De mulieribus claris: A New and Humanistic
Portrait of Women*

Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* is the first collection of the biographies of female secular historical figures in Western literature, as well as a revolutionary work of fiction and a cultural artifact that established new ways of representing women in writing.[1] My study seeks to demonstrate that Giovanni Boccaccio is the first European author to portray women realistically in his writings, especially in comparison with the technique of cataloguing brief biographies of women during the Middle Ages. Rather than idealized women or pure metaphorical representations, Boccaccio's female characters are creatures of flesh and blood. In this respect, the *De mulieribus* marks a cultural shift away from a stereotypical depiction of women, making it possible to cast women in a new light: multifaceted, more intimately psychologized and human, and inspired by civic humanism.

Portraying Women in the Italian Trecento

Creating a parallel with the visual arts and discussing the depiction of women in painting can enhance and illustrate the great shift which Boccaccio precipitates in his new manner of writing about women. In the history of Italian art, it is possible to note a similar shift in the representation of women: with few exceptions up until Giotto, female figures in medieval Italian art were represented as abstractions. Instead of reproducing the features of specific individuals, painted women were the visual equivalents of ideas and ideals. After Giotto, women began to be depicted with a new sense of individual expressivity based on three-dimensionality, physiognomy, and psychology. Theresa Flanigan analyzes Giotto's frescoes in the Lower Church at Assisi and asserts that "certain figures display a dramatically enhanced naturalism in the bodies, specifically in the emotions expressed by their actions, gestures, and facial movements" (Flanigan 73). Before Giotto, female figures were almost exclusively depicted as the Holy Virgin, saints, and martyrs, or as allegorical representations. As Chiara Frugoni states: "A female image also was used to illustrate concepts or institutions: liberal arts, mechanical arts, geographical sites, cities, or, as above, vices and virtues. See, for example, a miniature dated about 850, illustrating Boethius' *De arithmetica*. Four veiled, similar-looking women are distinguished only by the instrument each holds. They represent respectively Music, Arithmetic, Geometry, and Astrology" (Frugoni, *The imagined Woman* 370). In most cases, therefore, figures in

medieval painting would represent women not only in flat, two-dimensional images, but with very little physiognomic characterization. Only beginning in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and particularly with the distinct naturalism of Giotto and his followers, women came to be depicted with a new sense of expressivity based on three-dimensionality, physiognomy, and expression.

A figurative example closer to Boccaccio's time is the *Allegory of Good and Bad Government*, painted by Ambrogio Lorenzetti in Siena's City Hall between February 1338 and May 1339.[2] In the foreground, at the feet of the allegorical figures representing Peace, Fortitude, and Prudence, the viewer can admire the procession of the twenty-four magistrates of contemporary Siena, quite recognizable by their somatic features.[3] Behind them, on a stage, sit allegorical female figures representing Good Government: "Justice" is represented balancing the scale held by "Wisdom." The Virtues are represented by six crowned, stately female figures: Peace, Fortitude, and Prudence on the left, Magnanimity, Temperance, and Justice on the right. In this case, the Virtues are recognizable first because of the written cartouche above them, but also thanks to certain iconographical attributes such as the sword in the hand of Justice. It is remarkable that Peace and Fortitude are represented as twin sisters: they are almost identical except for their dress.

Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Allegory of Good Government* (1338–1339): Siena, City Hall—Sala dei nove.

It is also interesting to note that Boccaccio's contemporary women might have been very well aware of the abstraction of these representations: at the very least, the fictional women described in Boccaccio's *Corbaccio* were aware of this artistic trend, since the author states:

> E tra l'altre lor vanità, quando molto sopra gli uomini si vogliono levare, dicono che tutte le buone cose son femmine: le stelle, le pianete, le muse, le virtù, null'altro si vorrebbe rispondere se non: "Egli è vero che tutte son femmine, ma non pisciano." (*Il Corbaccio* 175)

> [Among their other vanities, when they wish to exalt themselves far above men, they say that all good things are of the feminine gender: the stars, planets, Muses, virtues, and riches. If it weren't indecent, to this you would only want to reply, "It's quite true they're all feminine, but they don't piss!"] (Cassell 32).

In this way, Boccaccio counters the abstractness and the incorporeality of the allegorical representations (stars, planets, Muses, virtues, and riches) against the quite corporeal physicality of real women. Similarly, the virtues frescoed by the Lorenzetti brothers are not characterized by distinct physical traits precisely because they are intended to embody ideal rather than real women. These women must look as artificial as possible to convey the idea of the conventional and canonical perfect beauty of the time: blond hair, a curvaceous body, a far-off look in their blue eyes, and a typical softness and elegance in their movements.

Another beautiful fresco that includes many female allegorical figures is the *Triumph of St. Thomas and the Allegory of Sciences*, painted by Andrea da Firenze in Santa Maria Novella's Spanish Chapel between 1365 and 1368.[4] Here we can see St. Thomas enthroned amongst other saints; under his feet are the heretics he defeated; and then, amid the gothic architecture of wooden benches, are many female figures, all seated. They depict the allegories of the seven "methodological disciplines" on the left,[5] and of the seven liberal arts on the right.[6] Each discipline and art is paired with and looks upon her biblical or classical male representative. All the female figures look very similar to one other, whereas the men are represented in a more detailed way. For instance, Euclid is identifiable by his dark skin, long black curly hair, and a beard; Solomon, too, is easily recognizable by his crown and long beard. Some men appear younger, some older, and each is doing something specific: one thinks, one shouts, one writes, and one hammers an anvil.
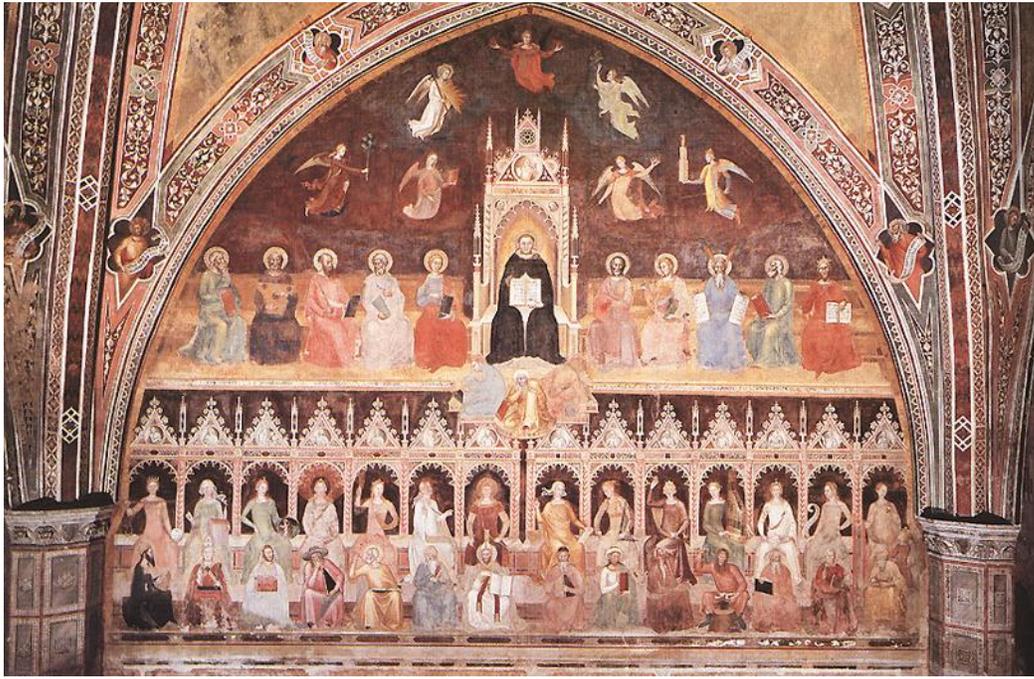
Andrea da Firenze, *Triumph of St. Thomas and the Allegory of Sciences* (1365–68): Florence, Santa Maria Novella, Spanish Chapel.

