Boccaccio 125 Years Later: Examining a Late Fifteenth-Century Portrait Medal

The Renaissance portrait medal emerged in the 1440s as a form that commemorated the character and achievements of living people. One of its great appeals was its ability to capture the likeness of an individual in a durable form that could be shared and distributed. At the same time, the medal's reverse — often featuring a scene, riddle, or symbol — could concisely encapsulate the personality, virtues, or values of the sitter. As a versatile art form that combined visual, textual, tactile, and intellectual modes, the portrait medal soon became popular at courts and in cities across Renaissance Italy. Its subjects ranged from the wealthy and powerful (princes, popes, aristocrats, and condottiere) to those lower down the social scale (doctors, lawyers, writers, and even courtesans). But for the remainder of the Quattrocento, all of these sitters were *living* people.[1]

This defining characteristic began to change ca. 1500 with the advent of medals that commemorated non-living people. In the sixteenth century, medals were commissioned by families to aggrandize illustrious ancestors, by cities to celebrate earlier civic worthies, and by lovers of classical culture to bring to life writers like Aristotle and Homer and pseudo-historical figures like Dido, Priam, and Helen of Troy.[2] The earliest of these medallic portraits were

---

[1] The few exceptions were posthumous medals to commemorate recently deceased people. For example, the reverse of a 1475 medal of Costanzo Sforza features a portrait of his father Alessandro, who had died 2 years earlier. Similarly, a 1467 medal of Niccolo Palmieri, bishop of Orte, was issued after his death. These medals are catalogued as no. 139, p. 155; and no. 236, p. 255, respectively, in Pollard 2007. All subsequent citations of this text will be from volume one.

[2] Pollard 2007, xviii. The medals mentioned are Aristotle (cat. no. 338, p. 356), Homer (cat. no. 455, p. 461), Dido (cat. no. 419, p. 430), Priam (cat. no. 420, p. 430), and Helen (cat. no. 442, p. 451).

produced in Florence in the late fifteenth century.[3] One of these groundbreaking medals memorializes the fourteenth-century writer Giovanni Boccaccio. Its obverse presents a leftward facing portrait, with the Latin inscription "IOH[ann]ES BOCATIVS FLORE[ntinus]" or "Giovanni Boccaccio, Florentine." On the reverse is an image of Wisdom gazing at a serpent that she holds in her right hand.[4] Why was the medal form appropriated to honor Boccaccio, a writer who had been dead for some 125 years? And what do the medal's features reveal about how Boccaccio was seen and commemorated in the late fifteenth century?

These questions are immediately complicated by our lack of knowledge regarding the medal's production. In *Renaissance Medals*, Pollard catalogues it as the work of an unknown Florentine medalist.[5] Nor do we know who commissioned the medal or why. When evaluating the context of a typical medal, it is often helpful to look at the sitter's social circle or perhaps an important life event in order to understand the occasion for which a medal was produced. But in the case of a long-dead writer like Boccaccio, neither approach is very useful.

Nevertheless, it seems likely that the medal was commissioned by a Florentine humanist or group of humanists who read, revered, and drew inspiration from Boccaccio. For one thing, the medallic form was often associated with humanism. The portrait medal emerged in the 1440s via the work of Pisanello, an artist who was active in the humanist courts of Ferrara, Mantua, Milan, and Naples.[6] The artistic genre that Pisanello initiated had no classical equivalent, but it was based loosely on the format and imagery of Roman coins. Indeed, many Renaissance medals are steeped in references to ancient culture and include reverses that engage with

[3] Pollard 2007, xviii. Pollard identifies a medal of Dante (cat. no. 339, p. 357) as the first — which he dates to the "late 15th Century" — followed closely by ca. 1500 medals of Petrarch (cat. no. 340, p. 358) and Boccaccio (cat. no. 341, p. 359).

[4] There are other possible interpretations of the figure on the reverse, but I follow Hill's and Pollard's designation of Wisdom, for reasons that will be explained later in the essay.

[5] Pollard 2007, 359.

[6] Scher 1994, 43-44.

classical myth, events, and personages.[7] Finally, the form reflects the humanist preoccupation with worldly fame and commemoration.

The portrait medal was a particular favorite of the late fifteenth-century Florentine humanists. Although Lorenzo de' Medici only commissioned one medal (to commemorate the Pazzi conspiracy in 1478), the city boasted two accomplished medalists in Bertoldo di Giovanni and Niccolò Fiorentino, the latter of whom was kept busy by commissions from the Florentine patriciate.[8] The group of humanist intellectuals — known as the Florentine Platonists — who gathered in Florence from the 1460s are commemorated in a number of medals of the 1490s, including Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Angelo Poliziano, and Antonio Pizzamani.[9] Even though most of these men were dead by 1500 — including Ficino in 1499 — a robust intellectual community persisted in Florence.

This community exhibited a keen interest in Boccaccio. For example, Poliziano (Chair of Rhetoric at the Florentine Studio from 1480) read Boccaccio carefully and drew directly from his conception "of poetry as *fabula*, the fictitious exterior that contains philosophical truth" in order to argue for "the didactic value of poetry."[10] Other Florentines would no doubt have seen Boccaccio as a humanist forebear who had pioneered many of the activities with which they were now engaged, including the study, collection, transcription, translation, and imitation of classical works.[11] As many of them

---

[7] See, for example, the 1486 medal of Giovanna degli Albizzi, which uses the Three Graces to illustrate her virtues of Chastity, Beauty, and Love. See also the 1473 medal of Pellegrino Prisciani, which depicts this man of letters and counselor to the Este dukes as the new Prometheus. Pollard 2007, cat. no. 325, p. 342, and cat. no. 88, p. 105.

[8] Pollard 2007, xxxiii.

