INTRODUCTION

Boccaccio between Dante and Petrarch Cultivating vernacular literary community in the Chigi Codex

The coronation of Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Cavalcanti in Giorgio Vasari's Six Tuscan Poets (1544; see Frontispiece) can seem inevitable from a modern perspective, but its vision of Italian literary history is the product of intense debates that began - as Vasari's painting suggests among the poets themselves.¹ At first glance, Boccaccio appears to have a relatively insignificant place in these discussions. Situated behind and between the imposing figures of Dante and Petrarch, he has no role in the play of hands and books that constitutes the main drama of the painting. To his left, Dante and Cavalcanti stare each other down over a volume of Virgil in a visual gloss on the question of whom Cavalcanti 'held in disdain' (ebbe a disdegno) in Inferno 10.² To his right, Petrarch attempts to intervene in Dante's Virgilian conversation, with his left hand posed like one of the manicula that occupy the margins of his manuscripts.³ Ignoring Petrarch's intrusion, Dante silences him with a single finger of his right hand that indicates the green volume Petrarch holds in his lap with its cameo of Laura. This pointed exchange suggests the evolving assessment of Petrarch's literary achievement: to be celebrated not for his attempt to imitate Virgilian epic in his Latin Africa, but for his vernacular lyrics.⁴ In the context of these carefully constructed encounters among the laurelled poets, Boccaccio's lack of involvement is notable. Reduced to a corpulent head floating in the background, Boccaccio is removed from the tensions between these individual figures that Vasari's painting suggests constitute the tradition itself.5

Boccaccio and the Invention of Italian Literature offers a new perspective on Boccaccio's place in this literary historical drama by putting into his hands a codex that reveals his pivotal role in mediating the figures of Dante, Petrarch, and Cavalcanti that Vasari's painting crowns. Written entirely in Boccaccio's hand and dedicated to Petrarch, this remarkable manuscript, now Chigi L V 176 in the Vatican Library, contains Boccaccio's *Vita di Dante*; Dante's *Vita nuova*; Cavalcanti's *Donna mi prega*, surrounded by the unique 2

Boccaccio and the Invention of Italian Literature

Table 1 Contents of Current Chigi L V 176

- a. Boccaccio's Vita di Dante, the second version of the biography
- b. Dante's Vita nuova in Boccaccio's modified edition
- c. Cavalcanti's *Donna mi prega*, surrounded by Dino del Garbo's commentary
- d. Boccaccio's Latin poem Ytalie iam certus honos, dedicating the collection to Petrarch
- e. Dante's canzoni distese, fifteen of Dante's longer canzoni
- f. Petrarch's Fragmentorum liber, an early version of the Rerum vulgarium fragmenta

witness of Dino del Garbo's Latin commentary; Boccaccio's dedicatory Latin poem to Petrarch on Dante, Ytalie iam certus honos; Dante's fifteen canzoni distese (extended canzoni); and the only extant early redaction of Petrarch's lyric collection, called the *Fragmentorum liber*.⁶ (See Table 1.) While scholars have examined this manuscript in fragments to analyze its rare and unique works individually, this study investigates the manuscript as a whole from Boccaccio's perspective. Bringing together material philology and intellectual history, I argue that Boccaccio's preservation of these rare and unique works is no accident of transmission, but a materialization of his larger efforts to vindicate and legitimize this emerging vernacular tradition. The Chigi reveals the variety of ways Boccaccio pursues this project: by constructing explicit arguments and composing narratives; collecting, compiling, and commenting on texts; and manipulating material forms. Boccaccio's multifaceted role in the transmission and mediation of these vernacular works shows that he is not only one of the vernacular authors canonized in Vasari's painting, but also a critical figure in the canonization of these other vernacular authors. From the perspective of the Chigi, then, Boccaccio's central placement in Vasari's image conveys his crucial role as a mediator, whose efforts to persuade his contemporaries of the value of the vernacular produced the texts and arguments that would be utilized by future generations, embodied in the unlaurelled figures, variously identified as Cristoforo Landino, Marsilio Ficino, or Angelo Poliziano, at whom Boccaccio directs his gaze.7

