

ITALIAN LECTURE

Dante's *Epistle to Cangrande* and its Two Authors

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I

THE DEBATE OVER THE AUTHENTICITY, whether total or partial, of the *Epistle to Cangrande* traditionally ascribed to Dante has been going on for over a century. Less than twenty years ago the issue was thoroughly scrutinised by Henry Ansgar Kelly—who rejected the authenticity of the *Epistle*—and by Robert Hollander—who supported it.¹ While I shall occasionally recall some of the conflicting arguments presented in the historical debate as background information, I shall concentrate mainly on the presentation of a new hypothesis of my own.

All Dante's letters are in Latin; the *Epistle to Cangrande* is no exception.² We can divide it into three sections. In the first section (paragraphs 1–4), which is written in the first person, Dante tells Cangrande della Scala, lord of Verona, that he is dedicating to him the third part, or *cantica*, of his *Commedia*: the *Paradiso*, at that time (about 1316) still

Read at the Italian Cultural Institute, London, 3 November 2005.

¹ H. A. Kelly, *Tragedy and Comedy from Dante to Pseudo-Dante* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1989); R. Hollander, *Dante's Epistle to Cangrande* (Ann Arbor, 1993).

² All quotations are from Dante Alighieri, *Epistola a Cangrande*, ed. E. Cecchini (Florence, 1995). See also G. Brugnoli's detailed commentary in Dante Alighieri, *Opere minori*, 2 (Milan and Naples, 1979), pp. 512–21, 598–643 (the introduction is dated 1973). English translation: *The Letter to Can Grande*, in R. S. Haller (ed.), *Literary Criticism of Dante Alighieri* (Lincoln and London, 1977), pp. 95–111. German translation: Dante Alighieri, *Das Schreiben an Cangrande della Scala*, ed. T. Ricklin, with an introduction by R. Imbach (Hamburg, 1993) (with a helpful commentary).

unfinished. The second section (paragraphs 5–16), written in the third person except for an isolated ‘ego’ (either the author or a commentator), provides a general introduction, or *accessus*, to the *Commedia*. The third section (paragraphs 17–33), also in the third person, provides a commentary on the first twelve lines of the *Paradiso*, quoted in Latin. In a rather abrupt conclusion the first person surfaces again.

Nine manuscripts of the *Epistle to Cangrande* have survived. The three oldest were copied in the fifteenth century (they are preserved at the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan, at the Staatsbibliothek in Munich, and the Biblioteca Comunale, Bergamo): they include only the short first section of the *Epistle*.³ The remaining six manuscripts contain the full text.

In 1943 Augusto Mancini argued that this bifurcated manuscript tradition rather neatly mirrors the distinction between a genuine, albeit truncated letter by Dante, preserved in paragraphs 1–4, and a lengthy addition by a commentator.⁴ According to Mancini, one can see the clumsy stitches between these two separate texts in a sentence at the end of the fourth paragraph:

Itaque, formula consumata epistole, ad introductionem oblatis operis aliquid sub lectoris officio compendiose aggrediar. (And so, having completed the formula for a letter, I shall undertake, in my capacity as commentator, to present a concise introduction to the work I offered to you.)⁵

In his detailed analysis of the *cursus* of the *Epistle to Cangrande*, Peter Dronke noted that the first four paragraphs follow the customary rhythmic patterns of Dante’s prose; the rest does not.⁶ Dronke’s analysis provides strong support for Mancini’s argument: but this converging evidence did not settle the debate. The reason for this seeming inconclusiveness is related to the peculiar features of the *Epistle*’s reception.

Tradition has assigned the earliest explicit reference to the *Epistle* approximately to 1400, or over eighty years after Dante is thought to have

³ Eight manuscripts are reproduced in F. Schneider, *Die Handschriften des Briefes Dantes an Can Grande della Scala* (Zwickau i. Sa., 1933); for the ninth manuscript see A. Mancini, ‘Un nuovo codice dell’Epistola a Can Grande’, *Studi danteschi*, 24 (1939), 111–22.

⁴ A. Mancini, ‘Nuovi dubbi ed ipotesi sulla epistola a Can Grande’, *Rendiconti della classe di scienze morali e storiche della R. Accademia d’Italia*, s. 7, 4 (1942–3), 227–42.

⁵ Haller (ed.), *The Letter*, p. 98, slightly modified.

⁶ P. Dronke, *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 103–11. See also Kelly, *Tragedy*, pp. 79–111; R. G. Hall and M. U. Sowell, ‘Cursus in the Can Grande Epistle: A Forger Shows His Hand?’, *Lectura Dantis*, 5 (1989), 89–104.

composed the text, in a passage from Filippo Villani's incomplete commentary on the *Commedia*. (Villani had been appointed to succeed Boccaccio to the Dante chair set up by the Florentine commune, but he died before assuming his duties.)⁷ I shall discuss later two references that would permit us to push back the date to the mid-fourteenth century.

Why are there no explicit references to the *Epistle to Cangrande* in the earlier commentaries? Why did Guido da Pisa, Pietro di Dante, Jacopo della Lana and others all fail to mention it? Their silence is particularly surprising since, as Luiso noted in 1902 in a ground-breaking essay, some passages from those commentaries are identical to passages from the *Epistle to Cangrande*. On the basis of these convergences, Luiso argued that (a) the commentators were not familiar with the *Epistle*, otherwise they would have assigned those passages to Dante; and (b) the *Epistle* itself was a forgery pieced together before 1400 from fragments of earlier commentaries on the *Commedia*.⁸ Some have objected that earlier commentators might have had access to a version of the *Epistle* lacking the first section, where Dante's name appeared. While such an imaginary text is conceivable, the presence of the first, properly epistolary part of the *Epistle* in all of the surviving manuscripts weakens such an argument. But a further argument against Luiso's hypothesis was offered, compellingly articulated, by Luis Jenaro-MacLennan in his book on the Trecento commentaries on the *Commedia*. The forgery hypothesis, Jenaro-MacLennan wrote,

would imply that the impeccable sequence of ideas which the epistle exhibits, with a perfect agreement between content and logical expression, is nothing but the result of its author's having put together a series of scrappy sentences, collected from different portions of slavish commentaries of different periods, and yet taking from these latter only certain unimportant and dissociated points in order to reproduce them in the cohesive unity of his text. That such a hypothesis is absurd becomes clear in the light of the arguments I have so far developed.⁹

Jenaro-MacLennan's reconstruction of the intricate relationship among the Trecento commentaries on the *Commedia* is an admirable piece of scholarship; but his conclusion is in my view unfounded. I will

⁷ F. Villani, *Expositio seu comentum super Comedia Dantis Allegherii*, ed. S. Bellomo (Florence, 1989), p. 32.

⁸ F. P. Luiso, 'Per la varia fortuna di Dante nel secolo XIV', in *Giornale dantesco*, 10 (1902), 83–97 and 11 (1903), 20–6, 60–9.

⁹ L. Jenaro-MacLennan, *The Trecento Commentaries on the Divina Commedia and the Epistle to Cangrande* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 67–8.

argue that the text of the *Epistle to Cangrande* which is available to us includes sections that are not by Dante; therefore we may consider it as a partial forgery.