[9] These medals are catalogued in Pollard's *Renaissance Medals* thusly: Ficino (cat. no. 305, p. 322), Pico (cat. no. 314, p. 330), Poliziano (cat. no. 316, p. 333), and Pizzamani (cat. no. 315, p. 332). All are attributed to the "Style of Niccolò Fiorentino."

[10] Godman 1998, 57-58.

[11] As Gittes (2015) explains, some recent critics have questioned whether or not Boccaccio should even be regarded as a humanist. For example Giuseppe Billanovich seems to "[cast] doubt on Boccaccio's humanistic vocation" and sees him as an "autodidact" follower of his much more important friend and contemporary Francesco Petrarch (156). Gittes finds it ironic that Boccaccio is now "at risk of being excluded from the [humanist] movement that he was instrumental in

also understood, Boccaccio had had a wide-ranging impact on contemporary genres as diverse as vernacular romance, Latin mythography, historiography, bucolic poetry, and political philosophy.[12]

Boccaccio's Latin works were highly prized by Florentine humanists throughout the Quattrocento.[13] These would include his moralistic biographies on famous men (the *De casibus virorum illustrium*) and famous women (the *De mulieribus claris*). Humanists also valued Boccaccio's reference works on classical mythology (the *Genealogia deorum gentilium*) and on geographical allusions in classical literature (*De montibus*). The prominence of these works is supported by Manetti's 1440 humanist *vita* of Boccaccio, which showcases the Latin works in general and especially recommends the *Genealogia*.[14] As Stephen Kolsky has shown, the *De mulieribus* was also an influential work among humanists, especially ca. 1480-1530.[15]

In his essay, "Boccaccio's Humanist *Brigata*," Timothy Kircher demonstrates that humanists also valued Boccaccio's vernacular works like the *Teseida*, the *Filocolo*, and especially the *Decameron*.[16] In fact, there was a heightened interest in the *Decameron* after about 1420, which continued throughout the century.[17] In Italy alone, some 11 separate printed editions appeared between 1470 and 1498.[18] Although Florence only produced one of these printed editions (in 1483), "Tuscany probably claimed the largest number of manuscript exemplars" in this period.[19] One reason for the *Decameron*'s local popularity may have been that the work was specifically championed by Lorenzo de' Medici.[20] According to Kircher,

---

founding" and takes great pains to catalog all of the humanist activities mentioned above (156).

[12] Eisner and Lummus 2019, xviii.

[13] Boitani 2014, 1. See also Daniels 2009, 3.

[14] Kircher 2019, 36-37.

[15] Kolsky 2005, 2.

[16] Kircher explains that despite a clear preference for Boccaccio's Latin works early on, "Quattrocento humanists […] increasingly recognized the value of his vernacular composition" (2019, 39).

[17] See Kircher (2019, 39), who cites Cursi 2007, 128.

[18] See table of "Editions of the *Decameron* printed before 1520" in Daniels 2009, 101.

[19] Daniels 2009, 101.

[20] Daniels 2009, 172.

humanists were drawn to the *Decameron's* "narratological sophistication and hermeneutical complexities imbedded in the layers of author, *brigata*, and story."[21] The work had a direct influence on later humanist dialogues because it modelled "how dialogues could be 'open' and allow a wide breadth of interpretive engagement in contrast to [...] more 'closed,' didactic models."[22]

That Boccaccio was important to later humanists can also be seen in the large number of humanist biographies written about him. This trend started with Villani in 1381, and comprises a cluster of *vitas* in the 1430s and 1440s, followed by a second cluster in the second half of the fifteenth century, including Squarzafico's highly influential 1472 biography.[23] As Rhiannon Daniels points out, such biographies can be seen as political documents designed to promote the heritage and cultural supremacy of Florence.[24] It may be that our medal is a part of the same humanist program, both in the ways that it celebrates Boccaccio and also in the manner that the obverse inscription claims him for the city of Florence.

When Poliziano died in 1494, other Florentine humanists like Francesco Cattani da Diacceto and Marcello Virgilio Adriani came to the fore (the latter succeeded Poliziano in the Florentine Studio and served as First Chancellor of Florence). Both Cattani and Adriani continued to engage with the ideas and approaches of Boccaccio.[25] It could therefore have been either one of these prominent humanist scholars who commissioned our ca. 1500 medal. The medal may even have been a way of pushing back against the recent regime of Savonarola, who had "criticized the weakness of literary humanism" in general and disparaged Boccaccio in particular as being corrupt and decadent (copies of the *Decameron* famously fed the flames in the so-called Bonfires of the Vanities).[26]

---

[21] Kircher 2019, 43.

[22] Kircher 2019, 43.

[23] See Daniels 2019, 113.

[24] Daniels 2019, 115.

[25] Though Cattani was a Platonist, many of his themes and interests — the vernacular, romantic love, classicism, secularity — align with those of Boccaccio. Adriani, like Poliziano before him, was keen to defend the *enkyklios paideia* (well-rounded education) against over-specialization and "[assert] the public utility of literature"; he would have seen the encyclopedic and prolific Boccaccio as an exemplar of both. Godman 1998, 297-98.

[26] Godman 1998, 31-34.

So far I have largely been describing the Boccaccian connections of Florentines that Maxson would refer to as "literary humanists," that small cadre of intellectuals who wrote original humanist texts.[27] But it is also possible that our medal was commissioned by someone in the much larger group of "social humanists," those individuals who were "content to read the [humanist] writings of others […] [and] correspond with friends and acquaintances about their studies."[28] The number of social humanists in Florence proliferated from about 1470, and Boccaccio may have held special appeal as a vernacular writer.[29] That social humanists were conversant with Boccaccio can be seen in the many ways in which they engaged with his image and his works: in visual culture, formal oratory, dinner party discussions, and library acquisitions.[30] Since many of these same patrician families were already commissioning portrait medals, it is quite possible that one (or a group) of them was responsible for commissioning the Boccaccio medal.