The contested identities of those unlaurelled figures to the far left of the frame evince a tension between Vasari's representation of literary history in *Six Tuscan Poets* and the three-stage theory of cultural history that he proposes in his *Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, ed architettori (Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*). Instead of an organic progression from humble beginnings through a period of development until finally reaching the height of perfection, Vasari's *Six Tuscan Poets* gives pride of place to the first two stages.⁸ This discrepancy underlines

Boccaccio between Dante and Petrarch

the novelty of the Italian literary tradition in which Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Cavalcanti are foundational figures in a way that the major figures of fourteenth-century English, French, German, and Spanish literature are not.9 Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Cavalcanti are not points of origin posited by a later national literary history, like the Chanson de Roland or Poema del mio Cid. Instead, they constitute the beginnings that inform the later tradition, providing points of reference and models from the fourteenth century to the present day.¹⁰ Indeed, critics continue to use them to characterize different literary modes, classifying modern poets like Eugenio Montale as Dantean, while Giuseppe Ungaretti and Andrea Zanzotto are Petrarchan.¹¹ Boccaccio, meanwhile, has attracted the attention of unconventional artists, like Pier Paolo Pasolini, Aldo Busi, and Dario Fo, all of whom have adapted the *Decameron*.¹² Cavalcanti, too, although excluded from the conventional idea of 'the three crowns' (tre corone) of Italian literature, functions as a cultural alternative to Dante not only in Vasari's painting but also in modern works, like Pound's 'Mediaevalism' essay and Calvino's 'Lightness'.¹³

To argue that Boccaccio invents Italian literature is not to disregard the longer historical and cultural process that stretches from the consolidation of the Sicilian school in Tuscany through Dante and Pietro Bembo to Francesco De Sanctis and Antonio Gramsci, but to emphasize the pivotal role Boccaccio's texts, arguments, and narratives play in the formation of this tradition that has a persistent place in reflections on Italian literary identity.¹⁴ Boccaccio produces the first edition of Dante's works with an extensive Vita that is also a defense of vernacular poetry; pens the earliest biography of Petrarch and transcribes the earliest redaction of his vernacular collection; transmits the only witness to Dino del Garbo's Latin commentary on Cavalcanti's Donna mi prega; and composes a remarkable story about Cavalcanti in the Decameron (6.9).¹⁵ Those interested in Dante's life, from Leonardo Bruni in the Quattrocento to modern critics, like Ernst Robert Curtius and Giorgio Agamben, have used Boccaccio's Vita di Dante as a primary point of reference.¹⁶ Petrarch himself employs Boccaccio's biography of him as the model for his own 'Letter to Posterity' (Sen. 18.1), and Boccaccio's story about Cavalcanti (Dec. 6.9) remains one of the most discussed and debated sources for understanding the poet.¹⁷ Boccaccio's reflections on poetry and the vernacular, as well as the texts he transmitted, also informed literary debate over the following centuries in the works of Coluccio Salutati, who appropriates Boccaccio's arguments for poetry and uses his copy of Petrarch; Leonardo Bruni, who criticizes Boccaccio's Vita di Dante to motivate his own biographical account; Poliziano, who borrows

4

Boccaccio and the Invention of Italian Literature

Boccaccian images for the Introduction to the *Raccolta Aragonese* and utilizes Boccaccio's texts for the collection; Landino, who relies on Boccaccio's commentary for his own *Comento*; and Bembo, who makes the copy of the *Commedia* that Boccaccio gave to Petrarch the basis for the first Aldine edition of Dante's work.¹⁸ Even the edition of Dante's lyrics that Giacomo Leopardi read in the nineteenth century took its texts from the sixteenthcentury Giuntina edition (1527), which was based on Boccaccio's copy of Dante's lyrics.¹⁹ Just as the tradition of Sicilian lyrics comes through Tuscan scribes, Dante, Petrarch, and Cavalcanti are mediated through Boccaccio.

