Introduction

I trust that my coming, because of the novelty of the occasion if for no other reason, may serve to bring some glory to this city, to the city whence I come, and to all Italy.

You must know that the office and profession of the poet are not by any means what they are commonly believed to be.

— Petrarch, *Coronation Oration*

On April 8, 1341, when he addressed the Roman Senate on the Capitoline to accept the laurel crown as poet and historian, Petrarch asserted that poetry was a profession. Poets had an *officium*, or civic duty, and a *professio*, a declared occupation. He described that duty in terms of the figurative representation of history for the moral betterment of humankind. Petrarch’s address was based on the exegesis of two lines from Virgil’s *Georgica*, which were expanded into a commentary on history and on the present’s relationship with the past. For Petrarch, the poet’s role was based on a privileged understanding of the events of history and a calling to inspire others. The activities of the poet as interpreter and as inventor – as *auctor* – were the foundation of the poet’s status and role in society. For all of its symbolic cultural value, Petrarch’s performance of authority on the Capitoline indicates that in fourteenth-century Italy the conception of what a poet should be and do was linked to communities beyond the book. In order to carry out the poet’s *officium*, the author needed to emerge from the text and enter the city. Petrarch was not alone in relating

* Petrarch 1988a, 38 and 42; Petrarch 1953, 1245 and 1246 (*Collatio laureationis* 6.34–36; 9.11–13).
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the work of the poet to a social reality consisting of more than readers. Albertino Mussato, Dante Alighieri, and Giovanni Boccaccio all, in diverse ways, also situate the work of poetry in relation to the city. It is in view of this civic role of the poet that they all conceive of and defend poetry as theology. The production of meaning in their poetry according to the allegorical models of biblical exegesis forms the basis of these poets’ status and reputation in diverse social realities.

In this book, I examine how these four Italian poets represent the role of the poet as a part of a civic context. The focus of my inquiry is the defense of poetry and the laurel crowning of the poet in the city (or its promise), though I also consider other texts that shed light on how these individuals perform their authority as poets in relation to the world beyond the book. I interpret this performance of authority primarily in view of their political concerns, but also in connection with their ideas about language and meaning. The central argument that I want to advance is that these poets viewed their authorship of poetic works as a function of their engagement in a human community, real or imagined. Indeed, as I hope to show, each poet creates a model of the poet as an intellectual who can intervene in public affairs thanks to their authority within texts.

Studies on medieval poetry and poetics tend to treat authorship as a phenomenon that inhabits books and schoolrooms, as if medieval poets considered their enterprises only in relation to other authors and other books. Indeed, ideas of authorship did develop out of the exegetical and pedagogical traditions, as the work of Alastair Minnis, Rita Copeland, and others has shown. My inquiry in this book is possible thanks to the research on medieval exegesis and rhetoric that has taken place over the past several decades. Minnis’ work on the commentary tradition has demonstrated, for example, that the literal or historical sense of a text’s meaning increasingly became seen as the foundation for further allegorical interpretation. The historical sense offered a level of certainty that the other senses could not provide. In interpretations of the Gospels and of classical poetry, exegetes as far afield as Hugh of St. Victor, Peter Abelard, and Nicholas of Lyre, on the one hand, and Arnulf of Orleans, Giovanni del Virgilio, and Giovanni Boccaccio, on the other, found the

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intentionality of the writer key to the interpretation of a text’s meaning. If
the historical sense offered certainty to medieval exegetes, then their
concern for it also demonstrates an awareness of the historicity of the
creation of meaning. Copeland, furthermore, has demonstrated how literal
and allegorical modes of reading were associated since antiquity with
political disenfranchise and agency respectively. In her study of the
pedagogical practices surrounding the Lollard heresy, she shows how
interpretation of the literal sense became the grounds for political dissent
and for the promotion of intellectual activity beyond the university. The
poets considered in this study assimilate poetic and biblical modes
of allegorical meaning and by so doing assert a political status in con-
comitance with the university. Applied to poetic strategies that make
far-reaching truth claims, such as those of Dante, the attention given to
the historical intention of the author reveals a related concern both to
control allegorical modes of discourse and to locate the text’s meaning in
the world of history.