The same stands true if we look at the figurative portraits of Madonnas or female saints and martyrs. In gothic art, each of these women is recognizable not through her individual physiognomic characteristics, but by her iconographical attributes in the codified hagiographical tradition.[7] This has indeed engendered some confusion throughout the centuries, because of the similarities between several saints and martyrs, as George Kaftal explains:

> The medieval rules of iconography seem to have slowly fallen into complete oblivion. Only a few distinctive signs for a small number of very popular saints remain known to the art historian; the name of one of these saints is often given to any saint who has a similar attribute; thus St. Dominic is frequently confused with St. Anthony of Padua for the sole reason that he is holding a lily, without any consideration for the difference between the Dominican and the Franciscan habit; this is also true for St. Bridget and St. Clare who are often confused with St. Catherine of Siena; St. Romuald is taken for St. Benedict etc. The difficulty of identifying each saint, owing to the intermingling of their legends, existed also in those days when the faithful were most familiar with them (Kaftal 19–20).
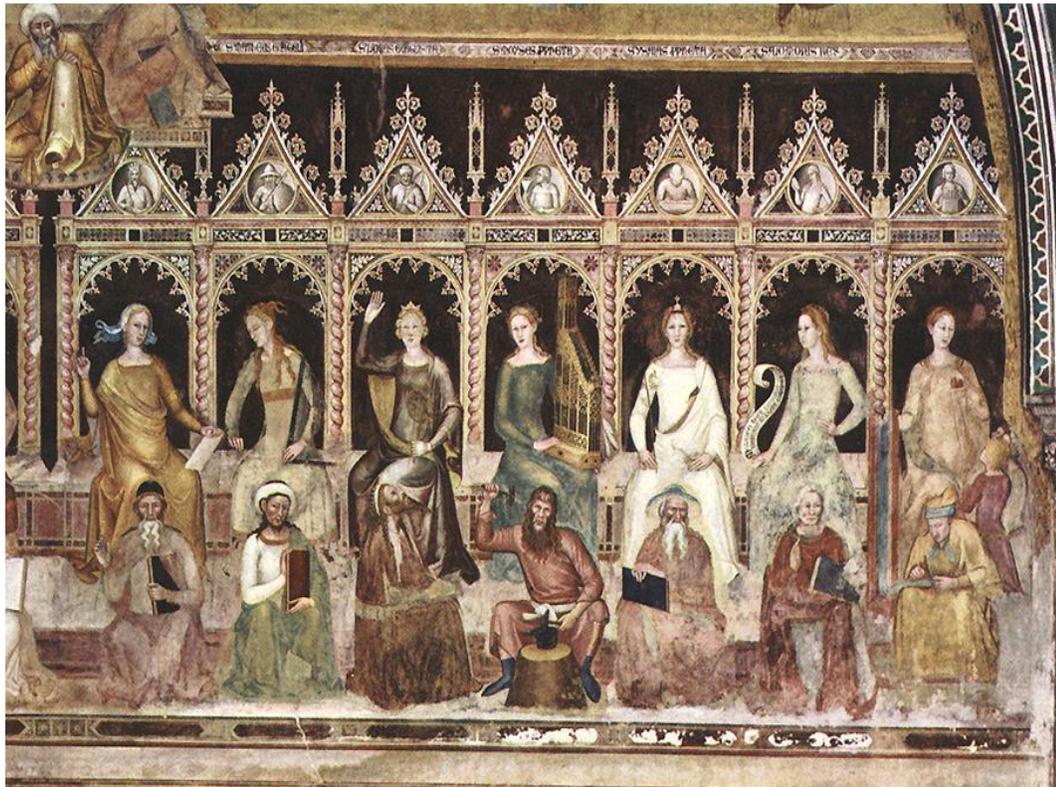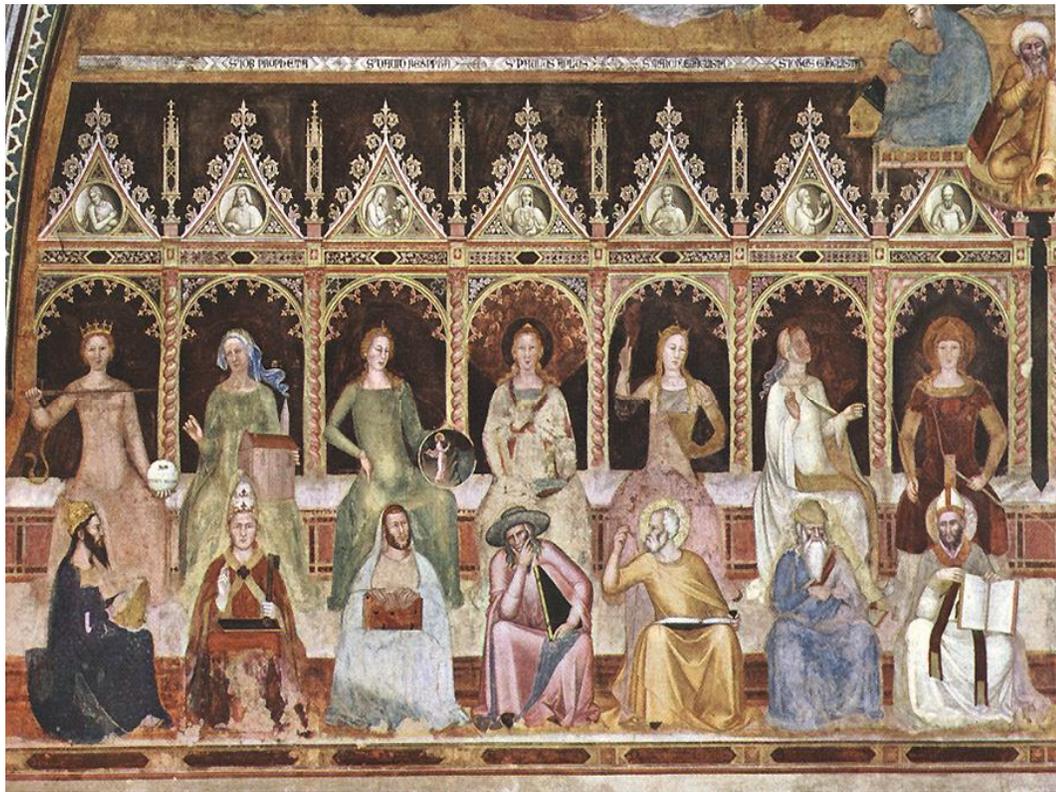
Andrea da Firenze, Triumph of St. Thomas and the Allegory of Sciences (1365–68): Florence, Santa Maria Novella, Spanish Chapel.