Boccaccio's role in this process has often been obscured by a tendency to see the vernacular tradition either as already established by Dante or canonized only later by Bembo, but the Chigi shows how Boccaccio combines theoretical arguments, narrative compositions, and material strategies to make this tradition visible.²⁰ Vasari's painting not only reflects Boccaccio's vision but also reveals his triumph. Reading Six Tuscan Poets in chronological order from right to left, the image reveals the ironies of literary historical rivalry, whereby one's disdain for a precursor links him all the more strongly to that poet: Cavalcanti's Virgil, Dante's Cavalcanti, Petrarch's Dante. It is Boccaccio's genius to have constructed, instead, a collective project that not only includes but also aims to authorize all of those modern poets. For Boccaccio, each of these authors is an example of both the validity of the vernacular and the legitimacy of the literary. Putting this codex in the context of Boccaccio's contemporary compositions and transcriptions will bring into relief this larger project to defend the vernacular and literature more generally.

Ideas of tradition and the vernacular in Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio

Despite Boccaccio's pervasive influence, his role in shaping this tradition tends to be hidden, like his figure in Vasari's painting, behind the selfauthorizing figures of Dante and Petrarch, who have different ideas of tradition and attitudes toward the vernacular. Over the last thirty years, critics have revealed the sophisticated methods that both Dante and Petrarch use to construct their own authority. Teodolinda Barolini has examined Dante's complex relationships with classical and vernacular poets.²¹ Albert Ascoli has explored how Dante appropriates cultural authority for himself.²² In complementary ways, these scholars have shown that the ultimate goal of Dante's engagement with the classical and vernacular predecessors is to surpass them by establishing his authority on transcendent and universal

Boccaccio between Dante and Petrarch

grounds as 'God's scribe' (*Par.* 10.27).²³ From the beginning of the *Vita nuova*, where Dante uses a cosmic perspective to narrate his first encounter with Beatrice, through his definition of the vernacular as original, natural, and noble in the *De vulgari eloquentia*, to his argument for a world empire in the *Monarchia*, Dante adopts a universal perspective.

Petrarch pursues a different path of self-authorization that entails a more problematic relationship to the vernacular. Refusing to entrust his imagined *magnum opus* to the 'soft mud and shifting sands' of the vernacular (Sen. 5.2), which he dismisses as juvenile, Petrarch emphasizes his intimate connections to the classical past. He not only tries to write a Virgilian epic in the Africa, where he imagines himself as Ennius or Homer reincarnate, but also orchestrates his own poetic coronation in Rome; recovers, reconstructs, and imitates texts of ancient authors, like Cicero and Livy; supports Cola di Rienzo's efforts to re-establish the Roman Empire; and reforms his writing style to match the Carolingian hand that he associated with classical texts.²⁴ Despite Petrarch's primary focus on antiquity, he also has a fraught relationship with Dante and the vernacular more broadly.²⁵ Even as he regards the vernacular as without foundations, elsewhere he provides it with a classical genealogy (Fam. 1.1).²⁶ In other words, Petrarch's positive remarks on the vernacular also fit into his concerns with antiquity. These diverse strategies of self-authorization entail distinct attitudes toward the vernacular: whereas Dante argues for the vernacular as universal and thus appropriate for his project, Petrarch can only justify the vernacular by placing it in a classical context.

When Boccaccio describes his place in a literary tradition, he does not claim divinely ordained authority as God's scribe, present himself as surpassing his contemporaries, or assert an intimate relationship with the classical past. Instead, in the Introduction to Day 4 of the *Decameron*, he places himself in a community of modern vernacular poets for quite a different purpose: to defend his continued love of ladies. He writes:

io mai a me vergogna non reputerò infino nello stremo della mia vita di dover compiacere a quelle cose alle quali Guido Cavalcanti e Dante Alighieri già vecchi e messer Cino da Pistoia vecchissimo onor si tennero, e fu lor caro il piacer loro. E se non fosse che uscir sarebbe del modo usato del ragionare, io producerei le istorie in mezzo, e quelle tutte piene mostrerei d'antichi uomini e valorosi, ne' loro piú maturi anni sommamente avere studiato di compiacere alle donne. (*Dec.* 4.Intro.33–34).

