

“Come pintor che con essempro finga”:  
Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio’s Giotto on *ingere* and *pingere*.  
For a Hermeneutics of Vision\*

Pictura autem dicta quasi fictura; est enim imago ficta, non veritas.  
(Isidore of Seville, *Etym.* 19.16.1)

e se natura o arte fé pasture  
da pigliare occhi, per aver la mente,  
in carne umana o ne le sue pitture  
(Dante, *Par.* 27.91–93)

Poetarum inventa, ornatis linita  
licteris, plus, a sapientibus lecta,  
volunt mentes inficiant, quam picta  
an ignaris inspecta.  
(Boccaccio, *Gen.* 14.18.9)

In the following paragraph from his commentary on the *Commedia*, Boccaccio considers the challenges faced by both painters and poets who would dare represent the radiant beauty of Helen of Troy.

Elena *fincono* i poeti essere stata figliuola di Giove e di Leda, moglie di Tindaro, re d’Oebalia, e lui dicono in forma di cigno con lei, bellissima donna e madre d’Elena, esser giaciuto, narrando in questa forma la favola. [...] Ma le istorie vogliono lei essere stata figliuola di Tindaro, re d’Oebalia, e di Leda e sirocchia di Castore e di Polluce. Fu la bellezza di costei tanto oltre ad ogni altra meravigliosa, che *ella non solamente a discriversi con la penna faticò il divino ingegno d’Omero, ma ella ancora molti solenni dipintori e più intagliatori per maestero famosissimi stancò*: e intra gli altri, sì come Tullio nel secondo dell’*Arte vecchia* scrive, fu Zeusis eracleate, il quale per ingegno e per arte tutti i suoi contemporanei e molti de’ predecessori trapassò. Questi, condotto con grandissimo prezzo da’ Crotoniesi a dover la sua effige col pennello dimostrare, ogni vigilanzia pose, *premedo con gran fatica d’animo tutte le forze dello ’ngegno suo; e, non avendo alcun altro essempro a tanta operazione che i versi d’Omero e la fama universale che della bellezza di costei correa, aggiunse a questi due uno essempro assai discreto: per ciò che primieramente si fece mostrare tutti i be’ fanciulli di Crotona e poi le belle fanciulle, e di tutti questi elesse cinque e delle bellezze de’ visi loro e della statura e abitudine de’ corpi, aiutato da’ versi d’Omero, formò nella mente sua una vergine di perfetta bellezza e quella, quanto l’arte poté seguire lo ’ngegno, dipinse, lasciandola, sì come celestiale simulacro, alla posterità per vera effige d’Elena*. Nel quale *artificio* forse si poté abattere lo ’ndustrioso maestro alle lineature

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del viso, al colore e alla statura del corpo: ma come possiam noi credere che il pennello e lo scarpello possano effigiare la letizia degli occhi, la piacevolezza di tutto il viso e l'affabilità e il celeste riso e i movimenti vari della faccia e la decenza delle parole e la qualità degli atti? Il che adoperare è solamente officio della natura. E, per ciò che queste cose erano in lei esquisite, *né vedeano i poeti a ciò poter bastare la penna loro, la finsero figliuola di Giove, acciò che per questa divinità ne desser cagione di meditare* qual dovesse essere il fulgore degli occhi suoi, quale il candore del mirabile viso, quanta e quale la volatile e aurea coma, da questa parte e da quella con vezzosi cincinnuli sopra li candidi omeri ricadente, quanta fosse la soavità della dolce e sonora voce, e ancora certi atti della bocca vermiglia e della splendida fronte e della gola d'avorio e le delizie del virginal petto, con le altre parti nascose da' vestimenti.<sup>1</sup> (5.lit.102–06, italics ours)

He starts with those who “fingono” that Helen was the daughter of Jupiter and Leda: the poets themselves whose accounts paradoxically witness the truth of something impossible and incredible. It is only after showing in detail Zeuxis' miserable failure that Boccaccio returns ready to prove his initial statement about poets: thanks to their ability to envision (“fingere”), they invent Helen as the daughter of Jupiter: “*it is in this way, through her divine lineage*, that they recreate the sparkle in her eye, the loveliness of her countenance, of her affable, heavenly smile and facial expressions, the comeliness of her speech, or the nature of her gesture, and inspired us to *imagine*” her miraculous beauty.

Speaking about Helen in *De mulieribus claris* (1361–62), Boccaccio establishes the same pattern about painters and sculptors as opposed to poets, with the same intent:

Preterea pictores et sculptores multiplices egregii omnes eundem sumpserunt laborem ut tam eximii decoris saltem effigiem, si possent, posteritati relinquerent. Quos inter, summa conductus a Crotoniensibus pecunia, Zeuxis heracleotes, illius seculi famosissimus pictor et prepositus ceteris, ad illam pinniculo formandam, ingenium omne artisque vires exposuit; et cum, preter Homeri carmen et magnam undique famam [...]. Nec ego miror: quis enim picture vel statue pinniculo aut celo potuerit inscribere letitiam oculorum, totius oris placidam affabilitatem, celestem risum motusque faciei varios et decoros secundum verborum et actuum qualitates? Cum solius hoc nature officium sit. Fecit ergo quod potuit; et quod pinxerat, tanquam celeste simulacri decus, posteritati reliquit. Hinc acutiores finxere fabulam eamque ob sydereum oculorum fulgorem, ob invisam mortalibus lucem, ob insignem faciei candorem aureamque come volatilium copiam, hinc inde per humeros petulantibus recidentem cincinnulis, et lepidam sonoramque vocis suavitatem nec non et gestus quosdam, tam cinnamei roseique oris quam splendide frontis et eburnei gucturis ac ex invisibilibus delitiis pectoris assurgentis, non nisi ex aspirantis concipiendis aspectu, Iovis in cignum versi describere filiam, ut, preter quam a matre suscepisse poterat formositatem, intelligeretur ex infuso numine quod pinniculis coloribusque ingenio suo imprimere nequibant artifices.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The *Esposizioni* are cited from the original in Boccaccio 1965, and from the English in Boccaccio 2009.

<sup>2</sup> *De mulieribus claris* 37.3–6. “Moreover, many distinguished painters and sculptors embarked on the same task of leaving to posterity, if they could, at least a likeness of Helen’s marvelous beauty. Among them was Zeuxis of Heraclea, the most famous and respected painter of the time, who was hired at great expense by the people of Croton. He put all his skill and the powers of his art into the attempt to depict her with his brush. The only models he had were Homer’s poetry and Helen’s own universal fame. [...] This does not surprise me. The happiness in Helen’s eyes, the pleasant serenity of her entire face, her heavenly laugh, and the charming change of expression reflecting what she heard and saw — who could represent these with a painter’s brush or a sculptor’s chisel? That is the prerogative of Nature alone. Zeuxis, therefore, did what he could, and what he left to posterity was but a simulacrum of her celestial grace. Hence the more ingenious authors invented the myth that Helen was the daughter of Jupiter transformed into a swan. Their

The comparison of both accounts reveals that Boccaccio assigns Zeuxis an exemplary role in his statements on painting and poetry. Even as a commentator on *Inferno* 5 he enjoys dwelling here on the “industrious painter’s” talent, to display how he “finds himself overcome by the contours of Helen’s face, by the tones and stature of her body.” In Pliny (*Hist. nat.* 35.64), we read that Zeuxis, unable to find a woman beautiful enough to pose for him as Helen, selected the finest features of five of the most handsome boys and five of the most attractive girls in town, thereby creating a composite image of ideal beauty. However, as Boccaccio dares to note, Zeuxis still found himself compelled to rely on Homer’s verses and the universal fame of Helen’s beauty.<sup>3</sup> He shares his skepticism regarding the outcome: “but it is hardly to be believed that he realized fully his artistic objective” (37.4-5), adding that the artist’s failure “did not surprise him,” since even Homer, “a man of divine talents, exhausted the resources of his art without describing her fittingly in verse” (§3). At this point, Boccaccio asks a question for which he provides a similar answer in both the *De mulieribus claris* and *Esposizioni*:

Nec ego miror: quis enim picture vel statue pinniculo aut celo potuerit inscribere letitiam oculorum, totius oris placidam affabilitatem, celestem risum motusque faciei varios et decoros secundum verborum et actuum qualitates? Cum solius hoc nature officium sit. (*De mulieribus* 37.5)<sup>4</sup>

ma come possiam noi credere che il pennello e lo scarpello possano effigiare la letizia degli occhi, la ppacevoleza di tutto il viso e l’affabilità e il celeste riso e i movimenti vari della faccia e la decenza delle parole e la qualità degli attil Il che adoperare è solamente officio della natura. (*Esp.* 5.lit.105)

Zeuxis’ failure to depict Helen’s divine beauty becomes for Boccaccio a concrete example that painting is an inferior and less reliable art, since it is imitation and, as such, requires a preexisting model (including the descriptions of the poets), while poetry is about inventing, and thus shares Mother Nature’s own activity of creation, a prerogative of Nature alone. Boccaccio, convinced of this, notes that Vulcan was believed to be the maker of all sorts of marvelous works of art (“quicquid artificiose compositum est factum” ‘whatever was made with art,’ 12.70.2) and that, just as monkeys imitate people, “homines arte et ingenio suo in multis naturam imitari conantur” ‘men try in many ways to imitate nature with art and their mind’ (*Gen.* 12.70.6).<sup>5</sup>

In reality, the uniqueness of Helen’s beauty is just a pretext for Boccaccio to talk about painters and poets and to offer a meditation on mimesis or types of artistic representation: *fingerere*, that is, *poiesis* (to invent, create or

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accounts described the starry splendor of her eyes whose light had never before been seen by humankind; the marvelous whiteness of her complexion; her mass of golden hair falling and swirling on her shoulders in saucy curls; the charming and the resonant sweetness of her voice; certain movements of her scented and rosy mouth; her dazzling forehead and ivory throat rising above the hidden delights of her breast that were imaginable only from the rhythm of her breathing. In this way they wished it to be understood that Helen possessed beauty from some divine source, besides that inherited from her mother, which the artists, despite their talents, could not express with brush and paint.” The original is cited in Boccaccio 1967, and the English in Boccaccio 2001.

<sup>3</sup> See Mansfield 2007. Leon Battista Alberti in his treatise *On painting* (1435) would advise “all painters to become friendly with poets, rhetoricians and other such lettered men, because these will provide new inventions or at least enrich the compositions of their works.” Cited in Warburg 1999, 114.

<sup>4</sup> “This does not surprise me. The happiness in Helen’s eyes, the pleasant serenity of her face, her heavenly laugh, and the charming changes of expression reflecting what she heard and saw – who could represent these with a painter’s brush or a sculptor’s chisel? This is the prerogative of Nature alone.”

<sup>5</sup> The original is cited in Boccaccio 1998.

make as poets do), as opposed to *pingere* (to imitate or replicate as painters do). In this essay, I wish to explore the figure of Giotto in Dante's *Purgatorio* 11.94–96 and Boccaccio's *Decameron* 6.5, by studying both poets' active involvement in the ongoing coeval debate on *pingere* and *ingere*, in which I believe that the painter of the Arena Chapel in Padua plays a functional role.

But what has this debate on *ingere* and *pingere* to do with Giotto? Considering the metaliterary dimensions of both the *Commedia* and the *Decameron* as observations on varieties of artistic representation, we see that investigations into Giotto as a character in a prose text or in Dante's verses would lead to differing results. His ability to paint figures that are true to life — as Boccaccio tells us in the story in which the master features as the protagonist (*Dec.* 6.5) — had already led Dante to distinguish between these very levels of truth achieved by the writer's pen and the painter's brush. Thus, the debate around poetry and painting ultimately involves art and nature, and in general the problem of creation.<sup>6</sup>

As is well known, Dante attributes to himself the same primacy in poetry that Giotto had in painting, and he seems to suggest that he will surpass the two Guidos (Guinizelli and Cavalcanti) themselves.

Credette Cimabue ne la pittura  
tener lo campo, e ora ha Giotto il grido,  
sì che la fama di colui è scusa.  
Così ha tolto l'uno a l'altro Guido  
la gloria de la lingua, e forse è nato  
chi l'uno e l'altro cacerà del nido. (*Pg.* 11.94–99)<sup>7</sup>

Petrarch was the first to associate Giotto and Apelles (in *Familiare* 5.17)<sup>8</sup> and mentions in his last will and testament that he owned an otherwise unidentified *Virgin and Child* painted by the former. In the *Itinerarium Syriacum* (10.2), he also mentions Giotto's frescoes, now lost, in the royal chapel of Naples, the Castel Nuovo (1329–33). In other words, Giotto was a renowned master and, as we would say today, a celebrity. Before making him a protagonist in *Decameron* 6.5, Boccaccio mentioned Giotto in his *Amorosa visione*.<sup>9</sup> In the fiction of the poem, the poet-*viator* has a dream vision of love and travels with a heavenly guide through a palace whose walls display painted triumphs of Wisdom, Glory, Wealth and Love. Notably, its artist's *ingegno* is matched only by Giotto's. Furthermore, Boccaccio compares Giotto to Apelles as the two greatest artists of their times (*Gen.* 14.6.7), although, contrary to Petrarch, he fails to explain the criteria used for his statement.

In fact, Cristoforo Landino once wrote: “Giotto is a Trojan horse from which all marvelous painters came.”<sup>10</sup> I argue that, just as the Trojan horse was born of the ancient poets' invention, there is another literary Giotto who was invented by Dante, Petrarch and especially Boccaccio. Giotto's work, and his special way of giving the appearance of reality to his paintings, forced our Tre Corone to distinguish the level of reality or truthfulness attained by poetry vis-à-vis the reality achieved in painting. This set of problems, I contend, lies behind the creation of Giotto's character in *Decameron* 6.5, a character who, as I hope to show, rather clearly reveals Boccaccio's

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the pioneering study on art and nature by A. Scaglione, *Nature and Love in the Late Middle Ages* (Scaglione 1963).

<sup>7</sup> The English and Italian text of the *Commedia* are cited in Alighieri 2002–07.

<sup>8</sup> Petrarch wrote: “I know two outstanding painters who were not handsome: Giotto, a Florentine citizen whose reputation is very great among the moderns, and Simone da Siena” (*Fam.* 5.17, in Petrarca 1975–85, 1:273).

<sup>9</sup> 4.13–18. First redaction (A) 1342, and second (B) 1355–60. Here and elsewhere, I quote from the B redaction of Boccaccio's *Amorosa visione*: the Italian from Boccaccio 2000 and the English from Boccaccio 1986.

<sup>10</sup> “Della disciplina di Giotto come del caval troiano usciron mirabili pictori.” Landino 1487.

ideas on the function of art and poetry, of brush and pen, and their respective places in relation to the truth.

We know that Dante presents himself in the *Vita nova* as if his main preoccupation were not writing, but drawing figures of angels “sopra certe tavolette” (34.1–2),<sup>11</sup> and that he often turns to pictorial metaphors in the *Commedia*, switching from pen and ink to the brush and colors of the painter in order to share moments of his vision in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* that would be otherwise more difficult to describe fully to the reader.<sup>12</sup> This is especially true of *Purgatorio* 29.73–75, when to render more vivid the effect of the seven candlesticks whose flames leave trails in the air above the entire procession, he creates an analogy with paintbrushes drawn across the canvas:

e vidi le fiammelle andar davante,  
lasciando dietro a sé l’aere dipinto,  
e di tratti pennelli avean sembriante,  
sì che lì sopra rimanea distinto  
di sette liste, tutte in quei colori  
onde fa l’arco il Sole e Delia il cinto. (Pg. 29.73–78)

More generally he turns to the pictorial world to make his aesthetic and formal intentions clearer, as he makes Statius say:

ma perché veggi mei ciò ch’io disegno  
a colorare stenderò la mano. (Pg. 22.74–75)

As for Petrarch, he dedicates two sonnets to Simone Martini for his portrait of Laura (*RVF* 77 and 78), while Boccaccio’s involvement in the visual arts is exemplified by the number of drawings that decorate the manuscripts in his possession and that have been attributed to him, including ms. Hamilton 90.<sup>13</sup> Also, hiding behind the Author of the *Decameron*, Boccaccio asks that his pen be given the same privilege as the painter’s brush (10.concl.6).

It is Benvenuto da Imola, one of the most refined readers of Dante and Boccaccio,<sup>14</sup> who suggests that Giotto and painting are functional to their meditation upon their role as poets and poetry.

S’io potessi *ritrar* come assonnaro  
li occhi spietati udendo di Siringa,  
li occhi a cui pur vegghiar costò sì caro;  
come pintor che con essempro *pinga*,  
*disegnerei* com’ io m’addormentai;  
ma qual vuol sia che l’assonnar ben *fin*ga.  
(Pg. 32.64–69, italics ours)

When Benvenuto annotates these verses, he calls our attention to the *modus operandi* of poets, since pictorial references and metaphors speak of the painter in order to speak of poets:

[I]o *disegnerei*, idest, describerem poetice, *com’io m’addormentai*, ad cantum, *come pintor che pinga con esemplo*, et est optima similitudo de pictore ad poetam, quorum uterque intendit repraesentare, *s’io potessi ritrar*, idest, repraesentare. (in Alighieri 2008 *ad Pg.* 32.64–69, italics ours)

<sup>11</sup> About this passage in the *Vita nova*, A. R. Crudale makes an interesting point on art and poetry: “Dante communicates with these on-lookers (at first unknowingly) through his drawings, which become his ‘said.’ The art creates a connection between the artist/poet and the gentlemen whereby words are unnecessary to provoke an exchange, which later will be expressed through poetry” (Crudale 2013, 95). See also Frosini 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Always fascinating to read on Dante and figurative art is Fallani 1971.