Another magnificent example are the two panels of a lost polyptych portraying Saint Catherine of Alexandria on the left and Saint Lucy on the right, by Simone Martini, a painter who was a near contemporary of Boccaccio and a friend of Petrarch in Avignon. The two saints, now facing each other because the central panel has been lost, look like twin sisters, or indeed one person looking at herself in the mirror. The medieval artists' goal was not to depict specific individuals, but to capture an ideal beauty of heavenly perfection which might inspire the spectator to such an ideal.

Simone Martini: *Saint Catherine of Alexandria* and *Saint Lucy* (ca.1320-25), Villa I Tatti, Berenson Collection.

The two saints represent that beauty typical of gothic art which finds its own parallel in the idealized woman in literature, such as Dante's Beatrice or Petrarch's Laura, the latter of whom Simone Martini portrayed in a work that unfortunately has been lost. Petrarch, in turn, recalls Simone Martini's celestial inspiration in Sonnets 77 (below) and 78 of the *Canzoniere*, observing that the artist is able to "translate" in perceptible terms a beauty that exceeds human possibility:[8]

> Per mirar di Policleto a prova fiso
> con gli altri ch'ebber fama di quell'arte
> mill'anni, non vedrian la minor parte
> de la beltà che m'ave il cor conquiso.

Ma certo il mio Simon fu in paradiso
onde questa gentil donna si parte:
ivi la vide, et la ritrasse in carte
per far fede qua giù del suo bel viso.
L'opra fu ben di quelle che nel cielo
si ponno imaginar, non qui tra noi,
ove le membra fanno a l'alma velo.
Cortesia fe'; né la potea far poi
che fu disceso a provar caldo et gielo,
et del mortal sentiron gli occhi suoi.

<div align="right">(Santagata 400)</div>

[No matter how hard Polyclitus looked,
and all the others famous for that art,
not in a thousand years would they see even
part of the beauty that has won my heart.
For certain my friend Simon was in Heaven
the place from which this gracious lady comes;
he saw her there and copied her on paper,
as proof down here of such a lovely face.
The work is one that only up in Heaven
could be imagined, not down here with us,
where body serves as veil for souls to wear.
a gracious deed that could not have been done
once he came down to feel the heat and cold,
and his eyes saw their own mortality.]

<div align="right">(Musa 131)</div>

Simone Martini's portrait of Laura surpasses any other possible portrait of her, as it depicts her in paradise. The perfection of the painting is such that it makes the viewer think that Simone could have contemplated Laura not as a terrestrial woman, but rather in her ideal form before it entered her mortal body. While another artist might have caught her exterior and earthly beauty, Simone was able to capture her supernatural beauty. Simone Martini's work is not one of naturalistic mimesis, but one dictated by a superior inspiration, the product of ecstasy, an ascension to the highest spheres in order to show "here below" what one can see "up above" (Baggio 326). In other words, Petrarch expresses precisely the medieval representational limits concerning saints and martyrdom: the human mind cannot perceive, much less portray visually, the celestial

perfection of the figures of paradise. Therefore, art can only allude to paradisiacal perfection: there is no such thing as the mimesis, or faithful representation, of what is ineffable.

Everything changed with Giotto, whose art embraced the Franciscan ideal of the humanity of Jesus; his pain, joy, and suffering all emphasized the human side of the Son of God. Giotto's paintings restore not only dimensionality with intuitive perspective, but also an unprecedented expressiveness. Giotto's *Lamentation* in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, a fresco depicting the deposition of Christ's body from the Cross, portrays the Holy Virgin as a mother in despair over her son's death, and Mary Magdalene's weeping expresses genuine torment. The whole fresco conveys expressive details of human emotion and movement. Even the angels show sorrow for the death of Jesus.

Portraying Women in Medieval Literature

A comparable distinction can be seen in the literary representation of women before and after Boccaccio: the Certaldese did for literature what Giotto did for the visual arts, as Attilio Hortis (71) first claimed. Prior to Giotto and Boccaccio, the representation of womanhood was mostly idealized, with little interest in actual women. In medieval literature, biographers of the lives of female saints only portray actions and events pertaining to their martyrdom and to their spiritual life, such as visions or dreams, but not to their individual identities as human beings. Hagiographical literature was a pervasive and widely read genre in the Middle Ages, and its prevalence tended to obscure other sorts of narratives about the lives of women. Boccaccio, in his preface of *De mulieribus claris*, says that with his work, he wants to do for classical women what other authors had done for Christian women. Even though the lives of the saints were well known, some catalogs with historical and classical women existed—not as a stand-alone genre, but as inserts in other works. These female figures have primarily symbolic value: for example, Lucretia, who committed suicide rather than endure the shame of rape, is presented as a model of chastity, while Messalina, by contrast, stands for exaggerated female sexual desire.

Some paragraphs of Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum* constitute the first important catalog of exemplary women of the Christian era and are our best source for studying how the classical legacy was absorbed into Christian thought and how the catalog's call to authority could mask an essential rewriting of sources. As Glenda McLeod states: "St.