I will not consider it shameful, until the end of my days, to please those whom Guido Cavalcanti and Dante Alighieri, already old, and Cino da Pistoia, very old, held in honor and whose pleasure was dear to them. And if it were not a departure from the customary mode of discourse, I would

6

Boccaccio and the Invention of Italian Literature

produce stories here, and show how they are filled with ancient and valiant men who in their more mature years greatly strove to please ladies. $^{\rm 27}$

In this passage, Boccaccio transforms the strategies of literary affiliation he found in Ovid and Dante, but diminishes the claim to singularity that characterizes his predecessors. In Tristia 2, for example, Ovid defends his writing about love by giving a lengthy catalogue of authors who have treated the topic, including Sappho, Homer, and Virgil, to make the point that 'not I alone have written tales of tender love, but for writing of love I alone have been punished'.²⁸ Within this history of amorous discourse, Ovid singles out the elegiac tradition of Gallus, Tibullus, and Propertius, whom he sees himself as succeeding as 'fourth in order of time'.²⁹ Like the larger catalogue, the point of this smaller group is to indicate Ovid's singularity: 'fourth in order of time' implies, of course, that he is not fourth with respect to art. Dante certainly understood the implication of Ovid's use of the ordinal number since he re-purposes it for his encounter with classical poets in Limbo, proclaiming himself 'sesto tra cotanto senno' (sixth among such wisdom; Inf. 4.102). In the Introduction to Day 4, Boccaccio returns to the Ovidian number of four, but eliminates the self-celebration found in both Ovid and Dante.³⁰ He does not seek to outdo or surpass the vernacular community of Cavalcanti, Dante, and Cino, but to join it. Whereas Dante evokes the 'fedeli d'amore' (love's faithful) at the beginning of the Vita nuova to indicate the other poets' limitations - because none of them, including Cavalcanti, can understand the true meaning of his dream about Beatrice - Boccaccio emphasizes instead a shared fallibility with respect to desire.³¹

Boccaccio's list also distinguishes itself from similar genealogies of the vernacular found in Dante and Petrarch by including only Italian figures.³² This emphasis on the Italian vernacular contrasts not only with Dante's use of the Ovidian model to link himself to ancient poets in *Inf.* 4, but also with Dante's discussions of the vernacular past in the *Vita nuova, De vulgari eloquentia*, and the *Commedia*, where Dante includes the Provençal tradition as parallel to, and predecessor of, the Italian tradition. Dante stages the climax of this parallel, pan-Romance history in *Purgatorio* 26, where he has Guido Guinizelli – 'il padre / mio e de li altri miei miglior che mai / rime d'amor usar dolci e leggiadre' (the father of me and of the others, my betters, who ever used sweet and graceful rhymes; *Purg.* 26.97–99) – describe Arnaut Daniel as 'miglior fabbro del parlar materno' (the best craftsman of the modern tongue; *Purg.* 26.117), who then replies to Dante in Provençal.³³ Boccaccio was very familiar with this passage

Boccaccio between Dante and Petrarch

from Purgatorio. The tale of Filippo Balducci's son in the Introduction to Day 4 that precedes this discussion of poetry, for example, expands into narrative form Dante's simile of the mountaineer astounded by the city (Purg. 26.67–69).³⁴ By excluding the Provençal tradition that Dante makes such an effort to integrate, Boccaccio's all-Italian vernacular community not only distinguishes itself from Dante, but also contrasts with the five-stage lyric history of Petrarch's Lasso me (Rvf 70).35 In the miniliterary history of his canzone, Petrarch also begins with a Provençal text that Petrarch believed to be Arnaut's before quotations from Guido Cavalcanti, Dante, Cino da Pistoia, and Petrarch himself.³⁶ Although it is not clear whether Boccaccio would have known Petrarch's *canzone* when he wrote the Decameron, the comparison nonetheless reveals the particular nature of his grouping. When Dante and Petrarch engage the vernacular tradition, they include the Provençal tradition to enhance their own status by presenting themselves as surpassing the supreme poets of a larger Romance tradition, while Boccaccio emphasizes an Italian community alone.