Having considered the late-Quattrocento context of the medal's production, let's now turn to the medal itself (*fig.* 1) to discover some of the ways in which Boccaccio may have been read, valued, and appropriated by late-fifteenth-century Florentine humanists. The obverse portrait offers a simple but dignified likeness of Boccaccio. It actually features more cloth than flesh, as the writer's head, neck, and shoulders are swathed in a loose hood known as a coif. On the one hand, this is typical fourteenth-century garb that is also found in other portraits of Boccaccio. On the other hand, the sheer amount of costly fabric in this rendering heightens the status of the subject. Still, the coif is pretty plain by the standards of Renaissance headgear, and seems to locate Boccaccio in an earlier and simpler time period. Such longevity may be intended to give the subject heightened authority as a writer whose fame and influence have endured.

---

[27] Maxson 2013, 9-10.

[28] Maxson 2013, 7.

[29] Maxson 2013, 181. According to Maxson, although some social humanists were fluent in Latin, many could only read the vernacular (10, 180).

[30] Maxson 2013, 32, 132, 19, 61, 67, 75-76. That Boccaccio is so well-represented in Florentine libraries is especially significant since "classical works dominated libraries" and relatively few contemporary or near-contemporary authors were represented (75).

Atop the fabric and crowning Boccaccio's head is a garland of laurel. This coronet alludes to the writer's status as a highly accomplished and revered poet.[31] Because of the voluminous fabric and laurel crown, we can only see the side of Boccaccio's face, which nevertheless possesses a serious and dignified expression. As the wrinkles under the eye and beside the mouth attest, this is not a youthful portrait. Instead, Boccaccio is depicted as a mature thinker and writer.

Fig. 1. Giovanni Boccaccio. Florentine 15th Century.[32]

It is also possible, however, to read Boccaccio's facial features as reflecting less esteemed aspects of his literary reputation. Using the lens of medieval physiognomy, we could read his large eye, full lips, and soft facial features as indicative of an amorous or lustful disposition.[33] And, indeed, Boccaccio was well known for his amorous tales, many of which were supposed to reflect his personal loves. It is also worth noting that the subject's head is unusually large for a portrait medal. It goes right to the top of the medal field and even

[31] Unlike his contemporary Petrarch, Boccaccio never officially served as poet laureate. However, the laurel garland marks him as a distinguished poet and may even allude to his unofficial status as one of the Three Crowns of Florence.

[32] Giovanni Boccaccio, 1313-75, Florentine Writer [obverse]; Wisdom Gazing at a Serpent [reverse], ca. 1500, bronze (late cast), diameter: 5.73 cm (2¼ in), Samuel H. Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art ‹https://www.nga.gov/artworks/44869-giovanni-boccaccio-1313-1375-florentine-writer-obverse›.

[33] It is worth noting that not all Quattrocento portraits of Boccaccio feature this pronounced physiognomy. See, for example, Domenico Castagno's well-known, full-body fresco of Boccaccio in his *Uomini famosi* series (c. 1450), now in the Uffizi.

interrupts the inscription.[34] Its relative size could possibly refer to Boccaccio's well-known corpulence, insofar as it makes his face seem especially large and fleshy by the standards of the medium.

In terms of visual sources, the portrait seems most likely derived from the ca. 1381-1406 Niccolo Gerini fresco in the Palazzo del Proconsolo in Florence.[35] This is one of the earliest portraits of Boccaccio, and is described by Victoria Kirkham as "of capital importance as a visual archetype" for later depictions of Boccaccio.[36] Like Gerini's image, our medal also features a fabric-covered head in profile to the left, a large eye, a prominent nose, and wrinkles descending from the nose and mouth. Gerini's fresco was in a highly visible, public place in late-fifteenth-century Florence, making it a well-known image that could have served as a model for our unknown medalist. A similar portrait is Giovanni dal Ponte's 1450 pen-and-ink drawing of Boccaccio.[37] It is an unlikely source for the medal, since it was made for a Venetian manuscript version of the *Corbaccio*. However, its similarity to the Gerini fresco may show the extent to which that image still had currency some 50 years after it was executed.

Other fifteenth-century depictions of Boccaccio are less similar to this portrait medal, but their differences help underscore the choices made by the medalist. For example, many early likenesses of Boccaccio lack a laurel coronet. This feature tends to appear in later portraits of the writer as part of an attempt by late-Quattrocento humanists to assert Boccaccio's importance and to elevate him — along with Dante and Petrarch — as the so called "Tre Corone" or Three Crowns of Florence.[38] Other fifteenth-century portraits of Boccaccio delineate him without the cloth head-wrap. Indeed,

34 It appears to take up a full 80% of the medal field, in contrast to the contemporary medals of Dante and Petrarch, whose busts take up a noticeably smaller percentage of their medal fields.

35 This fresco once included a "roster of illustrious poets" comprised of Petrarch, Zanobi da Strada, Dante, and Boccaccio, though only the latter two are still visible today. Kirkham 2019, 66-67.

36 Kirkham 2019, 68.

37 Kirkham has catalogued and discussed many of the surviving contemporary depictions of Boccaccio in manuscript and print, including Giovanni dal Ponte's drawing (1999, 102).

38 For the fifteenth-century timing of this trend, see Kirkham 2019, 62 and 68-73.

some of them attempt to render him as a latter-day courtier, complete with luxuriant hair and fashionable clothes.[39] In contrast, the traditional coif adopted in the medal deliberately marks the writer as belonging to an earlier generation.

Some contemporary portrayals show Boccaccio holding a book.[40] While it would have been hard to include a book within the confines of the obverse — which typically only contains a bust of the subject — it certainly could have been added to the reverse. For example, contemporary medals of Isotta degli Atti, Francesco Bonatti, Andreas Barbazza, and Galeotto Marzio deploy books in a variety of modes, ranging from scholarly accoutrements to allegorical entities.[41] By instead focusing on wisdom more generally, the medal gives a more philosophical bent to Boccaccio's writing activities. It elevates him from a mere producer of books to someone who grapples with transcendent truth.