Jerome uses his heroines within a rhetorical *persuasio* to prove that pagans had also valued chastity, albeit with an inferior understanding" (McLeod 39). This work became a model for later writers, and the same approach was adopted in other medieval catalogs. McLeod states that "Historical relevance is unimportant in *Adversus Juvinianum*, whose most important frame is ideological and heavenly" (McLeod 5). For example, in Chapter 41, entitled "Examples from secular history," Jerome begins by saying that virginity and chastity were values respected by the ancient Greeks, Romans and barbarians, and then he draws up a list of women:

> Referunt fabulae Atalantam Calydoniam virginem semper in venatibus, semper in silvis, non tumentes uteros feminarum fastidiaque conceptuum, sed expeditam et castam amasse virtutem. Harpalicen quoque virginem Thraciam, insignis Poeta (Virgil. I Aeneid.) describit; et reginam Volscorum Camillam, quam Turnus, cui auxilio venerat, laudare volens, non amplius habuit quod diceret, nisi virginem nominaret. […] Quid referam Sibyllas Erithraeam atque Cumanam, et octo reliquas: nam Varro decem fuisse autumat, quarum insigne virginitas est, et virginitatis praemium divinatio?
> (Hieronymus, *Adversus Jovinianum* Col. 270A)

> [It is told that Atalanta, a virgin of Calydonia, was always hunting in the woods, and not bothered by female sexual desire or by childbirth pains, but she always loved the chaste virtues. And then, the illustrious poet Virgil describes Harpalyce, virgin of Thrace; and, wanting to praise Camilla, the Queen of Volsci — to whom Turnus asked for help — he only had to say that she was a virgin. […] What should I recount about the sibyls from Erythrae and from Cumae, and the other eight? Varro said that they had divinatory power as a gift for their virginity]. (My translation)

It is clear, from this representative example, that very little is actually told about these women, other than the fact that they were virgins and they loved chastity: throughout the Middle Ages, famous women were depicted in such a narrow binary association, with no interest in their individual identity. In this way, they remain unreal, allegorical figures, symbols of a particular vice or virtue. Pagan women are taken, in a process of "Christianization," as models for

Christian women, to follow or reject. Their physical or psychological traits are not important; the only elements of importance are the abstract qualities they are taken to symbolize.

During the twelfth century, with the secularization of certain cultural aspects, new catalogs of women began to appear. One famous work of this period is the *Dissuasio Valerii ad Rufinum* by Walter Map, who borrowed examples from the classical tradition, alluding to mythology and quoting from pre-Christian philosophers. Also in this case, as we saw in the quotation by Jerome, it is easy to recognize the binary structure that connects each name to a vice or virtue: so, Scylla, who betrayed her father because she was in love with the enemy, represents the betrayal of parents, while Myrrhas, who engaged in incest with her father, represents unnatural love. To Map's work we can add, among others, Chaucer with *The Legend of Good Women,* and Jean de Meun, who proposes a catalog of the protagonists of the *Heroides* (Dido, Phyllis, Oenone, and Medea). Writing about Jean de Meun, McLeod states: "The Women from Ovid's epistles are not evoked as interesting psychological portraits but as examples of feminine fidelity" (McLeod 55). Equally eloquent is Victoria Kirkham's observation about the few women who appear in the commentaries on the *Divine Comedy*: "The only *terzine* about women on which commentaries swell wide are those whose subjects read symbolically, sentimentally, or uncertainly" ("A Canon" 18). In essence, Kirkham elaborates, "interpretative tradition on the *Commedia,* in other words, has most to say about a woman when it sees her as something else: Allegorical Reality, a Lyrical or Dramatic Moment, a Problem-in-the-Text. The others, those women who seem just to be a woman, remain by comparison in obscurity, their status reduced to nominal items. Such a dismissive tendency is particularly strong when critics come to subjects presented in groups" (Kirkham 19).

Female figures are thus portrayed as the embodiment of something else, signifiers whose signified disappears, mere emblems of a specific virtue or vice. In literature, women undergo a process of "christinanization" by which they become moral examples to reject or follow. Even Petrarch, considered the father of humanism, sustains this kind of binary construction in talking about women. An example is the Epistle 2:15 from the *Familiares*, written in Rome on 23 March 1337 to Cardinal Giovanni Colonna, "on the highly justifiable praises of his sisters, Giovanna and Agnes":

> Sunt qui Romanorum veteres matronas singulas singulis laudibus attollunt; et Lucretie quidem pudicitiam ascribunt,

Martie gravitatem, pium impetum Veturie, coniugalis amoris ardorem Portie, Claudie hilaritatem sobriam, Iulie facetias et eloquentiam muliebrem, Livie maiestatem, Corneliarum alteri generosum robur animi, alteri morum verborumque dulcedinem. Sunt et qui peregrinas suis laudibus prosequuntur: honestatem in Penelope, in Arthemisia amorem immortalem, in Ipsicratea tolerantiam, in Thamiri fortitudinem, consilium in Thetide, modestiam in Argia, pietatem in Antigone, in Didone constantiam admirantes.

(*Le familiari* 337–338; ch. 2:15)

[There are those who exalt unique Roman matrons of old with unique praises, and indeed ascribe to Lucretia chastity, to Maria seriousness, a holy inspiration to Veturia, the ardor of conjugal love to Portia, a sober joyousness to Claudia, wit and feminine eloquence to Julia, refinement to Cecilia, dignity to Livia, a noble firmness of mind to one of the Cornelias, an attractiveness of conduct and language to the other. Then there are those who have honored other foreign women with their praises, admiring honesty in Penelope, undying love in Artemisia, tolerance in Ipsicratea, fortitude in Thamyras, judgment in Thetis, modesty in Argia, devotion in Antigone, and constancy in Dido.] (Bernardo 114)

Of the many letters which Petrarch wrote, only another discusses women (*Familiari* 21.8, addressed to the empress upon the birth of her first child, a baby girl).[9] In these two letters, Petrarch does in fact introduce new models for women to follow, beyond those of the Christian tradition: Sappho and Proba, both of whom composed verses; Orythia or Pentesilea, Amazons with expertise in warfare; and the eloquent Livia, Giulia, and Cornelia. However, the treatment of these female figures seems closer to the rhetorical technique of enumeration, typical of medieval erudition, than to Livy's remarkably complex description of Lucretia, or Sallust's portrayal of Sempronia. In contrast to Petrarch, Boccaccio used these sources directly to create the respective chapters on these women in his *De mulieribus claris* (Chapter 48: *De Lucretia Collatini coniuge*, and Chapter 86: *De Sempronia Romana*).

