best, the poets are simply apes of the



philosophers. Hence, all good men will follow Jerome and Boethius in condemning poetry, they will follow Plato in banishing poets from the cities."

Such is the line of objections taken, and these objections Boccaccio considers one by one, using any argument that he thinks may avail, from the puerile quibbling of the schoolmen to the sweeping and revolutionary art-theories of the new Humanism. Indeed, it is this union, or rather intermingling, of the old and the new, that gives to the treatise much of its peculiar interest and significance.

Poetry, says Boccaccio, is not a nullity. If it were, he naïvely asks, whence come all these volumes of poems?<sup>2</sup> In reality, it is one of the faculties (in the scholastic sense of the word) coming from God, and this very name "facultas"—here speaks the schoolman—"implies a certain abundance or fullness." Then follows his own definition of poetry:

Poetry is a certain fervor of exquisite invention, and of exquisite speaking or writing what one has invented. A power which, proceeding out of the bosom of God, is granted at birth, though, I think, to but few. . . . This noble fervor manifests itself, for example, in urging the mind to a longing for expression, in searching out rare and strange inventions, in giving to one's thoughts order and arrangement, in adorning the composition by means of an unusual interweaving of words and thoughts, in concealing the truth under the beautiful veil of the fable.<sup>3</sup>

There follows a remarkable exposition of the etymology of the word "poetry."<sup>4</sup> Some malignant persons, he says, have derived it from the Greek ποιέω, which they make equivalent to the Latin *fin*go, and then, choosing out the worst meaning of this verb *fin*go, i.e., to cheat or deceive by made-up stories, they apply this meaning to poetry, and use it as a reproach, calling the poets cheats and deceivers. In reality, Boccaccio assures us, the word comes from an old Greek word, *poëtes*, meaning "carefully chosen expression" ("exquisita locutio") and it was applied to the efforts of the early poets, because they tried to give to their songs a distinctive form and order, by means of rhythm and choice of words.

Thus we see that Boccaccio's theory of poetry emphasizes, on the one hand, the careful ordering and disposition of words; and on the other, the existence of a hidden meaning, an allegorical significance. We are familiar with such a conception, as found, both implicit and explicit, in Dante; it was the conception Petrarch adopted and expounded, and Boccaccio merely gives to it a more elaborate expression.<sup>5</sup> Note, however, that though he emphasizes the formal side of poetry, the essential thing is in his eyes the content, the allegory; and therefore he can speak of his own ponderous prose treatise on the heathen mythology as being "wholly poetical."

It is possible to read into this notion of poetic allegory a meaning which shall conform to our own art-theories, and such an interpretation has by at least one student of Boccaccio been rather taken for granted.<sup>6</sup> But Boccaccio him-

self had certainly no such meaning in mind, and the sense in which he applied the word "symbolic" to the eclogues of Petrarch and of Virgil is not the sense in which we apply it to Shakespeare's *Lear* or Sophocles' *Ædipus*.

In connection with his art-theory, two other passages may be mentioned here, which occur farther on in the book. In one he speaks of the poet as imitating nature, and this expression suggests a possible trace of Greek influence. But, in his poetic system, the word imitation must apply merely to the external part of the poem, not to its real content. Thus he might say that Virgil describes bees, and in so far imitates nature; but he would also say that, for the discerning reader, Virgil is not really talking about bees at all, but about the human soul or the divine essence, or some other metaphysical topic. This "imitation of nature" as Boccaccio meant it, is then only a part of the external trappings of poetry; it is quite distinct from "imitation" as Aristotle meant it, or as Sidney meant it, or as we may mean it.

Again he says, speaking of Plautus and Terence: "Although they intended nothing beyond what the letter implies, yet by their genius they describe the manners and words of various men . . . and if these things have not actually taken place, yet since they are universal[ly valid] they could have taken place."<sup>7</sup>

These last phrases are extremely interesting as the only ones giving any hint of the Aristotelian conception of poetic universality—the conception which was two hundred years afterward beautifully restated by Sidney. But it is no more than a hint. Boccaccio seems to have no idea of its value, and one wonders where he got the notion from at all. He was not the man to have arrived at it by himself, and it sounds like an echo, for it is not the sort of idea one can get hold of independently and let go again.

After defining poetry, Boccaccio proceeds to discuss its origin. Assuming that its first appearance was in the religious formularies of the ancients which accompanied their sacrificial rites, he adduces three theories, which ascribe its origin respectively to the Babylonian fire-worshippers, to the Greeks, and to the Jews. The first theory he rejects unconditionally, saying, "yet, without more weighty evidence, I shall not easily believe that an art so sublime had its origin among nations so barbarous and savage."<sup>8</sup> But between the Greeks and the Hebrews he hesitates, and at last shrewdly refers the decision to King Hugo himself, suggesting, however, a compromise solution which would make Musaeus and Moses one and the same person. Whether the resultant from this fusion of the two is to be Hebrew or Greek, he does not say.