Similarly, the question of how a poet like Dante constructs for himself
an authority that equals and even surpasses that of his classical models
and contemporaries is often addressed as a phenomenon limited solely to
the text. Teodolinda Barolini has argued that Dante constructed his own role
as poet of the Commedia by self-consciously eroding the authority of his
contemporaries and models—an authority that he assumes for himself as
poeta. Barolini shows how Dante restricts the notion of poeta across the
poem so that it applies only to himself as the successor of Virgil. Albert
R. Ascoli, furthermore, has shown the extent of Dante’s unique obsession
with constructing his own author-figure in the Commedia. As Ascoli notes
about Dante, however, there is a disjunction between being a poeta and
being an autore. As I hope to show in this book, to be a poet, while often a
function of authorship, is not limited to asserting oneself as an autore.
Rather, it means to transfer and embody the writer’s authority through the
text and to reach beyond it. The poets considered in this study each build
their sense of authorship out of exegetical and pedagogical practices, but
their poetic strategies also intersect with their ideas about the function of
the poet in the world of history.

By examining how these poets project themselves beyond their works,
I also look past the material conditions of medieval reading and writing
practices, such as the production of codices and their historical readership.

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4 See Copeland 2002, esp. 51–149. 5 See Barolini 1984. See also Tavoni 2015a.
My aim is not to examine the historical realities of the role that poets or poetry played in specific communities of readers but to understand how these poets imagined their roles in communities, whether through their works or with their physical presence. The material artifact of the books that contained works of poetry, however, did represent to a certain extent the status of the poet in society. For example, Justin Steinberg has shown how Dante’s early attempts at anthologization and literary history, when viewed through the lens of the materiality of texts, demonstrate Dante’s broader cultural and political concerns about his own reception. Jonathan Usher, Jason Houston, and Martin Eisner have also demonstrated how Boccaccio’s practices of compiling codices reflect a broader cultural vision about the status of poetry in society. By examining the defenses of poetry and the historical or potential laurel crowning ceremonies of these poets, my aim is to add to this scholarship and to tell another part of the story, which escapes the materiality of the text. The poet’s role is just as much a function of reputation as it is a result of being read. While discourses on poetic fame tend to be read as a poet’s projection into the future, they are also indicative of a poet’s engagement with the present. The defense of poetry, like the rhetorical performance of the coronation ceremony, is a textual event that looks beyond itself onto the world of history and politics.

7 See Steinberg 2007.
8 See Usher 2007; Houston 2010; and Eisner 2013.
9 In Book 1 of the Genealogie deorum gentilium, Boccaccio demonstrates the link between future and present in consideration of the poet’s reputation. He contrasts the auctoritas earned by the ancients over time with the gravitas earned by modern individuals during their lifetime: “However new those authors who are now ancient once were, it seems that whatever has survived through many ages has been approved by a length of time, and thence gains most of its authority. But what one ought to think about all new men, whatever their merit, seems to many to be still in suspense. I am of the opinion that those whose novelty is not approved will not last in time, since the initial approval must be gained from their novelty. Thus, I have dared call forth in testimony those whom I call new, since I have known or know them by their merits to be exceptional men, worthy of approval. It is clear to me, about all of them, that for their entire lives they devoted themselves to sacred studies, frequented men famous for their learning and character, that they were praiseworthy in life, unmarked by any turpitude, and that both their writings and sayings have been approved by the most prudent men. I think for these reasons that novelty must be held as equal to antiquity” (”namquantumcunque novi fuerint qui nunc ex autoriibus veteres sunt, videtur quod per multa secula perseveratum est, a longitudine temporis approbatum sit, et inde plurimum auctoritatis sumpsisse. Quod utrum de omnibus novis, quantumcunque bene sint meriti, arbitari debet, apud multos videtur in pendulo. Ego autem huius sententie sum, nunquam in evum duraturos hos quorum novitas approbata non sit, cum ab eorum novitate necesse sit exordium approbationis sumendum; et sic eos, quos ego novos invoco, cum vivos noverim aut noscam, meritis eorum agentibus, egregios esse viros atque probandos ausus sum in testimonium evocare. Hoc enim mihi constat ex omnibus, eos fere per omne vitæ tempus studiis vacasse sacris, eos inter insignes scientia et moribus semper versatos homines, eos vita laudabiles, nec ulla turpi nota signatos, eorum scripta aut dicta a prudentioribus etiam approbata. Credo, his agentibus, equiparanda sit eorum novitas vetustati”). Boccaccio 1930, 111, modified Boccaccio 1998, 8.1528 (Genealogie 15.6.1–2). On the significance for Boccaccio’s cultural ideology, see Lummus 2012a, 117–118.
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My approach is based on a close rhetorical and intertextual analysis of verse and prose texts, which I place in the context of each poet’s political ideas and activities. I see fourteenth-century defenses of poetry not only as emerging from distinct historical and political contexts but also as self-conscious responses to those contexts.

