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978-1-107-01435-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Boccaccio

Edited by Guyda Armstrong, Rhiannon Daniels, and Stephen J. Milner

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PART I

Locating Boccaccio

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I

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STEPHEN J. MILNER

Boccaccio as cultural mediator

Networks

Was Boccaccio the most networked man in Trecento Italy? Simply posing this question allows us to begin to visualize the vast web of social, cultural, textual, political, and familial relations across which he operated. Boccaccio's literary standing alongside Dante and Petrarch as one of the three crowns of Italian literature is already familiar to us: he is the author of the world-famous story collection, the *Decameron*, at once the emblematic document of the Black Death in Europe and a repository of artful, erotic enterprises; he is also a proto-humanist, a learned friend, a follower of Petrarch, and an author of encyclopaedic scholarly works. But these familiar (predominantly literary) truisms give no sense of the scale of his astonishing achievements as a cultural mediator, his extraordinary interconnectedness, his revolutionary syntheses of intellectual domains, his social mobility, and political alignment. Even in his own time his mediating agency extended far beyond the bounds of the literary.

In a life spanning three-quarters of the century and which was lived the length of the Italian peninsula, Boccaccio was a poet and a reader, an author and an editor, an orator and a glossator, a merchant and an ambassador, a politician and a priest. To get a real sense of his reach and significance, we must abandon traditional biographical accounts and their linear timelines in favour of alternative models. Social network analysis shows that we are all single points in connected networks of association. Indeed with the advent of new digital media forms, we are increasingly used to locating ourselves in our own social networks, stretching across time and space, which we can now map with speed and complexity, tracing, registering, and (geo)locating our histories, friendships, encounters, and interests. Boccaccio was similarly well connected, and by viewing him as an actant in a social network, we can explore the multiplicity and complexity of the many relationships he had with different people (who are not simply limited to other authors),

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institutions, places, events, and domains of knowledge (not only literary, but also religious, political, and clerical). The breadth of his experiences, the extent of his networks, and the density of their interconnections make him a key nexus of mediation and exchange: a symbol for – and in fact a physical dealer in – literary and political transactions, inside and outside his texts. The network model would surely not seem unfamiliar to an author who created his own visualizations of social relations within his manuscript copies of the *Genealogia deorum gentilium* and whose own complex literary forms and multimedial reception history render him ideally suited to digital media as it continues to evolve (see Figure 1.1).¹

Just as Boccaccio meets and mingles with many people, so his culture is a combinatorial one, in which a multiplicity of sources, languages, registers, and geographies link and combine. His literary works are underpinned by a complex mesh of sources which he collected and transcribed in vernacular dialects (both Florentine and Neapolitan), and Latin (both classical and medieval). We should remember that, as an office-holder in the Florentine commune, he was equally expert in the languages and registers of civic documentary cultures; he was also a trained canon lawyer, and later, a lay priest, equally adept in legal and clerical forms of mediation and intercession. Boccaccio's position in multiple, overlapping, networks enabled him to mediate between these different social and cultural domains, and create new textual forms, which in turn become new points in other networks.

To date scholarship has largely examined Boccaccio as a mediator within a literary context: his authorial self in the *Decameron* explicitly presents himself as a go-between and procurer.² But in his civic life, Boccaccio is also a procurer and broker: a man who borrowed and lent classical and vernacular texts, exchanged words as a communal ambassador and private correspondent, gave official and personal gifts, and oversaw the pecuniary transactions of the common wealth as city treasurer. His textual practices as a mediator are similar in both civic and literary domains: he is a record-keeper and underwriter of communal registers, he collects and distributes monies, lists (and enlists) as auditor of the city's mercenary companies; likewise in his literary life he lists, compiles, and copies texts into his *Zibaldoni*, as well as auditing the contents of libraries in search of classical texts, as he did so successfully in 1355 when he discovered previously unknown works by Cicero, Tacitus, and Varro at Montecassino. The transactional terminology found in his *texts* in this way derives from the everyday lexis of his working *contexts*, where his narrative pose as literary procurer literally reflects his paid employment as a communal one.