II

Let me start from a piece of evidence that gained scholarly prominence after the publication of Jenaro-MacLennan's book. In an essay that appeared in 1979, Carlo Paolazzi scrutinised a passage from a commentary on the *Commedia* published in the late nineteenth century under the name of Stefano Talice da Ricaldone.¹⁰ As Michele Barbi had demonstrated, Talice da Ricaldone was not an author but a scribe, and the work to which his name became attached when he copied it in 1475 was a set of notes taken one hundred years earlier by an anonymous witness to the earliest series of lectures that Benvenuto da Imola gave on Dante in Bologna.¹¹

Here is the passage from Benvenuto's commentary that Paolazzi studied:

Sed est dubium, que est causa quod homo tantus [i.e. Dante] deduxit se ad describendum vulgariter. Ratio prima est ista, que habetur in sua epistula, ut faceret fructum et delectationem pluribus gentibus, tam literatis quam illiteratis: unde si descripsisset literaliter, tunc ipsum vulgares non intellexissent; unde novum stilum voluit capere, et etiam ut faceret fructum Italicis.¹² (A question has been raised: why did such a great man decide to write in the vernacular? The first reason, which can be found in his epistle, was to write something useful and pleasant for a larger audience, including both those able to read Latin [*literatis*] and those unable to read it [*illiteratis*]; if he had written in Latin, the latter would have been unable to understand. Therefore he decided to use a new style, to benefit the Italians.)

Paolazzi interpreted the words 'in sua epistula,' or in his epistle (a phrase absent from later versions of Benvenuto's commentary), as an allusion to the *Epistle to Cangrande*. This would make Benvenuto's comment, which he made in 1375, the earliest reference to the *Epistle*, since

¹⁰ C. Paolazzi, 'Le lecture dantesche di Benvenuto da Imola a Bologna e a Ferrara e le redazioni del suo *Comentum*', *Italia medioevale e umanistica*, 22 (1979), 319–66.

¹¹ M. Barbi, 'Benvenuto da Imola e non Stefano Talice da Ricaldone' [1908], in *idem*, *Problemi di critica dantesca*, 1st series, repr. (Florence, 1965), pp. 429–53.

¹² *La Commedia di Dante Alighieri col commento inedito di Stefano Talice di Ricaldone*, eds. V. Promis and C. Negrone, 3 vols. (Milan, 1888) (1st edn., 1886), p. 5. See also Paolazzi, 'Le lecture', 323.

the lecture was given twenty-five years before the appearance of Filippo Villani's commentary. Paolazzi rightly noted that no other letter ascribed to Dante refers to the *Commedia*. To support his interpretation, he then cited the following passage from the *Epistle to Cangrande* (15):

Finis totius et partis est removere viventes in hac vita de statu miserie et perducere ad statum felicitatis . . . (The end of the whole and of the part is to remove those living in this life from the state of misery and to lead them to the state of happiness . . .)¹³

The comparison is entirely unconvincing. Much closer to Benvenuto's talk of utility and benefit, as Paolazzi admitted, is a passage from the first version of Boccaccio's *Trattatello in laude di Dante*. Some wise men, Boccaccio wrote, had raised the following question: why had a profound thinker like Dante chosen to write a poem dealing with sublime matters in the Florentine vernacular rather than in Latin, as earlier poets had? Boccaccio's answer intersected at one point with Benvenuto's: 'per fare utilità più comune a' suoi cittadini e agli altri Italiani' (to be beneficial to the majority of his fellow citizens and the other Italians).¹⁴ No reference is made to Dante's epistle. It may be helpful to remember that in *Convivio* I, vii, 12, Dante had put forward a similar argument: in commenting on his poems (*canzoni*), which were of course written in Italian, the vernacular was more appropriate than Latin because 'lo latino non l'avrebbe esposte se non a' litterati, ché li altri non l'averebbero inteso' (the use of Latin would have rendered it accessible only to those who could read Latin [*litterati*]; the others would not have understood it).

Paolazzi's thesis has not won universal support. Robert Hollander accepted it; Zygmunt Barański did not.¹⁵ But even Hollander admitted that Benvenuto's recapitulation of the unnamed epistle did not square with the *Epistle to Cangrande*, though he insisted that it was 'nonetheless to be taken as Benvenuto's version of it': a somewhat circular argument. In my view, the quotations from Dante and Boccaccio provided by Paolazzi undermine his identification of the epistle mentioned by Benvenuto: but the latter's allusion to an epistle in which Dante commented on the

¹³ Haller (ed.), *The Letter*, pp. 103–4.

¹⁴ G. Boccaccio, *Trattatello in laude di Dante*, ed. P. G. Ricci, in *Opere*, ed. V. Branca (Milan, 1974), 3, 486.

¹⁵ Hollander, *Dante's Epistle*, pp. 78–80; Z. Barański, 'Benvenuto da Imola e la tradizione dantesca della "Comedia": appunti per una descrizione del *Comentum*', in R. Palmieri and C. Paolazzi (eds.), *Benvenuto da Imola lettore degli antichi e dei moderni: Atti del convegno internazionale, Imola 26 e 27 maggio 1989* (Ravenna, 1991), 215–30.

Commedia is intriguing. In my study of this question I follow Kelly, who provided a detailed discussion of Paolazzi's remarks; but my conclusions will diverge from both Paolazzi's and Kelly's.¹⁶

Between 1373 and the early months of 1374 Boccaccio delivered a series of public lectures on Dante in Florence. Benvenuto da Imola attended them and relied extensively upon them in his commentary. One may presume that Boccaccio said something about an epistle by Dante in these lectures. In 1375 Benvenuto defended Dante's decision to write the *Commedia* in Florentine vernacular for three reasons, all of them inspired by Boccaccio, either implicitly or explicitly. Paolazzi quoted only the first of them, which we have just examined.¹⁷ Here is the second.

Secunda ratio est, quoniam ipse consideravit quod reges et principes, qui olim delectabantur, et quibus opera poetarum intitulabantur, nunc ipsam poesim neglexerunt, et viciis dediti sunt: ideo se reduxit ad istum stilum. Primo enim noster incepit literaliter sic: *Ultima regna canam fluvido contermina mundo*.¹⁸ (The second reason is that he [i. e. Dante] thought that kings and princes, who in the past used to take delight in poetry and have poetical works dedicated to them, nowadays disregard poetry and give themselves over to vices: therefore he decided to use this style [i. e., the Florentine vernacular]. In fact our poet had begun by writing in Latin, to wit: 'Ultima regna canam fluvido contermina mundo' [I shall sing the most remote kingdoms, close to the boundaries of the corruptible world]).

Benvenuto's second point echoes *Convivio* I, ix, 5: since sovereigns do not support poetry as they did in the past, Dante chose the vernacular in order to make his poems available to a larger audience. But the Latin lines he identifies as an early attempt at the *Commedia* come from a different source: the notorious Ilaro letter preserved in a single manuscript known as the *Zibaldone Laurenziano* and written in Boccaccio's own hand (*Laur.* XXIX, 8, c. 67 r). The letter was allegedly written by a monk named Ilaro who had lived in a monastery near Sarzana. Addressing himself to Ugucione della Faggiola, lord of Pisa, Ilaro explains that on his way towards the Alps an unknown poet had made a stop at the monastery and shown to Ilaro the first part of a poem he was composing. Upon examining the document, Ilaro had been amazed to discover that the highly ambitious work was written in the vernacular: this was no mean feat. The poet had admitted that the task he had set himself was extremely daunt-

¹⁶ Kelly, *Tragedy*, pp. 48–55.