<sup>13</sup> On images and words, see Ciccuto 1995 and 1996 (now part of Ciccuto 2017). See Branca 1999 and Mazzetti 2012, but also A. Volpe who claims that a number of drawings attributed to Boccaccio were actually not done by him (2011).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Morosini 2019b.

*I would draw, that is, I would poetically depict, how I fell asleep, to that song, like the painter who paints with a model before him. This is an excellent comparison of the painter to the poet, both of whom he intended to represent, if I could depict, that is, represent.*

In fact, like Servius, who reveals with his commentary the divine content of Virgil's poetry (as depicted in a beautiful illumination that Simone Martini made for Petrarch [Fig. 1]), both Dante (in the *Vita nova* and *Commedia*) and Boccaccio (in his *Teseida* and *Decameron*) do the same. They too reveal what is behind the veil as they gloss their own writings, giving readers access to the truth that lies under the literal meaning of their poetry (cf. *Gen.* 14.14.3 and *Esp.* 1.lit.77).<sup>15</sup> The same urge led Boccaccio to hold public lectures on the *Commedia* and to be criticized “as an explicator of sacred poetic truths to the masses.”<sup>16</sup> Their efforts to display the verisimilitude of their poetic fiction are articulated through the differentiation between poetry and painting. A close reading of *Decameron* 6.5 in the light of 6.6, 8 and 9 (and other works by Boccaccio) shows that the narrative around paintings and images points towards writing and words (the art of speech), that is, the theme of Day 6.

The core of this discussion about Giotto, therefore, revolves around the difference between *fingere* and *pingere*, a difference that ultimately comes from Horace's principle *ut pictura poesis*, which endured throughout the Middle Ages,<sup>17</sup> but by the time of twelfth-century *poetriae* and even Dante, the discussion would shift to a new direction that concentrates on the epistemological variance between the two arts. Any reader at this point will anticipate a discussion of the myth of Narcissus, the unavoidable emblem of reality duplicated in a shadow, in an evanescent image.<sup>18</sup> Certainly, Narcissus will be an important supporting myth in the discussion of the epistemological implications between *fingere* and *pingere*, that is, between the illusionistic power of the image and truth of poetry. Less probable, though, is that every reader will think of this problem in terms of the fame and glory each art can bring, despite that being a very real problem for our authors. Dante and Boccaccio both rely on their poetry for immortal fame, a claim that emerges for each in relation to the “vainglory and pride in art” of visual artists, notwithstanding Oderisi's explanation that “La vostra nominanza è color d'erba, / che viene e va” (*Pg.* 11.115–16). Indeed, writing about Narcissus in his *Genealogie*, Boccaccio specifies that, as in the myth, only a feeble echo remains of those who do not pursue immortal fame: “many flee from fame, or give it little consideration, and contemplate themselves, their glory in the water, that is in worldly delight,” which is as fleeting as water (7.59.3).<sup>19</sup> Here and even earlier in the *Teseida* (6.61), Boccaccio glosses the myth in terms both of the vanity of image-makers, whose glory is as ephemeral as their earthly achievements, and of self-knowledge. Boccaccio, in fact, is the only writer who makes the young boy fall in love with a womanish water reflection [Fig. 2] in the *Teseida* and in the *Genealogie* (7.49.4). In so doing he displays the cognitive aspect implied in the Ovidian myth, about seeing and knowledge: since Narcissus can only see with his physical eyes, he is not aware of himself and he sees ‘someone else’ in the pool as if in a mirror.

<sup>15</sup> C. Cazalé Bérard examines the “esigenza di articolare un nesso necessario tra invenzione poetica e teorizzazione meta-poetica sotto forma di auto-commento” (2008, 438).

<sup>16</sup> Gittes 2008, 168. See also Morosini 2018, Eisner 2013.

<sup>17</sup> *Art. Poet.*, v. 360. Cf. De Bruyne 1946, esp. vol. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Ovid, *Met.* 3.339–510.

<sup>19</sup> “Hanc multi fugiunt et parvi pendunt, et in aquis, id est in mundanis deliciis, non aliter quam aqua labilibus, se ipsos, id est suam gloriam, intuentur” (orig. in Boccaccio 1998).

“Whether or not an image is ‘true’ (an accurate depiction of historical reality),” as G. Stone rightly notes, “the ‘truth’ that matters is located in the effect which arises in those who come under its sway.”<sup>20</sup> From this perspective, the debate on *pingere* and *ingere* seems shaped around wisdom and sense-certainty, which function dialectically to foster the traditional importance of seeing with the eye of the intellect rather than merely with those of the body.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, it raises questions of knowledge and ethics that involve image-making together with image-reading as in Dante, Petrarch and particularly Boccaccio, who introduce practices of viewing or what I call an hermeneutic of images in a literary context.<sup>22</sup> They condemn not painting, but its superficiality in order to focus on the reception of images by the beholder or reader and to show the intellectual perception of the divine and the eternal in poetry beneath the “fabuloso cortice,” the “bark,” of the fable: “Fiction is a form of discourse which under guise of invention, illustrates or proves an idea; and as its superficial aspect is removed, the meaning of the author is clear. If, then, sense is revealed from under the veil of fiction, the composition of fiction is not idle nonsense” (*Gen.* 14.9.4).<sup>23</sup>

Through painting, they advocate for a progression from the exterior, material world to the inner life of the mind and the truth of the *fabula*: what is kept beyond the ornaments, a process that C. Hamlin calls a “theology of narrative.”<sup>24</sup> Boccaccio says it clearly in his *Genealogie* as he defends the usefulness of poetry:

Quid multa? tanti quidem sunt fabule, ut earum primo contextu oblectentur indocti, et circa abscondita doctorum exercentur ingenia, et sic una et eadem lectione proficient et delectant. (*Gen.* 14.9.15)

Such then is the power of fiction that it pleases the unlearned by its external appearance, and exercises the minds of the learned with its hidden truth; and thus both are edified and delighted with one and the same perusal. (Osgood 51)

Convinced of the metaliterary nature of Boccaccio’s works, I approached his *Amorosa visione* as I have elsewhere, in the light of the *Filocolo*,<sup>25</sup> distancing my reading from the traditional allegorical or moral approach. The poem is a poetic fiction about “seeing well,” as both protagonists, the poet-*viator* and Florio-Filocolo must learn to see with the eyes of the mind, beyond appearances. The *Amorosa visione*, I claim, is a poem about practices of looking, for an hermeneutic of images that Boccaccio carries out in all his works. In the same vein, I shall consider the descriptions of the three women painters in the *De mulieribus* (Marcia in 66, Irene in 59 and Thamyris in 56), continuing a vertical reading through the *Decameron* and the *Genealogie*, in an attempt to display Giotto’s space in Boccaccio’s defense of poetry and its truths. Four tales in Day 6 dealing with image-making and image-reading raise ethic and epistemological questions tied to seeing only with physical sight, in a way that makes those stories essential to the ideological

<sup>20</sup> Stone 2015, 102.

<sup>21</sup> Carman 2014, 41.

<sup>22</sup> In the fiction of the *De casibus* (8.1.22–23), Petrarch reminds Boccaccio of the duty of the poet who with “the eyes of the mind,” may add splendor to the fame, embellishing what is not there, and use “the invention of fantasy” to add, some dignity, where there is nothing noteworthy.

<sup>23</sup> “Supervacaneum est composuisse fabulas, non inficiar, si simplices tantum poetas fabulas composuisse concesserim; verum nusquam legetur quin ab intelligenti homine cognoscatur aliquid magni sub fabuloso cortice palliatum. Et ob id consuevere non nulli fabulam diffinit: ‘Fabula est exemplaris seu demonstrativa sub figmento locutio, cuius amoto cortice, patet intentio fabulantis.’” See more on the ‘bark’ of the fable in S. Nobili 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Hamlin 1982, 218.

<sup>25</sup> Morosini 2004 and 2006, and more recently 2019.

project of the *brigata*. Storytelling is a model of behavior that — “senza traspasare in alcuno atto il segno della ragione” (*Dec.* 1.intro.65) — is founded on facts, rather than appearances. This is the scientific approach that Boccaccio owes to Andalò dal Negro (*Gen.* 15.6.4). In fact, as R. Martinez brilliantly argued, there is a strict relation between rhetoric and politics in Day 6.<sup>26</sup> Is it a coincidence that those four stories in Day 6 are all set in Florence, and that, right after writing about Giotto, Boccaccio features God as the imperfect painter Who learns to improve His craft over time? Is it a coincidence that in the same day, Cesca, like a modern Narcissus, is incapable of truly ‘seeing’ herself in the mirror (6.8), while it is a poet-thinker who shares an insightful statement on the vanity of ornaments and invites us to look instead at what endures much longer?<sup>27</sup>

Finally, the relocation of Giotto to within Boccaccio’s discussion of *fin-gere* and *pingere* contributes, if not to deconstructing the celebrated image of the painter, at least to rendering him problematic vis-à-vis Dante’s and Boccaccio’s full commitment to exploring his ideas on artistic representation, inasmuch as the physical constrictions and falsehood of image-making are in contrast with the intellectual freedom and truth of poetry. Boccaccio’s Giotto should be considered very much a part of the debate and closely related to the inspirational contributions of Dante and Petrarch to notions of poetry and painting.

#### *Pingere* or *Fingere*: the simulacrum of painting and the truth of poetry

By mapping the numerous metaliterary *loci* in Dante’s and Boccaccio’s works, one sees how they both relied heavily on pictorial metaphors for their own claims to the reader about the status of their works as “fabrications,” the creation of the *faber*/maker, that is, the poet. Discussions of poetry and painting constitute solid ideological structures that permeate not only Boccaccio’s works, as we shall see, but also the metaliterary and metapoietic nature of fourteenth-century writing only partially described by A. Minnis.<sup>28</sup>

Boccaccio’s relevance to medieval literary criticism and theory in the fourteenth century is relegated to Book 14 of his *Genealogie*, although previous studies convincingly prove how Dante and his contemporaries all make references to their own act of writing,<sup>29</sup> which involve their reflections on other forms of artistic representation since, of course, *ut pictura poesis*. Poets explore the creative possibilities of both *pingere* and *fin-gere*, with a tendency to resort to vivid pictorial images to determine the long-lasting freedom and truth of poetry. Even Petrarch who, as M. Baxandall convinced us, had an undeniable impact on the humanistic concept of painting<sup>30</sup> disputes the illusory nature of images. In the *De remediis utriusque fortunae* (1354–66), the longest discussion of art from the humanist Trecento,<sup>31</sup> the poet shows he is so intrigued by the debate between the modalities of artistic representation that he hints in *Fam.* 6.2.21–22 at a future book he would like to write on the subject.<sup>32</sup>

What exactly do the verbs *fin-gere* and *pingere* mean? Looking for the most accurate way to explain what it meant to a fourteenth-century writer, I found an answer in Jacopo Della Lana’s commentary to *Pg.* 32.67–69, where *pingere* is in rhyme with *fin-gere*. *Fingere*, he writes, “è mettere modo

<sup>26</sup> Martinez 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Durling 1983 and Ascoli 2009, 152.

<sup>28</sup> Morosini 2006.

<sup>29</sup> Morosini 2018b; Barolini 1984 and 1992; Barańsky 1997, 3.

<sup>30</sup> Baxandall 1971. See also Contini 1980.

<sup>31</sup> Baxandall 1971, 53.

<sup>32</sup> See also Stewart 1986, 251.



*poetico* in iscrittura,” that is to apply the poetic mode to writing, or to create a poetic fiction. *Pingere*, is a synonym of *disegnare* or to simulate, from the Latin verb *simulare* meaning to copy, represent or both. Regarding *ingere*, Boccaccio argues that although the verb *tingo* has been wrongly understood from Latin as “to lie/tell lies,” in fact it means “to compose, to adorn” and “to conceal the truth beneath fabulous and ornate speech” (*Esp.* 1.lit.70 and 78; see also *Gen.* 14.14.3). “I had supposed,” writes Boccaccio, “that a lie was a certain very close counterfeit of the truth which served to destroy the true and substitute the false” (Osgood 63) ‘Est enim mendacium iudicio meo fallacia quedam simillima veritati, per quam a non nullis verum opprimitur, et exprimitur quod est falsum’ (*Gen.* 14.13.2). He continues:

Amplissima quidem fingendi est area, et pleno semper fictionum cornu poesis incedit; non ergo deficiebant quibuscunque sensibus honestissima tegumenta. (*Gen.* 14.14.3)

Wide indeed is the field of fiction, and Poetry’s horn as she advances overflows with her many inventions; wherefore fair and decent disguises have never been lacking for any possible thought which an author may wish to express. (Osgood 70)

In *Purgatorio* 32.67–69, as in Boccaccio’s later accounts of Zeuxis’ Helen, the poet emerges as a *homo creator*,<sup>33</sup> the one who “fingit,” while the painter is the *artifex*/simulator who, in order to offer a *simulacrum* in his representation, needs a model before him. Isidore traces the etymology of this term to portrait, likeness, image or representation (a portrait, marble statue or wax figure representing a person). Perhaps because a simulacrum, no matter how skillfully done, is not the real thing, the word gained an extended meaning that emphasized the superficiality or insubstantiality of a thing:

The use of likenesses [*simulacrorum*] arose when, out of grief for the dead, images [*imagines*] or effigies were set up, as if in place of those who had been received into heaven demons substituted themselves to be worshipped on earth, and persuaded deceived and lost people to make sacrifices to themselves. And “likenesses” (*simulacrum*) are named from “similarity” (*similitudine*), because, through the hand of an artisan, the faces of those in whose honor the likenesses are constructed are imitated in stone or some other material. Therefore, they are called likenesses either because they are similar (*similis*), or because they are feigned (*simulare*) or invented, whence they are false. (*Etym.* 8.11.5–6, tr. in Isidore 2006)

In other words, for Boccaccio the painter is a *symia naturae* ‘an ape of nature,’ that is, a bad imitator of nature especially when the same attribution of *symia naturae* has a positive connotation when it is used to compare the truth of poetry with philosophy, and the creativity of poets. “Poetas esse symias confitebor,” he writes, to assert that poets are not just apes of philosophers. In his passionate defense of poetry, Boccaccio writes that “the poet tries with all his powers to set forth in noble verse the effects, either of Nature herself, or of her eternal and unalterable operation,” and in doing so, he is simply distinguishing the truth of poetic fictions against the “forgery of reality” of painting and sculpture (*Gen.* 14.17.5).<sup>34</sup> Boccaccio delivers also in the *De casibus* a passionate defense of the sublime creative audacity of poetry, second only to Scripture, since both reveal the arcana of the divine mind. Scripture revealed them to the prophets beneath the veil of figures (“sub figurarum tegmine reseravit”), and poetry through the veil of images (“sub figmentorum velamina”).<sup>35</sup> This conviction of the superiority of the

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Østrem 2007.

<sup>34</sup> See Janson 1952, 239, and Gittes 2008, 130 and note 51. The ape as metaphor appears in Curtius 1953, 538–40.

<sup>35</sup> *De casibus* 3.14.13.

mimetic qualities of poetry is consistent with what he says in the *De mulieribus claris*: “Zeuxis [...] did what he could, and what he left to posterity was *but a simulacrum* of her celestial grace,” while “more ingenious authors invented the myth that Helen was the daughter of Jupiter transformed into a swan” (37.6, italics ours). Also, when he writes in the *Esposizioni*: “because these characteristics of hers were so exquisite, poets well knew that their pens were unequal to her description” (*Esp.* 5.lit.106), Boccaccio is assigning to poets, and to himself, the same “officium” as mother nature, since they — just like nature — “recreate divine creation,” to use T. Barolini’s definition.<sup>36</sup> An investigation into the references and metaliterary allusions to painting in Dante’s *Commedia* and Boccaccio’s works shows their belief that *pingere* is a mere imitation that relies on the skills that the painter acquires over time, while *ingere* requires an intellectual ability (*facultas*), which likens them to God the Maker.<sup>37</sup>

In order to explore where Boccaccio stands in the debate regarding painters’ and poets’ types of mimesis, I started from his commentary to *Inferno* 5.64, where he proposes through the verb *vedere* a reflection upon the implicit aesthetic categories of mimesis, as poets and painters attempt to represent Helen’s divine likeness. Let’s look at a similar case where Dante is intent on describing the celestial beauty of Beatrice:

ma or convien che mio seguir desista  
più dietro a sua bellezza, *poetando*,  
come a l’ultimo suo ciascun artista.

(*Par.* 30.31–33, our italics)

At this point in *Paradiso*, Dante recognizes that his verse description (*poetando*) of the beauty of a divine creature like Beatrice has reached its limit, not to be understood as a limitation of poetry itself, or that “every art has its borders” (as G. Tamburini simply puts it<sup>38</sup>), but the opposite, inasmuch as the verb “desista” (especially in rhyme position with “artista”), points towards the fallacy of those *meccanici* who are not poets like him. We are invited to perceive the irony inherent in these verses: poetry has no ends.<sup>39</sup> “Poetando” is tantamount to “ingendo” ‘representing the divine’<sup>40</sup> (as the ancients did when inventing with their fables the miraculous appearance of Helen in a way that Zeuxis could not).<sup>41</sup> It is again about *ingere* and *pingere* as the poet reinforces the strong link between painting and poetry in *Purgatorio* 32, which contains numerous references to the act of seeing. The canto opens with the Pilgrim’s eyes fixed on Beatrice and moves from there to the idea that painters need a model for their image-making, and poets do not.