Much of the critical debate about poetic authority has traditionally concerned the question of how vernacular poetic culture emerged from and engaged with a dominant intellectual culture that used Latin. A great part of Dante’s novelty resides, in fact, in his bold turn to the Florentine idiom as the language of the *Commedia*. To increase the status of the vernacular was also a major goal of Boccaccio’s hybrid cultural project in Florence. For the other two poets, Mussato and Petrarch, however, the vernacular was either not under consideration or was discarded as the language of a publicly valuable poetry. The study of medieval Italian literature has inevitably gravitated toward poetic production in the vernacular and to a large extent has viewed these poets’ Latin productions as minor works, which are valuable insofar as they shed light on their principal vernacular works. The result of this separation of the Latin and vernacular has been that the works of a Latin poet like Mussato have been all but eliminated from the history of Italian literature. It has also often rendered the Latin Petrarch a footnote to the study of his *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, a text that had an extremely limited circulation during his lifetime.10 The eclogues of Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch have been pushed to the margins, even if for these last two poets, they were considered among their most important works during their lives.11 With the exception of Dante’s *Paradiso* and Boccaccio’s *Vita di Dante*, this study looks primarily at the Latin production of each poet. When the question of the vernacular emerges, such as in Dante’s correspondence with Giovanni del Virgilio or in Boccaccio’s exchanges with Petrarch about the value of Dante’s *Commedia*, it is addressed as a part of the larger question of the poet’s role in the theater of the city. Fourteenth-century Italy was fundamentally diglossic, so by divorcing Latin from the vernacular, a significant element of its poetic culture is omitted. The emergence of vernacular poetry in Italy took place in intellectual environments that were predominantly Latinate. Thus, I try to avoid the characterizations of the relative

10 For the complex history of the diffusion of Petrarch’s *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, see Santagata 1996 and Eisner 2013, 74–94.
11 These authors’ eclogues have begun to elicit more critical interest of late. See, e.g., Allegretti 2004 and 2010; Lorenzini 2013; Lummus 2013a; Combs-Schilling 2015; and Zak 2016.
literary value of these poets’ Latin and vernacular works that descend from the hierarchies of value embedded within the tradition of Italian literary history. My approach aims to reintegrate the Latin production of these poets with our understanding their vernacular works.¹²

Some explanation is due of the terms of my title – city and poetry – and of how I conceive of the question of the social and public worlds that these poets inhabited. Each poet in this study participated more or less actively as a member of a political body, whether in Padua, Florence, Rome, Avignon, or elsewhere.¹³ In each case, however, the poet’s ambitions for a political role are in excess of the real possibilities for political engagement. With the terms city and civic, thus, I mean to indicate not only the historical communities in which a poet lived but also the imagined communities that each poet projects in their efforts to individuate a place for poetic activity.¹⁴ For Dante, the work of Claire Honess and Catherine Keen has demonstrated that the city is “the normative human community.”¹⁵ We can apply such a definition of the city also to Mussato and Boccaccio, and even to Petrarch, whose rhetoric of non-belonging and cosmopolitanism belies the political associations that he maintained in cities. The human community denoted by the term city is both metaphorical and historical in the works of the four poets here considered, just as their conception of their role in a community oscillates between an active presence and a projected ideal. Thus, when I refer to the city and to the poet’s civic role, I mean above all to capture the poet’s reconciliation of the historical reality of a place and its community with its counterpart in the realm of the imagination. Furthermore, I use the terms poet and poetry throughout to indicate what is essentially the author and the literary text, be it in verse or prose. Although these terms have come to mean something

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¹² See Tavoni 2015b for a survey of the linguistic context in Dante’s Italy, for example. On the importance of recuperating Latin in the study of the Renaissance, see Celenza 2004.