Other representations of Boccaccio commonly show him addressing an audience of listeners.[42] Again, this would not have been practical on the obverse but could have been incorporated on the reverse. By not including an audience, our medal downplays Boccaccio's identity as a mere storyteller or rhetorician and instead emphasizes his careful and objective scrutiny of the world around him.

Another advantage of featuring Wisdom — which is traditionally depicted as a woman — is that it can also signify Boccaccio's own close literary associations with women. In the *Decameron*, the

---

39 For example, see the fifteenth-century manuscript of the *Consolatoria a Pino de Rossi* (Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, ms. 2544) and the woodcut *Boccaccio in cattedra che scrive* in the *Decameron* (Venice, 1492). Reproduced in Kirkham 1999, 108 and 114.

40 For example, see Gian Francesco Rustici's 1503 statue *Boccaccio with his Book* (Certaldo, Chiesa dei Santi Jacopo e Michele) and ca. 1397-1450 manuscript depictions in the *Filostrato* (Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, ms. II.II.38 and London, British Library, ms. Add. 21246), *De montibus* (Paris, Bibliothèque Mazarine, ms. 1526), and *Ameto* (Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, ms. Pluteo 41.35). Reproduced in Kirkham 1999, 90, 88, 89, 107, 89.

41 See Pollard 2007, for Atti (cat. no. 35, p. 52), Bonatti (cat. no. 129, p. 146), and Barbazza (cat. no. 99, p. 116). For Marzio, see Hill 1930, vol. 1, no. 1131, p. 294.

42 For example, Boccaccio speaks from an elevated lectern to a group of habited monks in a ca. 1345-50 *Buccolicum carmen* manuscript (Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, ms. Pluteo 34.49). In a ca. 1365-70 manuscript of the *Decameron* (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, ms. It. 482), he addresses a crowd of female spectators. Reproduced in Kirkham 1999, 87 and 89.

author identifies a predominantly female audience that he "delight[s] in entertaining" and remarks that he has been frequently criticized for "such pursuits as discussing the ways of women and providing for their pleasure" when he "would be better advised to remain with the Muses in Parnassus."[43] Not only does the *Decameron* engage with a female audience, it also experiments with women as narrators and subjects in their own right. Other Boccaccian works feature first-person female voicing (*Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*), catalogue the lives of virtuous women (*De mulieribus claris*), and expose the flaws of women (*Corbaccio*).[44] As the latter work suggests, Boccaccio does not always praise or flatter women, but he does consistently engage with them in his texts. They are "sometimes hated, sometimes celebrated, but a perennial point of tension and discussion."[45] In her essay "Boccaccio and Women," Marilyn Migiel maintains that the writer "forged new ways to imagine women as existential subjects, as objects of desire, as participants in literary and philosophical conversations, and as guides for how to live."[46] However, "[b]ecause Boccaccio's narrators articulate a variety of views about women," Migiel warns against synthesizing these views in an "attempt to derive a unified stance."[47]

Not surprisingly, Boccaccio's extensive literary engagement with women was noted even in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Some manuscript illustrations depict Boccaccio speaking to or surrounded by groups of women.[48] It is thus appropriate that the reverse of the medal is dominated by the figure of a woman. Indeed, one of Boccaccio's most idealized portrayals of women — the *De*

---

[43] Boccaccio 1986, 284 (orig. 4.intro.5-6). Subsequent *Decameron* quotations will be cited via page numbers in translation together with the original's paragraph numbering from Boccaccio 1992.

[44] Armstrong *et al.* 2015, 15.

[45] Armstrong *et al.* 2015, 16.

[46] Migiel 2015, 171.

[47] Migiel, "Boccaccio and Women," 171.

[48] I have already mentioned (in n. 42) the ca. 1365-70 manuscript of the *Decameron* (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, ms. It. 482) in which Boccaccio speaks to a crowd of women. See also the fifteenth-century Florentine manuscript of the *Teseida* (Naples, Biblioteca Oratoriana del Monumento Nazionale dei Girolamini, ms. C.F.2.8, fol. 1), where Boccaccio writes at an elegant desk with noble women standing to either side. This image was adopted by Rhiannon Daniels as the cover image of *Boccaccio and the Book* (2009).

mulieribus claris — had a special resonance in the late fifteenth century. At that time, "Boccaccio's text was recognizably the largest repository of ordered information on classical women available in a single text."[49] In his book *The Ghost of Boccaccio: Writings on Famous Women in Renaissance Italy*, Stephen Kolsky discusses the varied group of writers who drew from and engaged with this work ca. 1480-1530. As is typical for Boccaccio, the *De mulieribus*' treatment of women is not straightforward and contains both conservative and subversive elements, but this very ambiguity made the work attractive to later writers who could adapt and appropriate its content to suit their own aims.[50] As late-Quattrocento readers understood, Boccaccian works like the *De mulieribus* invest women with voices and agency to an unusual degree. Thus, the medal's deployment of a feminized Wisdom allows it to reflect the writer's close association with women as well as his intimation that women are moral beings whose wisdom is worth cultivating.

But how do we know that the uninscribed reverse depicts Wisdom? There are actually multiple possibilities, including Envy, Health, and Wisdom. A woman with a serpent can represent Envy, as seen in Giotto's ca. 1305 fresco of the vices in the Scrovegni Chapel and on the reverse of a sixteenth-century medal of Ariosto.[51] And, indeed, Boccaccio was troubled by the envy of contemporaries and addresses the subject in both the *Genealogia deorum gentilium* (1.18) and in the introduction to the fourth day of the *Decameron*. But the snake in the Boccaccio medal is not being nullified (as in Ariosto) nor is it emanating grotesquely from the woman or otherwise accompanied by negative symbols of greed and covetousness (as in Giotto). Instead, the woman holds it aloft and calmly gazes at it.