With this in mind, let’s now return to *Purgatorio* 32.64–69. Dante falls asleep while hearing an otherworldly melody and says that if he could describe (*ritrar*) how Argus’ eyes closed during Mercury’s song of the loves of Syrinx and Pan, he would use that as a model, like a painter, to describe his own nodding off, but the truth is, as the Anonymous Lombard points out, “non est pictor in mundo, qui proprie somnum pingere posset” (*ad Pg.* 32.66). Later on, Dante will tell us that he is “*figurando il paradiso*” (*Par.*

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Barolini 1992, 121–42. See also Gittes 2008, 130.

<sup>37</sup> On imitation and mimesis, see Kircher 2019–20, as well as Ascoli 1991–92 and 2011, 59–117.

<sup>38</sup> In Alighieri 2008, 515.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Morosini 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Francesco da Buti (1858–62) *ad Par.* 29.79–87.

<sup>41</sup> Boccaccio states that “to paint Helen’s likeness, Zeuxis put all he had into the work and pushed the strength of his intellect to its very limits” (*Esp.* 5.lit.104).

23.61)<sup>42</sup> through the vocabulary of painting: *ritrarre*, *pintor*, *esempio*, *pingere*, *disegnare* (cf. *disegnare* and *colorare* in *Pg.* 22.74–75). All these terms connected to the art of drawing and painting refer to the art of speech, especially to poetics (e.g., Horace’s *ut pictura poesis*), as Poletto reminds us (*Com.*, *Pg.* 32.64–69). *Ritrarre*, a recurring verb also for the poet-painter of Boccaccio’s *Amorosa visione*, must be understood according to its double (pictorial as well as poetical) connotations, as in *Purgatorio* 22.64–69 and *Inferno* 2.4–6: to “describe poetically.” On “ritrarre,” Francesco da Buti chimes in, specifying that “perché ritraere è vocabolo fiorentino, che significa esemplare, doviamo sapere che *la mente del poeta che finge e compone, ritrae et assempra* dal suo semplice concetto; cioè da quel che à pensato, e mette poi fuori o con voce o con iscrittura” (*ad Inf.* 2.4–6, emphasis ours).<sup>43</sup>

When Dante says “come pintor,” he means “as a painter who makes a copy of what he sees, from a model” and “che con esempio pinga,” as beautifully put by G. Campi, “che dipinga copiando, e non d’invenzione.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, the painter does not invent *ex nihilo*, but instead reproduces. Certainly, the verse could also be interpreted as a simile that intends to say that Dante would do what the painter does as he copies from other paintings (Cf. Francesco Da Buti, *ad Pg.* 32.66), but the idea is still that the painter does not paint according to his own fantasy, a technical term for the mind’s image-receiving faculty (*facultas imaginativa*), or without a model before him. “Disegnerei,” on the other hand, in this context echoes Boethius’ line “drawing with words” ‘designare verbis’ (*Cons. Phil.* 3.1.7), and resonates in Panfilo’s song, as he, failing to describe in words, sketches with his hand the joy and love that he is experiencing (*Dec.* 8.concl.11). It is Francesco da Buti who, again, skillfully brings out the difference established by Dante between what drawing with words and “co lo stilo ne le taulelle” ‘with the stylus on panels’ (*ad Pg.* 32.68), as painters do. However, he fails to understand Dante’s verse “Però trascorro a quando mi svegliai” (v. 70), that he reads as “I Dante will be able to describe how I fell asleep, and even how I woke up,” rather than “since I am not able to portray well my nodding off, therefore I move along to when I awoke.”<sup>45</sup>

In a similar situation (the Pilgrim hearing a sweet song in *Paradiso* 24), the poet chose again to turn to the technical language of painting to speak about poets. This time it is not a question of not being able to describe how he fell asleep, since he is awake and, therefore, he remembers, but how ineffable that song was. He invites the reader to imagine its nuances by referring to what painters do with colors:

Però salta la penna e non lo scrivo:  
ché l’imagine nostra a cotai pieghe,  
non che ’l parlare, è troppo color vivo.  
(*Par.* 24.25–27)

It seems that Dante would resort to the painter’s brush to introduce the reader to the nuances (“pieghe”) of the song, as he will with the mystery of

<sup>42</sup> In other words, Dante “repraesenta[t] poetice sub figura quia de rei veritate non est hic” (Benvenuto da Imola *ad Par.* 33.61–63, in Alighieri 2008). “Figurando paradiso” brings to mind Monciatti 2014–15, which we recommend, and Marcheschi 2004.

<sup>43</sup> “Because ‘to portray’ [*ritraere*] is a Florentine word that means to describe [*esemplare*], we must know that the poet’s mind, which *creates and composes*, essentially *portrays* and *imitates* his simple concept. That is, that puts in writing or orally what he has thought” (italics ours).

<sup>44</sup> In Alighieri 1888, *ad Pg.* 32.67ff.

<sup>45</sup> Bosco and Reggio note that if Ovid did not describe the sleep of Argus (*Met.* 1.568–747), although he was dealing with an objective representation, Dante could not possibly describe his own sleep, since when one is asleep, there is no awareness and no memory of what happened (*ad Pg.* 32.69 in Alighieri 1979).

Incarnation that is conveyed through a sophisticated painting metaphor, beautifully studied by E. Fenzi<sup>46</sup>:

dentro da sé, del suo colore stesso,  
mi parve pinta de la nostra effige:  
per che 'l mio viso in lei tutto era messo.  
(*Par* 33.130–32)

How could Dante render the double nature of Christ? He draws with words “three circles” of the same color absolutely similar to one another, and in the second one, to indicate the human nature of Christ, he claims to see *nostra effige* painted.<sup>47</sup> This painting (*pinta*), however, can be trusted as true since Dante sees not an image of God but God Himself. It is a case where painting is the truth itself, but this happens only in *Paradiso*.

All these pictorial references, if read in the context of the ‘fabrication’ of the poem, that is, how Dante rigorously composes “according to artifice” (*Pg.* 12.23), using the instruments and effects of art, are functional to the poet’s metapoietic urge to address the intellectual quality of his poetry and the freedom of creation. The blacksmith does not enjoy the same privilege and has to work with iron when it is not too hot<sup>48</sup> as much as the citharist whose trembling or stiff hand may ultimately affect the expected sound, as Jacopo della Lana explains.

Qui dà tale esempio che tal difetto avviene come a quello artista, che ha nello intelletto e nella mente l’abito dell’arte, ma non li corrispondono li organi a compiere ciò, come in lo citarista che ha il sonare, nota, o stampita, o danza in la mente, e non ha sufficiente mano a potere fornire le parti che è difettiva o in tremito o in durezza.

(Jacopo della Lana *ad Par.* 13.77–78)<sup>49</sup>

The artist is subject to physical constraints, including the resistance imposed by the materials themselves, a reason for which sometimes a work will fail the “intenzion de l’arte” (*Par.* 1.128), the image or the simile of the thing prefigured in his fantasy.<sup>50</sup> In this regard, trying to justify the presence of Cimabue among those who enjoyed worldly fame, the *Ottimo* commentator portrays this painter as a braggart who would not take criticism. If others or he himself saw a defect in his work, he would immediately abandon his project, showing a lack of awareness about the contingent factors involved in his craft, factors that ultimately challenge the fulfilment of Cimabue’s intention, despite his skill and talent (*ad Pg.* 11.94–96 in Alighieri 1995b).

The artist’s difficulty in the completion of his craft is unknown to God the painter Who is free from the yoke of necessity and needs no such help. In reference to the representation of the Eagle’s head by the glorified spirits in the sphere of Jupiter, God is described as “Quei che dipinge lì non ha chi ’l guidi” (*Par.* 18.109).<sup>51</sup> In the tale that follows Giotto’s in the *Decameron*, Boccaccio ironically overturns Dante’s metaphor of God as *Deus artifex*, the most miraculous artificer, in the definition of Johannes Butzbach (*De praeclaris picturae professoribus*, 1505). God, the first artist, made Adam “in

<sup>46</sup> See E. Fenzi 2018.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Malagoli 1967.

<sup>48</sup> Anonimo Fiorentino *ad Par.* 1.28.

<sup>49</sup> “Here he gives an example of what defect is by referring to the defect of the artist who has in his intellect and in his mind the habit of the art, but he does not have the organs apt to carry it out, as the citharist who has the sound, the notes or *stampita*, or dance in his mind, but he cannot fulfill the defective parts because of his trembling or stiff hand.”

<sup>50</sup> In order to explain that defects are to be attributed to the material itself and not to God, Jacopo della Lana draws a parallel between the act of creation by God, “sommo artifice,” and a blacksmith: the intention (Aristotle’s “causa finalis”) is in the mind of the creator who needs the tool (the hammer) and its component materials (the iron).

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Moore 1970, 138.

His image and likeness” (as *imago Dei*), and His (via Christ’s) likeness was impressed upon the veil of the Veronica (the true icon). Scalza quips that He, unpracticed, was not yet the perfect painter. “Domenedio gli fece quando apparava a dipignere” (6.6.15), an argument he makes to explain the unattractiveness of the Baronci family. (We will return later to this story, which is essential in capturing the role of Giotto in Day 6 and in Boccaccio’s poetics.) God is the creator of nature, which is the mother of every art (as we read in *Inf.* 11 and *Mon.* 1.4). This is an idea that leads in turn to Thomas’ discourse on creation in *Paradiso*. The only perfect artist is God.

ma la natura la dà sempre scema,  
similmente operando a l’artista  
ch’a l’abito de l’arte ha man che trema.  
(*Par.* 13.76–78)

Here, as often in *Paradiso*, the poet turns to other forms of aesthetic and formal expressions, identifying himself with the artist whose medium, his words, are inadequate to the spectacle he is witnessing, and pleads with the reader interactively ‘to imagine,’ a verb that is purposefully repeated three times in the very opening of the canto, what he is describing (“Imagini, chi bene intender cupe,” v. 1; “imagini quel carro a cu’ il seno,” v. 7); “imagini la bocca di quel corno,” v. 10). The reader is asked to fashion an image in his mind of what he saw (“quel ch’i’ or vidi – e ritegna l’image,” v. 2), which are the two circles of souls making a new constellation (*segni*).

Art is represented here together with nature as ‘defective’ since the mortal artist fails in comparison to the only perfect artist, God. While God performs creation directly (as He made Adam and Christ), nature and art must work with the preexisting elements: the “wax” of subsequent creation. However, as E. Moore and C. Cahill note, Dante contradicts the verses of *Inferno* 11.103–05 in Thomas’ discourse on creation in *Paradiso* 13.73–78.<sup>52</sup> He admit that all productions of nature fall short of the divine ideal of perfection, for nature’s works are like those of an artist who had the feeling for his art, but a faltering hand.<sup>53</sup>

“Filosofia,” mi disse, “a chi la ’ntende,  
nota, non pure in una sola parte,  
come natura lo suo corso prende  
dal divino ’ntelletto e da sua arte;  
e se tu ben la tua Fisica note,  
tu troverai, non dopo molte carte,  
che l’arte vostra quella, quanto pote,  
segue, come ’l maestro fa ’l discente;  
sì che vostr’arte a Dio quasi è nepote.  
(*Inf.* 11.97–105)

Referring to Aristotle’s *Physics* (book 4), Virgil reiterates the philosopher’s notion that *ars imitatur naturam in quantum posset*, as the pupil does with respect to the teacher.<sup>54</sup> At this point in *Paradiso*, nature and art are downgraded from being daughter and granddaughter of God since both nature and art are defective: nature is imperfect in its generating act, like the artist who knows well his art’s technique and has an inclination for it (*disposizione*) but whose hand fails to realize perfectly what he clearly has in mind. Cahill claims that “Thomas’ initial presentation of Nature as a perfect maker of God’s creation is intentionally contradicted here, in order to account for the difference we find all around us in the world. She also finds that the image of the artist’s trembling hand reflects that of Daedalus as

<sup>52</sup> Cahill 1996.

<sup>53</sup> Moore 1970, 140.

<sup>54</sup> Ascoli 2009.

portrayed by Ovid (*Met.* 8.211).<sup>55</sup> Daedalus stands out as an inventor and *artifex* (though he remains for Dante “quello / che, volando per l’aere, il figlio perse,” *Par.* 8.125–26) in relation to the limitations of the mechanical arts.<sup>56</sup> In this respect, G. B. Gelli justly pointed out that “sono propriamente l’arti; e quelle che si esercitano col corpo, per essere egli servo de l’anima, come son le meccaniche e fabbrili, si chiaman servili, e quelle che si esercitano con l’animo e con l’intelletto, come sono le scienze, si chiamano liberali” (Gelli 1887, 1:46).<sup>57</sup>

A long but insightful note by the Anonimo Fiorentino throws more light on the equation made by Virgil between art and nature as he specifies that “painters make the effort to imitate nature as much as they can in their paintings,” since image-makers are the *artifici meccanici*:

l’arte, in quantunque ella può, imita e seguita la natura; però che la natura fa gli uomini, fa gli animali, le piante etc. et gli artefici, pogniamo esemplo ne’ dipintori, et così negli altri artefici meccanici, i dipintori dipingono gli uomini, gli animali, le piante; nelle quali pitture egliono si sforzono d’imitare la natura in quanto possono; ciò è di fare la pittura simigliante, nel viso et nell’altre parti, agli uomini ch’è fatto la natura: et così i calzolaj in fare le scarpette simiglianti al piè; gl’orafi in fare le corone simiglianti al capo, ciò è che la larghezza loro sia appunto come il capo: onde si può conchiudere che l’arte sia nipote di Dio, però che la natura è figliuola di Dio; ché Iddio è prima causa, et la natura è causata da Dio, ciò è fatta da lui. Et noi diciamo quante volte una cosa fa un’altra, esemplo: l’uomo fa il figliuolo, l’uomo è padre del figliuolo, però che l’ha fatto; così Iddio fa la natura: la natura è figliuola di Dio; et l’arte, però che seguita la natura in fare le cose simiglianti alla natura, è l’arte causata dalla natura, et per conseguente è figliuola della natura: seguita adunque che l’arte, se è figliuola della natura, et la natura è figliuola di Dio, che l’arte sia nipote di Dio. (*ad Inf.* 11.101–05, emphasis ours)

The Florentine commentator is partly indebted to Boccaccio who, in his *Esposizioni* on Dante’s *Commedia* and not without a certain air of superiority, continues to contend after humiliating Zeuxis in his vain attempt to depict Helen’s marvelous beauty that painting is an outcome of physical ‘efforts’ merely to reproduce what nature has created:

Sforzasi il dipintore che la figura dipinta da sé, la quale non è altro che un poco di colore con certo artificio posto sopra una tavola, sia tanto simile, in quello atto ch’egli la fa, a quella la quale la natura ha prodotta, e che naturalmente in quello atto si dispone che essa possa gli occhi de’ riguardanti o in parte o in tutto ingannare, faccendo di sé credere che ella sia quello che ella non è; similmente colui che farà una statua; e il calzolaio, quanto più conforme farà la scarpetta al piede, miglior maestro è reputato: intendendo sempre in questo che, medianti questi essercizi e le forze degli ingegni, seguiti quel frutto all’artefice, che a noi seguita dell’operazion della natura, la quale in ogni sua operazione per alcuni mezzi, sì come per istrumenti a ciò atti, è fruttuosa. (*Esp.* 11.lit.69–70, italics ours)

Among other things, Boccaccio insists that “painting is nothing other than a bit of colour placed with a certain amount of technique upon a panel,” a concept that returns in his annotations about the decorations on Geryon, the result of the Turks’ excellent manual skills: “the best masters of the craft,” capable of such magnificently woven decoration on cloth, “that there is no painter who could use a brush to make anything similar, not to mention more beautiful” (*Esp.* 17.8, emphasis ours).

<sup>55</sup> Hollander *ad Par.* 13.67–78 in Alighieri 2002–07, discussing Cahill 1996, 268 note 25.

<sup>56</sup> Cahill 1996, 256–65.

<sup>57</sup> “Arts are those carried out through the body, the body being a servant of the soul, as the mechanical arts are called subservient, and those exercised through the intellect, like the sciences, are called liberal arts.”

Is Boccaccio sharing Calandrino’s idea of painting as “to daub walls all the time like a lot of snails” (“tutto dì a schiccherare le mura a modo che fa la lumaca,” 8.3.29)? Certainly, the mechanical nature of painting brings up one more reason for Boccaccio to praise the poets’ poverty compared to making a living as an artist: “poets have always been poor [...], for money-getting is *not* the function and end of the speculative sciences” (Osgood 23), as opposed to the “*mechanicorum artificum, seu feneratorum, [...] in hunc finem omnis tendit intentio, qui, ut cito veniat, nil gratis penitus operantur*” (*Gen.* 14.4.3, italics ours). We know that Bruno and Buffalmacco, when not poking fun at Calandrino or Mastro Simone (8.9), stand out in 8.3 and 9.5 as actively working at making a living, even despite the climate (“quantunque il caldo fosse grandissimo,” 8.3.27) and other contingent factors, in religious as well as private spaces. What is more, in both his accounts of Helen, Boccaccio makes sure to inform us that Zeuxis was “hired at great expense” by the people of Crotona, and that Marcia “surpassed Sopolis and Dionysius, the most famous painters of her day: clear proof of this is the fact that *the pictures she painted were sold for better prices than those of other artists*” (*De mulieribus* 66.4, italics ours). For the same reason, because visual art is seen as inferior compared to the liberal arts and the sciences, Giotto uses “voi” to address Forese, but the lawyer uses “tu” to the painter, and in the *Amorosa visione*, just as in the *Commedia*, Giotto is only mentioned as part of a favorable comparison of the painter who made the frescoes, that is Boccaccio himself, whereas Dante, the only modern among ancient writers, is crowned by Lady Wisdom (4.66). As Giotto is functional to Oderisi’s suggestion that Dante will eclipse the two Guidos, as the painter in fact did with respect to Cimabue, he is only there to praise the poet-painter in the *Amorosa visione*.

