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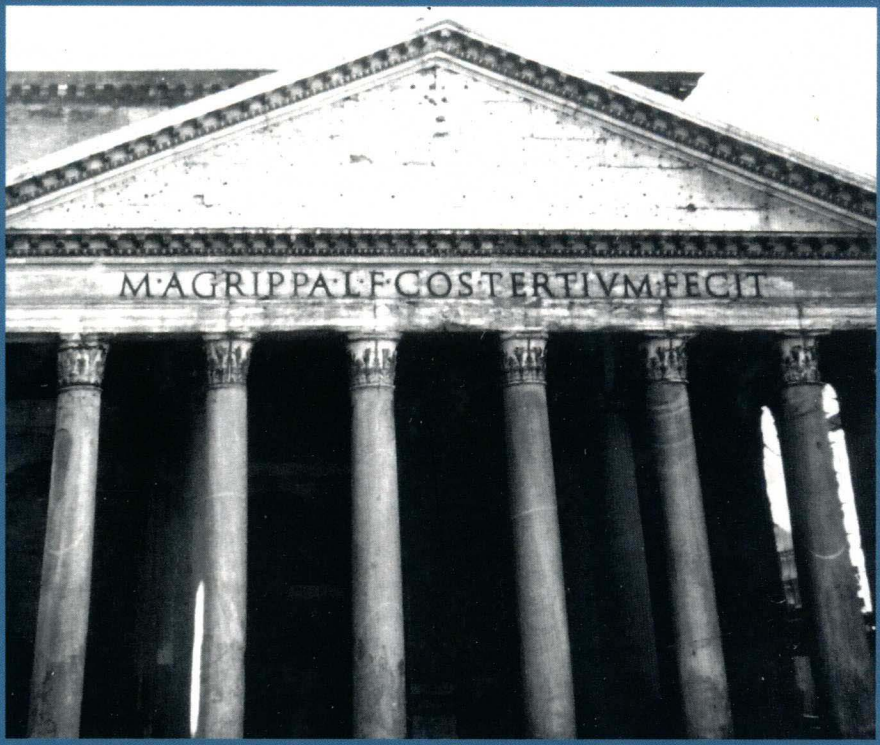

BOCCACCIO'S *DECAMERON* *and the* CICERONIAN RENAISSANCE

Michaela Paasche Grudin
and Robert Grudin

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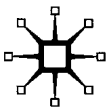

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Novi ingenium tuum; et quid merear novi.

—Boccaccio, *De casibus,* IX.xxiii.8

To Anthony, Nicholas, and Theodore
Charles Muscatine, In Memoriam

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: CICERO AND THE *DECAMERON*

In the pages that follow we will present a new interpretation of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*. By "new" we mean that we have availed ourselves of previously unexamined Ciceronian sources, and that these sources have led us to new conclusions about the unity and direction of Boccaccio's work. As we conceive it, the *Decameron* not only establishes a clear line of evolution between late classical thought and modern humanism, but also stands as the first coherent expression of moral principles that scholarship has come to associate with the Renaissance.

How the coherence of this work of genius and its readily discernible sources remained unrecognized until now is a good question. The answer, in as few words as possible, is that understanding the coherence of the *Decameron* depends in large measure on the identification and interpretation of these sources; and that, given the character of literary interpretation since the late fourteenth century, there seemed little reason to see them as sources at all. Some of Cicero's works were fragmentary, so fragmentary that at least one of them was despised by Petrarch himself. And none of them was literary in subject matter. *De legibus*, which of them all is perhaps the most crucial to this study, has not up to now been considered a major Boccaccian source. Centuries after Boccaccio's time, *De legibus* would become uncommonly important to the Enlightenment, but since then it has retired into the province of political scientists.

Thus what might otherwise have been regarded as the obvious line of descent from the classical godfather of humanism (Cicero invented and developed the idea of *humanitas*) to its most formidable fourteenth-century protagonist has been so obscured that it will now require substantial effort to show that such descent existed at all. But evidence in favor of our thesis is not lacking. Boccaccio had access to most of Cicero's then-extant writings. He showed this by reproducing Ciceronian terminology, Ciceronian lines of argument, and, in sum, the entire framework of the Ciceronian humanistic project. He declared that he modeled his

own style on Cicero's. Granted, he modernized Cicero, converting him from an ancient authority to an early modern resource. But this fact in no way reduces the Roman's contribution, or the Italian's debt.