This passage from the Introduction to Day 4 not only shows Boccaccio's different relationship to the past and his emphasis on an Italian, as opposed to Romance, tradition, but also brings into focus the problem of vernacular love poetry and authority that Alastair Minnis has seen as the central problem in authorizing the emerging vernacular literatures. Minnis asks, 'how could a poet who wrote about love, and/or expressed his own (limiting and probably demeaning) emotional experiences, be trusted as a fount of wisdom, accepted as a figure worthy of belief? An auctor amans was an utter paradox, almost a contradiction in terms.'37 Boccaccio clearly engages this tradition in the Introduction to Day 4. Whereas Dante's Guinizelli describes himself as having repented of his lust before the last part of his life ('e già mi purgo / per ben dolermi prima ch'a lo stremo'; Purg. 26.92-3), Boccaccio's vernacular community is characterized by a shared desire that persists 'infino nello stremo della mia vita' (until the last part of my life), as Boccaccio puts it, echoing Guinizelli's verse. Boccaccio's goal in establishing this vernacular community is to legitimize it, as he makes clear immediately after the list of poets in the Introduction to Day 4, when he claims that he has not strayed from Parnassus in composing these stories: 'queste cose tessendo, né dal monte Parnaso né dalle Muse non mi allontano quanto molti per avventura s'avisano' (in composing these stories, I am not straying as far from Mount Parnassus or from the Muses as many people might be led to believe). In other words, Boccaccio aims to align this problematic tradition of vernacular love poetry with the Muses of Parnassus. Just as

8

Boccaccio and the Invention of Italian Literature

Boccaccio's stories suggest his role as a 'dispenser of legitimation' within the *novelle*, the Introduction to Day 4 aims to legitimize the tradition of vernacular literature itself.³⁸

Boccaccio carries forward this argument in the pages of Chigi L V 176, which materialize his efforts to legitimize this tradition and bring vernacular love lyric to Parnassus. It might not be too much to claim, adapting the titles of two well-known books on nationalism, that Boccaccio imagines a community to invent a tradition.³⁹ If the theme of love is a problem for gaining authority for the vernacular, the contents of Chigi L V 176 show how works of vernacular love poets were authorized in the fourteenth century: through the use of a prose frame (Dante's Vita nuova), assembling a collection of the same poetic form (Dante's canzoni distese), constructing a sequence of lyrics (Petrarch's Fragmentorum liber), furnishing a poem with a commentary (Dino del Garbo's glosses on Cavalcanti's Donna mi prega), and providing a series of works with a scholastic introduction (Boccaccio's Vita di Dante). Whereas other early manuscripts gather fragments, Boccaccio's Chigi Codex collects collections that show different ways of authorizing love lyrics. In the Vita nuova, Dante already begins to claim this authority for himself by joining love to reason through the figure of Beatrice, in a strategy that reaches its climax in the *Commedia*.⁴⁰ Petrarch, on the other hand, uses a retrospective stance to maintain authority over the passions that he recounts, or at least suggests, in his poems. Dino del Garbo's commentary on Cavalcanti's Donna mi prega is the product of similar concerns. Dino insists that Cavalcanti could not have been in love when he wrote the poem because, according to the conception of love that the *canzone* expresses, he cannot be in love and have possession of reason.⁴¹ Boccaccio himself not only transcribes each of these works, but also constructs an authorial assemblage of Dante's works that he prefaces with a Vita where he directly addresses the problem of the relationship between love and authority.42

Just as Boccaccio uses lyric poets to defend himself in the Introduction to Day 4 of the *Decameron*, his attempt to authorize a lyric tradition in the Chigi aims to legitimize his own work by producing a space in which he can situate his late transcription of the *Decameron* in Hamilton 90.⁴³ Boccaccio's composition of the *Decameron* in the early 1350s and his later transcription of it in the early 1370s significantly serve as the chronological bookends for his construction of the Chigi. In his choice of parchment size, script, and layout, Boccaccio transcribes the *Decameron* in Hamilton 90 according to the model he constructs in the Chigi. As Armando Petrucci notes, 'it seems possible that [Boccaccio] consciously attempted to raise

Boccaccio between Dante and Petrarch

books with texts in *volgare* to the dignity of the ruling model of book production of the time – the desk book in gothic *textura* script with all its physical and symbolic attributes'.⁴⁴ By investigating the meaning of these material connections, this study reveals Boccaccio's larger strategy of authorizing himself by canonizing others.

