

Fabulous Vernacular

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Boccaccio's *Filocolo* and the
Art of Medieval Fiction

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Ann Arbor

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In memory of my parents,
Don and Betty Kirkham

Preface

Fabulous Vernacular is as much an expression of my identity as a scholar as a synthesis of my thinking about Boccaccio. This sense of professional identity, which has roots reaching back to a family background in Iowa where both parents were university professors, was something first cultivated in graduate school at Johns Hopkins University. There I found a rich intellectual environment at an American institution with proudly maintained connections to the German world of learning, from avatars of Romance philology to the dreaded public dissertation defense, an event anyone could attend to query candidates on our universal knowledge. Charles Singleton presided over our Gilman Hall seminars opposite two older worthies, spiritually with us in their portraits—a magisterial Wilhelm Meyer-Lübke towering in an oil painting high on the wall and, below him, in a large black-and-white photograph propped on the chalk tray, Leo Spitzer, intensely cerebral with his lighted cigarette. As Singleton spoke of the men in those pictures, he made us feel the power of academic continuities, for in this scene there was a succession of generations from the great nineteenth-century philologist, to his student Spitzer, to Singleton, and right on down to us. So, too, when our professor recited and explained the *Divine Comedy* in that long room with its battered oak conference table, we could envision ourselves as new links in a historical chain uninterrupted since the fourteenth century, when it started with Dante's own sons and his most passionate medieval reader, Giovanni Boccaccio.

Memorable for his teaching in the classroom, Singleton was a strong scholarly model for me as I began to find my own academic voice. No less important in my formation was the larger Hopkins community, inspired by interdisciplinary ideals of study in the humanities and the history of ideas. Intellectual itineraries all take unpredictable turnings that push our research into new directions, and so it was with mine, thanks to several vis-

its as a fellow at the Harvard Center for Renaissance Studies in Florence, Villa I Tatti, a haven imbued with the character of its remarkable maker, Bernard Berenson. As I knew them, both Hopkins and Harvard privileged the literary classics. Both settings nurtured a kind of scholarship cast in historical depth yet inclined to move freely across disciplinary boundaries. Both provided strong examples of scholars who had forged distinctive styles of writing, English prose bearing a personal imprint that it has also been my goal to craft.

Others in the field of literary studies have gone in directions different from mine, following successive waves of semiotics, deconstruction, new historicism, and cultural studies. Their work has touched and taught us all. Since I am a literary historian, I have not theorized the *Filocolo*. My lexicon is belletristic. My approach couples philology and criticism, a pairing for which the studies of Vittore Branca stand as paradigmatic. Here my curiosities converge on Boccaccio's notions of literary decorum, on the creative continuities that unify his corpus, and on the new "poetry" that emerges from his engagement with Latin and vernacular tradition.¹ To answer them, I have meditated on the provocative interplay between his poetic inventions and historical truth; on the autobiographical stamp of his fiction, especially as it reflects the author's formation in canon law; on "signature" themes to which he keeps returning, such as the story of his love for Fiammetta; on the kinds of compositional structures he prefers, typically symmetrical or "Gothic" arrangements around a center; and on the medieval esthetics of concealment, the practice of layering hidden meanings into a text for the delight of discovery that comes as we readers recognize its allegory and decode its symbolism, iconography, and numerology.²

1. I take the accommodating term *engagement* from Winthrop Wetherbee, *Chaucer and the Poets: An Essay on Troilus and Criseyde* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 9–11; Wetherbee writes of his subject's "engagement" with tradition, both Latin and vernacular, including Boccaccio. By *poetry* I mean imaginative literature in the widest sense, as Boccaccio would have understood the word.