Another, more positive, possibility is that our reverse represents Salus, the Roman god of health, safety, and well-being. Salus is sometimes depicted on Roman coins — which were frequently collected and studied by Renaissance humanists — in the company of

[49] Kolsky 2005, 3.
[50] Kolsky 2005, 4-7.
[51] In Giotto's fresco, Invidia is depicted as a woman with a snake crawling out of her mouth while she stands in flames and clutches a money bag. In the Ariosto medal by Domenico Pogini, the snake of envious slander is having its tongue cut off by a hand holding a pair of scissors. Pollard 2007, cat. no. 389, p. 403.

a snake that represents healing.[52] Typically Salus holds the snake in one hand and directs it toward a dish of food that she holds in the other hand, though there are also examples of Salus gazing into the sacred snake's eyes, as on the reverse of a 49 BCE denarius of Manius Acilius Glabro. While it is possible to interpret the reverse as Envy or Salus, neither fits the late fifteenth-century context of the medal so well as Wisdom.[53]

An important part of that context is the production of two related medals depicting Dante and Petrarch. All three were cast in Florence. Hill suggests that the Dante medal came first and that "the others may have been made by a second hand to match it."[54] Pollard agrees, assigning a "late 15th Century" date to the Dante medal, and referring to the Boccaccio and Petrarch medals as "companion pieces" that were cast ca. 1500.[55] The related production of these three medals would seem to reflect the growing currency of the *Tre Corone* in late-Quattrocento Florence. That the medals are a cohesive group can also be seen in their shared design elements. The three obverses all have inscriptions with the writer's name and the word "Florentinvs," a clear attempt to claim each writer for the city of Florence.[56] All three reverses feature images of single figures but (unusually) lack inscriptions. Finally, all three medals are roughly the same size.[57]

Given the similarities of this group of medals, the Dante (*fig.* 2) and Petrarch (*fig.* 3) medals can instruct us in reading the Boccaccio

[52] Salus is the daughter of Asclepius, the god of medicine and healing. He is closely associated with snakes, as can be seen in the Asclepian Rod with the snake twined about it. Snakes were seen as sacred beings with healing powers (since their venom had remedial properties), and their ability to shed their skin seemed like an act of regeneration, rebirth and renewal. Salus's role was to assist her father by feeding and caring for his sacred snakes.

[53] This is the identification first given by Hill 1930 and then followed by Pollard 2007, though neither elaborates on *why* wisdom in general and this type of wisdom in particular is such an apt reflection of Boccaccio's contemporary reception.

[54] Hill 1930, 1:281.

[55] Pollard 2007, 357-59.

[56] Seemingly for space reasons — see n. 34 — Boccaccio's inscription is abbreviated to "IOH[ann]ES BOCATIVS FLORE[ntinus].

[57] The Dante medal is a bit larger at 67 mm, while the 'companion' medals of Petrarch and Boccaccio are 54 mm and 57 mm, respectively. Pollard 2007, 357-59.

medal. Crucially, the other two medals feature reverses of allegorical scenes that help us understand the perceived legacy of each author. On the Petrarch medal, the female figure of Poetry is walking in a forest and picking laurel branches. The scene alludes to Petrarch's poetic achievements, to the woman (Laura) who inspired his verses, and perhaps to the resulting poetic laurels that now crown the poet. The Dante reverse — directly inspired by a ca. 1465 painting in the Florence Cathedral — shows the author in front of the Mountain of Purgatory, with Inferno below and the celestial Paradise above. These reverses not only allude to the major works — the *Canzoniere* and *Commedia* — of each author; they also emphasize the lofty activities that they enshrine. In the *Canzoniere*, Petrarch's application of pure poetry to idealized beauty elevates the human soul. In the *Commedia*, Dante's vivid descriptions alternately terrify and inspire the reader towards virtue and religious salvation. Both works may be creative, learned, entertaining, and well-written, but the medals underscore the intellectual activities at their core and posit Petrarch and Dante as — above all else — mediators of important spiritual ideas. Given this exalted context, the Boccaccio medal seems less likely to be depicting Envy or Health. Instead, we would expect our medal to point us towards Boccaccio's perceived literary legacy and to celebrate the idealized intellectual and spiritual work that his works perform. Wisdom would therefore seem a more likely interpretation.

Fig. 2. Dante Alighieri. Florentine 15th Century.[58]

[58] Dante Alighieri, Florentine Poet, 1265-1321 [obverse]; Dante Before the Mountain of Purgatory [reverse], late 15th century, bronze (molded frame), diameter:

And indeed, the medal's depiction of Wisdom seems tailored to endorse a kind of irreverent, unconventional wisdom with which Boccaccio can be associated. Typical allegories of Wisdom emphasize her role in bringing clarity or dispelling ignorance. Hence, she is often pictured holding a lamp or basking in the rays of the sun.[59] But the Boccaccio medal shows Wisdom gazing at a serpent. The iconography is partially derived from Matthew 10:16, where Jesus tells his disciples to "Be ye therefore wise as serpents and harmless as doves." In this verse, Christ endorses a particular kind of discerning wisdom. Other English renderings of the verse are "Be as *wary* as serpents" and "Be as *shrewd* as serpents." As Jesus sends the disciples out to preach, he knows that they will face opposition and persecution; he doesn't want them to be naïve, but rather wary and shrewd so that they can escape harm and be effective. On the medal's reverse, Wisdom carefully examines the snake so that she too can acquire a kind of worldly shrewdness. The reverse thus models the approach of not being overly trusting or taking things at face value. Instead, Wisdom should scrutinize, peer into the depths, and use discernment. A similar representation of wisdom can be seen in a ca. 1520 Milanese medal of Scaramuccia di Gianfermo Trivulzio.[60] Its reverse depicts Prudence with a mirror and dividers, signifying her capacity for reflection and judgment. At Prudence's feet is a small dragon, which Pollard explains as "represent[ing] the world of serpents, proverbial for their wisdom."[61]