Boccaccio as cultural mediator

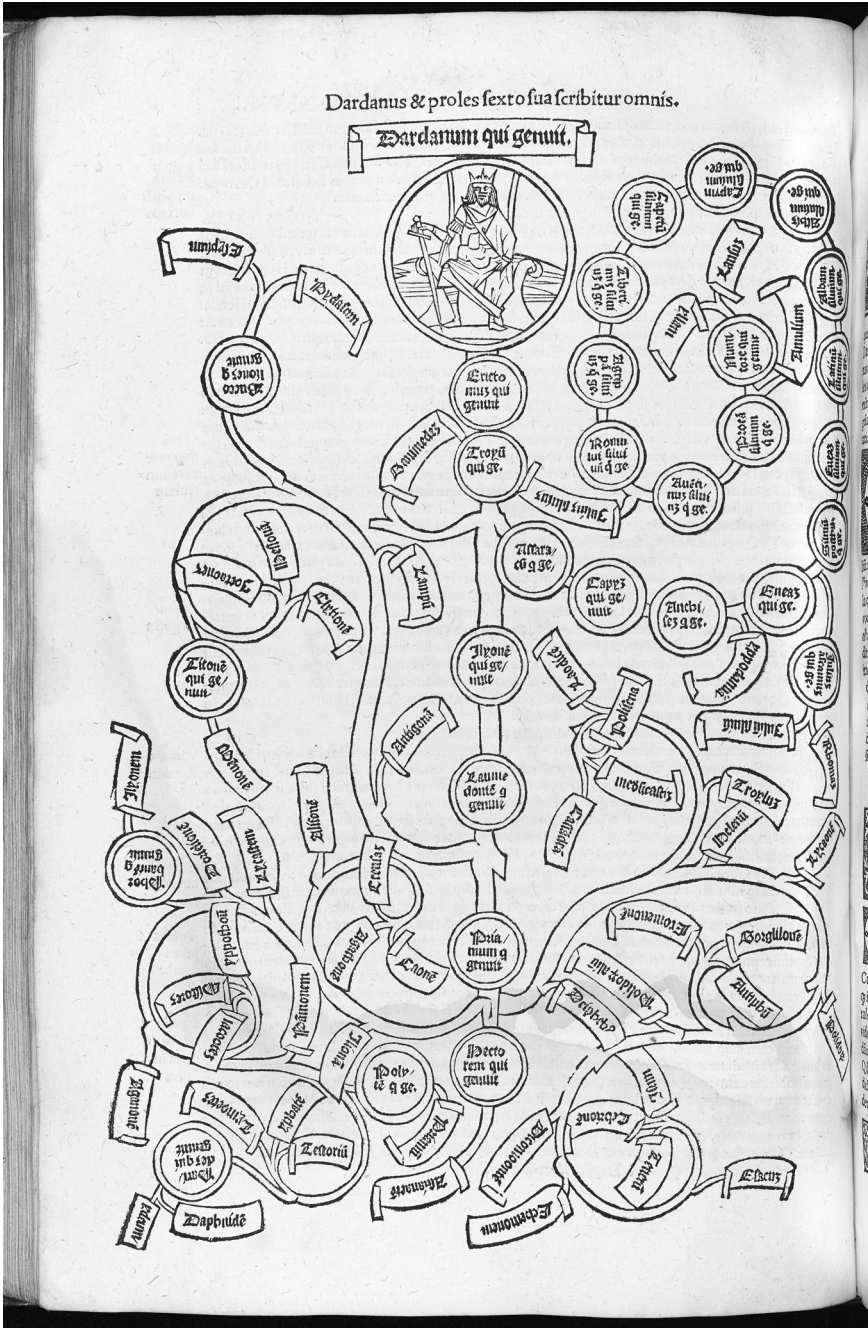


Figure 1.1 Proto-network visualization in an early printed edition of the *Genealogia*, after Boccaccio's autograph diagrams (Paris: Denis Roce, N. Hornken et sociorum, 1511), fol. 47v.