¹³ Dante’s political theories and practices have been by far the most studied. See, e.g., the classic studies by D’Entrèves 1952; Davis 1957; and Ferrante 1984. On Petrarch’s political theories, see Furlan and Pittalunga 2016. See also Dotti 2001. For a recent study of Petrarch’s political activities, see Cafiero 2013. On the political Boccaccio, see Filosa 2014; Olson 2014; and Veglia 2015–16. For a study of the social world of the humanists who follow in the footsteps of these poets, see Martines 1963.

¹⁴ While analogies may be made to Benedict Anderson’s notion of imagined communities, his reflection on nationalism is based on post eighteenth-century political theory that does not find direct analogies in fourteenth-century Italy. My use of the term of phrase here is in reference to the poet’s projection of a community around himself, not to the stylized ideological communities of the modern nation. This should not hinder readers from reflecting on possible connections. See Anderson 2006. For a reconstruction of reading publics in medieval England, based on ideas of habitus surrounding virtue and language, see Breen 2010.

else that is far narrower, it is important to maintain them as historical terms that cover a broad semantic field in constant flux. For each of these poets, poetry indicated a meaningful and skillfully wrought creation through figurative language, including – at least for Boccaccio – prose fiction. While the form and language of a composition were important factors in determining the nature of poetry, it was meaning, communicated through allegory, that separated poetry from rhetoric and other forms of discourse. In claiming a civic relevance for the work of poetry, each of these poets sought to expand the semantic field of the terms poeta and poesis to include an authority in the world. As authors of their texts, they would also be poets outside of them.

The Defense of Poetry and the Laurel Crown

In the intellectual culture of the late Middle Ages, poetry was not autonomous from other disciplines. It was associated with the lower arts of grammar and rhetoric, but was sometimes elevated to be considered a part

16 While it was already common to trace the origin of the terms poeta and poesis to the Greek verb ποιέω, both Boccaccio and Petrarch explicitly reject this etymology and its association with the Latin verb fingo, as does Musato implicitly. This is both because they did not want poetry to be associated with falsehood and because they wanted to dissociate poetry from the mechanical arts. Rather, both claim that the terms derive from the Greek ποιήσις, which they understand as meaning exquisite discourse. Their etymology derives from Isidore of Seville’s chapter on poets in the Etymologiae 8.7.2. The term ποιήσις, which is transliterated as poesis, derives from the word ποιέω, which was coined by Plato in the Theaetetus as indicating a certain quality. This etymology allows them to assert the sublime contemplative origins of poetry’s function of communicating truth in beauty by means of allegory. Their definition seeks to represent poetry as a quality of discourse rather than as a fiction, precisely to avoid the negative connotations of fiction as weak form of knowledge. The other term that is employed for the poet is vates, which is sometimes translated as “bard.” Like their etymology of poeta, that of vates links poetry with the speculative sciences and with religion, inasmuch as its etymology was traced to the Latin vis mentis, or power of the mind, and vas Dei, or vessel of God. The religious connotations of the term in relation to its employment as a term for the poet were readily available through Cicero, Virgil, Horace, and Ovid. Dante, aware of the links between poetry and making or inventing, self-consciously brings poetry and theological contemplation together in Convivio 2.1 and in the Commedia. At stake was the poet’s ability to signify truth through linguistic inventions. In Vita nova XXV, even, Dante is interested in expanding the notion of poeta, typically used only for ancient poets, to include vernacular lyric poets (dicitori per rima). In De vulgari eloquentia 2.4, Dante defends this use of the term by insisting on the importance of style. Furthermore, Boccaccio associates poetry not only with a quality of discourse but also more simply with a discourse with a certain quality of meaning, so that when the aesthetic elements of a composition disappear (i.e., its meter and rhythm) it may still be considered poetry, even if it is in a prose form. The role of the poet in a social reality emerges from the status acquired from the connotations of this specific terminology. By calling poetry “literature” and poets “authors,” the complexity of the terms’ meanings are flattened. Even the Latin terms for these English words, litterae and auctor, bear connotations that are not easily transposed into a twenty-first-century idiom.
of ethical philosophy. By the beginning of the fourteenth century, the poets of the Italian peninsula began to claim that poetry, as a form of knowledge, was not only superior to professional disciplines like medicine and law but also equal to theology, the highest form of human inquiry to which the study of the liberal arts ultimately led. Their claims were founded upon the conviction that poetry was able to communicate historical, moral, and higher truths hidden in verisimilar allegorical fictions. Their defenses of poetry were oriented toward both salvaging the value of ancient poetry and justifying their own poetic production. While they were directed at poetry’s attackers, real and imagined, more often than not they were self-created contests and were often directed at other poets as a way asserting a different role for poetry within a civic space. At stake for them was the recognition of the status of poetry as a discipline or science to which the study of the liberal arts would lead, but also the definition and acknowledgment of the poet’s task as a professional occupation.