¹⁷ C. Paolazzi, 'Le letture dantesche', 325. But see also L. M. La Favia, 'Benvenuto da Imola's Dependence on Boccaccio's Studies on Dante', *Dante Studies*, 93 (1975), 172 ff.

¹⁸ *La Commedia di Dante Alighieri col commento inedito di Stefano Talice di Ricaldone*, p. 5.

ing, explaining that he had begun in Latin: reciting the first two and a half hexameters of this version, he had opened with the words 'Ultima regna canam fluvido contermina mundo.' His decision to choose the vernacular, he had explained, had been driven by the conviction that the 'generous men for whom such things had been written during a better age now left liberal arts, alas, to lesser folks'.¹⁹

In an essay that prompted a passionate defence by Edward Moore, Francesco D'Ovidio contemptuously wrote that the *Epistle to Cangrande* was a forgery 'as blatant as the alleged letter by Ilaro'.²⁰ But only fifty years later the identity of the pseudo-Ilaro was unmasked. On the basis of compelling stylistic analogies, Giuseppe Billanovich showed that the Ilaro letter had been written by the very individual who transcribed it: Giovanni Boccaccio.²¹ In his youth Boccaccio had reworked Dante's letters to Moroello Malaspina and Cino da Pistoia in two letters addressed, respectively, to the duke of Durazzo and to Petrarch. At a later date, but in a similar vein, Boccaccio made up the pseudo-Ilaro's letter as a rhetorical exercise. The *Zibaldone Laurenziano*, which includes all these texts, permits us to trace Boccaccio's strenuous, relentless practice of *ars dictandi*.²²

Billanovich's hypothesis was not new. The possibility that Boccaccio might have made up Ilaro's letter as a rhetorical exercise had been both proposed and rejected by Adolfo Bartoli; Francesco Macri-Leone had put forward the same hypothesis with more conviction; but neither had provided a detailed proof.²³ If I am not mistaken, Billanovich's brilliant

¹⁹ I rely here on G. Billanovich, 'La leggenda dantesca del Boccaccio. Dalla lettera di Ilaro al Trattatello in laude di Dante', *Studi danteschi*, 28 (1949), 45–144; the text of Ilaro's letter appears on 141–4.

²⁰ F. D'Ovidio, 'L'Epistola a Cangrande', in *idem, Studij sulla Divina Commedia* (Palermo and Naples, 1901), pp. 448–85, especially p. 473; E. Moore, 'The Genuineness of the Dedicatory Epistle to Can Grande (Epistle X in Oxford Dante)', *Studies in Dante. Third Series* (Oxford, 1903), pp. 284–369.

²¹ Billanovich, 'La leggenda'.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 63; S. Zamponi, M. Pantarotto, A. Tomiello, 'Stratigrafia dello Zibaldone e della Miscellanea Laurenziani', in M. Picone and C. Cazalé Bérard (eds.), *Gli Zibaldoni di Boccaccio. Memoria, scrittura, riscrittura. Atti del seminario internazionale di Firenze-Certaldo (26–28 aprile 1996)* (Florence, 1998) pp. 181–258, especially pp. 186–7; A. C. de la Mare, *The Handwriting of Italian Humanists*, 1 (Oxford, 1973), p. 21.

²³ See A. Bartoli, *Storia della letteratura italiana*, 5 (Florence, 1887), pp. 208–9; G. Boccaccio, *La vita di Dante*, ed. F. Macri-Leone. Introduction (Florence, 1888), pp. CXII–CXIII. See also P. Rajna, 'La lettera di frate Ilario', *Studj romanzi a cura di E. Monaci*, 2 (1904), 123–34; *idem*, 'Testo della lettera di frate Ilario e osservazioni sul suo valore storico', in *Dante e la Lunigiana* (Milan, 1909), pp. 235–85, especially pp. 248, 273 n. 19. Billanovich writes that these scholars (he does not mention Macri-Leone) 'si chiusero con ruvida ingenuità nel processo sterile sulla

demonstration paved the way for the much later methodological tour de force in which Gianfranco Contini contrasted Boccaccio's Dantesque pastiches ('paccotiglia') with the enormous complexity of Dante's poetical memory.²⁴

What concerns me here are the far-reaching implications of Billanovich's piece. Its subtitle—'From the Ilaro Letter to the *Trattatello in laude di Dante*'—highlighted the profound ambivalence in Boccaccio's attitude towards Dante. Boccaccio repeatedly transcribed Dante's poems, imitated his letters, made up a fake letter about him, wrote an essay on his life, lectured about him. But imitation and competition are two sides of the same coin. In his great book Erich Auerbach showed that Boccaccio's work would have been impossible without Dante's.²⁵ Boccaccio's lifelong fascination with Dante led him to write a 'Comédie Humaine', a work of one hundred *novelle* rather than one hundred *canti*.²⁶ The one-hundred-and-first *novella*, as it has been called, was the description of Paolo's and Francesca's death that Boccaccio included in his lectures on the *Commedia*, opposing the truth of his own account to Dante's fictional description (*fizione*) of Paolo's and Francesca's falling in love.²⁷

All this throws some light on Boccaccio's use of the Ilaro letter in his late works on Dante. What had been conceived as a rhetorical exercise became a reservoir of pseudo-factual data: a forgery. But this was not Billanovich's conclusion. He noted that while the 'fable' Boccaccio had fabricated about the triple dedication of the *Commedia*, still prominent in the *Trattatello in laude di Dante*, had disappeared from the lectures on the *Commedia*, Boccaccio had not abandoned the Latin version of the opening of Dante's poem: he continued to treat it as an authentic piece of evidence, using it, as Billanovich said, 'colla stessa franchezza sollecitata dagli stessi irti pregiudizi' (with the same directness driven by the same harsh prejudices).²⁸ My translation of this convoluted phrase is clearly

autenticità della testimonianza' ('La leggenda', p. 135 n. 2): an inadequate (and ungenerous) evaluation.

²⁴ G. Contini, 'Un'interpretazione di Dante', in *idem, Un'idea di Dante* (Turin, 2001), pp. 69–111, especially p. 80: 'La tipologia ripetitoria ordinaria, di parole e immagini, tocca al dantismo di modesta osservanza, non solo nella paccotiglia del peggior Boccaccio . . . '.

²⁵ E. Auerbach, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, 1991), p. 220.

²⁶ R. Hollander, 'Boccaccio's Dante: Imitative Distance (*Decameron* I, 1 and VI, 10)', *Studi sul Boccaccio*, 13 (1981–2), 169–98, especially pp. 169 ff.

²⁷ G. Boccaccio, *Esposizioni sopra la Comedia*, ed. G. Padoan (Milan, 1965), *Tutte le opere*, ed. V. Branca, 6, 316.

²⁸ G. Billanovich, 'La leggenda', pp. 107, 129.

inadequate: but Billanovich's prose, which is often quite awkward, in this case betrays an obvious embarrassment. He seems to have refrained from accepting the consequences of his own demonstration.

III

Recently the very premises of Billanovich's essay have been called into question. One scholar has suggested that Boccaccio himself had been the victim of a hoax, a conclusion I find unconvincing; another scholar has argued that the Ilaro letter itself is both authentic and a description of a real event, a conclusion I find grotesque.²⁹ Both involve deliberate attempts to remove from Boccaccio the taint (and even the suspicion) of forgery. Giorgio Padoan has informed us that 'Boccaccio did not have the mind of a forger' (Il Boccaccio non ebbe animo di falsificatore).³⁰ Saverio Bellomo's conclusion is less radical: Boccaccio was not 'given to deliberate forgery' (avvezzo alla premeditata falsificazione).³¹ As I read these sentences I heard Boccaccio's voice whispering in my ear: 'Ser Ciappelletto, *c'est moi*.' But this is no counterargument.