*Se non scritto, almen dipinto (Pg. 33.76)*

Boethius’ notion of poets drawing with words, proves to be true of the superiority of poetry vis-à-vis the sketchiness of painting for Dante. Since his intellect is petrified and *tinto* (obscured), Beatrice asks that he carry with him at least inside *a sign* of his journey, almost like, “quasi in figure e in geroglifici” says N. Sapegno. Let’s look at these verses:

Ma perch’io veggio te ne lo ’ntelletto  
fatto di pietra e, impetrato, tinto  
sì che t’abbaglia il lume del mio detto,  
voglio anco, e se non scritto, almen dipinto  
che ’l te ne porti dentro a te per quello  
che si reca il bordon di palma cinto.

(Pg. 33.73–78)

So, Dante has to carry with him the image, the *signum* of Beatrice’s words, if not in a sculpted form (*scritto*), at least painted (*dipinto*), like the pilgrim returning from the Holy Land who brings his staff back wreathed with palm leaves to prove he has been there.

But what does it mean *se non scritto, almen dipinto*? I believe that M. Porena clarifies these verses attributed to Beatrice when he says:

Beatrice vuol dire che Dante deve portare dentro la sua memoria il preciso suono materiale delle sue parole, anche senza capirne il significato, come uno che senza capire uno scritto, e magari senza saper leggere, *trascriva copiando materialmente la forma delle lettere e delle parole, come se dipingesse (la cosa doveva capitare effettivamente coi miniatori che trascrivevano parole latine)*. Una distinzione simile a quella fatta qui tra scritto e dipinto, vedila in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* I, II, 7, ove è detto che

l'imitazione del discorso umano che fanno certi uccelli, poiché essi non capiscono quello che significa, è *sonus non locutio*. (ad Pg. 33.73–78 in Alighieri 1964, italics ours)<sup>58</sup>

Dante entrusts to Beatrice Isidore's notion of the word as a *signum*, and letters as an *iter*, a road to follow for those who read:

Litterae autem sunt indices rerum, signa verborum, quibus tanta vis est, ut bonis dicta absentium sine voce loquantur. [Verba enim per oculos non per aures introducunt.] Usus litterarum repertus propter memoriam rerum. Nam ne oblivion fugiant, litteris allingantur. In tanta enim rerum varietate nec disci audiendo poterant omnia, nec memoria contineri. *Litterae autem dictae quasi legiterae, quod iter legentibus praestent.*

Letters are tokens of things, the signs of words, and they have so much force that the utterances of those who are absent speak to us without a voice [for they present words through the eyes, not through the ears]. The use of letters was invented for the sake of remembering things, which are bound by letters lest they slip into oblivion. With so great a variety of information, not everything could be learned by hearing, nor retained in the memory. Letters (*littera*) are so called as if the term were *legitera*, because they provide a road (*iter*) for those who are reading (*legere*). (*Etym.* 1.3.1–3).

Isidore clearly states that the use of letters was invented for the sake of remembering things, which are bound by letters lest they slip away into oblivion: writing is about memory (poetry's eternal power, thanks to letters and the transmission of books) and it is for this reason that Boccaccio celebrates Carmenta. See how she is portrayed in the act that defines her, teaching the Latin alphabet that she invented [Fig. 3], and that contributes to the perpetual remembrance of things that we cannot see. The passage in celebration of the eternal power of the Latin alphabet is too beautiful not to share it here:

Quibus delinita, facultatum omnium infinita splendent volumina, hominum gesta Deique magnalia perpetua servantur memoria ut, que vidisse nequivimus ipsi, eis opitulantis, cognoscamus. His vota nostra transmittimus et aliena cum fide suscipimus, his amicitias in longinquo iungimus et mutuis responsionibus conservamus. He Deum — prout fieri potest — nobis describunt; he celum terrasque et maria et animantia cuncta designant; nec est quod queras possibile quod ab his vigilans non possis percipere; harum breviter opere quicquid amplitudine mentis complecti atque teneri non potest, fidissime commendatur custodie. Que tamen, etsi aliis ex his nonnulla contingent, nil tamen nostris commendabile aufertur. (*De mulieribus* 27.14)

[A]n infinite number of books on all subjects has rendered the Latin alphabet illustrious: in its letters is preserved a perpetual remembrance of divine and human accomplishments so that with the help of Latin characters we know things which we cannot see. In Latin characters we send our requests and receive with trust those made by other people. Through these characters we enter into friendship with people far away and preserve it by reciprocal correspondence. Latin characters describe God for us insofar as that can be done. They show forth the sky, the earth, the seas, and all living things; there is nothing open to investigation that one cannot understand by careful study of its letters. In short Latin characters enable us to entrust to faithful guardianship whatever the mind cannot embrace and retain. Nor does the fact that a number of the same advantages may be true of other alphabets detract in the least from the merits of our own.

Isidore's notion of the word as painted figure, one that receives sounds and meaning through the intellectual activity of the poetry that informs it, is also

<sup>58</sup> For a distinction similar to that which is made here between writing and painting, see *De vulgari eloquentia* 1.2.7, where it is stated that the imitation of human speech performed by certain birds, since they do not understand the meaning of it, is "*sonus non locutio*" (italics ours).



found in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa theologiae* where he quotes Aristotle's notion in the *De anima* (3.4 429b29) that the soul initially "est sicut tabula rasa, in qua nihil est pictum" 'like a tabula rasa that has nothing painted on it.'<sup>59</sup> Dante, through Beatrice, turns to the language of figural depiction, but once again to make contrasts with the written form, which is instead an operation of the intellect. However, Isidore indicts painting as a material falsehood: "a picture is an image representing the appearance of some object, which, when viewed, leads the mind to remember" (*Etym.* 19.16.1). Beatrice wants Dante to bring with him her teaching: the light of her words (*lume*), if not sculpted (*scritto*) in his mind in comprehensible and exact characters, at least sketched (*dipinto*) as a concrete proof of his journey, like the pilgrim coming back from Jerusalem brings his "staff" wreathed with palm leaves. Beatrice's figurative language of the *signum* returns in Dante's reply to her (vv. 79–81), when he specifies that words are imprinted as images ("figura impressa") in his brain, as a *suggello* in good wax, that retains informative images.

Giacomo Poletto's note about Dante's use of visual arts in its relation to writing is very illuminating: "for Dante, as a sculpture or a painting (made with the goal to "pigliar occhi per aver la mente," *Par.* 27.92), are "visibile parlare" (*Pg.* 10.95), in the same way each word is a sculpted sign of the thing (*ad Pg.* 33.79–81 in Alighieri 1894). It is Dante's idea that the nature of images is to be unclear and therefore to deceive the eyes of the mind; thus, they are less reliable than the written word. This contrast shows that Beatrice is content that Dante should return with even a sketchy image of what she has said, if not sculpted within his mind, then perhaps "vaguely obscured," reiterating in a way the superiority of words over images, words being well marked, with clear characters" (*scritto*), while "painted" (*dipinto*) things can be just sketched and therefore "confusing," as Francesco da Buti claims:

sicchè s'intenda, *almen dipinto*; cioè se non scritto, sì che s'intenda pienamente come si dè intendere la scrittura, al meno scritto per sì fatto modo che *s'intenda confusamente come fa la dipintura.* (*ad Pg.* 33.79–81, italics ours)

In *Paradiso* the poet addresses concerns about how physical vision can be misleading, when by confusing true substances for reflected images in 3.19–24 [Fig. 4], he finds the opportunity to differentiate himself from Narcissus (*Met.* 3.339ff.), in such a way that the Narcissus trope serves the poet's journey of knowledge. We will return to Dante and Narcissus, to say for now that *Paradiso*, in fact, opens with Beatrice making the association for the pilgrim, that his ability to discern beyond the surface of things, relies on his eyes: he will be able to understand if he is able to see (*vedresti*), once he removes his "falso imaginar," the "false notions" (*Par.* 1.88–90) that he has formed through the errors of the sight "all lost to knowledge and truth," as Dante states in his *Rime*<sup>60</sup>:

Io presi tanto smarrimento allora,  
ch'io chiusi li occhi vilmente gravati,  
e furon sì smagati  
li spirti miei, che ciascun giva errando;  
e poscia imaginando,  
di caunoscenza e di verità fora,

<sup>59</sup> *Summa theologiae* 1<sup>a</sup> art. 79.2, resp. (trans. ours). Cf. also Francesco da Buti *ad Pg.* 33.73–81.

<sup>60</sup> Dante experiences the same in the fiction of the *Vita nova* as in "Donna pietosa" (23): the illusionary nature of the vision is reiterated through "vano imaginare," "erronea" or "vana fantasia." For a metaliterary reading of Boccaccio's *Filocolo*, see Morosini 2004, 48–59; cfr. also Morosini 1999, 183–203.

visi di donne m'apparver crucciati,  
 che mi dicean pur: – Morra'ti, morra'ti –  
 (*Vita nova* 14.22 [Barbi 23])<sup>61</sup>

Finally, painting represents actions for the physical eye, and therefore often risks confusing the viewer who misunderstands images, while the verse “almen dipinto,” calls dialectically for a recognition of the ethical responsibility of the poets who are not liars. Poetic fiction has nothing in common with any variety of falsehood, for it is not a poet’s purpose to deceive anybody with his invention, on the contrary as he states in several instances of *Gen.* 14, and about Dante’s *Commedia* and in general poetry which has “sotto alle dure cortecce salutevoli [...] dolcissimi ammaestramenti” *under its rough bark* healthful and extremely pleasant lessons’ (*Esp.* 1.lit.77): poetry is useful and beyond the surface there is truth for those who read it with the ‘proper’ eyes.<sup>62</sup>

### *Giotto, Deus the imperfect artifex, and the Poet-Philosopher*

The distinction in Beatrice’s words between *scritto* and *dipinto* makes even more alluring an investigation into *pingere* (imitate) and *fingere* (create) as an approach to *Decameron* 6.5. Beginning with the novella’s rubric, the reader learns that what is at stake are “appearances” and speaking well, the latter ability fitting in Day 6, dedicated precisely to the art of speech.

It is Benvenuto da Imola again who recognizes in Giotto a functional figure of the debate about *fingere* and *pingere*, as he relates an anecdote that I consider a gloss to *Pg.* 11.94–96, and to *Dec.* 6.5 and 6. Let’s read it:

Et hic nota, lector, quod poeta noster merito facit commendationem Giotti, ratione civitatis, ratione virtutis, ratione familiaritatis. De isto namque Giotto faciunt mentionem et laudem alii duo poetae florentini, scilicet Petrarca et Boccacius, qui scribit, quod tanta fuit excellentia ingenii et artis huius nobilis pictoris, quod nullam rem rerum natura produxit, quam iste non repraesentaret tam propriam, ut oculus intuentium saepe falleretur accipiens rem pictam pro vera. Accidit autem semel quod dum Giottus pingeret Paduae, adhuc satis juvenis, unam cappellam in loco ubi fuit olim theatrum, sive harena, Dantes pervenit ad locum: quem Giottus honorifice receptum duxit ad domum suam, ubi Dantes videns plures infantulos eius summe deformes, et, ut cito dicam, simillimos patri, petivit: egregie magister, nimis miror, quod cum in arte pictoria dicamini non habere parem, unde est, quod alienas figuras facitis tam formosas, vestras vero tam turpes! Cui Giottus subridens, praesto respondit: Quia pingo de die, sed fingo de nocte. Haec responsio summe placuit Danti, non quia sibi esset nova, cum inveniatur in Macrobio libro Saturnalium, sed quia nata videbatur ab ingenio hominis. Iste Giottus vixit postea diu; nam mortuus est in MCCCXXXVI. Et sic nota, quod Giottus adhuc tenet campum, quia nondum venit alius eo subtilior, cum tamen fecerit aliquando magnos errores in picturis suis, ut audivi a magnis ingeniis. Ista ars pingendi et sculpendi habuit olim mirabiliores artifices apud graecos et latinos, ut patet per Plinium in naturali historia. (Benvenuto da Imola, *ad Pg.* 11.94–96)

As Benvenuto chose to adapt Macrobius’ joke about Mallius (*Saturn.* 2.2.10), a famous painter in Rome, and the writer Geminus into a hilarious anecdote that fits well with Giotto and Dante, he relates that when the painter was in Padua working in the Arena Chapel, Dante paid him a visit. When Dante sees that Giotto’s sons looked as ugly as their father, he says: “Great master, since you are said to have no equal in the art of painting, I greatly wonder how it is that you make the appearance of others so attractive while your family is so dreadful?” Giotto quickly responded “Quia pingo de die, sed fingo de nocte,” “I paint during the day and I create at night.”

<sup>61</sup> “Donna pietosa e di novella etate,” vv. 35-42.

<sup>62</sup> For bibliography on the subject of mirrors and optical theory, see Saiber 2018 and Gilson 2000.

Wilson maintains that here “Giotto is the emblem of getting ahead, of an artist making his mark, and not merely competing against his own standards by outstripping others in painting, as Dante did in verse,”<sup>63</sup> referring to Dante’s Giotto to express feelings of professional rivalry with Guido Cavalcanti, but I would argue that the painter in Benvenuto’s eyes does not look good either, as he adapts Macrobius’ joke through the *Decameron*.

Benvenuto da Imola’s short account leads us to think that for 6.5 and 6 Boccaccio had in mind *Saturnalia* 2.10, first reported by a modern in Petrarch’s *Memorandarum libri* (2.48, 1343–45). Many factors lead us to read these two stories together, as one discussion of the fallacy of appearances and the superiority of creation over imitation, and therefore poetry over painting. Benvenuto, who does not hide his preference for the ancient painters, appreciates Giotto more for his verbal than drawing skills, as he shows by adding this comment: “Haec responsio summe placuit Danti, non quia sibi esset nova, cum inveniatur in Macrobio libro Saturnalium, sed quia nata videbatur ab ingenio hominis” ‘Dante enjoyed the answer, not because he had never heard it before, since it can be found in Macrobius’ *Saturnalia*, but because it was prompted by the vivacious wit of the painter.’ Dante was very pleased with Giotto’s answer because it proved to him that the painter eventually recognized that they were acting out Macrobius’ joke. Giotto is presented as a fine speaker also by the Anonymous Florentine who is the only one to report a couple of anecdotes about the two main pricy and notable mistakes the painter made as an architect when he in 1334 was trusted to design the marble bell tower at Santa Reparata, now Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence, a disappointment after which he got sick and died.<sup>64</sup> On the same occasion, the ancient commentator on Dante’s *Commedia*, tells of the exchange between him and a cardinal who was a vicar of the Roman Church in Bologna. One day the cardinal found Giotto painting the miter of a bishop and asked why, since bishops normally do not have one, and why the miter had two horns. Giotto answered that two horns indicate that any religious authority, from priest to bishop, who carries a miter is supposed to know the Old and New Testament. The cardinal was not happy with Giotto’s answer and asked him the meaning of two ribbons hanging behind

<sup>63</sup> Wilson 2011, 193.

<sup>64</sup> “Giotto similmente fu dipintore, et maestro grande in quella arte, tanto che, non solamente in Firenze d’onde era nato, ma per tutta Italia corse il nome suo. Et dicesi che ’l padre di Giotto l’avea posto all’arte della lana, et ogni volta ch’egli n’andava a bottega si fermava et ponea alla bottega di Cimabue. Il padre dimandò il lanajuolo con cui avea posto Giotto com’egli facea; risposegli, egli è gran tempo ch’egli non v’era stato: trovò ultimamente ch’elli si rimanea co’ dipintori, dove la natura sua il tirava, ond’egli, per consiglio di Cimabue, il levò dall’arte della lana, et poselo a dipingniere con Cimabue. Divenne gran maestro, et corse in ogni parte il nome suo; et molte dell’opere sue si truovono, non solamente in Firenze, ma a Napoli et a Roma et a Bologna. Et dicesi che, oltre all’arte del dipigniere, egli fu intendente et valente et eloquente uomo: et dipigniendo a Bologna una cappella, il Cardinale che a quel tempo era Legato et Vicario della Chiesa in Bologna, andando spesso a vederlo, gli giovava di ragionare con lui: et facendo un dì et dipigniendo un Vescovo, et facendogli la mitria, il Cardinale, per udirlo, il dimandò un dì per che a’ vescovi si faceva la mitria, et che volevon dire quelle due corna della mitria. Giotto gli rispose: Signore et padre reverendo, voi il sapete; ma poi che voi volete udirlo da me, queste due corna significano et dimostrano che chiunque tiene luogo di vescovo, o d’altro cherico che porti mitria, egli debbe sapere il Testamento vecchio et il nuovo. Il cardinale, non contento a questa risposta, che gli piacque, il dimandò che vogliono dire quelle due bende che si pongono pendenti dirietro alla mitria? Giotto, accorgendosi ch’egli avea diletto di lui, et ch’egli l’uccellava, disse: Queste due bende significano ch’è Pastori d’oggi che portano mitria, non sanno né il Testamento vecchio né il nuovo, et però l’hanno gettate dirietro. Compose et ordinò il campanile di marmo di santa Riparata di Firenze; notabile campanile et di gran costo. Commissevi due errori, l’uno che non ebbe ceppo da piè, l’altro che fu stretto: posesene tanto dolore al cuore, ch’egli si dice ch’egli ne ’nfermò et morissene.”

the miter. Giotto, who was aware that the cardinal was trying to make fun of him, said: “These two ribbons coming down the miter, are meant to say that the new pastors of the Church do not know the Old and New Testament; this is the reason why they have it always falling behind the miter.”