Portraying Women in Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*

The 106 women's biographies of Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* (*On Famous Women*) represented a sea change in the genre. Instead of the concise medieval convention of cataloguing women with brevity, Boccaccio develops long and ample narrative modules about his female characters. In Boccaccio's passages, women are given not only their own corporeal features, but their own psychology, their own individualized story, their own historical context, and their own voices, thoughts, and lives. Boccaccio begins by presenting these ancient women in a vast literary space. He narrates, in the form of short stories, the life of each woman, inventing what amounts to a new genre in literature: the collection of female biographies.

Composed in the 1360s, Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* is the first collection of female biographies in the history of Western literature. The success of *De mulieribus* was immediate and widespread, as attested by the numerous manuscripts, translations and editions of the work which appeared all over Europe. Stephen Kolsky, the author of *Boccaccio's Ghost*—a book on the influence of Boccaccio's *De mulieribus* in the Renaissance—observes that the work became an obligatory reference point for all writings on women: "Boccaccio's secularized presentation of women in the *De mulieribus claris* is one of the foundational texts for our modern discourse on women, inaugurating a literary genre that flourished in the early modern period" (Kolsky, *Genealogy* 1).

How did Boccaccio bring about this radical shift in the depiction of women? What innovative techniques did he employ to transform the possibilities of representing women and womanhood in writing? Since he wanted his stories about women to be based on their ancient, original sources, Boccaccio retraced and utilized several classical texts. Like his friend and master Petrarch, Boccaccio approached ancient texts from a philological perspective, intending to achieve a deep and broad knowledge of classical literature. Consequently, he avoided references to medieval texts that repeated, and corrupted, the stories he selected. After having rediscovered the original sources of information on classical women, he developed his characters' psychological profiles; he created an historical context for the characters; he presented female characters with more agency. By analyzing Boccaccio's method of researching classical sources, his creative engagement with those sources, and his experimentation with new narrative techniques in *De mulieribus*, it is possible to

establish the breakpoint between the more stereotypical portrayal of women in medieval literature and the initiation of more individuated, flesh-and-blood representations of women in Western literature.

In order to show an example of Boccaccio's methodological approach, it might be useful to consider a passage of the classical author Valerius Maximus, and then examine the narrative technique which Boccaccio adopted to reshape the earlier literary text. For this comparison, we will examine the case of Turia (or Curia, as Boccaccio spelled it), a Roman matron whose information comes to us only through Valerius Maximus from his *Memorable Deeds and Sayings* VI.7.2 in the chapter titled "De fide uxorum erga viros":

> Q. Lucretium proscriptum a triumviris uxor Turia inter cameram et tectum cubiculi abditum una conscia ancillula ab inminente exitio non sine magno periculo suo tutum praestitit singularique fide id egit, ut, cum ceteri proscripti in alienis et hostilibus regionibus per summos corporis et animi cruciatus vix evaderent, ille in cubiculo et in coniugis sinu salutem retineret. (*Detti* 451)

> [When the triumvirs put Quintus Lucretius on their death list, his wife, Turia, hid him between the ceiling and the roof over the bedroom, letting just one young female slave in on the secret. Whereas other men on the death list went through great physical and mental agonies and barely escaped to foreign and hostile regions, her exceptional loyalty allowed him to stay safe in the bedroom and bosom of his wife.] (Walker 224)

These few words become the inspiration for Boccaccio to write a longer chapter on Turia entitled "Curia, Wife of Quintus Lucretius" ("De Curia Quinti Lucretii coniuge", Chapter 83). As usual, Boccaccio begins this female biography with the geographical, historical, and social contextualization of the protagonist in the first paragraph: "*Curia* romana fuit mulier et, si nomini fidem dabimus, ex prosapia Curionum, si operibus, mire constantie atque integerrime fidei vetustatis splendidum specimen" ("Curia was a Roman woman. If we can put any stock in her name, then she belonged to the Curio family; if we believe in her deeds, she was a splendid example in the ancient world of extraordinary constancy and absolute fidelity"; 83.1).[10] Because of this, we now have a historical character with specific temporal and spatial coordinates, and not just a symbolic

name. Thereafter, when discussing antecedents—namely, the hit list of wanted persons and their reactions—Boccaccio amplifies the original text of Valerius Maximus by using the rhetorical technique of enumeration, in the form of a tricolon: "ceteris fuga celeri patrium solum liquentibus, et vix tutam, inter ferarum speleas et solitudines montium, seu apud hostes romani nominis, latebram invenientibus" ("The others swiftly fled their native soil and found insecure places in the dens of wild animals and lonely mountain regions or with the enemies of Rome"; 83.2). Moreover, Boccaccio emphasizes that Turia herself formulates the idea of hiding her husband in his own house: "solus ipse, amantissime uxoris usus consilio, intra romana menia, intra domestici laris parietes, intra coniugalis cubicula secretum, in sinu coniugis intrepidus latuit" ("only Lucretius, following the advice of his loving wife, hid fearlessly within the walls of Rome itself, inside the confines of his own house, in the secret of the marriage chamber, indeed, in the bosom of his wife"; 83.2). Again, Boccaccio applies the rhetorical technique of climax to draw focus from the expansive Roman countryside to the intimacy of Turia's bosom, using the repetition of *intra…intra…intra… in sinu coniugis.* The next sentence is an exaltation of her actions, expressed with the repetition of *tanta…tanta…tanta…ut* in a consecutive clause: "et tanta uxoris solertia, tanta sagaci industria, tanta fidei integritate servatus est ut, preter ancillam unam consciam, nemo etiam ex necessariis arbitrari, nedum scire, potuerit" ("Curia protected him so cleverly and zealously and faithfully that, with the exception of a servant girl who was part of the plan, not one of their friends and relatives even suspected, much less knew, the situation"; 83.2).

In the following paragraphs, the reader is treated to Boccaccio's narrative genius since everything written from that point forward is the author's own invention. Here, Messer Giovanni simply imagines what happened, and he involves the reader in his fantasy. In fact, he starts by saying: "We can imagine" ("Credere possumus"), and that "we" is used to engage the reader's participation in this adventure of visualizing Curia.