Let me go back to Benvenuto da Imola and his Bolognese lectures. As we have seen, Benvenuto, following in Boccaccio's footsteps, quoted the line 'Ultima regna canam fluvido contermina mundo' to prove that Dante's choice of the vernacular did not imply a lack of proficiency in Latin. Henry Kelly suggested that the person who recorded Benvenuto's lectures in Bologna might have interpreted the reference to Ilaro's epistle *on Dante* as an allusion to an epistle *by Dante*. This is very unlikely, since Benvenuto mentioned both.³² As I said before, his reference to an unknown epistle—either genuine or fictitious—in which Dante defended his use of

²⁹ See, respectively, S. Bellomo, 'Il sorriso di Ilaro e la prima redazione in latino della *Commedia*', *Studi sul Boccaccio*, 32 (2001), 201–35; G. Padoan, 'Il progetto di poema paradisiaco: "Vita nuova", XLII (e l'epistola di Ilaro)', in *idem, Il lungo cammino del 'poema sacro'* (Florence, 1993), pp. 5–23. G. Gorni refers to Ilaro's letter as 'contestatissima', but seems to give some credit to it: Dante Alighieri, *Vita nuova*, ed. G. Gorni (Turin, 1996), p. 151 note.

³⁰ G. Padoan, 'Il progetto', p. 10, followed by F. Bruni, *Boccaccio. L'invenzione della letteratura mezzana* (Bologna, 1990), p. 296 n. 9.

³¹ S. Bellomo, 'Il sorriso di Ilaro', 216.

³² Kelly, *Tragedy*, pp. 48 ff. (Kelly mistakenly refers to Stefano Talice da Ricaldone as the man who recorded Benvenuto's lectures; in fact he transcribed them, one century later). See also Hollander, *Dante's Epistle to Cangrande*, p. 79 (Hollander incorrectly ascribes to Kelly a second, hypothetical identification between the epistle mentioned by Benvenuto, and Petrarch's letter, discussed below).

the vernacular was presumably an echo from Boccaccio's lectures. Ilaro's letter pointed in the same direction. Why did Boccaccio, followed by Benvenuto, insist so much on this issue?

The question may seem preposterous: Boccaccio had been pondering this theme since his youth, as Ilaro's letter clearly shows. But recently the topic had re-emerged, in a different, more threatening context. Benvenuto's third point helps to clarify this:

Alia ratio est, quia vidit stilum suum non esse sufficientem materie de qua inceperat; sed sic faciendo omnia vicit; et sic fuit. Unde dicens Petralca: magna opinio huius hominis ad omnia scivisset se optime applicare. Melius est scire pauca de nobilibus quam multa de rebus ignobilibus; Aristoteles XII Metaphisice. Dicitur pro tanto quantum hic interest tangere res substantiales et necessarias. (Another reason is this: because he realised that his own [Latin] style was not appropriate to the matter he had begun to write about; but in doing this he overcame all obstacles. Therefore Petrarch said: I have a high opinion of this man [i.e., Dante]; he was able to excel in everything he did. It is better to know a bit about noble things than a great deal about ignoble things: Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII. I said this in order to stress that it is important to deal with matters that are necessary and of the essence.)³³

IV

Benvenuto's reference to Petrarch points, once again, to Boccaccio. The sentence 'I have a high opinion of this man: he was able to excel in everything he did' is taken from *Fam.* XXI, 15, the letter Petrarch sent to Boccaccio in May 1359.³⁴ Eight years after the letter was sent, Boccaccio had written to Petrarch complaining that he had never received it; later he finally recovered a copy.³⁵ Benvenuto either saw the letter or heard about it from Boccaccio. But in the process of transmission the original meaning of Petrarch's sentence was deliberately distorted, as a comparison with the full text of the famous letter will immediately show.

³³ *La Commedia di Dante Alighieri col commento inedito di Stefano Talice di Ricaldone*, p. 5.

³⁴ F. Petrarca, *Le familiari*, ed. V. Rossi, U. Bosco (Florence, 1942), pp. 94–100, especially p. 98: 'Nam quod inter laudes dixisti, potuisse illum si voluisset alio stilo uti, credo edepol—magna enim michi de ingenio eius opinio est—potuisse eum omnia quibus intendisset; nunc quibus intenderit, palam est.'

³⁵ G. Boccaccio, *Opere latine minori*, ed. A. F. Massera (Bari, 1928), p. 182: 'Et ego, iam fere annus est, eo quod michi ipsi plurime videantur epistole tue ad me, in volumen unum eo ordine quo misse seu scripte sunt redigere cepi: sed iam gradum figere coactus sum, cum deficiant aliquae quas numquam habui, etiam si a te misse sint, ut puta "Beasti me munere, etc." et eam quam de Dante scripseras ad me et alias forsan plures.'

The letter is indeed 'famosissima', as Gianfranco Contini once said.³⁶ But it is also, in a sense, still insufficiently known. Jean-François de Sade, who rediscovered and republished it, reproached Italy's scholars with these words: 'How is it possible that this letter has remained unknown until today?'³⁷ Sade, a relative of the marquis and a direct descendant of Petrarch's Laura, was writing in the mid-eighteenth century; but Petrarch's letter to Boccaccio has continued to generate a subtle discomfort up to today.³⁸ The reason is simple. The letter undermines the harmonious legend of the *tre corone*, the royal trinity that stands at the majestic opening (and apex) of the Italian literary tradition: Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. Instead of harmony this long, understated letter is full of half-veiled hostility. Petrarch refers dryly to the poet his correspondent had lauded as 'our countryman' (*conterraneus noster*), Dante.

Let me briefly recall the circumstances of Petrarch's letter. After having met Petrarch in Padua in 1351, Boccaccio sent him a manuscript of the *Commedia* (which is still extant) along with a Latin poem he had written himself in praise of Dante. In this poem Boccaccio addressed Petrarch as 'laureate' (*laureato*)—a reference to his famous crowning on the Capitol in 1341—and invited him to read Dante's poems, 'sung in his maternal tongue only / and not encircled by any wreath' (*et patrio tantum sermone sonoros / frondibus ac nullis redimiti*).³⁹ The work Boccaccio transcribed for Petrarch he called 'a delight for the learned, and a source of wonder for the populace' (*gratum . . . opus doctis, vulgo mirabile*).⁴⁰ He explained that Dante's choice was not dictated by ignorance, whatever the

³⁶ G. Contini, 'Preliminari della lingua del Petrarca', in *idem, Varianti e altra linguistica. Una raccolta di saggi (1938–1968)* (Turin, 1970), p. 174. See also *idem, Letteratura italiana delle origini* (Florence, 1970), pp. 662–3.

³⁷ J. F. de Sade, *Mémoires pour la vie de François Pétrarque, tirés de ses oeuvres et des auteurs contemporains*, 3 (Amsterdam, 1756) p. 514 (pp. 508–13 includes a translation of *Fam.* XXI. 15). Sade remarked that there was no excuse for the silence of Italy's scholars, since the letter had been published as part of Petrarch's correspondence (Geneva and Lyons, 1601). See also C. Paolazzi, 'Petrarca, Boccaccio e il "Trattatello in laude di Dante"', *Studi danteschi*, 55 (1983), 165–249, especially 167 n. 9.