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In his *Textual Cultures of Medieval Italy*, Will Robins has noted the habitual distinctions which obtain for different types of texts produced in late medieval Italy:

Approaches to medieval textuality, especially editorial methods . . . customarily distinguish between two general species of texts: first, documentary ‘acts’ produced in the course of institutional administration (especially when an act stands as an official record or executive order), which are caught up in a tight web of legal, political, governmental, and archival apparatuses; and second, texts which are not juridical or contractual (for example, literary texts or scientific writings), and which harness narrative or discursive or expressive modes for bringing writers and readers into shared textual practices.³

Adhering to such distinctions is especially limiting in this case, since Boccaccio himself worked across both systems. Why has the civic, documentary record of Boccaccio’s work been so obscured in favour of a historically deracinated study of his literary texts alone? Even the material forms of his books have been a minority interest until very recently, in comparison with the amount of attention paid to the content of the text. After all, ‘texts (medieval or otherwise) consist of both an immaterial aspect (structured in the minds of readers and writers through literary form, propositional content, and conceptual patterns) and a material aspect (vocalized sound, ink on a page, etc.).’⁴ Why, indeed, has his autobiography for so long been premised on his literary texts, when many traces of the actual life lie in the archive? From the combined perspective of literary scholars and historians, it has become apparent that the material text-object is the natural meeting point where disciplines converge, as the manuscript record (albeit different kinds of manuscript record) becomes the means by which essential clues about Boccaccio’s literary and socio-political interactions are revealed.

Mobilities

Boccaccio is above all else *mobile*: he moves within and between a wide range of contexts, as do his texts both during his life and in their multimedial afterlives. Textual scholars now talk about the fluid, mobile text, which changes form and function as it circulates and is republished in various media.⁵ The canonical, authorized, critical edition is no longer the stable, unproblematized monument it once was. Boccaccio scholars themselves have moved away from a dogmatic attribution of chronological dating to a more fluid understanding of the mobility of Boccaccio’s own texts, recognizing

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that he was an author who constantly revised and reworked the same texts across his life, leaving traces of multiple redactions both in autograph copies as well as embedded within the wider manuscript tradition. New technology now renders the reading of such three-dimensional works possible through the archaeological analysis of the different strata of ink deposits inscribed in the overwriting of the parchment and paper record.⁶ Boccaccio himself, as author and scribe, makes the mobility of texts his signature compositional manoeuvre: his citational mechanisms move his sources into his own works, while his miscellany autograph manuscripts such as the *Zibaldone membranaceo*, or his copies of other authors' texts, such as his Dante compilations, reveal the ways in which he groups and collates sources, and how their internal juxtapositions and design decisions externalize his immense learning. As a cultural processor and early adopter, he acts as a literary mediator par excellence as he imports his sources into his writings, recombines them, and exports them out again to his readers (both historic and imagined).

But if the texts are mobile, then Boccaccio himself is even more so, in an extraordinary life of extraordinary social, geographical, and cultural range. Boccaccio's cultural mediation – in his literary work and his social worlds – arises from and is an expression of the various contexts within which he operated, contexts which are themselves more mixed and mobile than has sometimes been thought. For example, the reductive and traditional critical dichotomy often established in Boccaccio's biography between 'mercantile Florence' and 'chivalric Naples' underplays the complex political and cultural interrelations between the two centres. While there are certainly marked political and linguistic differences between them (Florence a republican commune, Naples a monarchy and the seat of King Robert of Anjou's court; one Tuscan-speaking, one French), in some ways Boccaccio's Naples was as mercantile and classical as his Florence was chivalric and French. Boccaccio is thus a product of this social, geographical, and cultural hybridity, and his ability as a mediator is a consequence of his facility in moving within and between these worlds.