Still, there is something unique about Benvenuto’s adaptation of Macrobius’ anecdote, since it sheds light on Boccaccio’s appreciation for Giotto as a “bellissimo favellatore” ‘fine speaker,’ more than as a painter, a quality that he uses to make the image-maker aware of the superficiality of his *pingere*. Giotto’s verbal skill and awareness about painting, leads him to make the statement to Forese about not putting trust in what the lawyer sees, while the next story stresses the difference between creation and imitation: conceiving children (*fingis*) is not the same thing as painting figures (*pingis*).<sup>65</sup> Boccaccio, goes further than Macrobius, sparing no one: he makes Giotto, the painter, responsible for telling the truth about the falsehood of his own art when he tells Forese not to trust appearances, as well as using it to denounce the corrupt habit of men of law like Forese, who should base their verdicts on reported facts, a motif that continues in an ironic key in the following story.

“Giotto, a che ora venendo di qua allo ’ncontro di noi un forestiere che mai veduto non t’avesse, credi tu che egli credesse che tu fossi il miglior dipintor del mondo, come tu se”? A cui Giotto prontamente rispose: “Messere, credo che egli il crederebbe allora che, guardando voi, egli crederebbe che voi sapeste l’abici?” (*Dec.* 6.5.14–15)

In the *Chançon Giotti pintori de Florentia* attributed to Giotto,<sup>66</sup> the same invitation from the painter concerns the importance of opening our eyes and seeing the truth concealed behind what is manifest. In the poem, first brought to general attention by Friedrich von Ruhmor in 1827, Giotto stresses the need to go beyond the signs (the *signa*, or the superficial, literal meaning). He claims in his tirade against poverty that, even if God praises it, one needs to remove the blindfold and see beyond:

Guarda che ben s’ intenda,  
ché sue parole son molto profonde,  
ed in lor hanno doppio intendimento.  
[...]  
Però ’l tuo viso sbenda,  
e guarda ’l ver che dentro vi s’asconde.<sup>67</sup>

The problem with Forese is centered on Giotto’s words: the “abici” as Forese’s polyptoton “credi tu che egli credesse che tu fossi.” Boccaccio purposely aims to mock linguistically the lawyer whose confused status is rendered through his rambling, reverse the elevated status of the judge and protonotary Pier delle Vigne that Dante had anticipated with the verse “cred’io ch’ei credette ch’io credesse” (*Inf.* 13.25), a verse that Hollander justly defines “the most self-consciously literary line in a canto filled with literariness” (*ad loc.*). Also, Giotto’s “abici” in reference to Forese reiterates the Isidorian notion of the word as a *signum*, while Forese’s line “credi tu che egli credesse che tu fossi” conveys the same type of confusion brought about by images, all that is “dipinto,” while books transmit past knowledge and the law that regulates civic life. Forese’s books are closed, in fact, by the artist who illustrated 6.5 in the BnF codex ms. Fr. 239 [Fig. 5], at which we shall take a closer look.

While Forese da Rabatta and Giotto are often portrayed riding in that beautiful natural scenery that the painter imitates so well [Fig. 6 and Fig. 7],

<sup>65</sup> Wilson 2011, 192.

<sup>66</sup> The poem (Florence, BML, ms. Plut. 90, inf. 47, cc. 36v–37r, and Biblioteca Riccardiana, Ricc. ms. 1717, cc. 6v–7v) can be read in Baldassari 1997, 375–77. See also Cicuto 1996b.

<sup>67</sup> “Molti son que’ che lodan povertate,” vv. 48–54 (in Baldassari 1997, 377).

the artist of ms. Fr. 239 introduces both characters in a closed space that looks like a *studiolo*, or a *cabinet*, one of those private rooms used as a study or retreat in houses and palaces of early modern Europe. The starry sky painted on the ceiling so clearly brings to mind its analogue in Giotto's fresco in the Scrovegni chapel that is quite difficult to think that the artist was making a reference to anything else. As was common, Forese's and Giotto's professions are suggested through exterior details, their robes and the objects that surround them. The artist captures the spirit of the story as he illustrates both the jurist and the painter fully involved in a debate. As they point to one another, they seem oblivious to their respective professions, as they turn their backs to the essential tools of their trades. The painter's palette and his other necessities, including a stool, identify the figure on the left as Giotto. The illuminator decided not to portray Giotto as a working professional artist, but rather as a "fine talker," a choice that becomes clear when one compares this illustration with those French manuscripts of Boccaccio's *De mulieribus* that depict Thamyris, Irene and Marcia [Figs. 8–10] who are at work in what looks like a space devoted to their craft. Thamyris sits with mixing shells and brushes on display [Fig. 8], Irene is mixing her paints on a handheld palette and applying them to the icon [Fig. 9], while Marcia, surrounded by the palette, brushes, tools and paints in various jars, is holding a mirror in one hand and with the other applying color to her self-portrait [Fig. 10 and Fig. 10a]. All these scenes exemplify what Joseph Leo Koerner recognizes in German Renaissance self-portraiture as "the powers of art and human making."<sup>68</sup> In these illuminations "the entire process of artistic creation is assembled in front of the viewer"<sup>69</sup> who sees brushes, palettes and paints as well as the working process of painting. My favorite representation of women painters is in the codex of the French translation of the *De mulieribus* kept at the New York Public Library: Thamyris is seated before an easel in an urban square, and she paints a portrait of Diana, and the finished portrait is visible on an altar through the window of a church in the middle distance. [Fig. 10b] One artist even reminds us that the artist's infinite colors (though available in natural substances) are the final product of work. We see that a man is preparing them for Thamyris in Fig. 8. In fact, the nature of colors and other forms apart from matter constitute the last section of the *De proprietatibus rerum*, as is visible in a miniature featuring the entire process of the color making technique [Fig. 11].

In the representation of Forese mentioned above, the artist conveys Boccaccio's criticism for the judge in a few details: the books lying on a bookwheel, a type of rotating bookcase that enables one to read multiple books in one location, are all closed, piled up and apparently infrequently consulted. The pen, almost invisible to the viewer, is kept in the box and there is no paper or sign of his involvement in the profession, as he is mainly occupied in chatting like all men of law (cf. *Gen.* 14.4), often speaking in vain, without checking facts as they should. A miniature illustrating Semiramis marks the difference with the lawyer Forese: she is presiding over an assembly of senators in what looks like a courtroom, on behalf of her son Antonio relying on a book, propped up and visibly open on the lectern in front of her, while two senators are featured in the act of writing or reading. The one on the left holds a magnifying glass in his left hand [Fig. 12]. The bookwheel in medieval illuminations sparks the viewer's interest in the way the artist interpreted 6.5, almost suggesting what is at stake in Day 6: books, as opposed to paintings, judging from the illustration, because all the

<sup>68</sup> Koerner 1993, 58.

<sup>69</sup> Koerner 1993, 58.

painter needs is colors. Proba and other poets in the *De mulieribus* are portrayed in the act of writing and with their books open [Fig. 13], and the author himself seems content next to codices as well [Fig. 14]. My favorite is a portrait of Boccaccio in the Spenser Collection at the New York Library: he is asleep in a gothic chamber, a book open on a lectern, and other books scattered around, as a cat chases a mouse across the room. It gives a sense of the ordinary life of the writer at work, the pen is in his hand [Fig. 14a].

Boccaccio's criticism of the unreliability of judges and the counterfeiting of painters continues into the next tale. During a debate with other friends at the house of Piero di Fiorentino, Michele Scalza, to prove his claim about the ancient heritage and nobility of the unpopular Baronci family, points out as a proof of their ugliness that, being the oldest family, not only in Florence, but in the whole world, they were created at a time when "God was still learning the rudiments of His craft, whereas He created the rest of mankind after He had mastered it," since their faces, when compared with others, are "just like the ones that are made by children when they are first learning to draw" (6.6.15). The miniature that depicts this story in the French translation of the *Decameron* [Fig. 15] brilliantly illustrates the view that painting is all about imitation and, as such, that it is a mere question of skills. This is also said about the painter Marcia who is good at what she does because she learned from a teacher or was naturally gifted (*De mulieribus* 46.6). Despite the fact that some critics claim that "the difference pointed out by Benvenuto's anecdote lies not in skill, but in the conditions under which Giotto carries out each kind of creation,<sup>70</sup> Benvenuto also proves to be glossing 6.6 in terms of completing the operation started in the previous story to put forward Macrobius' idea that the artist needs skills to paint, but no skill is required to create, since it is a natural act. Skills can be improved in time and, above all, be repeated several times, whereas creation only happens once: "freedom is indeed a decisive factor between painting and poetry. They who practice art throw off the yoke of necessity: art creates, craft replicates," as argued by D. Maleuvre.<sup>71</sup> Creation is one instant act (cf. *Par.* 21.25ff.), God created all simultaneously and in a predetermined manner: "Omnia simul facta esse per ordinem praestitutum" (Augustine, *Com. to Genesis*).<sup>72</sup>

Again, in 6.6 the tension between *fingerere* and *pingere* is at stake. Echoing Macrobius' anecdote, the story, full of legal terms, shows the dangers of trusting in appearances during the proper administration of the law. Scalza's argument is delivered at the house of Piero who is appointed as the judge of 'a debate' regarding the oldest people in the world. He is represented seated on his chair in a 'courtroom' by the artist of ms. Fr. 239 [Fig. 16]. Scalza brings evidence to his companions to win his case, basing his argument on the Baroncis' faces and comparing them to those of others, thus, once again putting into question the arbitrary and superficiality of appearances. A similar link is explicitly made by Fiammetta when she evokes Panfilo's previous tale to hint at the dangers for the community to have judges like Piero who is a parody of Forese, as they rely on appearances for their final "sentenzia" 'verdict' (8). It was a message entrusted to Tedaldo, who is a victim of the blind exercise of justice by judges when they mistake him in 3.7 for another person only because of a close resemblance. Then Tedaldo "cominciò a riguardare quanti e quali fossero gli errori che potevano cadere nelle menti degli uomini" [...] "e oltre a ciò la cieca severità delle leggi e de' rettori, li quali assai volte, quasi solliciti investigatori del vero, incrudelendo fanno il falso provare" (3.7.16). Scalza's argument in 6.6

<sup>70</sup> See Land 2009 and 1994.

<sup>71</sup> Maleuvre 2016, 73.

<sup>72</sup> Cited in Chiarini 2013, 104.

goes hand in hand with 6.5, as pointed out by Fiammetta (§3 and §15), and definitely with the *Genealogie*, where Boccaccio finds fault with lawyers, especially during a lull in their duties, to leave bench and join an informal gathering of friends (14.4.3), passing sentences without a proper *investigation* (“si laborem *inspexerint* nostrum,” 4). Through Forese and Piero on the one hand, and Giotto and God the painter on the other, Boccaccio ties the debate on  *fingere* and  *pingere* to the social and civic connotations of useful storytelling, and ultimately to the ideological project of the  *brigata* who left Florence to launch a new model of civilization.

Boccaccio’s criticism of the unreliability of ornaments and the counterfeiting of painters continues in 6.9 with the mirror-like opposite natures of 6.5 and 6, in matters related to  *fingere* and  *pingere*. As Emilia implies (4–5), Betto’s  *brigata* contrasts socially, economically and intentionally with Pampinea’s  *brigata* and the poet-philosopher. Benvenuto understood that Boccaccio makes Giotto not just a fine talker, but someone who “fabricates” fables so that the reader can put faith in what he says, and not just in what he paints, especially considering that in 6.9 it is the poet-thinker Cavalcanti who unveils the superficial world of images with the deep truth of poetry, thus sealing the question of mimesis that is at stake in Day 6. The artist who illustrated this story in the BnF’s ms. It. 63 [Fig. 17] hints at the deception of vision, as the unlettered see only the exterior and the decoration. For this reason, they are already dead and at home in the cemetery, while intellectuals, literally in Guido’s case, fly over the world of appearances and live forever. Interestingly enough, Guido is represented sitting on one of the sarcophagi, and yet his figure does not lose its vitality, since the sculptures that adorn the tomb suggest the point made in the story. As brilliantly noticed by Mulas, 6.9 does not present Guido as a poet, but a “loico” or philosopher, as in the  *Esposizioni*.<sup>73</sup> The tale deals with poetry and the ability of poets ‘to see’ beyond the surface. Let’s consider Betto’s explanation of Guido’s retort: “Signori, voi mi potete dire a casa vostra ciò che vi piace” (“Gentlemen, in your house you may say whatever you like to me” 6.9.14):

dichiara umilmente  *in verbis* la supremazia intellettuale di Guido e degli altri uomini scienziati. E intanto, sotto il velo della favola, il poeta suggerisce al filosofo che per la conoscenza degli uomini e delle cose umane l’umile favola novellistica non vale meno della più intensa riflessione filosofica.”<sup>74</sup>

Campbell notes here: “after warning his readers not to fall into a similar error, Panfilo proceeds to suggest that there is more to be discovered in Giotto’s imitative powers than the amazing but potentially misleading illusions achieved in his paintings.”<sup>75</sup> While I agree with the art historian on this point, it is more difficult to see how “Boccaccio is here defining Giotto’s painting as poetry, where poetry is understood as a veil for unseen truths.” On the contrary, one cannot forget that Boccaccio is assigning a role to Giotto in a day of the  *Decameron* dedicated to the art of speech, to assert that poetry conveys the truth in the depth of what lies behind the  *velamen* of fiction and, in way, that painting and all that is ornament do not, as proved by Guido in 6.9.

In the light of these considerations that take into account the subject of storytelling in Day 6 and its internal symmetries, it is hard to see how “as Boccaccio indicates in his praise of Giotto’s art, the understanding or truth value involved in fiction-making is founded in the imitation of nature, ‘the

<sup>73</sup> In  *Esp.* 10.lit.62, Boccaccio calls Guido “a dicitore in rima,” which still does not quite make him a poet.

<sup>74</sup> Mulas 2014, 840.

<sup>75</sup> Campbell 2010, 55.

mother and motivator of all things.”<sup>76</sup> When Scalza wins his ‘case’ by comparing the appearances of the Baronci with other people’s faces, he joins Giotto and Guido in seeing beyond the visible while his God, as the imperfect painter, ironically displays the superiority of creation over imitation. The *topos* of deception stems from the competition between art and nature, and the artist’s *inganno* of the visual senses.

“Pigliare occhi per aver la mente” (*Par.* 27.92)

In an explicit correlation between nature and art, Dante reminds us that no discussion of mimesis can disregard the relation between the mind and the eyes, or how to read the *scritto* and *dipinto*:

La mente innamorata, che donnea  
con la mia donna sempre, di ridurre  
ad essa li occhi più che mai ardea;  
e se natura o arte fé pasture  
a pigliare occhi, per aver la mente,  
in carne umana o ne le sue pitture,  
(*Par.* 27.88–93)

Petrarch, who left in his will a *Virgin and Child* by Giotto to Francesco il Vecchio da Carrara, first distinguishes the way the ignorant read images only for the pleasure of the eyes, compared to the learned who instead go beyond the falsehood of appearances as they see with the eyes of the intellect. He admired Giotto’s art because it appealed to the knowledgeable but not to the ignorant.<sup>77</sup> He noted that, although the icon’s beauty was incomprehensible to the unlettered (*ignorantes non intelligunt*), the art masters (*magistri artis*) were stupefied by it and profoundly admired it. This is a rare instance in the Trecento of a great poet commenting on a great painter<sup>78</sup> and, as Baxandall justly recognized, “humanists like Petrarch aimed at re-establishing the institution of art criticism as they went along.”<sup>79</sup>

The *Decameron*’s Giotto is Nature’s equal, such that what he does with his tools matches what she does as she moves the universe. The proof of that lies in Giotto’s paintings, so natural that they deceive the eyes. Vasari’s Giotto even fooled his master Cimabue:

Dicesi che stando Giotto ancor giovinetto con Cimabue avea fatta, una mosca tanto naturale, che tornando il maestro per seguitare il lavoro, si rimise più d’una volta a cacciarla con mano, pensando che fusse vera, prima che s’accorgesse dell’errore.<sup>80</sup>

Boccaccio of the *Amorosa visione* is the first, however, to recognize in Giotto the merit of having given back to art the *similitudo naturae* (a concept already expressed by Thomas Aquinas, following Augustine fairly closely,<sup>81</sup> of the “buona similitudine” ‘good simile’ or the ‘accurate image.’ “In a perfect image,” says Aquinas, “nothing is wanting that is to be found in that of which it is a copy” (‘nam in perfecta imagine non deest aliquid imagini, quod insit illi de quo expressa est’).<sup>82</sup> The imitation of art leads inevitably to a replica, and therefore to a fake. Augustine writes:

<sup>76</sup> Campbell 2010, 56.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Pflüger 2012.

<sup>78</sup> See also Dunlop 2008 and the recent studies Huss 2019 and 2019b.

<sup>79</sup> Baxandall 1971, 50.

<sup>80</sup> Vasari talks about the young painter Giotto who had painted a fly that seemed so natural and real that his maestro Cimabue more than once tried to flick it away with his hand (1906, 408).