Examining this largely unexplored interaction will bring a few academic assumptions into question. Cicero was not, as many believe, a derivative philosopher, trafficking merely in traditional academic, Epicurean, and Stoic points of view. Instead it was Cicero who used these and other sources, including his own political experience, to construct the modern ideas of the state, of private property, of community, of liberty, of natural law, of government by consent, and of political theory as deriving from an understanding of real-life events. Neither was Cicero, as is generally assumed, a second-rate thinker and a recalcitrant conservative, thrown onto the scrap-heap of political history by the premodern executive politics of Julius and Augustus Caesar. He is more accurately seen as a liberal visionary in his own time, paving the way for Locke, Jefferson, and modern democracy. Renaissance humanism did not, as literary scholars often assume, evolve initially from the Arab Aristotelians alone. It also found its origins in civic humanism, as promoted in Florence in the mid-thirteenth century by Dante's teacher, the Ciceronian Brunetto Latini. Dante, who grew to hate his own Guelphic republic, could not in the end accept Brunetto's republican teachings. But two generations later, Boccaccio could and did. Finally, Boccaccio was not, as Vittore Branca declared, an organic outgrowth of medievalism. On the contrary, he was the most radical convert to Ciceronian humanism of his time. To Boccaccio, Cicero was no mere mortal, but rather a quasi-divine figure, sent by the heavens for the betterment of humanity. Cicero's heroic and tragic mission, as Boccaccio describes it, is comparable to Christ's, and Boccaccio's account of it in *De casibus* may be seen as the modern alternative to the prevailing evangelical narrative.[1]

But for all this, Boccaccio's aim was not, as it was for Cola di Rienzi and so many since, a restoration of the classic. Like Cicero, Boccaccio looked to the future, and he assembled his many powers and resources, including the Ciceronian legacy, to this end. Without an excess of nostalgia, he accepted his location in history. He concentrated so intensely on the now, the Italian, and particularly the Florentine for his fictive raw material that his operative principles became submerged in an ocean of original configurations. The extent to which he realized Cicero's promise, and transformed it with his own brilliant inventiveness, will be of major interest here.

Boccaccio's debts to Cicero in the *Decameron* are many and various. He regularly employs Ciceronian prose style and is adept at imitating

the form and/or substance of Ciceronian oratory. He is clearly attentive to Cicero's emphasis on the practical application of human intelligence (*De inventione*, I. i). He shares Cicero's ability to view a given topic (*De natura deorum*) from separate and opposed positions—a strategy employed to great effect in his treatments of religion and of the status of women in the *Decameron*. He follows Cicero's advice to cultivate a studied neglect, thus creating an informal-yet-articulate style of expression (*Orator*).[2] Similarly, he is attentive to Cicero's counsel (*De inventione*, I. xv.21) on the use of indirection and suggestion (*insinuatio*) rather than direct statement, when dealing with difficult issues. He profits from the Ciceronian strategy of moving from the serious to the comic and back again, and he accepts and transmits the Ciceronian theory of humor (*De oratore*, II. liv. 216–lxxi. 289). He excels, finally, in the use of *copia*, the discursive variety, abundance, and pure bounty that gave Cicero his almost hypnotic allure.[3] Yet Boccaccio turns all these inherited felicities into a literary experience so completely his own that his debt to the Roman is superficially invisible. So great is the Italian's alchemy that many have long read his masterpiece as sui generis: a source of modern perspectives rather than a revival of ancient devices. This oversight is itself a gauge of Boccaccio's achievement. As T. S. Eliot remarked, good writers borrow; great writers steal.

But these are only the more easily apparent Ciceronian influences on the *Decameron*. Beyond them lies a corpus of moral and political ideas that derive from Cicero's late works: the *Laws* (*De legibus*, 52 BC) the *Republic* (*De re publica*, 52 BC), and the *Duties* (*De officiis*, 44 BC). These ideas may be summarized as follows: Nature is the only palpable manifestation of the divine; thus Nature and natural Justice must be our guides in all human matters.[4] We cannot comprehend Nature without using Reason, which unites us with the gods, and which, by virtue of this, endows us with the spark of divinity. The rule of Reason implies the use not only of logic, but also of history and direct experience. As Nature embodies Justice, and Reason perceives Justice, so we are obliged to use Reason as a means of replicating Justice in our laws and our behavior. Reason teaches that all human beings are fundamentally similar to each other, and that all of us crave liberty. To achieve and preserve a rational degree of liberty, we must cultivate moral and political virtue. The same Nature that made us individuals also bonds us through love or mutual attraction into political groups, thus giving each person a dual identity: as an independent being and as a social team member. To accommodate this double nature, we choose to form republics: independent societies founded by common consent. From Nature and Reason we learn to

live independently, yet also harmoniously and decorously. In Cicero's words,

> And it is no mean manifestation of Nature and Reason that man is the only animal that has a feeling for order, for propriety, for moderation in word and deed. And so no other animal has a sense of beauty, loveliness, harmony in the visible world; and Nature and Reason, extending the analogy of this from the world of sense to the world of spirit, find that beauty, consistency, order are far more to be maintained in thought and deed, and the same Nature and Reason are careful to do nothing in an improper or unmanly fashion, and in every thought and deed to do or think nothing capriciously.[5]