³⁸ G. Billanovich's comment in his *Petrarca letterato* (Rome, 1947; new edn., 1995), pp. 238–9, is notable for its vagueness.

³⁹ G. Boccaccio, *Tutte le opere*, ed. V. Branca, 5 (Milan, 1992), *Carmina*, ed. G. Auzzas, pp. 430–3. See also P. G. Ricci, introduction to his edition of G. Boccaccio, *Trattatello*, p. 427. The manuscript is Vat. Lat. 3199; see G. Billanovich, *Petrarca letterato*, pp. 421–5.

⁴⁰ A reworking of Dante's epitaph by Giovanni del Virgilio: 'vulgo gratissimus auctor': see E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. W. R. Trask (New York, 1953), p. 214.

envious might say; in fact, he wanted to demonstrate, for posterity, the power of modern vernacular poetry (*metrum vulgare . . . modernum*). Only death had denied Dante a crown of laurel. He had been both a theologian and a poet, but his fame (Boccaccio suggested) was tainted by two weaknesses, both revealed by an implicit comparison with Petrarch: he had written in the vernacular and had never become a poet laureate.⁴¹

In March 1359 Boccaccio met Petrarch again in Milan and spent a month with him. As soon as he returned to Florence, Boccaccio sent Petrarch a revised version of his poem, as well as a letter, which is lost, in which he acknowledged somewhat apologetically having gone a bit too far in his praise of Dante. Petrarch's answer, written in May 1359, aimed at dispelling the suspicion that he was jealous of Dante. But the interpreters' usual emphasis on Petrarch's psychological ambivalence misses the main point of the letter, which is literary and, in a broad sense, political.⁴²

Petrarch began with a cold reference to Boccaccio's diffuse praise of the unnamed poet, 'popular in his style, noble, without doubt, in his matter' (*popularis quidem quod ad stilum attinet, quod ad rem haud dubie nobilis poete*). This sentence, inspired by the classical hierarchy of styles (which had a social dimension as well) ignored the fact, mentioned by Boccaccio, that the *Commedia* had been praised by a learned audience (*gratum . . . opus doctis*). Petrarch condescendingly wrote that the poet's style was excellent of its kind (*stilus in suo genere optimus*); he admitted that he had never had anything by that poet among his many books; and he explained that absence by his desire to preserve his own originality, since as a young man he had also written poems in the vernacular. Then Petrarch scornfully rejected the ridiculous rumours suggesting that his attitude towards the unnamed poet was inspired by envy. There was no room for envy, Petrarch said. You, Boccaccio, have praised him, saying that he could easily have written in another language. I believe you, since I have a great opinion of his mind. He would have succeeded in any enterprise; but what he really did, we know. (This is the sentence which, as we have seen, Benvenuto da Imola, presumably echoing Boccaccio, extracted

⁴¹ G. Boccaccio, *Opere latine minori*, pp. 96–7.

⁴² For a typical effort to downplay Petrarch's hostility towards Dante, see C. Paolazzi, 'Petarcarca, Boccaccio e il "Trattatello in laude di Dante"'. A recent booklet (A. Quondam, *Petarcarca, l'italiano dimenticato* [Milan, 2004] claims (p. 39) that the opposition between Petrarch and Dante emerged about 1750. As an antidote to this rubbish see M. Feo's excellent article 'Petarcarca' in *Enciclopedia Dantesca*.

from Petrarch's letter, turning a condescending recognition of Dante's intellectual power into unconditional praise.)

Then, in a sudden, uncontrolled outburst Petrarch wrote:

But if we admit that he fully succeeded in his projects, so what? Is this a reason for envy rather than for joy? Should somebody who does not envy Virgil envy him—unless I should envy him for the applause and the raucous mouthings of dyers, innkeepers, wool carders (*fullonum et cauponum et lanistarum*) and all those whose praise is an insult—so that I, like Virgil and Homer, rejoice because I did not receive it?⁴³

This letter by Petrarch, written in Latin, is the true birthplace of Italian literature. In his book *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, Ernst Robert Curtius compared the roles that Homer and Dante played in their respective literary traditions, noting the often ambivalent (and even hostile) attitude towards both of them. Everybody knows that Italian literature began with Dante, but 'Dante stands at the beginning [of Italian literature] and remains alone', Curtius wrote.⁴⁴ This far-reaching remark is included in a chapter on Dante: more precisely, in a paragraph entitled 'Petrarch and Boccaccio'. Curtius did not mention Petrarch's letter to Boccaccio, which would have supported his point—but from a perspective very different from his own. Italian literature emerged as a bilingual project against the poet who came to be regarded as the father of the Italian language. The target of Petrarch's letter was Dante's successful attempt to address a larger audience, which included artisans and women: people unable to read Latin. Sacchetti's colourful stories about blacksmiths and muleteers reciting lines from the *Commedia* should not be taken literally, of course: but they should not be ignored either.⁴⁵ Dante's use of the vernacular in a poem like the *Commedia*, which deals with sublime matters, was immediately perceived as a scandal: literary, religious, and political. The *Epistle to Cangrande* (which Curtius regarded as authentic) was a deliberate attempt to remove that stumbling block.⁴⁶

⁴³ F. Petrarca, *Le familiari*, pp. 98–9: 'Quis hic, precor, invidie locus, que ve suspitio est? Namquod inter laudes dixisti, potuisse illum si voluisset alio stilo uti, credo edepol—magna enim michi de ingenio eius opinio est—potuisse eum omnia quibus intendisset; nunc quibus intenderit, palam est. Et esto iterum: intenderit, potuerit, impleverit; quid tandem ideo? Que ve inde michi invidie et non potius gaudii materia? Aut cui tandem invideat qui Virgilio non invidet, nisi forte sibi fullonum et cauponum et lanistarum ceterorum ve, qui quos volunt laudare vituperant, plausum et raucum murmur invideam, quibus cum ipso Virgilio cumque Homero carere me gratulor?'

⁴⁴ E. R. Curtius, *European Literature*, p. 225.

⁴⁵ F. Sacchetti, *Il Trecentonovelle*, nov. CXIV: *idem*, *Opere*, ed. A. Borlenghi (Milan, 1957), pp. 360 ff.

⁴⁶ E. R. Curtius, *European Literature*, p. 222.

V

The intricate relationship between Boccaccio and Petrarch provides the context in which the *Epistle to Cangrande* emerged. Boccaccio's effort to promote the cult of Dante, from the first version of the *Trattatello* onwards, was to a large extent an indirect response to Petrarch's criticism.⁴⁷ The standard expression I just used—'the cult of Dante'—must be taken in a quasi-literal sense. As has been noted, Boccaccio's *Trattatello in laude di Dante* was conceived as the life of a saint, complete with prophetic announcements to a pregnant mother, posthumous miracles and so forth.⁴⁸ To those standard hagiographic features we may add the use of *piae fraudes*, pious frauds. One of these was the use, both in the *Trattatello* and the later commentary, of Ilaro's letter, that youthful rhetorical exercise, to prove that Dante, far from being ignorant of Latin, had initiated his grand enterprise in that language.⁴⁹

But to stress Dante's proficiency in Latin was not enough. The *Epistle to Cangrande* defended Dante on a different ground, providing a learned scholastic commentary on a *Commedia* paradoxically removed from the language in which it had been conceived. Quoting the beginning of the *Paradiso* in Latin is, as Barański rightly noted, 'the most shocking thing about the Epistle's exegetical procedures.'⁵⁰ Through this highly symbolic gesture, Dante's poem was plucked from the unclean hands of dyers, innkeepers, wool carders. The message was duly received. The fifteenth-century Ambrosiana manuscript of the *Epistle to Cangrande* (C. 145 inf) is inscribed 'Dantis Aligerii poete laureatissimi Florentini', the *very laureate* Florentine poet Dante Alighieri: a curious act of retroactive justice.⁵¹

⁴⁷ The impact of Petrarch's *Fam.* XXI, 15 on Boccaccio is rightly stressed by Jenaro MacLennan, *The Trecento*, p. 122 n. 1.