Ernst Robert Curtius listed among the commonplace of medieval literature the connection between poetry and theology made in Dante’s epistle to Cangrande and in the defenses of poetry of Mussato, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. Each poet, as he notes, links poetry to theology. For Mussato poetry is “another theology” (altera . . . theologia) and for Boccaccio theology and poetry are “almost the same thing” (quasi una cosa) or otherwise poetry is “similar” (simigliante) to theology, while for Petrarch “theology is the poetry of God” (theologiam poetica esse de Deo) and for Dante the Commenda is “consecrated” (sacratu) and “sacred” (sacro). Curtius traced the commonplace of the poetæ theologus, or poet-theologian, that appears in their defenses of poetry and that is implied by Dante’s letter, to Thomas Aquinas’ commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics, to Cicero’s De natura deorum, to Augustine’s De civitate Dei, and to a series of patristic texts that lead to Isidore of Seville’s Etymologiae. He defined the source of the debate in terms of the hierarchy of the sciences established by Aquinas.24

77 See Minnis 1988, 56 and 182.
78 On the relationship between the rise of humanism and professional identity, see Blow 2002, esp. 27–44 on Petrarch and the “professionless profession” of being a poet.
80 Mussato 2000, 39 (Epistola 7.21).
81 Boccaccio 1974, 475 (Vita di Dante 1.154); Boccaccio 1974, 516 (Vita di Dante 2.91).
82 Petrarch 1938–42, 2.301; Petrarch 1975–85, 2.69 (Familiare 10.4.1).
84 The commonplace of the poeta theologus derives from the first book of Aristotle’s Metaphysics (982 b10; 983 b29), where he describes the story-lover (φοβομάθης) as a kind of philosopher and goes on to mention that the first to discourse about the divine (θεολογησάντας) did so in poetic terms (ποίησαν). Thomas Aquinas’ commentary on Metaphysics 983 b29 links these poetic theologians to a series of pagan poets whom he notes were contemporaneous with the judges among the Hebrews.
Moreover, he found that, while each poet was in some way reacting to a Scholastic hierarchy of knowledge that saw poetry as the lowest of the sciences, these defenses of poetry were reactionary to the Thomistic modernity of the late Middle Ages and had “little to do with the Humanism of the Trecento.” Rather, what these poets were calling theology was not the theology of the Scholastics but was a part of ancient culture that had already been absorbed into Christianity by the Church Fathers; it was therefore old-fashioned. Much of the scholarship surrounding the defense of poetry has been a reaction to or expansion of Curtius’ representation of the *poeta theologus* commonplace.