We can learn much about this foundational hybridity and mobility from the career of Boccaccio's father, Boccaccio di Chellino. Boccaccio's father was a 'new man', a migrant from the country to the city who was granted Florentine citizenship and access to public office in 1320. He became a member of the major guild of bankers and money-changers, a councillor to the merchant court of the *Mercanzia*, and, during his political life, served as both a Prior of Florence and one of the standard-bearers (*Gonfalonieri*) of the city's popular militia charged with the city's security. As a member

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of the mercantile *popolo*, as opposed to the Magnate class of the old feudal aristocracy, it was his business interests that took him to Paris on two occasions in 1313 and 1332, whilst his transfer to Naples in late 1327 – as the main agent for the Florentine Bardi bank – also placed him in the world of aristocratic court culture. In fact, it was Boccaccio di Chellino's role in mediating between the Angevin court and communal Florence during the tenure of King Robert's son Carlo, Duke of Calabria, as *Signore* of Florence in 1326, that in all likelihood resulted in his transfer to Naples the following year. Once there, he acted as a broker in securing loans for the Neapolitan treasury and obtaining supplies for the army of the Duke of Calabria.

Boccaccio's transfer to Naples as a teenager to serve as an apprentice to his father in the Bardi bank, therefore, was a direct consequence of the interpenetration of mercantile and court cultures. In many ways the move prefigured his own professional career as civic office-holder and mediator between Naples and Florence. He, too, experienced the signorial rule of an Angevin military captain over Florence when the city's elite invited the French mercenary captain and Duke of Athens, Walter of Brienne, to assume signorial powers over the city in 1342. He, too, mediated between Naples and Florence as the communal treasurer who oversaw the sale of Prato to Florence by the King of Naples in February 1351. He, too, was involved in raising troops, but in this case for his fellow Florentines, in his role as overseer of the city's mercenary captains and their horse and infantry in the 1350s.⁷

The social mobility these relationships permitted to the second generation of the Florentine mercantile 'new men' is best illustrated by the career of Boccaccio's Florentine friend and associate, Niccolò Acciaiuoli, who also transferred to Naples to work for the family's banking company in 1331. Not only was Niccolò elevated to the post of Grand Seneschal of Naples by King Robert, but he was also made a knight, the highest social rank a king could confer. The assumption of the courtly attributes of chivalric culture by the growing class of communal knights in Florence illustrates perfectly the blurring of traditional social distinctions, as the revival of Magnate fortunes and the renaissance of the 'comune nobiliare' (commune led by the patrician elite) in Florence resulted in political instability and the perennial possibility that Florence's communal status could be threatened should it become a permanent Neapolitan protectorate under royal rule.

In a telling indication of the complexity of social relations at this time, the chronicler Marchionni di Coppo Stefani noted that the leading families in Florence during the rule of the Duke of Athens in 1342 were horrified that his French courtiers and soldiers, themselves representatives of the European feudal class, enjoyed better relations with the lower-class Florentines (the

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so-called *Ciampi*) than did the city's noble families; the word *Ciampo* being the artisan's response to the French invitation to drink, which was prefixed by the salutation *Compar*, meaning friend or ally. The 1340s–1370s in Florence were characterized, therefore, by tensions between an increasingly assertive and articulate urban aristocracy and a guild-based *popolo* both inhabiting the same social space in which chivalric and communal practices, values, and literary cultures ebbed and flowed, overlapping, merging, and clashing in what has been termed the fourteenth-century dialogue of power in Florence.⁸