⁴⁸ G. Boccaccio, *Trattatello*, pp. 441 ff.: 'Pareva alla gentile donna nel suo sonno essere sotto uno altissimo alloro, sopra uno verde prato etc.'; pp. 485 ff.: 'Raccontava uno valente uomo ravignano, il cui nome fu Piero Giardino, lungamente discepolo stato di Dante, che, dopo l'ottavo mese della morte del suo maestro, era una notte, vicino all'ora che noi chiamiamo "mattutino", venuto a casa sua il predetto Iacopo etc.'

⁴⁹ G. Boccaccio, *Trattatello*, p. 486; *idem*, *Esposizione sopra la Commedia di Dante* (Milan, 1965), *Tutte le opere*, 6, pp. 17–18.

⁵⁰ Z. Barański, 'Comedia: Notes on Dante, the *Epistle to Cangrande* and Medieval Comedy', in *Lectura Dantis: a Forum for Dante Research and Interpretation*, 8 (1991), 26–55, particularly 44; *idem*, 'The *Epistle to Can Grande*', in A. Minnis and I. Johnson (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, 2 (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 583–9, especially pp. 587–8.

⁵¹ Schneider, *Die Handschriften*, ill. 1. See also p. X, quoting N. Zingarelli, *La vita, i tempi e le opere di Dante*, 2, Milan, 1931, p. 714: 'Perché quel laureatissimo, se non ha mai cinta la testa del sacro lauro? Esprime forse una protesta dell'opinione pubblica, nel secolo XV?'

VI

In the past, some scholars pointed to the traditional features of the *Epistle to Cangrande* as an argument for rejecting its authenticity.⁵² Today this argument, inspired by a Romantic image of the poet as an isolated genius, seems particularly weak. The *Epistle*, and especially the section that includes the *accessus*, is clearly indebted to a long tradition, as pointed out by Zingarelli, Pflaum (in a learned, rarely mentioned essay), Curtius and Nardi.⁵³ But if this doubt is not sufficient grounds for dismissing Dante's authorship of the *Epistle to Cangrande*, neither does it prove it. As Giovanni Morelli showed a long time ago, to identify the author of a painting we have to focus on marginal, idiosyncratic details, not on widespread, easily copied features.⁵⁴ Is there something like Morelli's nails and earlobes present in the text of the *Epistle to Cangrande*?

My attempt to answer this question relies to a large extent upon Luis Jenaro-MacLennan's excellent work on the Trecento commentaries on the *Commedia*—although, as will be seen, our conclusions are widely divergent. After a close scrutiny of Boccaccio's use of the *Epistle to Cangrande*, Jenaro-MacLennan came to the following conclusion:

Since the fragments of the epistle that are preserved in Boccaccio's commentary are independent of the earlier exegetical tradition of the *Comedy*, it seems reasonable to conclude that they presuppose a direct knowledge of the epistle to Cangrande.⁵⁵

As I shall show, Boccaccio was not entirely aloof from the tradition of earlier commentaries. But his direct knowledge of the *Epistle to Cangrande* seems to me certain, because he was its author (the first four paragraphs excepted). I take the word 'author' in the medieval sense, designating the person who assembled pre-existing material as well as the

⁵² F. D'Ovidio, 'L'Epistola a Cangrande', p. 473.

⁵³ See Zingarelli, *La vita*, p. 718 (with a reference to Boethius); H. Pflaum, 'Il *modus tractandi* della Divina Commedia', in *Giornale dantesco*, 39 (1936), 153–80; E. R. Curtius, *European Literature*, pp. 221–5 (but see the earlier 'Dante und das lateinische Mittelalter', *Romanische Forschungen*, 57 (1943), 163–71); B. Nardi, 'Osservazioni sul medievale "accessus ad auctores" in rapporto all'epistola a Cangrande', in *Studi e problemi di critica testuale. Convegno di studi di filologia italiana*, Bologna, 1961 (= *Saggi e note di critica dantesca* [Milan and Naples, 1966] pp. 268–305).

⁵⁴ C. Ginzburg, 'Clues', in *idem, Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (London and Baltimore, 1989), pp. 96–119.

⁵⁵ Jenaro-MacLennan, *The Trecento Commentaries*, pp. 107–8 (and see the entire chapter: 'Boccaccio and the Epistle to Cangrande').

person who created something new.⁵⁶ Jenaro-MacLennan's argument that no forger would have been able to create a convincing, unified mosaic of fragments from previous commentaries, is unconvincing, in the light of Boccaccio's uncanny cleverness in making works of his own based on mosaics drawn from other people's writings.⁵⁷ In the case of the *Epistle to Cangrande* the mosaic included also some passages by Dante.

VII

I am eager to remind the reader of this in order to make sense of a recent, important discovery concerning the *Epistle*. Luca Azzetta found a reference to an epistle which Dante had addressed to 'Cane Grande della Scala' in a series of glosses to the *Commedia*, written in a manuscript now at the Biblioteca Nazionale in Florence, traditionally ascribed to the fifteenth century.⁵⁸ The reference is followed by a translation into the vernacular of a passage of the *Epistle* on a twofold division of the *Paradiso* into a 'prologue' and an 'executive part': an isolated quotation that does not of itself support Azzetta's claim that at that time the *Epistle* was circulating in its entirety.⁵⁹ These glosses have been attributed on paleographic grounds to Andrea Lancia, the Florentine notary traditionally identified as the author of the so called *Ottimo Commento* on the *Commedia*. This newly discovered document would thus push back the earliest evidence concerning the *Epistle* to about 1345. At that time, as Azzetta emphasised in a detailed essay, Andrea Lancia and Boccaccio, following in their parents' footsteps, were personally close. They were both devoted to Dante; they both transcribed the *Commedia*. Lancia, who had met Dante, was presumably the source of some biographical details included in Boccaccio's *Trattatello*.⁶⁰ Did Andrea Lancia also give

⁵⁶ M.-D. Chenu, 'Auctor, actor, autor', *Bulletin Du Cange*, 3 (1926-7), 81-6.

⁵⁷ For an outstanding case study see G. Billanovich, 'Pietro Piccolo da Monteforte tra il Petrarca e il Boccaccio', *Medioevo e Rinascimento. Studi in onore di Bruno Nardi*, 1 (Florence, 1955), pp. 3-76.

⁵⁸ L. Azzetta, 'Le chiose alla *Commedia* di Andrea Lancia, *l'Epistola a Cangrande* e altre questioni dantesche', *L'Alighieri*, ns 21 (2003), 5-75, especially 37-47.