> Quotiens ad contegendum facinus arte credere possumus mulierem hanc, exoleta veste, habitu sordido, mesta facie, flentibus oculis, neglecto crine, nullis comptam de more velamentis, anxio suspiriis pectore, ficto quodam amentis stupore, in medium prodisse et, quasi sui inscia, discurrisse patriam, intrasse templa, plateas ambisse et tremula ac fracta

voce, dum videretur deos precibus votisque onerasse, percontasse obvios amicosque numquid Lucretium vidissent suum, an scirent numquid viveret, quorsum fugam ceperit, quibus sociis, qua spe; preterea se summopere desiderare fuge exiliique et incommodorum comitem fieri; et huiusmodi plura factitasse que infelices consuevere facere, latebris quidem viri integumenta prevalida. (*De mulieribus* 332; ch. 83.3)

[We can imagine how often Curia, in order to provide an artful disguise for the true state of affairs, appeared in public wearing an old dress and exhibiting an unkempt appearance, a sad face, tearful eyes, disheveled hair, her veils disordered, a heart wracked with sighs, and a kind of simulated mad stupor. We can visualize her as if in a daze, running through the city, going into the temples, drifting around the squares, and, in a cracked and trembling voice (so as to seem already to have burdened the gods with vows and petitions), inquiring of friends and passersby if they might have seen her Lucretius or knew if he still lived, whither he had fled, with whom, and with what hope—adding that she wished above all to share his flight and exile and misfortune.] (Brown 170)

In this passage Boccaccio employs the technique of *amplificatio*, or what in the Middle Ages would have been called *argomentum*. In the *Rhetorica ad Herennium,* studied widely by scholars of the period, narrations were divided into three kinds: *historia,* the narration of facts that really happened; *fabula*, the narration of invented facts and imaginary things; and *argumentum*, the narration of facts that might have happened, thus something between history and invention. The goal of the *argumentum* was to make the narration more credible. What Boccaccio did, in comparison with Valerius Maximus, was therefore to amplify the text thanks to a series of invented argumentations which gave a nuance of reality. Curia is no longer a symbol: she is a historical character, a woman with feelings, clever ideas, and agency.

Let us consider another biography ("Virginia virgine Virginii filia"—"The Virgin Virginia, Daughter of Virginius"), which represents an important example for two reasons. The first is that the classical source for this chapter is Livy, whose prose differs significantly from that of Valerius Maximus: if Valerius's prose is concise, Livy's prose is expansive. So, Boccaccio cannot expound as

he did with Valerius; instead, he must reduce the original source. It is indeed extremely interesting to witness the narrative choices he makes in rewriting the story. The second reason for considering Virginia is that, throughout the Middle Ages, this young girl was used as an example of virginity, but with Boccaccio she receives a very important new shift in meaning.[11]

In Livy's account of the story, the people of Rome were already angry with the decemviral leaders for not calling proper elections and for other abuses of power. In 451 BC, Appius, one of the *decemviri*, began to lust after Verginia, a beautiful plebeian girl and the daughter of Lucius Verginius, a respected centurion. Verginia was betrothed to Lucius Icilius, a former tribune of the plebs, and when she rejected Appius, he had one of his clients, Marcus, claim that she was actually his slave. Marcus then abducted her while she was on her way to school. The crowd in the Forum objected to this, as both Verginius and Icilius were well-respected men, and they forced Marcus to bring the case before the *decemviri*, led by Appius himself. When Verginius arrived, Appius would not let him speak, and declared that Verginia was indeed Marcus's slave. Verginius grabbed a knife and stabbed Virginia in the heart, the only way the father felt he could uphold his daughter's freedom. Verginius and Icilius were arrested, and the people revolted. This sequence of events led the people, out of pity and disgust, to overthrow the *decemviri* and to re-establish the Roman Republic.

Livy tells this story expansively and with great detail, but the narration focuses entirely on the male figures, who in his account are the true protagonists of the story, and not on the girl, who is ultimately just the object of desire. This long episode is shrunken down in Boccaccio's *De mulieribus*, where Virginia goes from being the object of desire, as presented in Livy's narrative, to being the protagonist of the account. The chapter starts, as usual, with historical details about Virginia, describing her social status, and locating her in place and time:

> Virginea nomine et facto romana Virgo pia est recolenda memoria: fuit enim ìnsignis decoris conspicua et Auli Virginii, plebei hominis sed honesti, filia. Que esto optime esset indolis, non tantum tamen sua constantia clara quantum scelere amantis infausti et severi nimium patris facinore, ac ex illo Romanorum libertate secuta, facta est. (*De mulieribus* 236; sec. 58.1)

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[Virginia, a Roman, was a virgin in name and in fact, and she should be remembered with reverence. Notable for her remarkable virtue, she was the daughter of Aulus Virginius, a plebeian but an honorable man. Although Virginia had an excellent character, she became famous not so much for her constancy as for the wickedness of her ill-starred lover, the extraordinary severity of her father, and the liberty of the Romans that resulted from it.] (Brown 120)

In these few lines, the narrator identifies Virginia immediately as a Roman virgin, honest and of humble status, who became famous for the perversity of her lover and the severity of her father. Boccaccio then adds a significant detail missing from the original source: thanks to the sacrifice of the girl's life, the most important of values—freedom—was restored to Rome.

After framing the characters and the historical antecedents offered by Livy, Boccaccio begins to tell the story, and the action passes to the female protagonist, who becomes the active subject of the following sentence:

Cuius adhuc tenella Virgo cum frustrasset blanditias, nec illis nec donis ingentibus neque precibus aut minis flecteretur imbutum sanctitate pectus, tanto insano furore succensus est Appius ut, cum in varia labantem volvisset animum, nec satis tantum vim publice inferre arbitraretur, in fraudem ingenium verteret ... (*De mulieribus* 238; sec. 58.4)

[The young girl spurned his advances, and her pure heart was not swayed by his flattery or extravagant gifts or entreaties or threats. Appius burned with such a mad passion that, after hesitantly turning over various possibilities in his mind, he opted for cunning, regarding a public display of force as unsafe.] (Brown 120)

In this passage, Virginia actively refuses Appius's advances and becomes the subject of the story. The grammatical construction—and therefore the narrative agency—are reversed with respect to Livy, where Virginia appeared in the accusative case, that of the object, and the *decemvir* Appius acted out his evil intentions as the subject:

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> Hanc virginem adultam, forma excellentem, Appius amore ardens pretio ac spe perlicere adortus, postquam omnia pudore saepta animadverterat, ad crudelem superbamque vim animum convertit. (*Ab urbe condita* 144; sec. 3.44.4)

> [Appius, burned of passion toward the virgin, physically well-developed and extraordinarily beautiful, tried first to seduce her with gifts and promises; but, as soon as he understood that he could not make her change her mind, he turned his mind to cruel and violent actions.] (Foster, 145)