Boccaccio makes no overt statements concerning his own social and political alignment in the struggle between the merchant 'new men' fresh from the countryside, the longer-established mercantile families of the *popolo grasso*, and the still-older aristocratic lineages. However, it is telling that he looked to court cultures for employment, first in Ravenna at the court of Ostagio da Polenta, and then at the court of Francesco Ordelaffi in Forlì. It was only in 1348, with the onset of the Black Death, that Boccaccio returned to Tuscany for the remainder of his life. Boccaccio died three years before the uprising of the *popolo minuto* and *Ciampi* woolworkers of 1378, but it is notable that it was his friends and neighbours from his own quarter of Santo Spirito, and the colleagues with whom he worked during his diplomatic missions, who suffered at their hands. Many saw their houses torched and their social standing challenged by the *Ciampi*'s own cohort of sixty communal knights, created in recognition of services to the *popolo* rather than as the result of any aristocratic or Magnate lineage. Boccaccio's associates and peers belonged to the social elite of knights, lawyers, and members of the Parte Guelfa, who sought to reform Florentine foreign policy to realign it with Angevin Naples and the Papacy, and to reduce the influence of the rising business class and guild regime. They represented the oligarchy that had controlled the government and economy of the city pre-1343. At their head were families with established Neapolitan (and Boccaccian) connections: the Bardi, Rossi, Acciaiuoli, Peruzzi, and Castellani, all led by Lapo da Castiglionchio, himself another close associate of Boccaccio who shared his literary and rhetorical interests.

Within the unstable political world of Florence in the mid-fourteenth century, Boccaccio was closely associated with major political upheavals. The Bardi, for example, led a Magnate attempt to overthrow the popular communal regime in 1340, whilst several of Boccaccio's closest friends, including fellow communal ambassador and knight, Pino de' Rossi, were involved in factional struggles within the elite and were either hanged or exiled for participation in a plot against the prevailing regime in 1360. It was after this incident that Boccaccio noticeably withdrew from the

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political world of communal office-holding for nearly five years. Such was the complex and unstable social reality which conditioned Boccaccio's textual practices and which he, in turn, read and represented in his works: a dense network of social relationships, professional associations, and communal roles across which flowed official and personal correspondence and through which passed texts of various types with Boccaccio acting as go-between.

Understood in these terms, Boccaccio's activities as a man of letters run parallel with his activities as a communal office-holder and his participation in the textual economy of the communal chancery and its associated documentary culture. One consequence of the rapid growth of the administrative offices and bureaucracy of the Florentine commune in the mid-fourteenth century was an explosion in governmental record-keeping as the complexity of social regulation and statutory reform increased. As a Florentine communal office-holder, diplomat, and cultural attaché from the 1340s onwards, Boccaccio was embedded in the administrative machinery of the commune and participated in its own official mediating practices. The increasing focus on the archival witness to Boccaccio's presence in these communal records and the conventions of communal record-keeping shows the continuity and interrelation between the practices of textual production and circulation in the communal and literary realms, and the correlation between communal and literary registers.

Similarly, the practices of recording, compiling, copying, listing, and corresponding were as civic as they were literary. The book-keeping and accounting skills Boccaccio learnt in Naples, therefore, were put to use in a variety of appointments from the late 1340s to the late 1360s, covering roles as diverse as *Ufficiale delle gabelle* (Collector of indirect taxes) in 1348, *Difensore del contado* (Overseer of the territorial state) in 1351, *Camerlingho della Camera del commune* (Communal treasurer) in early 1351, *Ufficiale del pane* (Collector of taxes on bread) in 1352–3, *Ufficiale di torre* (Communal overseer of public works and the city's streets and bridges) in 1354, *Ufficiale dei difetti* (Auditor of mercenary troops) in 1355, and *Ufficiale della condotta* (Communal overseer of the armed forces) in 1368 (see Figure 1.2). All these offices required the keeping of records, the collating of accounts, the rogation of registers, the constant switching between Latin and the vernacular, and the supply and use of the self-same materials of paper, parchment, ink, and quills that Boccaccio used in his literary production. Amongst the payments listed during Boccaccio's tenure as Communal Treasurer, for example, is the sum of twenty-two lire to one Filippo di Giovanni, *cartolaio* (stationer), for the supply of office stationery.⁹ In the same capacity, Boccaccio oversaw payments to Antonio Pucci as town crier and Andrea Lancia as ambassador,