⁵⁹ L. Azzetta, 'Le chiose', 37. But see the somewhat embarrassed comment: 'Finalmente, alieno da dogmatismi ignoti agli antichi commenti, ritornò all' "altro ghiosatore", cioè, abbandonata *l'Epistola a Cangrande*, a Pietro Alighieri' (40).

⁶⁰ L. Azzetta, 'Per la biografia di Andrea Lancia: documenti e autografi', *Italia medioevale e umanistica*, 39 (1996), 121-68, especially 141, 147 ff.; L. Azzetta (ed.), *Ordinamenti, provvisioni e*

a truncated version of Dante's letter to Boccaccio, who later reworked it in the form familiar to us?

I am well aware that this may sound like an ad hoc hypothesis and a little slippery. But if we do not have Dante's letter available to Andrea Lancia, we do have the letter in which Boccaccio left, I would argue, his signature.

VIII

The contiguity between Boccaccio the story-teller and Boccaccio the critic (and forger) is especially instructive. In the introduction to the *Decameron's* fourth day, Boccaccio referred to his own work in the following terms:

... le presenti novelle... le quali non solamente in fiorentin volgare e in prosa scritte per me sono e senza titolo, ma ancora in istilo umilissimo e rimesso, quanto il più si possono (... these present stories... which have been written by me, not only in vulgar Florentine and in prose and untitled, but also in as humble and restrained a style as might be).⁶¹

Jenaro-MacLennan saw a 'significant connection' between this passage and the passage from the *Epistle to Cangrande* in which the style of comedy is described as 'remissus... et humilis'.⁶² The sources of these adjectives (first put forward as adverbs: 'remisse et humiliter') have been identified. 'Item comedia humili stilo scribitur, tragedia alto' (comedy is written in a humble, tragedy in an elevated style), Ugucione of Pisa wrote in his lexicon.⁶³ 'A poet writing a comedy must speak, as Terence did, in a restrained, not in a lofty tone (*remisse et non alte*)', Pietro di Dante remarked in his commentary on the *Commedia*.⁶⁴ The convergence of both adjectives—'remissus et humilis' and 'umilissimo e rimesso'—in Boccaccio's passage is indeed significant. But Jenaro-MacLennan's

riformagioni del Comune di Firenze volgarizzati da Andrea Lancia (1355–1357) (Venice, 2001), pp. 20–1, 27 ff.

⁶¹ G. Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ed. V. Branca (Turin, 1980), pp. 459–60; *idem*, *Decameron*, the John Payne translation revised and annotated by Ch. S. Singleton (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1992) p. 286 (with a slight change).

⁶² Jenaro-MacLennan, *The Trecento*, p. 118. A 'most suggestive' remark, wrote K. Foster in his review: *Italian Studies*, 30 (1975), 101–2.

⁶³ Dante, *Opere minori*, 2, *Epistola XIII*, ed. G. Brugnoli, pp. 614–15.

⁶⁴ L. Jenaro-MacLennan, 'Remissus est modus et humilis (Epistle to Cangrande 10)', *Lettere italiane*, 31 (1979), 406–18; Kelly, *Tragedy*, p. 29.

assumption that Boccaccio picked up the two adjectives from the *Epistle* is far from obvious. I will explore an alternative source, extending the comparison from the two pairs of adjectives to their respective contexts. I will take into account, on the one hand, a longer passage from the introduction to the *Decameron's* fourth day, and, on the other, the full definition of the comic style that appears in the *Epistle*.

The beginning of the introduction to the fourth day—‘carissime donne’, dearest ladies—echoes the address to the ‘graziosissime donne,’ most gracious ladies, which opens the introduction to the entire work. In both cases an allusion to Dante follows. In the introduction to the fourth day Boccaccio writes:

Estimava io che lo 'mpetuoso e ardente vento della 'nvidia non dovesse percuotere se non l'alte torri o le più levate cime degli alberi: ma io mi truovo della mia estimazione ingannato. (I had conceived that the boisterous and burning blast of envy was apt to smite none but lofty towers or the highest summits of the trees; but I find myself greatly mistaken in my conception.)

This is an echo of the prophecy delivered by Cacciaguida, Dante's ancestor (‘Questo tuo grido farà come vento / che le più alte cime più percuote’, *Paradise* XVII, 133–4). But, as Vittore Branca and Robert Hollander noted, the allusion stresses the difference between the two poets: Dante proudly addressed ‘le più alte cime’, the highest religious and political authorities; Boccaccio followed a different way, in order to avoid the attacks of the envious. ‘Non solamente pe' piani ma ancora per le profondissime valli mi sono ingegnato di andare’ (I have striven to go, not only in the plains but in the very deepest of the valleys), he wrote. This ostensible lack of ambition is proved by ‘these present stories which have been written by me, not only in vulgar Florentine and in prose and untitled, but also in as humble and sober a style (*in istilo umilissimo e rimesso*) as might be’. But notwithstanding this, Boccaccio concludes, I have been cruelly blasted by the winds of envy.

Hollander argued that Boccaccio, by echoing and reinforcing the definition of comic style provided in the *Epistle to Cangrande*, which he must have regarded as ‘a significant *accessus* by an unknown commentator’, rearranged ‘the “outdoing topos”’ turning it into ‘a claim for having been utterly outdone . . . If Dante has claimed, disingenuously or not, a style “remissus . . . et humilis”, Boccaccio will go still deeper in self-abasement: “in istilo umilissimo e rimesso etc.”’⁶⁵ This argument takes for granted

⁶⁵ Hollander, ‘Boccaccio's Dante: Imitative Distance’, 173.

that the *Epistle*, as we can read it today, existed when the *Decameron* was written, between 1349 and 1351. I propose to read the relationship between the two texts backwards. After Boccaccio's first encounter with Petrarch in Padua, which took place in 1351, he rearranged some elements scattered in the introduction to the fourth day of the *Decameron* to create a passage in the *Epistle*. Among those elements I will mention not only the 'istilo umilissimo e rimesso' but the 'dearest women' (carissime donne) to whom the introduction is addressed.

IX

Comedy is suited, one reads in the *Epistle to Cangrande*, to a style both 'remissus' and 'humilis', restrained and humble, 'quia locutio vulgaris in qua et muliercule communicant' (because its speech is the vernacular, in which even ordinary women communicate).⁶⁶ This sentence has no precedent whatsoever among the earlier commentaries on the *Commedia*. I would suggest that it may provide a way out from the odd relationship between the commentaries and the *Epistle*, that Lino Pertile (as we learn from Barański) described in conversation as 'the textual equivalent of the chicken and egg problem'.⁶⁷ Let us take the word 'et', even, which adds an unmistakably disparaging edge to the condescending tone of 'muliercule'. Is the expression 'et muliercule', literally 'even ordinary women', compatible with what we would expect from Dante in this context?

This question has been a source of embarrassment for the scholars who support the authenticity of the *Epistle to Cangrande*.⁶⁸ A scholar from the opposing camp emphasised that the disparaging words 'et muliercule' ran counter to the spirit of the argument on the nobility of the vernacular that Dante put forward in the final section of the first book of *Convivio*.⁶⁹ The observation is correct, but does not go far enough. A broader perspective is needed.

In his commentary, Boccaccio debated whether the title *Commedia*, comedy, was appropriate to the poem's matter and style. Following a

⁶⁶ Haller translates 'even women'.