<sup>81</sup> Connolly 2014, 122.

<sup>82</sup> *Summa theologiae* 1<sup>a</sup> q. 93.1, resp. (trans. ours). Cf. 1<sup>a</sup> q. 9. See also Assunto 1961, 301.



Reason: It is one thing to wish to be false and is another to be able to be true. So we cannot put human activities like comedies or tragedies or mimes and other things of that sort on the same level as the results of the activity of painters and image-makers. For a painted man, even though he is trying to look like a man, cannot be as true as what is written in the books of writers of comedy. Pictures, images, etc. do not wish to be false and are not false because of any desire of their own, but because of a certain necessity, to the extent that they follow on the aims of the maker... The only thing which helps to their being true is that in another respect they are false. [...] How could the man in the mirror be true, if it were not a false man? (*Soliloquia*, Book 2)<sup>83</sup>

The issues raised by Augustine about the falsehoods of image-makers who merely copy real things foreshadow Isidore's own conviction that painting lacks credibility and truth:

A picture is an image representing the appearance of some object, which, when viewed, leads the mind to remember. It is called 'picture' (*pictura*) as if the word were *fictura*, for it is a made-up (*fictus*) image, and not the truth. Hence also the term 'painted' (*fucatus*), that is, daubed with some artificial color and possessing no credibility or truth. Thus some pictures go beyond the substance of truth in their attention to color, and in their efforts to increase credibility move into falsehood, just as someone who paints a three-headed Chimera, or a Scylla as human in the upper half and girded with dogs' heads below. (Isidore, *Etym.* 19.16.1)

K. F. Morrison points out, "all artistic activity should engage the faculty of reason, which Aristotle considered the essential characteristic of man and his most intimate likeness to God."<sup>84</sup>

If Giotto is praised for his art as appearing convincingly 'true' according to criteria of plausibility which also earned Thamyris (56), Irene (59) and Marcia (66) a place in Boccaccio's gallery of famous women, it is in the *Amorosa visione* that the poet-painter Boccaccio attributes to himself the "buona similitudine," and the ability of imitation possessed by painters. Indeed, he surpasses artists because his images are the product of his mind, not of his hand. In Book 4, as the poet enters the room of worldly glory, he exclaims:

Humana man non credo che sospinta  
mai fosse a tanto ingegno quanto in quella  
mostrava ogni figura lì distinta,  
    eccetto se da Giotto, al qual la bella  
Natura parte di sé somigliante  
non occultò nell'atto in che suggella.

(*Am. vis.* 4.13–18)

How similar these verses are to Boccaccio's accusation against the image-makers mentioned earlier (*Esp.* 11.lit.101–105)!

Stewart rightly notes that the second redaction of the poem (1355–60), completed after the composition of the *Decameron*, "replaced in the last verse *atto* with *arte*," to make sure that the reference is made to Giotto,<sup>85</sup> and goes on to explain how *atto* in the poem is used as "operation" (*actus secundus*, in Scholastic terms), in opposition to *habitus*, attitude or acquired ability (*actus primus*), in this case the ability to paint.<sup>86</sup> Concerning the ambiguous passage on "parte di sé somigliante," Stewart, addressing the mental image that the painter has in mind, is again first to interpret the passage as "intellectual mediation presupposed by imitation."<sup>87</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Cited in Dunlop 2009, 68.

<sup>84</sup> Morrison 1982, 17.

<sup>85</sup> Stewart 1986, 258.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. *Summa theologiae* 1<sup>a</sup>2<sup>a</sup> q. 49.3 (trans. ours).

<sup>87</sup> Stewart 1986, 259.

I have shifted in a different direction as I approached these verses (13–18) of the *Amorosa visione* after analyzing a key passage in Dante’s *Convivio*, in which the poet writes that “poi chi pinge figura, se non può esser lei, non la può porre” ‘he who paints a form, if he cannot be it, cannot set it down’ (*Cv.* 4.10.10). Dante claims that whosoever paints a figure cannot paint it if he himself is not able to embody this figure, which implies that for the painter to be able to present it vividly he must put in the situation he describes, since the object of representation must already exist: “nullo dipintore potrebbe porre alcuna figura, se intenzionalmente non si facesse prima tale, quale la figura essere dee” (*Cv.* 4.10.11). The adverb *intentionally* is strictly linked to the Scholastic sense of ‘idea’ or representation of a sentient subject,<sup>88</sup> not as a real entity — as Aristotle pointed out in his *Poetics*, although Dante was not familiar with the *Poetics* directly — but as intentions (*intentiones*), as in *Cv.* 3.9.7.<sup>89</sup> In this context, *intentionally* specifically refers to the relationship of the painter with the object of his representation.

In the *Amorosa visione*, according to Watson and others, Boccaccio claims somewhat cryptically that nature imparts some of her gifts to Giotto,<sup>90</sup> but they fail to notice to what extent Boccaccio assigns that primacy to himself as a poet, like Dante in *Purgatorio* 11, since he is the one who gave shape to those figures there admired. His invention is true, inasmuch as the poet celebrates the *hand* (*mano*), or skill, and the *talent* (*ingegno*) of the painter of the *Amorosa visione*, in the same terms used by Petrarch to praise Giotto for his *manus* and *ingenium* in his *Itinerarium Syriacum* (25.2).

Even changing *atto* into *arte*, there is still an attempt on Boccaccio’s part to affirm the superiority of the poet-painter over Giotto. Moreover, Dante’s verb *suggella*, understood as to form, or inform, and so to make “similar to creation” (*Pg.* 25.95), seems to celebrate the poet who ‘forms’ through words a shape that does not exist. Lastly, “tanto ingegno” (4.14) echoes the moment when Dante as a poet-painter, praises the artist of the sculptures he sees in *Purgatorio*, thus assigning to himself the “ingegno sottile” that guided the brush of the master who created them:

Qual di pannel fu maestro di stile  
che ritraesse l’ombre e’ tratti ch’ ivi  
mirar farieno uno ingegno sottile?  
(*Pg.* 12.64–66)

The “subtlest or truest talent” that Benvenuto recognizes in Giotto, Dante sees in the mastery of the artist who shaped those forms and outlines, while Boccaccio goes even further and adopts the first person for the “sublime genius” who depicted (*ch’io disegno*) the figures on the painted walls in the *Amorosa visione*:

Non credo sia così sublime ingegno  
che intieramente potesse pensare  
le bellezze di quelle *ch’io disegno*.  
(*Am. vis.* 40.34–36. Our italics)

In the same canto, the poet sees “the beautiful Lombard” lady, whose shape he attributed to God (40.67–69), in an association that ties together the genius and mastery of both as in *Dec.* 10.concl.17, where he associated the inventor and writer of the work to God/Maestro and later continues with the same rhetorical line (“non credo”):

<sup>88</sup> See Notes to *Cv.* 4.10.11, in Alighieri 2018,

<sup>89</sup> See T. Gregory, “Intenzione” in *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, now online.

<sup>90</sup> Watson 1984, 55.

*Certo non credo che natura ed arte  
bellezze tante formasser giammai,  
quante io ne' visi a quelle vidi sparte.  
(Am. vis. 42.4–6. Our italics)*

What is more, the poet makes sure in the first of the three acrostic sonnets that open the work that the *donna gentile* to whom the *vision* is dedicated knows that he who “con sottile rima tractar parlando brevemente” is “Giovanni di Boccaccio da Certaldo,” naming himself as Dante does through Beatrice in *Pg.* 30.55. The moment when Dante the pilgrim is called by Beatrice by his name for the first and only time in the poem is the same moment at which he regains his ability to see. “La vista,” his sight, is paralyzed by a majestic force until Beatrice insists that he look more deeply in order to see her. It is the eyes of his mind that she is asking to “see well.” In fact the adverb “ben,” insistently associated with the verb to “look” is repeated twice: “*guardaci ben! ben son, ben son* Beatrice” (v. 73), as if to say that her essence (“ben son, ben son”) resides in his sight. It is by looking “well and in depth” that one finds the essence and truth of what lies on the surface, otherwise the eyes do not “see” as Dante admitted a few verses earlier (v. 37).

Since the initial sonnets of the *Amorosa visione*, Boccaccio has identified and praised under his own name this “new style,” where *new* is the key to reading the poem, composed of rhymes and images shaped, not by the hand but by the mind (*fantasia*), so as to confirm from the outset the intellectual nature of the frescoes depicted in his poetry. Boccaccio, the poet-painter, evokes Venus to inspire his poetry and asks that she make “his genius subtler” and stronger: “o Citerea / a me lo ’ngegno a l’opera presente, / ma più sottile e più in me ne crea” (2.1–6, italics ours). He portrays himself as aware, as is Dante, of the instruments and the effects of his *ars*, worked according to *ingegno* and *arte*, the same criteria shared by Thamyris, Irene and Marcia. The three women painters are all remembered for their “masterly ability” ‘artificium’ in imitating what is in nature, and for their talent ‘ingenium’ (*DMC.* 49.3). It is their “vis maxima ingenii” that gives them the power to distinguish themselves from those who spin and weave. This is even truer in Marcia’s self-portrait, as she establishes the value and meaning of her inimitable authorship through her work of art such that it manifests her style, her talent and her body.<sup>91</sup>

It is no coincidence that in canto 6 of the *Amorosa visione*, which is full of metaliterary *loci*, Boccaccio celebrates poetry through the imagery of painting as he alludes again to the skills of the painter who put those images on the walls: “O Dio ché mai Natura con sua arte / forma non diede a sì bella figura” (6.43–44). That not even nature has shaped a figure as beautiful as the one the painter depicted is reinforced here not only in the comparison between the works of poetry and nature, but also in the superiority of the former. Dante does the same when he ranks the artist who portrayed the sculptures (that is, himself) above both nature and the fifth-century sculptor Polykleitus, who was admired by all his contemporaries for his excellence:

esser di marmo candido e adorno  
d’intagli sì, che non pur Policleto,  
ma la natura li avrebbe scorno  
(*Pg.* 10.31–33. Our italics)

Hence the importance of looking for the truth beyond images and appearances, a concern that is contained in the recurring verb *affigurare*. Dante uses it only once in the *Commedia*, when he says that “to see” does not necessarily mean “to see *well*” (“così giù veggio, e niente affiguro,” *Inf.* 24.75).

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Koerner 1993, 111.

But to get a full understanding of the meaning of *ra/affigurare* in Boccaccio, we should keep in mind that his first use of it is in relation to Dante in the *Amorosa visione*:

rimirando, *vid'io di gioia pieno*  
*onorar festeggiando un gran poeta,*  
*tanto che 'l dire alla vista vien meno.*  
 Aveali la gran donna mansueta  
 posta d'alloro una corona in testa,  
 e di ciò ciascun' altra pareva lieta.  
 E vedend'io così mirabil festa,  
*per lui raffigurar* mi fei vicino,  
 fra me dicendo: “Gran cosa fia questa.”  
 Trattomi così innanzi un pocolino,  
 non conoscendol, la donna mi disse:  
 – Costui è Dante Alighier fiorentino,  
 il qual con eccellente stil vi scrisse  
 il sommo ben, le pene e le gran morti:  
 gloria fu delle Muse mentre visse,  
 né qui rifiutan d'esser sue consorti –.

(*Am. vis.* 5.73–88. Our italics)

*Affigurare* means “to discern” or “to scrutinize” with reference to knowledge passing before the eyes of the mind. As the poet stands speechless in front of the painted figure of Dante, the Guide asks: “Che pur miri? Forse credi / renderli col mirar le morte posse?” (6.23–24). This is exactly the point: seeing well with the eyes of the intellect is a way to bring the truth back to life. The poet has Orpheus’ gift, to give life back to the dead, and it is for poetic strength that he asks “che 'l mio dir d'Orfeo risembri il suono / che 'l mosse a racquistar la sua parente” (2.7–9). *Affigurare* is a crucial verb then, for any research related to Giotto since it conveys the central idea of the Boccaccio’s *Filocolo* and *Decameron*’s 6.5 to explore what lies behind a vision, in order to scrutinize the nature of what is being seen and that is the activity of becoming aware and learning.<sup>92</sup> C. Landino, the sixteenth-century commentator on Dante’s *Commedia*, provides an accurate explanation of the strict relation of this verb with the eyes of the mind: “*La mente* adunque, cioè questo lume dell’animo, *ritrarrà, cioè exprimerà et dimostrerà quello dove affisò l’occhio et per affisarlo vide et cognobbe*” (*Com. Inf.* 2.4–6, italics ours). *Affigurare* is a verb that cannot be associated with a character like Calandrino who is one of the unlettered mentioned in *Dec.* 6.5, one who cannot go beyond the *signum*, that is, the signifier or the external life of words and things, a characteristic that belongs also to Mastro Simone (*Dec.* 8.9).

The first time we meet Calandrino in *Dec.* 8.3, he is sitting inside Florence’s Baptistery “staring intently” at “the paintings and bas-reliefs of the canopy which has recently been erected above the high altar” (6). Though such a learning technique is common,<sup>93</sup> I would argue that Calandrino proves to lack visual discernment. He is only capable of seeing through his physical eyes and therefore can only grasp the signifier (how far from Florence can he find the stone, their size and colors, or the parchment filled with meaningless hieroglyphics in 9.5). Through Calandrino, Boccaccio shows the dangerous civic consequences of not seeing with the eyes of the mind, as the illuminator shows in his illustration of the story, where he is beating his wife to death. [Fig. 18] Also, as a commentator to *Inferno*, he addresses Dante’s ‘delirium’ in the same terms of seeing and knowledge:

<sup>92</sup> I make a parallel between Giotto and the composer of the *Filocolo* in Morosini 2004, 145–48.

<sup>93</sup> Cennino Cennini would recommend it to a young artist at the end of the Trecento. See Watson 1984, 46.

E così qui vuol Virgilio dire all'autore: "E perché questo, cioè il non giudicar dirittamente delle cose e però muoverne dubbio, suole avvenire dall'una delle due cose, o per ignoranza o per l'aver l'animo impedito d'altro pensiero, segue: *O ver la mente, tua, dove altrove mira?* (Esp. 11.lit.53–54).

Most important, Boccaccio continues after *Decameron* 6.5 to expose the risks of the deception that he ironically calls the "miracle of sight" in 7.9.76, a tale set not in Florence but in Greece. Novella 7.9 evolves entirely around fraudulent sight. Lydia persuades her husband that when he climbs a pear tree, what he sees with his own eyes (and which is true) is not real. [Fig. 19]

Even more interesting, after the notions on painting and its deceiving nature in 6.5 and 7.9, another warning about not scrutinizing with the eyes of my mind, comes from the scholar of 8.7 (85 and 6.2.77), who presents himself as a victim not of the widow, but of appearances. He is the thinker-artist who makes a tin image of the man whose love the widow wishes to regain §(56),<sup>94</sup> who writes a fable (§64) and who then purposely uses the ethically charged adjective "sleali" to address the vain nature of promises that clouded the eyes of his mind. Words are images, and they can be deceitful, disloyal, lest "*da intendente persona fian riguardate,*" as the Author himself declares in the Conclusion.

In Day 6 of the *Decameron* and canto 6 of the *Amorosa visione*, there are warnings about the risks of a deceitful painting, of art that is addressed only to the eyes, and has no depth. The ignorant know not how to go beyond the surface of what they see, just as the *Filocolo's* author carries out the same operation as Giotto by saving a story that had been buried by the fanciful chatter of the ignorant.<sup>95</sup> Giotto himself warns about 'reading' images when at the entrance of his Arena Chapel, where he places Prudence who, thoughtfully inspecting what her mirror displays, invites us to go cautiously beyond the surface, even as she gazes down on the observer with extreme severity.<sup>96</sup> [Fig. 20] The image matches how Dante interprets Philosophy as an: "amoroso uso di sapienza" who "se medesima riguarda, quando apparisce la bellezza de li occhi suoi a lei" (*Cv.* 4.2.18).

#### The *Amorosa visione* and the *Commedia* for an epistemology of vision

The theme of "viste frodose" 'fraudulent appearances,' is central in the *Amorosa visione* because the *viator* needs to learn how properly to understand what he sees painted on the walls, but painted stories also bring to mind Jupiter who *tricked many girls* with his *lying countenance* (23.11–12), or Laodamia and Narcissus. Laodamia is often represented as she engages an artist to make a beautiful wax likeness of her husband, Protesilaus [Fig. 21], before he is taken to die. Boccaccio takes care to make her the artist who falls in love with the image but also the victim of the confusion that images, paintings or sculptures can bring about, as in the *Filocolo* where her name is raised in the *Questioni d'amore*. In fact, Grazia calls Laodamia as a witness to prove how much more happiness is brought by the present sight — as opposed to the absent thought — of the lover. Unlike the wise Queen, Fiammetta, who prefers the long-lasting delight of the thought to the fleeting sight, believes in the sensitive and immediate pleasure given by the sight of the things we love (the more you see it, the more delight you receive).

<sup>94</sup> This echoes a myth that Boccaccio recalls in *Gen.* 10.42. A waxen image was made of the young Erigone and later hung upon a tree as a way to honor her memory. After being raped by Bacchus, Erigone had hanged herself and, since her body was never found, it cast a dark shadow upon the region.

<sup>95</sup> Morosini 2004, 145–48.

<sup>96</sup> Nolan 1990, 318.