What faculty gives us access to reason and the understanding of nature? In his *De legibus* (I. xxii.59) Cicero answers with one of his most powerful concepts: *ingenium* (genius, imagination, inventiveness), a blessed, even holy gift, inborn in every human being, at once drawing human beings together and distinguishing them from every other species. *Ingenium* is at the root of all human achievement—especially the arts of speech, which build and guard the health of the *res publica*. Boccaccio appropriates the idea as *ingegno* and makes it the key to the morality and esthetics of the *Decameron*. Various forms of the word *ingegno*, referring to human ingenuity and inventiveness of all sorts, throng the text of the *Decameron*, as do related verbs like *conoscere*, nouns like *industria*, *ragione*, and *intelletto*, and adjectives like *savio* and *avveduto*. When Boccaccio introduces Titus, his Ciceronian avatar, in the *Decameron* tale of Titus and Gisippus (X.8), he links him specifically to *ingenium*: "Titus Quintius Fulvus, possessed of marvelous genius" (*Tito Quinzio Fulvo nominato, di maraviglioso ingegno*). And by contrast, words denoting the lack of *ingegno* abound. At or near the front of the pack are forms of *sciocco* (fool), and the profusion ranges to metaphoric terms like *meccanico* and *lavaceci* (bean-washer). One uncommonly feeble mind is characterized as *più che una canna vana* (hollower than a cane). Calandrino, the captain of Boccaccio's ship of fools, is *di grossa pasta* (pasta-brained).

It must be added that Cicero was as alert to *ingenium* as a source of social ills as he was to its blessings. In his political and rhetorical writings, as well as in his public speeches, the bête noire is tyranny. In *De inventione*, he inveighs against the sort of inventiveness that worms its way into public power by imitating virtue—"a depraved imitation of virtue... low cunning supported by talent" ("*prava virtutis imitatrix... ingenio freta malitia*") (I. ii).[6] For him the only rhetoric that can build and protect a republic is eloquence (*copia dicendi*) supported by reason (*ratio*) and wisdom (*sapientia*).

This crucial distinction between base and noble rhetoric would not be ignored by Boccaccio, who reprises it in *De casibus* (I. xi and VI. xiii) and enlarges on it comprehensively in the *novelle* of the *Decameron*.

Boccaccio was by no means the first writer in the late Middle Ages to integrate concepts like genius, reason, and nature into philosophical fiction. Alain de Lille (1128–1202) and Jean de Meun (1240–*ca.* 1305), both admirers of Cicero, had embodied one or more of these concepts allegorically in major works.[7] Nor was he the first writer in that era to proclaim the virtues of Eros, either allegorical or physical. Here also Jean de Meun and others, including the thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century authors of the fabliaux, preceded him.[8] But perhaps the most important of Boccaccio's predecessors was the Florentine, Brunetto Latini (*ca.* 1220–1294). Brunetto, regarded by many as a medieval encyclopedist in the style of Isidore, is more accurately seen as the effective founder of civic humanism and humanist vernacular literacy in thirteenth-century Florence:

> He commented the Rhetoric of Tully, and made the good and useful book called the *Tesoro*, and the *Tesoretto*, and the *Keys of the Tesoro*, and many other books of philosophy, and of vices and of virtues, and he was Secretary of our Commune. He was a worldly man, but we have made mention of him because he was the first master in refining the Florentines, and in teaching them how to speak correctly, and how to guide and govern our Republic on political principles.[9]

First chancellor of the Florentine commune (*primo popolo*), Brunetto provided the first example of republican government in what would become a uniquely productive, if fractious, city-state. He achieved this feat by emulating his idol Cicero in word and deed. He was an expert in law, a celebrated civic leader, and a writer whose influential work, including the widely circulated *Tesoro*, laid the foundations for independent thinking and political liberty. In effect, he harnessed classical discourse and drove it into the forum.[10] As Stephen J. Milner attests, Brunetto was thus instrumental in transforming classicism from a learned pursuit into a political imperative.[11]

Brunetto was also responsible for an innovation in discourse that would have a pervasively energizing effect on Italian letters. In his influential *Rettorica*, he developed a new kind of writing: a lively oppositional style based on the rhetoric of Cicero's orations. Brunetto took the adversarial element implicit in Ciceronian rhetoric and expounded on it as a tension (*tencione*) that could be used to energize discourse in general. This latter style, with its dialectical implications, would be an obvious advantage