The iconography of wisdom and the serpent is also classical. Athena, the Roman goddess of wisdom and war, is often accompanied by a snake that signifies hidden knowledge. Snakes were renowned for their cunning, which is also an attribute of Athena herself. But cunning need not be maliciously deceptive. In Athena's case, cunning and arcane wisdom enable her to offer protection to her followers (snakes are frequently depicted on her shield and protective cloak). As we have already seen with Salus and Asclepius, classical snakes sometimes appear in the context of medicine and

---

6.78 cm (2 11/16 in), Samuel H. Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art ‹https://www.kressfoundation.org/kress-collection/artwork/e4fc03b420225714bcc2a43efa6caf0e9854436fac178417915f75c72dffd518›.

[59] See, for example, #136 in Cesare Ripa's 1593 *Iconologia*. A useful modern edition is Ripa 1971.

[60] Pollard 2007, cat. no. 223, p. 238.

[61] Pollard 2007, 239.

healing. But here, too, medicinal power is rooted in the specialized knowledge — of plants and their healing attributes — that physicians must master. A 1472 medal of Pietro Bono Avogario illustrates the currency of these ideas.[62] Avogario's identity as a physician is indicated on the reverse by the figure of Asclepius, who holds a vial and some herbs and has a dragon at his feet.

Both the Trivulzio and Avogario medals depict the wisdom of serpents via dragons rather than snakes. This may be because snakes had mostly deleterious connotations, given their role in the Fall of Mankind and their subsequent association with evil, sin, and death. Negative representations of snakes are typical in other Renaissance medals. For example, medals of Pope Paul III, Ludovico Ariosto, and Alfonso d'Este use snakes to symbolize riot and rebellion, envy and slander, and monstrosity, respectively.[63] The fact that the Boccaccio medal incorporates a snake as an element of Wisdom is thus unusual. It carries with it the ideas that we need to be shrewd and calculating in order to be truly wise, that what we fear or dread can actually be a source of healing and regeneration, and that rather than striving to be as "innocent as doves," a knowledge of evil may help us to understand the good and truly be good.

Fig. 3. Francesco Petrarca of Arezzo. Florentine 15th Century.[64]

[62] Pollard 2007, cat. no. 84, p. 101.

[63] On the first medal (Pollard 2007, cat. no. 437, p. 446), the Pope is depicted as a griffin fighting with a snake, "believed to refer to the pope's suppression of riots in 1540 against a salt tax in Perugia" (446). For the Ariosto medal, see n. 51. The third medal (Pollard 2007, cat. no. 63, p. 84) depicts the young Alfonso d'Este as the infant Hercules strangling two snakes, an early sign of the Greek hero's precociousness in defeating monsters.

[64] Francesco Petrarca of Arezzo, 1304-1374, Poet [obverse]; Poetry Walking in a Wood [reverse], c. 1500, bronze (late cast), diameter: 5.43 cm (2 1/8 in), Samuel

This conception of wisdom fits well with late-fifteenth-century debates about Boccaccio. Some detractors dismiss Boccaccio as (at best) a mere storyteller, especially compared to a seemingly more serious writer of religious 'epic' like Dante. Others critique Boccaccio for being too focused on romantic love.[65] And, of course, many of these same romantic works often have bawdy or erotic elements that could be morally problematic for humanists.[66] As we have seen, these concerns were the source of Savonarola's attacks on Boccaccio in the 1490s and why, a half century later, the Inquisition stipulated that only censored versions of the *Decameron* could be published.[67] But our medal attempts to rehabilitate Boccaccio by associating him with wisdom rather than romantic love. In part, the medal follows Poliziano in insisting that deeper philosophical truths lie beneath Boccaccio's tales. But its iconography also suggests that Boccaccio's well-rounded engagement with all aspects of the world — including exposure to evil — is a necessary component of true wisdom. In this sense, Boccaccio himself is the figure who holds aloft and scrutinizes the snake so that we can understand our world and ourselves more fully. In her book entitled *The Ethical Dimension of the* Decameron, Marilyn Migiel argues that the *Decameron* seeks to "complicate our moral views and ethical responses."[68] It does this by telling stories that get readers to examine and reflect on their own values and biases when faced with an ethical decision; this, in turn, may lead them to "[question] moral authorities, transcendental messages, and traditional didacticism."[69]

H. Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art ‹https://www.kressfoundation.org/kress-collection/artwork/cebd50e7c71d96d31073302323cc53266818cd93b59609824124832a96265c44›.

[65] A common occurrence in early images of Boccaccio, since so many of the author's vernacular works center on romantic love. For example, in a ca. 1365-70 manuscript of the *Decameron* (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, ms. It. 482), the figure of Cupid hovers above the crowd of listeners with bow drawn. See also a fifteenth-century manuscript of *Filostrato* (Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, ms. II.II.90), where the figure of love stands at Boccaccio's right shoulder and inspires him as he writes. Both images reproduced in Kirkham 1999, 89 and 106.

[66] Eisner and Lummus 2019, xxi.

[67] Godman 1998, 303-07.

[68] Migiel 2015b, 3.

[69] Migiel 2015b, 5 and 11.