Grazia and Fiammetta repeat Dante’s fears of enjoying the sight of Beatrice far too much (*Vita nova* 26.1) and Petrarch’s fictional dialogue between *Gaudium* and *Reason* in the *De remediis*. Following Pliny (*Hist. nat.* 35.50), Petrarch argues against the mere enjoyment of painting, and states that one should appreciate the ability of the artist, rather than find delight with an image. As *Gaudium* repeatedly expresses joy for the beautiful colors, “I am wonderfully delighted with painted tables” (40), *Reason* replies “O wonderful madness of men’s mind,” calling for moderation against “the vain delight” of the eyes. In the next book, *On statues and images*, *Gaudium* keeps stating that she “takes pleasure in images” and again, *Reason*’s argument is that pictures are only mere appearances. This is a concern for the poet-*viator* of the *Amorosa visione*: he doubts that his “vacillating will” could be subject to such pleasure given by the great beauty of the women painted on the walls, but his fragile desire was defeated by reason.

Sempre con l’occhio quelle seguitando  
lento io n’andava, e dentro l’intelletto  
lor gran bellezza giva imaginando;  
e di quelle prendea tanto diletto  
in me, ch’alcuna volta dottai ch’io  
a tal piacer non facessi il subbietto,  
a mal mio grado, il vacillante mio  
libero arbitrio: ma pur si ritenne  
con ragion vinto il fragile disio.

(*Am. vis.* 41.73–81)

In these terms, as privileging the immediate pleasures of appearances, Boccaccio approaches the myth of Narcissus and changes it with the same epistemological concerns.

Narcissus is represented grieving over his beautiful features and enraged with himself, aware of having been burning for himself beyond measure, but Boccaccio gives dignity to him and his drama by making him aware as he recognizes the nature of his mistake and voices it:

Narcisso vid’io quivi ancor sedendo  
sopra la nitida acqua rimirarsi,  
fuora di modo di *se stesso* ardendo.  
Deh, quanto quivi nel rammaricarsi  
E talor seco *se stesso* crucciarsi  
“Oimè,” dicendo, “oimè, avrò mai riposo  
se la gran copia, ch’io *ho di me stesso*,  
*di me stesso* m’ha fatto bisognoso?”

(*Am. vis.* 22.55–63)

The fountain in which Narcissus admired himself remains an allusion that shapes his character. He sits before the water, but no mention is made of his fatal attempt to embrace the image reflected there. It is a short passage but enough for Boccaccio to let Narcissus emerge from the silence to speak for himself. He does not focus on the consequences of his actions, but on their origin, that is, his excessive desire to possess what he had in abundance, the image that led him to want what he saw reflected in the water. “Di me stesso” (of myself), in fact, is repeated twice and in so doing Boccaccio catches the essence of Narcissus’ drama as only Caravaggio understood two centuries later. As I discussed elsewhere,<sup>97</sup> the painter portrays Narcissus as a young boy who looks at himself in the water that reflects an older man, the man he will never be, as in Tyresias’ prophecy to Liriope (*Met.* 3.340): “he would have lived as long as he postponed seeing himself,” that is, until he had known himself. That old Narcissus reflected in Caravaggio’s painting seems to echo the one portrayed in the *Amorosa visione*, and it is there that

<sup>97</sup> Morosini 2022.

men are reminded of the vainglory of painting, as images have the same ephemeral nature as the water where Narcissus sees his reflection, and the only place where the image of a man who has not experienced himself can survive. From the *Amorosa visione* to the *Genealogie*, Boccaccio makes this myth functional to his epistemology of vision and the illusionistic nature of appearances. The surface of the water in which Narcissus reflects himself seems to signify the mimetic surface of painting for Leon Battista Alberti, for example, who baptized Narcissus the father of painting (*De pictura*, book 2),<sup>98</sup> while Boccaccio tended to address the lack of painting's truth, rather than the contrary.<sup>99</sup>

As we have already seen, *pingere* and *figere* raise epistemological and ontological questions concerning seeing and knowing, which is why Dante refers to the surface of the pool as “lo specchio di Narciso” (*Inf.* 30.128), and at the threshold of Paradise distances himself from Narcissus when he recognizes that he has made an “error contrario” (cf. *Par.* 63.17–18: “per ch'io dentro a l'error contrario corsi / a quel ch'accese amor tra l'omo e 'l fonte”). “Crescendo conosca se stesso” (“As you grow older, learn about yourself”), as the Anonymous Florentine says in his glosses to *Inf.* 30.128. The theme of knowing oneself involved in Narcissus' drama is used by Dante who, in the only moment his name is mentioned in the *Commedia* — in a canto that, as we said earlier, brings up issues of looking and knowing —, he looks down at the clear water of Lethe and, when he sees himself reflected, averts his eyes in order not to see his own face:

Li occhi mi cadder giù nel chiaro fonte;  
ma veggendomi in esso, i trassi a l'erba,  
tanta vergogna mi gravò la fronte  
(Pg. 30.76–78)

The pilgrim is overcome by shame as he sees his face reflected in the water, not just any water but the clear water of the Lethe, the river of forgetting related to an absolute awareness of the self. The rhyme *fonte* / *fronte* definitely associates Narcissus' drama echoed in these verses: Dante recognizes the reflection of himself in the water and then the sentiment of shame.

In the *Teseida*, Boccaccio makes Narcissus see a feminine image of himself in the pool because he had never contemplated himself before (6.1), and in the *Genealogie* the reflection of the face of a nymph (7.59.2). While Boccaccio follows the tradition of representing Narcissus confusing himself in the surface of the pool with another (*Met.* 3.404), he makes the Ovidian character structural to the discussion of the epistemological value of painting, an occasion for the poet to emphasize the erratic nature of images that do not convey the truth.

Appearances make one forgetful of oneself, as is clear in “smagarsi,” a verb referring to the enchantment and the illusion of the sirens (*Pg.* 19.19–20), except for those like Rachel who never takes her eyes from the “miraglio” (*Pg.* 27.105). As Leah reveals that she is satisfied with “doing”/“ovrare” (*Pg.* 27.108), Rachel “speculates” (gazes into a mirror, a *speculum*), and her seeing is productive self-reflection, “an activity that produces, shapes, or otherwise has some effect upon its object.”<sup>100</sup> The same can be said for Emilia in the *Decameron*. she is happy to see her beautiful eyes in that mirror in which God reflects himself: “quel ben che fa contento lo 'ntelletto” (1.concl.18–20). Emilia and Rachel's fulfilment in the cognitive sight of themselves, leads them to recognize the “active” power of contemplative life and speculative arts like poetry, since storytelling in the *Decameron*,

<sup>98</sup> “What is painting but the act of embracing by means of art the surface of a pool?”

<sup>99</sup> See Baskin 1993.

<sup>100</sup> Stone 2015, 142.

and poetry in general for Dante and for Boccaccio inspires the good *ovrare* / *adoperare* that fulfils Leah.<sup>101</sup> These verbs that fill Panfilo’s speech to the rest of the *brigata* (9.concl.5),<sup>102</sup> further proves what has been noted by Cazalé Bérard: “Boccaccio offre il modello esistenziale ed etico del letterato, che gli consente di operare per il bene comune.”<sup>103</sup> God and his works are reflected in the eyes of the viewer — like Rachel and Emilia — for He looks at Himself in the mirror of his Creation (“in quo tamquam in speculo relucet omne creatum,” Benvenuto da Imola, *ad Pg.* 27.103), and holds it up for priests and kings in the illustration of Duranti’s *Rationale* [Fig. 22].

In the *Amorosa visione*, Narcissus is in good company with Pasiphae, and justly so as the two share an irrational desire for their own appearance, a mistake that Boccaccio considers “*stulta concupiscentia*” (*Gen.* 7.49.2), a type of intellectual blindness that equates men to animals. Boccaccio moves away from the traditional portrait of Pasiphae in the poem, as is represented in her essential act of arranging her hair, and often considering her beauty in the mirror that conveys the excessive love for her looks, used to purposely seduce a beast, the bull that Daedalus had fabricated and that she called her “her only true lord,” as she seems to align herself along with other heifers:

Costei più innanzi un poco si vedea  
 accesa tutta di focoso ardore  
 di Ippolito, cui per figliastro avea.  
 Ivi vedeasi lo sfacciato amore  
 di Pasifè, che ’l toro seguitava  
 di sé chiamandol sol dolce signore:  
 ove con e man proprie ella segava  
 le fresche erbette nel fogliuto prato  
 e con quelle medesme glile dava.  
 Spesso i suo’ bei capei con ordinato  
 stile acconciava, e della sua bellezza  
*al specchio prima l’occhio consigliato,*  
*adorna venia innanzi alla fierezza*  
*bestiale, e quivi pareva che dicesse:*  
*“Aggradati la mia piacevolezza?”*  
 Certo s’io solamente comprendesse  
 che più ch’ogni altra vacca mi seguissi,  
 io non so che più avanti mi volesse.”

(*Am. vis.* 22.25–43, italics ours)

There is no mention of the Minotaur or the labyrinth of Crete and, following Ovid’s *Ars amatoria*, Boccaccio frames Pasiphae in zoophilic terms: (“Pasiphae fieri gaudebat adultera tauri” ‘Pasiphae took pleasure in becoming an adulteress with a bull’), although he shifts the focus on the unnaturalness of her excessive lust for her own and the bull’s appearance,<sup>104</sup> which is the deceit of trusting images and falling in love with them.

The epistemological significance of the theme of Narcissus linked to the values of images returns in Day 6.8 with the story of Cesca<sup>105</sup> in which an echo of the Ovidian myth may be recognized. As beautifully captured by the illuminators who illustrated this story, the intellectual sight that goes hand in hand with self-awareness is symbolized through the mirror, which is the real protagonist. Cesca concentrates only on herself: see in Fig. 23 how the

<sup>101</sup> A reference to Emilia’s song in relation to Rachel and her sister in A. R. Ascoli, “Solomon and Emilia, or the King and I: A reading of *Decameron* 9:9,” note 58. The essay is forthcoming and I thank Albert for generously sharing it with me before its publication.

<sup>102</sup> Morosini 2016.

<sup>103</sup> See Cazalé Bérard 2018, 90.

<sup>104</sup> Boccaccio speaks of Pasiphae in the same terms when he compares her to “una bestia senza razionale intelletto [che] non ardiva di esprimere il suo volere” (*Filoc.* 4.42.6). For more on Boccaccio’s Pasiphae and the labyrinth, see Morosini 2019.

<sup>105</sup> Cf. Ascoli 2009 and Oesch-Serra 1990.



sequence shows her with other women to suggest how more beautiful she thought she was. In the next image, the wise uncle holds a mirror for her, as he, like Tiresias with Narcissus, is trying to show her that, in order to continue bragging about her beauty, she has to avoid looking at herself. However, as beautifully captured by the next miniature, she holds the mirror herself and sees somebody else [Fig. 24], proof that, like Boccaccio's Narcissus, she does not know herself: “vir insipiens non cognoscet, et stultus non intelligent haec” (Ps. 91:7). One of the ancient commentators on Dante's *Commedia*, evoking Narcissus' fable, notes that young people do not know themselves,<sup>106</sup> this is the case of Cesca. The Narcissus trope, I would argue, it is not cast in a moralizing light as Carman claims,<sup>107</sup> but rather within a cognitive and ethical approach to the debate on *fingerere* and *pingere*, which is at the heart of Boccaccio's poetics in search of the truth.

In the *Amorosa visione*, the Guide's role is to convince the *viator* to chase away every (false) opinion generated by the frescoes he was gazing at on the painted walls of the palace, because they are misleading (33.79–81):

Lei mirando, le dissi: – *Oh quanto vale  
aver veduto queste varie cose  
che dicevate pien di gran male!*  
Or come si porria più valorose,  
che sieno queste, mai per nullo avere  
o pensare o udir più meravigliose? –  
Rispose allor colei: – *Parti vedere  
quel ben che tu cercavi qui dipinto,<sup>1</sup>  
ché son cose fallaci e fuor di vere?*  
E' mi par pur che tal vista sospinto  
in fasa oppenion t'abbia la mente,  
ed ogni altro dovuto ne sia istinto. –

(*Am. vis.* 30.7–18, italics ours)

Such looking has goaded his mind into false opinion, which is the same as to say that the eyes of his mind have been obfuscated by those images, “fallacious and without truth,” leading to the same “false notions” that risk making Dante the pilgrim dull-witted (*Par.* 1.89–90). The Guide keeps insisting that the *viator* look and discover (*scoprissi*). He would then recognize that it is unwise to believe in those paintings and what lies behind the ostentatious show (*famosa mostranza*), in a moment of the poem when she makes her remarks in connection with his poor initial choice of not taking the other gate, very small and narrow, and hurrying instead to enter through the palace's larger door. When she says that the narrow gate he had initially discarded is the one that leads to the good, gracious and eternal delight of the wise, she is pointing to the *viator* as the opposite of a wise man, as one of the unlettered described in *Dec.* 6.5, someone who enjoys what he sees, though it blinds him (*abbaglia*):

Deh, quanto quello a' più savi diletta  
grazioso ed eterno! Ed io il ti dissi  
quando d'entrar pur quivi avesti fretta.  
Or dunque fa che più non istien fissi  
gli occhi a cotal piacer: che se tu bene  
quel, qual si sia, con dritto occhio scoprissi,  
aperto ti saria che in gravi pene  
vive e dimora chiunque sua speranza  
non saviamente a cotal cose tene.  
Tu t'abbagli te stesso in tanta erranza  
con falso immaginar, per le presenti

<sup>106</sup> Chiose Vernon, *ad Inf.* 30.91–148.

<sup>107</sup> Carman 2014, 41, where the comparison to *Gen.* 7.59 is made clear.

*cose che son di famosa mostranza.*  
(*Am. vis.* 30.31–42, italics ours)

The Guide then displays the truth behind those images so that the *viator* can “veder vero,” that is, “see the truth” (30.55). Images, just like mundane goods, trouble “the intellects of human beings,” and she makes a clear association between the two when she tells him:

Facciam, mentre avem tempo, nostra via,  
ché, *come tu costà pinto hai veduto*  
*così vi è dentro mondana vania*  
(*Am. vis.* 37.82–84, italics ours)

She had at length instructed the *viator* about the way of looking at images in the human pursuit of virtue and knowledge, but in the following verses one finds the core of Boccaccio’s poetics reiterated through the *De casibus* and *Genealogie*:

Per quel potrai *veder vero*, pensando  
quanto sia van quel ben che’ vostri petti  
empie, fuor di ragion, di mal nefando;  
onde, *seguendo quei’ ben imperfetti*  
*con cieca mente*, morendo perdeti  
il poter acquistar poi li perfetti.  
In tal disio mai non si sazia sete:  
dunque *a quel ben, che sempre altrui tien sazio,*  
*e per ci acquistar nati ci sete,*  
*dovrebbe ogni uomo, mentre ch’egli ha spazio,*  
*affannarsi di gire.* Ma oltre andiamo  
(*Am. vis.* 30.55–65, italics ours)

As these verses echo Dante’s *Inf.* 26.18–20, the meditation upon image-making turns into appreciation of the eternity of poetry that instead leads the mind to celestial things (see also *Gen.* 14.4.11), concerning what distinguishes man from animals. In many instances in his works Boccaccio draws a difference between animals and men, in the attempt to show how poetry invigorates human beings and inspire them to be active, against laziness (14.9.14).<sup>108</sup> While learned men can overcome corporeal death through worthy deeds, including writing, those who do not do so are the unlettered. They, like animals, only see with their physical eyes: they think of filling their stomachs, and their names end when their bodies lie in the tomb which is their home, as Guido tells Betto and his friends (*Dec.* 6.9).

#### *The poet-painter and the ‘true’ colors of poetry*

As a way to conclude I would like to return to the beginning of this essay. Starting from Boccaccio’s meditation upon Zeuxis’ failure to represent the divine beauty of Helen, I proposed to enquire into questions of mimesis and aesthetics concerning Dante and Boccaccio’s Giotto in relation to  *fingere* as opposed to  *pingere*.

Throughout his works, and not just in Book 14 of the *Genealogie* inspired by Dante and Petrarch, Boccaccio shows an active participation in the debate with the ultimate aim of resorting to painting in order to underscore the truth of poetry and the falsehood and vanity of images, if not looked at with a clear sight. By discussing the limitations of the mechanical arts, he displays the intellectual freedom and the truth of the art of poetry, one that falls within the liberal arts, under the category of  *grammatica* and/or  *rhetorica*.

Poets are not liars, Boccaccio claims, and thanks to Benvenuto’s anecdote we recognize how he, through Macrobius’ joke, makes Giotto aware of

<sup>108</sup> I examine in depth those passages in Boccaccio’s works in *L’amore e il lavoro al tempo della peste. Il modello di civiltà di G. Boccaccio*. Lucca: Edizioni La Vela, forthcoming.

being a *simia naturae*, as Landino said about the admirable painters who followed his legacy: “Stephano da tutti è nominato scimia della natura tanto expresse qualunque chosa volle” (in Murray 1953, 392). The poet, instead, “ordisce” (*Pg.* 33.140), that is, he “weaves” words and creates as he orders and prepares “le carte” according to laws and criteria that belong ultimately to “arte” (*Pg.* 33.136–41): “an art is so called because it consists of strict precepts and rules,” says Isidore (*Etym.* 1.1). The poet has the *science* and the *art*, qualities and abilities that Dante recognizes in Virgil (*Inf.* 4.73). That leaves the painter’s *artificium*, which is simply a skill, a technical ability, as Isidore reminds us: “Inter artem et artificium. Ars est natura liberalis, artificium vero gestu et manibus constat.”<sup>109</sup> The anecdote of Apelles, who was asked by Alexander the Great to make a statue of Campaspe for him to carry in his travels, and was petrified once he saw her naked (cf. Benvenuto da Imola and Chiose Vernon, *Com. Inf.* 9.52–53), conveys to what extent, in the fourteenth century, there was a general perception of the constraints, hence inferiority, of the visual arts.