⁶⁷ Z. Barański, 'Comedia', 48 n. 14.

⁶⁸ In his comment G. Brugnoli quoted the exchange between S. A. Chimenz and F. Mazzoni (*Opere minori*, 2, 620). R. Hollander (*Dante's Epistle to Cangrande*, p. 66) referred to the passage without commenting on it.

⁶⁹ S. A. Chimenz, 'Per il testo e la chiosa della Divina Commedia', *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana*, 133 (1956), 168–9.

standard scholastic procedure he raised a series of objections. One of them brings us to familiar ground:

Oltre a questo, lo stilo comico è umile e rimesso, acciò che alla materia sia conforme; quello che della presente opera [the *Commedia*] dire non si può, per ciò che, quantunque in volgare scritto sia, nel quale pare che comunichino le femmette, egli è nondimeno ornato e leggiadro e sublime, delle quali cose nulla sente il volgare delle femine. Non dico però che, se in versi latini fosse, non mutato il peso delle parole volgari, ch'egli non fosse più artificioso e più sublime molto, per ciò che molto più d'arte e di gravità ha nel parlare latino che nel materno. (Moreover, the comic style is humble and restrained, in order to be appropriate to the content; this cannot be said in the case of the present work [the *Commedia*], because, although it is written in the vernacular, in which ordinary women appear to communicate, nevertheless it is elegant, graceful and sublime, and the feminine vernacular is none of these. I admit, however, that if it were written in Latin verse, keeping the gravity of the vernacular, it would be much more artful and sublime, since the Latin tongue is more artful and solemn than the maternal tongue.)⁷⁰

Here Boccaccio tacitly distances himself from the *Epistle to Cangrande*, a text he never mentioned. This silence is an obvious difficulty for those who believe that Boccaccio was aware of Dante's authorship of the *Epistle*. Jenaro-MacLennan objects that 'Boccaccio's borrowings from Dante's epistles are made without acknowledging Dante's authorship of the material he uses. This is precisely the technique used by Boccaccio in his commentary on the *Comedy*, where he borrows from the epistle to Cangrande without suggesting that he is using a particular source.'⁷¹ But the examples Jenaro-MacLennan mentions to support his argument are rather weak, and possibly self-defeating. Boccaccio's epistle, perhaps ideally addressed to Petrarch (*Mavortis miles extremue*), or the pseudo-Ilaro's epistle could not mention Dante's epistles on which they were based, otherwise the rhetorical game would have collapsed. More interesting would be a comparison between Boccaccio's use of, respectively, Ilaro's epistle and the epistle to Cangrande: as texts to be reworked, commented on or criticised—but never mentioned. On one occasion Boccaccio seems to have played the two epistles against each other. In the earlier, and longer version of Boccaccio's *Trattatello in laude di Dante* one reads that Dante had planned, according to one source, to dedicate the *Inferno* to Ugucione della Faggiuola, the *Purgatorio* to Moroello Malaspina, and the *Paradiso* to Frederick the Third, king of Sicily (whom

⁷⁰ G. Boccaccio, *Esposizione sopra la Commedia di Dante*, p. 5.

⁷¹ Jenaro-MacLennan, *The Trecento*, pp. 116–17.

Dante utterly despised); according to another source, to dedicate the entire poem to Cangrande della Scala (a misreading of the first section of the epistle to Cangrande, to whom the *Paradise* was dedicated). Boccaccio's conclusion that the debate was ultimately irrelevant is understandable, since the source for the former alternative was Ilaro's epistle, his own concoction. In the shorter version Boccaccio suggested that the latter alternative (Dante's dedication of the entire poem to Cangrande) seemed more likely.⁷²

X

These conflicting versions on Dante's dedication of the *Comedy* do not contradict my hypothesis (which, as far as I know, has never been advanced before) that Boccaccio made up the second, and longer part of the *Epistle* from a number of different sources. Likewise, Boccaccio staged the debate concerning the genre of Dante's poem, first by raising a series of objections, largely based on his own writings (the Ilaro letter, the *accessus* section of the *Epistle*), only to dismiss them on the ground that Dante himself had called his poem *Commedia*. But even in his criticism (or pseudo self-criticism) Boccaccio did not renounce those playful, patronising diminutives that recur so often in his writings (against a single occurrence in the *Commedia*, Purg. XXI, 2): 'feminette', 'feminelle', 'fanticelle'.⁷³ To Boccaccio, the language spoken by 'feminette' or 'muliercule' could not be compared to the language of Dante.

Dante's ideas about language, women and their relationship did not coincide with Boccaccio's.⁷⁴ Let me first recall the famous passage from *Vita Nuova* (XXVI, 7):

E lo primo che cominciò a dire sì come poeta volgare, si mosse però che volle fare intendere le sue parole a donna, a la quale era malagevole intendere li versi latini. (And the first who began to speak as a vernacular poet, did so, because he wished to make his mistress understand his words, to whom Latin verses were hard to understand.)⁷⁵

⁷² Jenaro-MacLennan, *The Trecento*, pp. 108–16.

⁷³ A. Barbina (ed.), *Concordanze del 'Decameron'*, 1 (Florence, 1969): *fanticella* (14 occurrences); *feminetta* (6 occurrences); *feminella* (2 occurrences).

⁷⁴ Here I am developing Auerbach's remarks on Dante's and Boccaccio's widely different approaches to love (*Mimesis*, pp. 226–31).

⁷⁵ Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*, ed. G. Gorni, p. 150; *Dante's Vita Nuova*, trans. R. W. Emerson, ed. C. J. Mathews (Chapel Hill, 1960, 1966), p. 30 (slightly modified).

Inviting us to take this argument seriously, Gianfranco Contini pointed to its further development in the *Convivio*, which he called ‘Dante’s first attempt at a democratic *summa*’ (‘primo tentativo di *summa* democratica dantesca’).⁷⁶ Following this suggestion, let us enter into Dante’s *ergasterium* (workshop).⁷⁷ I would suggest that we may find the distant roots of the famous definition of Arnaut Daniel, ‘Fu miglior fabbro del parlar materno’ (*Purg.* XXVI, 117: ‘a better smith of the mother tongue’) in a passage from the *Convivio* (I, xiii, 4). Here Dante pointed to the tight knot between the mother tongue and generation, making poetry and making love:

Questo mio volgare fu congiugnitore de li miei generanti, che con esso parlavano, sì come ’l fuoco è disponente del ferro al fabbro che fa lo coltello; per che manifesto è lui essere concorso a la mia generazione, e così essere alcuna cagione del mio essere. (My mother tongue brought together those who begat me, who spoke with it, even as the fire is the cause that disposes [prepares] the iron for the smith who makes the knife; therefore it is evident that it cooperated in my birth, and so it was in some way the cause of my being.)⁷⁸

Two voices; two authors.

Note. I am very grateful to Sam Gilbert for his stylistic revision and to the anonymous referee for his/her helpful comments.

⁷⁶ G. Contini, ‘La poesia rusticale come caso di bilinguismo’ in *La poesia rusticana del Rinascimento (Roma, 10–13 ottobre 1968)* (Rome, 1969), pp. 43–55, especially p. 50.

⁷⁷ *De vulgari eloquentie*, II, iv, 1: ‘illius artis ergasterium reseremus’.

⁷⁸ D. Alighieri, *Il convito. The banquet*, trans. E. Price Sayer (London, 1887), p. 44. This translation has been modified.