A good example of this dynamic is the story of Nastagio degli Onesti (the eighth of the fifth Day of the *Decameron*), which is, incidentally, a further example of Boccaccio's engagement with women.[70] Here is Boccaccio's synopsis of the story:

> In his love for a young lady […] Nastagio degli Onesti squanders his wealth without being loved in return. He […] leave[s Ravenna] […] where he sees [the spirit of a deceased] girl being hunted down and killed by a horseman, and devoured by a brace of hounds. He then invites […] the lady he loves to a banquet, where this same girl is torn to pieces before the eyes of his beloved, who, fearing a similar fate, accepts Nastagio as her husband. (419, 5.8.1 in Boccaccio 1992)

The story is told by Filomena and intended to illustrate the wickedness of women who are too cruel and haughty towards their suitors. As Filomena tells her female listeners at the outset of the story: "our cruelty [in love is] severely punished by divine justice" (419, orig. 5.8.3). On the surface, this seems to be the clear moral of the tale. In life, the unnamed deceased girl spurned the advances of the horseman Guido, causing him to take his own life; now, she endures the eternal punishment of being repeatedly pursued and ripped apart. In arranging the banquet, Nastagio is then able to use this incident to overcome the refusal of his beloved so that they marry at the end of the story and "[settle] down to a long and happy life together" (425, orig. 5.8.43).

Yet Boccaccio also leads us to question this seemingly straightforward reading. First, the story gives subtle reasons for the lady's refusal of Nastagio that go beyond arbitrary "cruelty." She is described as being "of […] singular beauty" and "of far more noble lineage than his own" (419, orig. 5.8.5). Perhaps Nastagio would be better served to woo in his own sphere. Moreover, his main mode of wooing is to aggrandize his own accomplishments, an approach that not surprisingly elicits the lady's "harsh and unfriendly" behavior (419, orig. 5.8.6). Finally, Nastagio's reaction to her refusal seems extreme and indiscriminate, as he fluctuates between "longing to kill himself, […] give her up altogether, or learn if possible to hate her" (420, orig. 5.8.7). This is hardly an ennobling kind of love. We know even less about Guido's ill-fated love affair, only that he

[70] This same story has also been immortalized in the famous series of four paintings by Botticelli. These 1483 works illustrate yet another aspect of Boccaccio's influence in late-Quattrocento Florence.

too was refused and that "her pride and cruelty led me to such a pass that, one day, I killed myself in sheer despair […] and thus I am condemned to eternal punishment" (422, orig. 5.8.21). Guido clearly places the blame for his suicide (and hellish torment) on the lady who refused him. At first, Nastagio disagrees and sides with the lady. Yet after recognizing his own similarity to Guido, his initial compassion for the girl dissipates — he begins to refer to her as "the cruel lady" — and he rapidly begins to consider how the recurring nature of this incident might "prove very useful to him" (423, orig. 5.8.32).

Aside from complicating the readers' views of the alleged male victims in the story, Boccaccio also invites reflection on the nature of so-called female cruelty. In the story, women who refuse their suitors are described as "cruel," "harsh," "haughty," "contemptuous," and "prideful." In fact, the hunting incident elevates the refusal of a suitor to an actual "sin," which can be seen in the fact that Guido's mistress is now in hell and enduring eternal punishment. Even granting the dubiousness of this claim, the severity of the punishment surely exceeds the crime. Guido is described as "pounc[ing] like a mad dog, rapier in hand, upon the girl, who was kneeling before him, held by the two mastiffs, and screaming for mercy at the top of her voice" (422, orig. 5.8.29). He then "plunged his rapier into the middle of her breast and out again at the other side, whereupon the girl fell on her face, still sobbing and screaming" (423, orig. 5.8.29-30). Finally, he "slashed open her back, extracted her heart and everything else around it, and hurled it to the two mastiffs, who devoured it greedily on the instant" (423, orig. 5.8.30). Such graphic details clearly invite us to see the disconnect between the simple act of refusing a suitor and the physical, emotional, and spiritual punishment that is now being inflicted on the powerless lady.

Not surprisingly, when Nastagio arranges for his lady (and several other women) to see this spectacle at the banquet, they are greatly distressed. All of the ladies are affected, "[b]ut none was stricken with so much terror as the cruel maiden loved by Nastagio […] So great was the fear engendered within her by this episode, that in order to avoid a similar fate, she converted her enmity into love" (424, orig. 5.8.40). Yet it is evident here that her conversion is motivated by terror rather than any kind of edification or change of

heart. She is made to feel that her continued refusal of Nastagio will lead directly to her own damnation and physical torture.

Finally, at the end of the story, Boccaccio probes the nature of the ladies' initial refusals. In hearing their stories, we have probably assumed that what suitors like Nastagio and Guido had in mind was honorable marriage. But once she has been "scared straight," the lady sends word to Nastagio that "she was [now] ready to do anything he desired" (424, orig. 5.8.41). Nastagio expresses his gratification, but then adds that "if she had no objection he preferred to combine his pleasure with the preservation of her good name, by making her his lawful wedded wife" (424, orig. 5.8.42). The suggestion is that the lady has all along seen Nastagio's advances as a request for sex rather than marriage, and that she is now ready to comply. But this also makes her initial refusal seem much less cruel, as it was merely an attempt to preserve her own chastity. Nor does Nastagio deny this earlier intention; he merely adds — as a kind of unexpected benefaction — that he is now ready to marry her as well. Boccaccio furthers the critique of so-called female cruelty in the story's final sentence, when he reports that "from that day forth the ladies of Ravenna in general were so frightened by it that they became much more tractable to men's pleasures than they had ever been in the past" (425, orig. 5.8.44). This seems like an ominous development. Like Nastagio's lady, the fear of ending up like the hunted lady is now motivating the ladies' compliance. But unlike Nastagio's lady, there is no indication that they are being offered anything beyond "men's pleasures."

What do we do with a story like this? On the one hand, the female narrator asserts the lesson of curbing female cruelty, and all of the characters in the story (both men and women) seem to endorse it.[71] Moreover, the women do seem to go beyond mere refusal, and are described — at least by the men — as taking delight in their power of saying "no" and even "gloating" over the sufferings of their suitors (420, 422). Finally, the story does depict the posthumous punishment of "cruel" mistresses; it is not simply a fiction created by the men in the story. On the other hand, Boccaccio thoroughly undercuts the tale by showing the biases of male characters and exposing how they play upon women's fears of being labelled as cruel

[71] The one exception is the savagely hunted lady, though she (tellingly) never articulates how she feels about her sufferings.

and haughty. In the end, it seems clear that the women of Ravenna have been rendered less — rather than more — virtuous, and we are invited to question whether or not the marriage of Nastagio and his lady will indeed be "long and happy" (425, orig. 5.8.44).