In an effort to connect the defense of poetry as theology to humanism, intellectual historians such as Eugenio Garin described the defenses of poetry of Mussato, Petrarch, and Boccaccio as part of a fundamental turning point in the secular appreciation of classical literature that would lead to the *studia humanitatis* of the next century. Charles Trinkaus, seeking to reconcile the secular and the sacred, saw these defenses of poetry as leading “towards a greater universality in the conception of human culture by finding a means of bringing the vast world of ancient paganism within the frame of a Christian image of God and His works.” In her exhaustive survey of humanist and Scholastic poetics, influenced by Paul Oskar Kristeller, Concetta Carestia Greenfield places these three poets’ defenses along with Dante’s poetics squarely within a humanist tradition that developed out of medieval grammar and rhetoric in concomitance with the novel approaches of Scholastic logic. Poets’ claims to divine inspiration were, for her, linked to a neo-Platonic tradition of divine frenzy. For Ronald Witt, these defenses of poetry “tended to emphasize an idea that he receives from Augustine *De civitate Dei* (18). The commonplace is further substantiated by the use of the term theologian (*theologus*) to refer to the creators and interpreters of myth in Cicero’s *De natura deorum* and by Augustine’s discussion of Varro’s three types of theology in the *De civitate Dei*, one of which is a kind of poetic theology (*theologia fabulosa*). As Curtius 1953, 219 notes, once the idea finds its way into Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologiae*, “it becomes the common property of the entire Middle Ages.” While Aquinas recognized that theology and poetry shared a common use of metaphor and symbol in his commentary on Peter Lombard’s *Sententiae*, he nevertheless characterized poetry as having the least amount of truth of all the sciences. In the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas further classes poetry as the lowest of all the disciplines. It is clear that what is meant by theology in regard to poets is not the same as what is meant by theology in the Scholastic context. The equivocation, however, allowed poets to challenge not only the hierarchy of the sciences in Thomistic thought but also the status and privilege afforded to theologians within a social context.

35 Curtius 1953, 220.
36 See Garin 1957, 81 and 96–97.
28 See Greenfield 1981, 56–128, for her discussion of Dante, Mussato, Petrarch, and Boccaccio.
the natural character of ancient society and thus to secularize its history and achievements” and therefore represent an assertion of the aesthetic and stylistic value of ancient poetry and its modern imitations. Each of these narratives seeks to explain how the truth value that these poets claimed either for their own poetry (Dante) or for the poetry of the ancients and their imitations of it (Mussato, Petrarch, and Boccaccio) was indicative of a future movement that would see the study of poetry and the other humanistic disciplines as foundational for the moral and political health of communities.

While these investigations tend to blend together the terms of the various defenses of poetry, as in Curtius’ account, Giuseppe Mazzotta has examined in different contexts the defenses of poetry of Mussato, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. As he has argued about Dante’s poetry in the *Commedia,* Mazzotta finds that their defenses of poetry intervene in the aesthetic–theological debates between Franciscans and Dominicans on the hierarchy of the arts within the medieval encyclopedic tradition, which saw theology as encompassing all the arts (Thomas Aquinas) or all of the arts as implying each other (Bonaventure). Mussato, for Mazzotta, sought to coopt this encyclopedic project through poetry “as a model for the ordering of institutions,” while Boccaccio’s defense was a justification of poetry’s ability to reanimate history for the present. Similarly, he sees Petrarch’s defenses of poetry as indicative of an engagement with this same encyclopedic tradition, whose models of abstract knowledge Petrarch critiqued in favor of the more self-questioning form of knowledge that poetry represented. Mazzotta’s approach seeks to show how these poets tried to divorce poetry from its origins in grammar and rhetoric and to assert it as the organizing principle for all of the liberal arts, as a kind of theology, because of its capacity to harness the imagination and to communicate meaning in a stylistically compelling way, as opposed to the abstractions of neo-Aristotelian logic.

There is no doubt that medieval and humanistic conceptions of poetry evolved out of its origins in the study of grammar and rhetoric and in relation to contemporary intellectual debates about the status of the arts. What is missing from these studies, however, is an examination of the local circumstances within which these defenses of poetry emerged. On the one

59 See Witt 1977, 538 and Witt 2000, 157–59. Witt argues that humanist ideas about poetry develop out of the medieval study of grammar, but that humanist poets demonstrate an increasing self-consciousness about being classical in their Latin style. More recently, see Witt 2015.
60 See Curtius 1953, 226: “Petrarch and Boccaccio, then, follow the same line as Mussato.”
61 See Mazzotta 1993a.
62 Mazzotta 2006a, 122.
63 See Mazzotta 2000.
64 See Mazzotta 1993b, 14–32.