The poet creates something that will lead the hierarchy of artistic creation, that ascends from the best of artists to nature and then to God himself, as hinted in *Pg.* 10.31–33. Thus, Boccaccio opposes the *Deus artifex*, who has to improve his skills in time in 6.6, to God the Maker, and Giotto to the poet-philosopher Cavalcanti. The poet is the *homo creator*, since he shares with God the ability to *ingere*, while the image-maker depends on the outside world for his craft. The poet “does not imitate nature but performs the verbal function of *natura* itself: the poet does what nature does.”<sup>110</sup> As I pointed out elsewhere,<sup>111</sup> the problem related to the *topos* of deception is the incapability of the ignorant to go beyond images and consider paintings and sculptures as books. Boccaccio said this explicitly in a letter of condolences for the death of Petrarch to his son-in-law Francesco da Brossano (Nov. 3, 1374) that echoes Guido’s words to Betto in 6.9:

Satis tamen credibile est quoniam in conspectu eruditorum parvi momenti erit, cum sepulti virtutes, non ornamenta cadaverum prospectentur [...]; verum ignaris erit monumentum. Horum enim libri sculpture sunt atque picture, et insuper causa percunctandi quisnam tam grandis in eo iaceat homo, que illius merita, qui splendores; et dum responsum talibus dabitur, procul dubio ampliabitur aliquantulum prestantissimi senis gloria. (*Epist.* 24.21–22).

What Boccaccio states here on this solemn occasion is that the wise look at the virtues of the dead not their ornaments, but the sepulcher will be a warning to the ignorant who have made paintings and sculptures their books so to invite them to go beyond and look for is beyond the façade of the tomb to see the great man that is buried inside, his merits, his fame.

The superficiality and vanity of ornaments is all that Betto’s brigade sees. Their incapability to consider what is “inside,” that is the virtues of the illustrious Florentine men buried there, makes them already dead. To be sure, Boccaccio describes ignorant people in the *Genealogie* as those who have made their own body the grave of an unhappy soul:

cum nil ignaro indecentius homine, nil indocto fastidiosius: ante quidem diem miserum atque caducum mortalitatis sue corpus infelicis anime fecere sepulcrum. (*Gen.* 14.2.5)

For there is nought so ugly as an ignoramus; none so unreasonable as a fool. Such are they who, long ere the miserable hour of their death, have made the body the grave of an unhappy soul. (Osgood 19)

<sup>109</sup> *Differentiae* 20. Cited in Barrett 1970, 89.

<sup>110</sup> Stone 2015, 44 and 49.

<sup>111</sup> Morosini 2004, 145–49.

It is about the practices of “seeing,” it is about poetry, but it is also about society as addressed in *Decameron* 6.9.

When no one but Guido Cavalcanti, whom Boccaccio considers also in his commentary to Dante’s *Inferno* “ottimo loico e buon filosofo” (*Esp.* 10.lit.62), in the midst of the marble tombs of Santa Reparata in Florence tells Betto and his friends, who were trying to mock his epicurean ideas on life ending with the body, “Gentlemen, in your house you may say whatever you like to me” (6.9.14), Boccaccio proves that poetry grants eternal fame and defeats corporeal death, because “ethereal and eternal as she has no dealings with things that perish, but holds of little worth all *splendoresque manu factos*, splendours made with hands as things useless and empty” (*Gen.* 14.4.10). As he defends the poverty of poets and the wealth of mechanical artists, he states that “virtue, not robes, is man’s natural ornament” (14.4.28), and, more importantly, in the *De casibus* as “Giovanni from Certaldo,” he asks Fortuna to let him complete his work, to be able to achieve fame and so not to die with his body, but to continue living in his writing for posterity, and Fortuna grants that he and his native town Certaldo will be numbered among the famous names of antiquity (6.1).<sup>112</sup>

It is in the *Genealogie*, and again in the place dedicated not to Giovanni’s navigation as he tries to map the places where the fables of the ancient poets unfolded, but to an articulated defense of poetry, that Boccaccio, in order to denounce the ignorance of those who claim that reading the books of the poets is a deadly sin which “exile the souls from the Kingdom of Heaven,” draws an opposition between them and the painters. First, as he did in the Conclusion of the *Decameron*, he claims for his pen the same freedom of the painter’s brush, but here he goes further, as indicated by a series of indefinite pronouns *hominumque, quecunque, cuiuscunque, quibuscunque*, to strongly warn of the higher risks of exposing ignorant people to images, when compared to the reading of the inventions of the poets. It would be a pity not to share this passage, which remains a powerful moment in the conclusion of this essay, to further recognize in *Decameron* 6.5 and Boccaccio’s Giotto, a part of a more complex and elaborate hermeneutic vision that he brings forward in all his works:

Pictori etiam in sacris edibus fas est pingere Tricerberum canem, Ditis observantem limina, Charonem nautam, Acherontis vada sulcantem, Erinas ydris accinctas accensisque armatas facibus, ipsum Plutonem, infelicis regni principem, damnatis supplicia inferentem, poetis sonoro carmine hec eadem scripsisse nephas, et irremissibile lectori crimen nest. Pictori eidem concessum, in aulis regum et nobilium virorum, amores veterum, deorum scelera hominumque, et quecunque cuiuscunque commenta pingere, nullo patrum prohibente decreto, et hec a quibuscunque pro libito intueri permissum est; *poetarum inventa, ornatis linita licteris, plus, a sapientibus lecta, volunt mentes inficiant, quam picta an ignaris inspecta.* (*Gen.* 14.18.9, emphasis ours)

It is thought proper for the painter to paint, within the holy precincts of the church itself, pictures of the triple dog Cerberus guarding the gate of Pluto, or sailor Charon plying the waters of Acheron, or the Furies with snaky fillets and flaming brands, or even Pluto himself, prince of the unhappy realm, in the act of visiting punishment upon the damned. Then is it wrong for poets to describe them in resounding verse, and is the reader guilty of unpardonable sin? The painter has even been permitted to decorate the palaces of princes and nobles with the subjects chosen from the amours of ancient myth, the crimes of gods and men, and all sorts of fabrications, without an interfering word from the Fathers; and anyone who

<sup>112</sup> In Boccaccio 1983.

will may look at these pictures all he pleases. But a poet's creations, blazoned in ornate letters, they find more vicious to the wise than are pictures to the ignorant. (Osgood 82–83)

From the *Filocolo* onwards, Boccaccio is committed to a hermeneutics of vision, a quest to learn how to look with the eyes of the mind. Ultimately, though, the invitation is to look beyond the surface, that is, beneath the “fabuloso cortice” and “honestissima tegumenta” of poetry (*Gen.* 14.14.2–3). Unlike painting, as Boccaccio says with regard to Dante's *Commedia*, the poem has “under its rough bark healthful and extremely pleasant lessons” (*Esp.* 1.lit.77).

Finally, studying Giotto within the debate on *fingere* and *pingere* shows that Dante, and even more so Boccaccio's Giotto, is a character meant to demonstrate the primacy of poets and the eternal fame that poetry's truth reveals, while the painter is limited to a temporal fame that ends in death. Ultimately, talking about painting means talking about poetry and vice versa. In fact, Boccaccio features Giotto in the *Amorosa visione* at a point when praising him leads to praise of himself as a poet-painter who draws with words, as we have seen in the *Genealogie*'s chapter on how “poetry is a useful art” and in the Sixth Day of the *Decameron* where he reflects upon epistemological questions of interpretation. In fact, Day 6 features four tales about the deceitful nature of painting and appearances that can blind the eyes of the mind. It should not be surprising, moreover, that this day opens with a meta-novella on how not to tell a tale and ends with Friar Cipolla's fable, narrated as if it were true.

Painting in the *Decameron* additionally provides an opportunity to reflect on the hermeneutics of vision, that is, to investigate the illusory and misleading power of images over the eyes of the mind. This is a work, studied with references to seeing with the physical and intellectual eye, that ends with the Author finally achieving his dream of endowing his pen with the same freedom enjoyed by the painter's brush (10.concl.6). Boccaccio declares that he will survive forever through writings of his that inspire valorous deeds: *videre* (to see), *intelligere* (to understand), *servare* (to keep), *exarare et in opus collecta deducere* (“to set it all down in writing and organize the work,” *Gen.* 1 proem 14–15). Memory will retain what has been lived, and the pen will record it all in writing. The art of recollecting what he has seen into one work will ensure the everlasting memory of the past.

Painting can represent any aspect of life, a lesson that one can draw from Giotto's poetry where he invites us to open our eyes: “l tuo viso sbenda” ‘remove the blindfold.’ It is awareness concerning the ‘true’ colors of poetry that ultimately forecasts the development of modernity. This is a dynamic not unlike that observed by art historian A. Dunlop in secular painting within a cultural movement of vernacular literature. In this regard, Cristoforo Landino comes to mind as he writes about the verb “ritrarre”:

Et ottimamente pose *ritrarrà*, cioè apertamente dimostrerà. Imperoché diciamo *ritrarre* quando o el pictore o lo scultore rassempla alchuna cosa nella propria similitudine in forma che nell'opera sua si conosca chome in se medesimo. Et a questo modo diciamo che *Apelle ritraxo Alexandro Magno. Et Giotto ritraxo Danthe. Perchè lo formò in modo che chi vedeva la pictura vedea Danthe. Et chosì la mente del poeta dipignerà con parole ciò che ha conseguito nella contemplatione.* (*ad Inf.* 2.4–6, italics ours)<sup>113</sup>

<sup>113</sup> “And *will depict* is the optimal phrase; that is, ‘it will comprehensibly show.’ For we say *depict* when the painter or sculptor copies an object with such similitude of form as to be recognizable as itself in the piece. It is in this sense that we say, *Apelles portrayed Alexander the Great and Giotto portrayed Dante for he fashioned it such that whoever saw the picture saw Dante. And this was how the poet painted, using words, what he perceived through contemplation.*”

We will forgive Landino for his inaccurate claim that Apelles portrayed Alexander the Great,<sup>114</sup> but we should recognize too that he believed Giotto painted such a very realistic image of Dante that whoever saw it would see Dante himself. We might also say that whoever saw the portrait of Giotto fashioned by the words of two poets' words saw indeed no one else but Dante and Boccaccio themselves.

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<sup>114</sup> Alexander's portrait was painted on the order of Candace of Meroe Queen of Ethiopia in secret by "one of her best artists," or, as stated in the *Romance of Alexander by Pseudo-Callisthenes*, a "Greek painter."

Figures

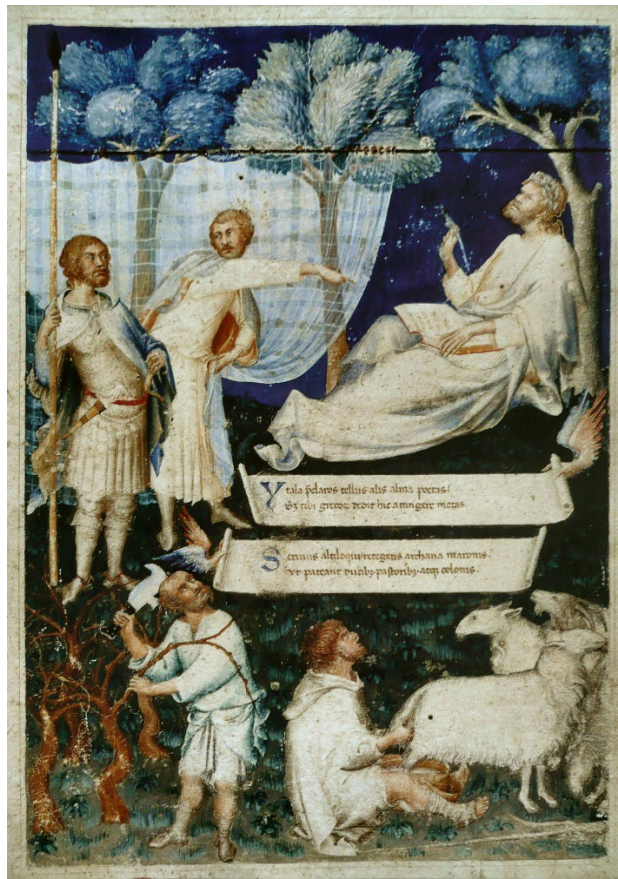


Fig. 1. Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana ms. A 79 inf., frontispiece. [[return to text](#)]



Fig. 2. *The Mirror of Narcissus*, in *Ovide moralisé*, Paris, Arsenal ms. Fr. 5069, fol. 33v, 1330 ca., maître du Roman de Fauvel et collab. [[return to text](#)]



**Fig. 3.** *a b c d e f g i l m n o p r s t y*: Carmenta teaches the Latin alphabet, in *De mulieribus* 27, Paris, BnF, ms. Fr. 12420, fol. 37r, 1402. [[return to text](#)]



**Fig. 4.** Primo della Quercia, Dante, *Par.* III 133, London, British Library, Yates Thompson ms. 36, fol. 133r, 1440-1450. [[return to text](#)]





**Fig. 5.** Forese da Rabatta and Giotto, in *Dec.* 6.5, trans. Laurent de Premierfait, Paris, BnF ms. Fr. 239, fol. 174v, second quarter of 15<sup>th</sup> c. [[return to text](#)]



**Fig. 6.** Giotto and Forese, *Dec.* 6.5, Paris, ms. It. 63, fol. 200v, ca. 1427 ca. [[return to text](#)]



**Fig. 7.** Giotto and Forese, *Dec.* 6.5, Paris, Arsenal, ms. 5070, fol. 228v, ca. 1400s.  
[\[return to text\]](#)



**Fig 8.** Thamyris painting, *De mulieribus* 56, Paris, BnF, ms. Fr. 12420, fol. 86, 1402.  
[\[return to text\]](#)



**Fig. 9.** Irene painting, in *De mulieribus* 59, Paris, BnF, ms. Fr. 598, fol. 92r, 1400s. [\[return to text\]](#)



**Fig. 10.** Marcia painting her self-portrait, in *De mulieribus* 66, Paris, BnF, ms. Fr. 598, fol. 100v, 1400s. [\[return to text\]](#)



**Fig. 10a.** Marcia holding the mirror for a self-portrait, in *De mulieribus* 66, Paris, BnF, ms. Fr. 12420, 101v, 1402. [[return to text](#)]



**Fig. 10b.** Thamyris seated before an easel in an urban square, as she paints a portrait of Diana. The finished portrait is visible on an altar through the window of a church in the middle distance, in Boccaccio, *Des cleres et nobles femmes*, New York, The New York Public Library, ms. Spenser Collection 033, fol. 32, ca. 1450 ca. [[return to text](#)]



**Fig. 11.** Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *De proprietatibus rerum*, Paris, BnF, ms. Fr. 9140, fol. 361v, artiste Évrard d’Espinques, 1480. [[return to text](#)]



**Fig. 12.** Semiamira seated in the Senate, *De mulieribus* 99, Paris, BnF, ms. Fr. 12420, fol. 150v, 1402. [[return to text](#)]



**Fig. 13.** Proba, *De mulieribus*, Paris, BnF, ms. Fr. 598, fol. 143v. [[return to text](#)]



**Fig. 14.** Boccaccio and his audience, Boccaccio, *De casibus*, Paris, BnF, ms. Fr. 235, fol. 135v, 1400s. [[return to text](#)]



**Fig. 14a.** Boccaccio tired of writing, *Des cleres et nobles femmes*, New York, The New York Public Library, ms. Spenser collection 033, incipit, ca. 1450 ca. [[return to text](#)]



**Fig. 15.** The young and the older God-painter, Paris, BnF, ms. Arsenal 5070, fol. 229v, second quarter of 1400s, Maître du mansel et collab. [[return to text](#)]



**Fig. 16.** Piero Fiorentino “judging” Scalza’s argument, *Dec. 6.6*, Paris, BnF, ms. Fr. 239, fol. 175r, second quarter of 1400s. [[return to text](#)]



**Fig. 17.** Guido Cavalcanti: the poet-thinker, in *Dec.* 6.9, Paris, BnF, ms. Italien 63, fol. 203v, 1427. [\[return to text\]](#)



**Fig. 18.** Calandrino and the heliotrope, in *Dec.* 8.3, Paris, BnF, ms. Fr. 239, fol. 216r. [\[return to text\]](#)





**Fig. 19.** *The miracle of the sight and the pear-tree*, in Dec. 7.9, Paris, BnF, ms. Arsenal 5070, fol. 267v. [[return to text](#)]



**Fig. 20.** Giotto, *Prudence*, Cappella degli Scrovegni, Padua, 1360. [[return to text](#)]



**Fig. 21.** *Laodamia*, in Ovid's *Heroides*, Paris, BnF, ms Fr. 847, fol. 105r, 1500s. [\[return to text\]](#)



**Fig. 22.** God shows the Mirror-Model to kings and bishops, Paris, BnF, ms. Fr 176, fol 110v, Guillelmus Duranti, *Rationale divinatorum officiorum*, 1200s. [\[return to text\]](#)



**Fig. 23.** Cesca “unaware of herself” and the mirror, Dec. 6.8, Paris, BnF, ms. Fr. 239, Fol 177v. [[return to text](#)]



**Fig. 24.** Cesca holds the mirror and sees “somebody else,” Paris, BnF, ms. Arsenal 5070, fol. 233v., second quarter of 1500s. [[return to text](#)]

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