As Migiel suggests above, Boccaccian wisdom is complex and multi-faceted. It prods readers to recognize the biases of others — here, the narrator and the principal characters — and also attend to their own biases, which may include whether they are male or female, or whether they have spurned or been spurned in love. It resists a surface-level reading of events and eschews traditional authorities and overarching certitudes. As Robert Hollander observes, "The author of the *Decameron* prefers to formulate questions rather than to answer them."[72]

As we can see from this single representative story, Boccaccio is interested in a particular type of moral inquiry that seems to fit with Wisdom gazing at a snake. His is an unflinching examination that reveals the weaknesses, biases, and sometimes worse parts of human nature — but ultimately as an avenue towards increasing readers' understanding of themselves and the choices they make. As Timothy Kircher puts it, Boccaccio "attends to the *process* of becoming aware of the human capacity for goodness and wickedness."[73] As we have already seen, later humanists were drawn to this very narrative and hermeneutical complexity, which seems to be being celebrated in our medal. It is unusual that the medal's reverse has no inscription; there is no pithy Latin statement that explains *why* Wisdom should be gazing at a snake. Instead, the viewer is prodded to think about the image and actively interpret its meaning. It therefore simulates and stimulates the same kind of careful, open-ended interpretation that one has to bring to Boccaccio's works. The medal is thus an apt emblem of some of the things that late-Quattrocento Florentine intellectuals found engaging and worth celebrating about their humanist ancestor.

JOHN M. ADRIAN

THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA'S
COLLEGE AT WISE

[72] Quoted in Migiel 2015b, 10.
[73] Quoted in Migiel 2015b, 11.

Works Cited

Armstrong, Guyda, Rhiannon Daniels, and Stephen J. Milner, eds. 2015. "Boccaccio as Cultural Mediator." In *The Cambridge Companion to Boccaccio*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. 3-19.

Boccaccio, Giovanni. 1986. *The Decameron*. G. H. McWilliam, trans. New York: Penguin.

———. 1992. *Decameron*. 2 vols. V. Branca, ed. Turin: Einaudi.

Boitani, Piero. 2014. "Boccaccio in Western Europe." In *Boccaccio and the European Literary Tradition*. P. Boitani and E. Di Rocco, eds. Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura. 1-16.

Cursi, Marco. 20078. *Il Decameron: Scritture, scriventi, lettori: Storia di un testo*. Rome: Viella.

Daniels, Rhiannon. 2009. *Boccaccio and the Book: Production and Reading in Italy 1340-1520*. London: Legenda.

———. 2019. "Squarzafico's *Vita di Boccaccio* and Early Modern Print Culture: A New Model for the Study of Biography." In *A Boccaccian Renaissance: Essays on the Early Modern Impact of Giovanni Boccaccio and His Works*. M. Eisner and D. Lummus, eds. Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame P. 112-50.

Eisner, Martin and David Lummus. 2019. "Introduction: Finding the Renaissance Boccaccio." In *A Boccaccian Renaissance: Essays on the Early Modern Impact of Giovanni Boccaccio and His Works*. M. Eisner and D. Lummus, eds. Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame P. xiii-xxv.

Gittes, Tobias Foster. 2015. "Boccaccio and Humanism." In *The Cambridge Companion to Boccaccio*. G. Armstrong, R. Daniels, and S. J. Milner, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. 155-70.

Godman, Peter. 1998. *From Poliziano to Machiavelli: Florentine Humanism in the High Renaissance*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP.

Hill, George Frtancis. 1930. *A Corpus of Italian Medals of the Renaissance before Cellini*. 2 vols. London: British Museum.

Kircher, Timothy. 2019. "Boccaccio's Humanist *Brigata*: Reading the *Decameron* in the Quattrocento." In *A Boccaccian Renaissance: Essays on the Early Modern Impact of Giovanni Boccaccio and His Works*. M. Eisner and D. Lummus, eds. Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame P. 36-55.

Kirkham, Victoria. 1999. "L'immagine del Boccaccio nella memoria tardo-gotica e rinascimentale." In *Boccaccio visualizzato:*

Narrare per parole e per immagini fra Medioevo e Rinascimento. 2 vols. V. Branca, ed. Turin: Einaudi. 1:85-133.

———. 2019. "Poets Prefer Company: Boccaccio's Portraits and the Three Crowns of Florence." In *A Boccaccian Renaissance: Essays on the Early Modern Impact of Giovanni Boccaccio and His Works*. M. Eisner and D. Lummus, eds. Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame P. 59-93.

Kolsky, Stephen. 2005. *The Ghost of Boccaccio: Writings on Famous Women in Renaissance Italy*. Turnhout: Brepols.

Maxson, Brian Jeffrey. 2013. *The Humanist World of Renaissance Florence*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Migiel, Marilyn. 2015. "Boccaccio and Women." In *The Cambridge Companion to Boccaccio*. G. Armstrong, R. Daniels, and S. J. Milner, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. 171-84.

———. 2015b. *The Ethical Dimension of the* Decameron. Toronto: U of Toronto P.

Pollard, John Graham. 2007. *Renaissance Medals*. *Volume One: Italy*. New York: Oxford UP.

Ripa, Cesare. 1971. *Baroque and Rococo Pictorial Imagery: The 1758-60 Hertel Edition of Ripa's* Iconologia. E. A. Maser, ed. New York: Dover.

Scher, Stephen K. 1994. *The Currency of Fame: Portrait Medals of the Renaissance*. New York: The Frick Collection.