Appius then sends his client Marcus to kidnap her, declaring that she is his slave. At this point, in Livy's account, Virginia is frightened and astonished ("Pavida puella stupende"), while the nursemaid reacts by screaming, calling out to everybody ("Ad clamorem nutricis fidem Quiritum implorantes"). In Boccaccio's version, it is the protagonist, Virginia, who acts in resistance, while the nursemaid and other women react in chorus:

> Quam cum paucos post dies ausu temerario transeuntem cepisset libertus et sua diceret, proclamante virgine atque pro viribus impuro homini obsistente, iuvantibus matronis, cum quibus una incedebat, factus est repente hominum concursus. (*De mulieribus* 238; sec. 58.5)

> [A few days later, the freedman seized Virginia with reckless boldness as she passed by, and he claimed that she was his slave. The girl cried out and resisted the wicked man with all her might.] (Brown 120)

The story as told by Boccaccio continues to summarize Livy, always focusing as much as possible on Virginia, avoiding, for example, all the speeches delivered in the tribunal. In these passages, we can see briefly but clearly how Boccaccio orchestrates a shift from a male-centered to a female-centered perspective in order to tell the story of this young girl: a real girl, and not a mere allegory or symbol of virginity, as we see in other medieval texts.

Depicting real women, who lived in a real past, is a strategy that causes the reader to identify much more easily with the protagonist of the biography. But we may ask at this point: what kind of women are represented in Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*? What kind of

values does the author want to teach through his book? There is a bit more, perhaps, to understand about Virginia and the message in her biography. Virginia has always been linked with virginity, like Lucretia with chastity. However, themes such as chastity and virginity, absolute virtues for the Christian Middle Ages, are represented with complex nuances in some biographies of the *De mulieribus*. These virtues are no longer connected with the purity of the body and the soul. Rather, they are related to the dignity of the State: chastity is an ethical value that reflects the civic ethos.

The biographies of Lucretia and Virginia are ideal expressions of civic humanism. The two women are not examples of chastity for its own sake, as is so often the case in the Middle Ages: through their chaste behavior and through their tragic and unjust deaths, the Romans are driven to insurrection against tyranny, and Rome succeeds in restoring freedom. Lucretia and Virginia become symbols of the fight against immorality and corruption in the *Res Publica*. If Lucretia had silently accepted her destiny of violence under the sway of Tarquinius Superbus, hence living with this stain of dishonor, and if Virginia had given herself to the lustful *decemvir*, the Roman people would not have risen against tyranny and corruption. In *De mulieribus*, therefore, private life is the mirror of public life; private virtues and vices reflect the characteristics of the state. If private life is corrupt, the state is also corrupted. Women should be chaste for the welfare of the republic, so private life seeks to serve the welfare of the state.

Many illustrious women in *De mulieribus claris* choose to take their own lives rather than fall into the hands of their enemies, live under tyranny, or be enslaved. Impassivity toward death, in particular when death is the only escape to preserve personal freedom, is yet another stoic classical value revived by pre-humanists and by Boccaccio, in a spirit contrary to Christianity's condemnation of suicide.

The greatest and most evident innovation in the *De mulieribus claris* is its addition of women to the pantheon of intellectual figures: for the first time since classical antiquity, the reader is swept up in the celebration of female painters, sculptors, writers, and poets. The mere presence of these kinds of women in Boccaccio's society is a remarkable phenomenon, and his reader has the possibility to envision a new kind of femininity and womanhood that vivifies classical models: like Sappho and Cornificia, the new woman is able to compose poems; like Proba, she can read and write in Latin and

ancient Greek; like the Queen of Sheba, she is an intellectual; like Thamyris, Irene, and Marcia, she can paint and sculpt; like Minerva, (inventor of fiber arts, of olive oil, war strategy, numbers, and the flute), Ceres (inventor of the plow and the plowshare), Isis (inventor of the alphabetical characters), and Pamphile (inventor of the art of cotton weaving), she is capable of inventing important tools for humankind. In a fifteenth-century illuminated copy of *Les livre des cleres et nobles femmes*, a French translation of Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*, Chiara Frugoni identifies a new kind of image in which women are active and creative. On folio 86r of this manuscript (Paris Bibliothèque Nationale fr. 12420), the artist Thamyris is portrayed painting on a canvas, while next to her a male servant prepares colors for her.
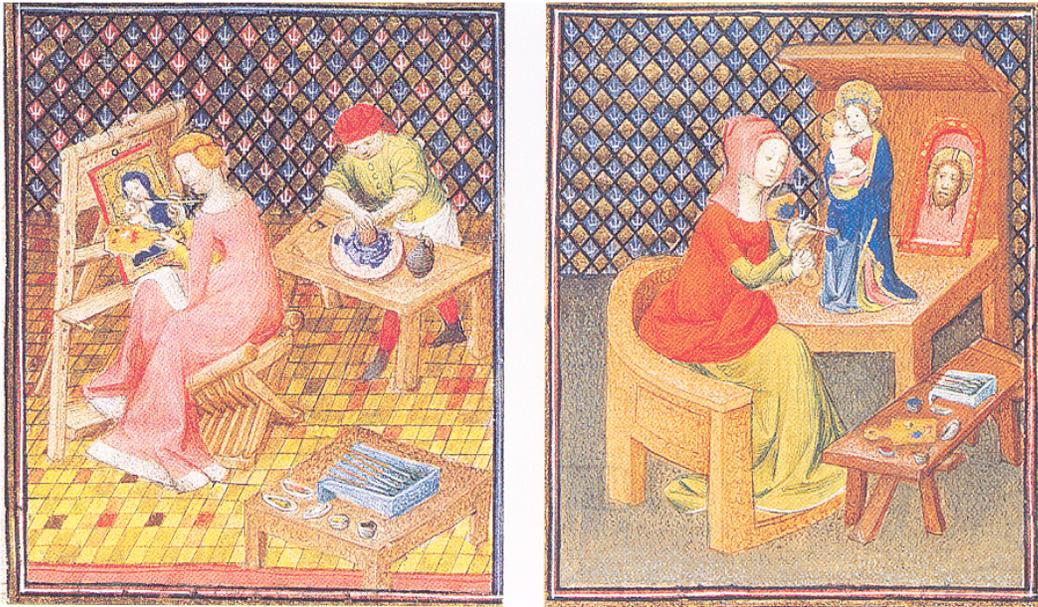
Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Le Livre des clares et nobles femmes.* Paris: Bibliothèque National, ms fr. 12420, f. 86r.