2. Our categories of "fiction" and "nonfiction" only partially overlap with Boccaccio's notions of generic distinctions and the relationship between fiction and truth. Long-held critical convictions about his "realism," for example, rested on anachronistic assumptions. Their drift has found correction in such recent work as Millicent Marcus, *An Allegory of Form: Literary Self-Consciousness in the Decameron* (Saratoga, Calif.: Anna Libri, 1979); Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The World at Play in Boccaccio's Decameron* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Pier Massimo Forni, *Adventures in Speech: Rhetoric and Narration in Boccaccio's Decameron* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996). Most attention has gone to the *Decameron*, much less to the early fiction, and virtually none to the late Latin encyclopedias, which freely intermingle history and poetry. A classic and appealingly lucid treatment of these problems for medieval narrative fiction more broadly is Eugène Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

If the elegance of science lies in its capacity to reduce mysterious complexity to understandable simplicity, the virtue of the humanities is their tolerance of ambiguities, of conflicting points of view, and of endless possibilities of interpretation. The university, which in its medieval origins was quite literally “diversity coming together,” ought to be an environment where different schools of thought can flourish, an intellectual chorus of many voices. Every humanist must speak in his own voice. Every author must write his own book. I have written mine.

Acknowledgments

The history of this book, which spans my career as an Italianist, had its origins thirty years ago when I wrote a dissertation on the *Filocolo* under Charles S. Singleton. That project sparked my first article, “Reckoning with Boccaccio’s *Questioni d’amore*,” *MLN* 89, no. 1 (1974): 47–59, here reproduced in updated form as chapter 4 by permission of the Johns Hopkins University Press. A portion of chapter 2, “Signed Pieces,” overlaps in part with “Iohannes de Certaldo: La firma dell’autore,” my contribution to the anthology *Gli zibaldoni di Boccaccio: Memoria, scrittura, riscrittura*, ed. Claude Cazalé Bérard and Michelangelo Picone (Florence: Franco Cesati, 1998). I thank my European collaborators and Franco Cesati Editore for permission to reproduce parts of that article, originally presented as a paper at the conference they organized on Boccaccio’s working notebooks. The rest of the material in this volume has never before been published. Portions of it have been presented over the years in talks for colloquia, occasions that pushed me to develop my ideas in writing and provided opportunities for a preliminary scholarly airing. I am grateful to those colleagues who invited my participation at such events, in particular Claude Cazalé Bérard, Pier Massimo Forni, Christopher Kleinhenz, Lucia Marino, Michelangelo Picone, Janet Smarr, and Elissa Weaver.

Others who have contributed enrichment from their fields of expertise, shared both in correspondence and conversations pleasant to recall, include Samuel G. Armistead, Susannah Baxendale, Pamela Benson, Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Kevin Brownlee, Barbara Burrell, Allen Grieco, Tim Halliday, Sylvia Huot, and Georg Nicholas Knauer. I owe a particular debt to Paul F. Watson, a past collaborator and coteacher at Penn, for sharing from his wealth of knowledge on Boccaccio and the visual arts. Patricia Grieve was extraordinarily generous in making available to me photocopies of articles on the diffusion of the *Filocolo* source tale, as well as an early

draft of her book manuscript, which takes welcome account of the Spanish prototype (a version of which was known to Boccaccio) and has now appeared as *Floire and Blancheflor and the European Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Both Vittore Branca and Robert Hollander provided important encouragement for completing this book when my own spirits were flagging. I especially thank Pier Massimo Forni, Millicent Marcus, Ronald Martinez, and Janet Levarie Smarr, those close colleagues in Italian studies who, with patient goodwill and judicious advice, scrutinized my manuscript as it was evolving.

Knowingly or not, many others have contributed to this book along the way, in friendship, generosity of spirit, and hospitality, among them Ann Arnaud and her family, Bianca Tarozzi, both Vittore and Olga Branca, Marco and Paola Frascari, Pietro Frassica, Rebecca West, Apostolos and Marina Condos, and Marco and Edda Vandini. Over the years, the University of Pennsylvania has assisted me with leave time and supported travel in Italy through the Henry Salvatori Fund of the Center for Italian Studies. I am especially grateful to Walter Kaiser, director of the Villa I Tatti, for welcoming me twice as a visiting professor during the years of this project's long gestation. Finally, I have benefited for work on the final stages of the book from a grant at the Newberry Library in Chicago funded by the Rockefeller Foundation.

My mother, Mary Elizabeth Erwin Kirkham, always one of my best readers and boosters, read as much of the manuscript as had taken shape before she died. To her memory and to that of my father, a passionate traveler who first introduced me to Italy, I dedicate this book.

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