The manner of its origin among the Greeks he describes in part as follows (the passage is, by the way, closely paralleled in one of Petrarch's letters):<sup>9</sup>

At length, since it seemed absurd for the priests to offer the sacrifice to the deity in silence, they desired to have forms of words drawn up, in which the glory and might of the



divinity should be set forth, the desire of the people be expressed, and their prayers be offered to God according to their human necessities. And since it seemed unfitting to address the deity in the same way that one would speak to a rustic or a servant or a familiar friend, they laid upon the priests the charge of devising a more excellent and refined manner of speech. Some of these men—few, indeed, amongst whom are to be counted Musaeus and Linus and Orpheus—filled with a kind of inspiration from the divine mind, composed strange songs, regulated by measure and time, and gave praise to God. In these songs, that they might have greater weight, they concealed the divine mysteries beneath a noble disguise, wishing that the venerable majesty of such [mysteries] should not, through too facile comprehension by the vulgar, fall into contempt. The art-product, because it seemed wonderful and even unheard of, was, as we have said, called from its properties [ab effectu] poetry, or *poëtes*, and those who composed were called poets.<sup>10</sup>

Boccaccio next considers the assertion that the fables of poets are to be condemned. “I grant,” he says, “that poets are story-tellers, that is, they invent fables, but this seems to me no more disgraceful than it is for a philosopher to have framed a syllogism.”<sup>11</sup> To begin with, he goes on in effect, the word *fabula* comes from the verb *for, faris*, and from the same stem is derived the word *confabulatio*, meaning conversation. Now, in the Gospel of Luke, is it not written that the disciples went toward Emmaus, and Christ came to them as they talked together—“Cum confabularentur.” Now, he concludes triumphantly, since *confabulari* is thus used with reference to the disciples themselves, it cannot be wrong, and if *confabulari* is not wrong, neither is *fabulari*.<sup>12</sup>

After this rather astonishing pun, offered, however, in perfect seriousness, he returns to the argument. There are, he says, three kinds of fables to be considered:<sup>13</sup>

- I. Those in which disguise entirely lacks truth, as in the fables of Æsop, where the animals are made to talk, quite contrary to fact. Aristotle too used this kind of fable.
- II. Fables where the true and the false are intermingled. This sort is sometimes abused by the comic poets.
- III. Fables which approximate history, and are thus close to the truth, though divergent. Of this sort is epic poetry, and the comedies of Plautus and Terence.
- IV. The foolish inventions of old women, not worth considering.

For each of the first three Boccaccio now presses his strongest argument—the argument from Scripture writing. The first sort of fables—like Æsop’s—will, he says, be found in the Old Testament, as for instance in Judges, ix, 4-15, where the trees of the forest set out to choose for themselves a King. The second makes up the great bulk of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Isaiah, though these visions of theirs are called by the theologians “figures,” not fables. The third sort have no less a warrant than the parables of Christ himself. These three, then, cannot be condemned without condemning the Scriptures also.

Passing on to the assertion that poets conceal no meaning beneath their fables, he declares this simply fatuous. It is well known how deep a meaning Virgil’s *Bucolics* and *Georgics* contain, and, to come down to modern times, every one must see that Dante was not merely a poet, but a profound philosopher and theologian. Or do they think that “when the poet depicted the double-membered Gryphon dragging the car on the summit of Mount Severus, accompanied by the seven candlesticks and the seven nymphs, with the rest of the triumphal pomp”—do they think that Dante did this merely “to show that he knew how to compose rimes and fables?”<sup>14</sup>

Or “who will be so insane as to suppose that that most illustrious and most Christian man, Francisco Petrarca . . . spent so many vigils, so many sacred meditations, so many hours, days, and years . . . simply in depicting Gallus demanding his pipe of the Tyrrhene, or Pamphilus and Mitio contending with one another?” No one would be so insane as to think this, especially none who had read his other writings, “in which whatever of sanctity and penetration can be contained in the breast of moral philosophy is there discerned with so much majesty in the words that nothing can be expressed for men’s instruction with more fulness, nothing with more beauty, nothing with more ripeness, nothing, finally, with more sanctity.” And he adds, with a humility which I think was genuine: “I might in addition adduce my own bucolic poem, whose meaning I well know, but I think it is better to omit that, because I am not yet of such worth that I ought to mingle with illustrious men, and because, too, one’s own productions ought to be left to the judgment of others.”<sup>15</sup>

He concludes the chapter with a picturesque turn worthy of Sidney, and, as Professor Scott has pointed out, recalling one passage of the *Defense*:

We must believe that it is not only illustrious men . . . who have put into their poems profound meanings, but that there is never an old woman doting on the home hearth in the watches of the winter nights, who, when she tells tales of Orcus or the Fates or of witches—about which they oftenest make up their stories—does not, as she invents and repeats them, conceal beneath the narrative some meaning, according with the measure of her narrow powers—a meaning sometimes by no means to be derided, through which she wishes either to terrify the little boys, or to divert the girls, or to make the old people laugh, or at least to show forth the power of fortune.<sup>16</sup>

There follows a defence of the poets’ love of solitude,<sup>17</sup> and then a defence of the alleged obscurity of poets’ writings.<sup>18</sup> First, as usual, he argues that if they are obscure, so too are the philosophers, and the writers of the Scriptures; and if this concealment of the truth is right in the Bible, which is meant for the multitude, it is much more allowable in poetry, which is meant for but few. Moreover, it is well to conceal precious truths, lest by too easy accessibility they become cheap, while if they are hidden, those who really seek them can always find.