The material turn and the transformation of the Chigi

The connections between the *Decameron* and Chigi L V 176 in their groups of vernacular love poets and concern with Parnassus have often been overlooked because scholars have not examined the codex from Boccaccio's perspective. Instead, critics have analyzed it for the remarkable texts it contains. Dante editors, like Michele Barbi, Giorgio Petrocchi, and Domenico De Robertis, have identified Boccaccio's transcriptions of Dante's works as breaks in their respective textual traditions.⁴⁵ Petrarch scholars, like Ruth Phelps and Ernest Wilkins, have used Boccaccio's unique copy of Petrarch's *Fragmentorum liber* to try to reconstruct 'the principles of arrangement' behind Petrarch's collection of his lyrics.⁴⁶ Boccaccio's unique transcription of Dino del Garbo's Latin commentary has similarly been a crucial resource for a range of readers interested in Cavalcanti, like Ezra Pound, Guido Favati, and Maria Corti, who have relied on it to understand the philosophical context and content of Cavalcanti's difficult *canzone*.⁴⁷

While these critics have used the texts that Boccaccio's manuscript preserves to access and understand the authorial intentions of Dante, Petrarch, or Cavalcanti, the turn to the material that has taken place over the last several decades across the humanities can help bring Boccaccio's achievement into focus by investigating not the texts alone but the significance of the physical object itself. From the call for a New, or Material, Philology that returns to 'the manuscript matrix' of medieval studies, to the renewed attention to 'the materiality of the Shakespearean text', and the emphasis on reading the 'bibliographical codes' of Romantic and modernist works, critics have explored how certain material and graphic choices, from a work's physical dimensions and its hand or type to its *mise-en-page* and paratextual apparatus, contribute to producing meaning.⁴⁸ This move toward rematerializing the tradition was set in motion by Giorgio Pasquali's critique of the Lachmannian system of textual criticism in his Storia della tradizione e critica del testo (History of Tradition and Textual Criticism). From its very title, Pasquali's attention to the complexity of textual traditions emphasized history over system and contamination over mechanical transmission, which, along with his argument that recentiores non

10

Boccaccio and the Invention of Italian Literature

deteriores (more recent witnesses are not worse), laid the groundwork for future developments.⁴⁹ Although Pasquali did not include an analytical concern with material form, his attention to the complexity of individual textual traditions prepared the way for investigating the intricacies of the individual objects.⁵⁰ If the process of textual criticism involves the 'dematerialization of the text', Pasquali facilitated the process of its rematerialization.⁵¹

The attention to the material that has occurred in the wake of Pasquali's work has produced a new kind of literary history that is no longer the account of a tragic loss of authorial will through scribal contamination and corruption, but an examination of these objects in what Caroline Walker Bynum terms a 'comic mode', that is, for what they do convey about the historical worlds that produced them.⁵² From this perspective these textual, material, scribal, and editorial transformations can be interpreted as 'conscious artistic and intellectual decisions rather than failures to reproduce a primal truth'.⁵³ By shifting away from an exclusive concern with the author and a work's original meaning, the material turn introduces a new concern with canonization and 'the forces that motivate the development, growth, coming together, and sanctification of the texts' that constitute a tradition.⁵⁴

This attention to the material or physical attributes has entailed a new attention to the 'human presence' that crafted these objects.55 While this human presence can sometimes be an author, as in some extraordinary instances like the 'visual poetics' Wayne Storey identifies in Petrarch's autograph of his lyrics (Vat. lat. 3195), most of these figures are unknown.⁵⁶ For this reason, several scholars, like Brian Stock, Mary Carruthers, and Jeffrey Hamburger have examined not individual scribes but how particular communities produced and used books.⁵⁷ In the medieval Italian context critics such as Petrucci, Roberto Antonelli, Storey, and Justin Steinberg have similarly examined how the material features of early Italian collections and transcriptions can encode complex literary ideas and provide new perspectives on literary and cultural history.58 This interest in human agents has motivated research into the scribes, editors, publishers, and printers that produced and reproduced these works, as well as the readers who consumed them.⁵⁹ In the context of the medieval manuscript, these investigations have led to a new interest in scribal intention, as critics have examined miscellanies of unknown scribes and compilers to discover the 'center of intelligence' or 'controlling literary intelligence' that organized the gathering of materials.⁶⁰

While Derek Pearsall has expressed concern that some studies of English miscellanies may 'overestimate the activity of the controlling or guiding