Moreover, these new women are inclined to honor the value of friendship and civic ethics, new values exalted by burgeoning humanism. For example, the biographies of Leaena and Epicharis (*De mul.* Chapters 50 and 93), which are very similar, promote friendship as the most important value. The Greek hetaera Leaena took part in the plot organized by Harmodius and Aristogeiton to overthrow the tyranny of Hipparchus: once she was arrested and tortured, she preferred to bite off her own tongue in order to avoid naming her friends. Similarly, the Roman freedwoman Epicharis was a member

of the Pisonian conspiracy against Nero: once she was caught and tortured, she preferred to die rather than accuse her co-conspirators. The two women chose to commit an act of violence against themselves, rather than betray their fellow conspirators against tyranny in favor of democracy and the Roman Republic. Other heroines, in particular those of the Roman period, are remembered for the good they did for the state, sacrificing their own interests to protect the highest of values: the freedom of the Roman Republic. An eloquent example is Veturia, the mother of Coriolano, who reprimanded her son for attacking Rome: "Satius quippe non concepisse fuerat: potuerat sterilitate mea Roma absque oppugnatione consistere et ego misella anus in libera mori patria" ("Better, truly, not to have conceived! By my sterility Rome could have remained free from siege, and I a poor old woman, could have died in a free country"; 55.9).[12]

To conclude, Boccaccio's narration, humanization, and historicization of women creates new role models and envisions a future for the humanistic woman. *De mulieribus claris* proposes new values in contrast to those of the medieval Christian tradition—values often modeled after those rediscovered in classical sources. In the Proem, the author declares that Christian women are indeed superior because they seek eternal and true glory, in contrast to pre-Christian women who pursue earthly fame. In the 106 biographies, many heroines are representative of typical Christian values—such as a chaste widowhood (Dido, Pompeia Paolina, Antonia), conjugal love (Portia, Curia, Tertia Emilia, and others), or virginity (the sibyls are a primary example)—, reflecting the stereotypical division of women into virgin, wives, and widows. Still, among these, new elements transcend the traditional medieval values and make a leap toward the culture of Renaissance, and toward a new model of women that was destined to persist in the subsequent literature.

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NOTES

[1] *De mulieribus claris* presents itself as a collection of 106 biographies of female figures gathered in 104 chapters, all of them preceded by a dedication to Andrea Acciaiuoli and a proem, and followed by a conclusion. The biographies of the queens of the Amazons, of Marpesia and Lampedo, and those of Orithya and Antiope, are respectively ensembled in Chapters XI-XII and XIX-XX. In this essay I use the term "female" as an adjective related to gendered sex designation, whereas I use the term "woman" as a noun for gendered social construct with agency. Also, when talking about women, I am referring to secular female figures, without taking in consideration saints and martyrs.

[2] For a thorough analysis of the fresco in all its detail, see Frugoni (2019). For an overview of the fresco's meaning see Polzer.

[3] The Sienese magistrates have not been identified by name; nevertheless, it is safe to assume that contemporary viewers would have been able to recognize them, given the painter's accuracy in reproducing highly individualized somatic features.

[4] For an introduction to the Spanish Chapel, see Bargellini 1954; Romano 1976; Baldelli 1981; and Dieck 1997.

[5] On the identification of the figures to the left, art historians are not in agreement. In this essay, I embrace the proposal by Serena Romano, who argues that these are the "methodological disciplines," the *modus scientia*, according to the commentary on Thomas Aquinas's fifth question on Boethius' *De trinitate*. In his commentary, Thomas explores how humans can acquire knowledge thanks to sciences and disciplines. The first woman on the left is Civil Law with her signs of power (crown, sword, and globe), and in front of her sits Solomon, the greatest of all judges; following is Canonical Law, presented with the Church within her. Many art critics recognize the representative of Canonical Law as Boniface VIII, precisely because of the resemblance to many of his portraits (Haidacher 1965, 30). Following is Physics, holding a globe, along with Galen; Biblical Studies with Saint Jerome; Dogma with Gregory of Nazianzus; Mysticism, represented with a veil covering her eyes and ears, in order to avoid any external influence, and a white glove for falconry (the symbol of mysticism), with Dionysius the Areopagite; and Apologetics, armed with helmet, arc and arrows, along with Saint Augustine.

[6] Critics agree in recognizing these female figures as the Liberal Arts (*artes liberales: trivius et quadrivius*; Romano 1976, 192 n.54). Beginning from the left, we have the arts of the *quadrivium*: Math with Pythagoras; Geometry, holding a square, with Euclid; Astronomy with a globe in her hand and Ptolemy looking up to the sky; Music is presented holding an organ with Tubal-Cain, the biblical smith who invented the first musical instrument by noticing the sound of a hammer on an anvil. After the *quadrivium*, we find the *trivium*: Dialectic, with a branch in the right hand and a scorpion (symbol of the syllogism) in her left hand, is represented with Aristotle; Rhetoric, with a sign reading "Mulceo dum loquor varios induta colores" ("I soften with many nuances while I speak"), with Cicero; and Grammar, holding a fruit in her right hand and the narrow door of wisdom in the left, with either Priscian or Donatus. For identification, see Romano 1976, 192–ff.

[7] For hagiography indispensable is Giorgi 2003, *passim*.

[8] For a more detailed analysis of these sonnets, see Mazzotta 1988; Ciccuto 1991; and Mirabile 2019, 22-23, who offers an updated bibliography.

[9] On *Familiares* 21.8, see Kolsky 1993 and 2001, 42–47; Filosa 2004 and 2012, 51–62; Lukaszewics-Chantry 2017.

[10] All English translations of the *De mulieribus claris* are by Brown, in Boccaccio 2001. The oscillation in the spelling Turia/Curia is not random, but intentional: in

this essay, I use Turia when quoting Valerius Maximus, and Curia when quoting Boccaccio. In my book on *De mulieribus claris* (2012), I hypothesize that the orthographical change T > C in the name of Turia > Curia is due to the fact that, in reading Turia's biography by Valerius Maximus, Boccaccio might have used a manuscript written in semiuncial, a script in which it is easy to confuse the capitalized T with a C.

[11] Botticelli's *The Story of Virginia* quite possibly was based on Boccaccio's biography: Nelson 2010, 196; Filosa 2019. For the representation of Virginia in art, see Loda 2018.

[12] For anti-tyrannical themes in some biographies of the *De mulieribus claris*, see Filosa 2015–2016.

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