Paolo Cherchi

The Inventors of Things in Boccaccio's *De genealogia deorum gentilium*

The topic of this paper can be defined as "modest," considering that we will discuss only a small amount of the vast body of Boccaccio's *De genealogia deorum gentilium,* otherwise known simply as the *Genealogie*; it can be defined as "important," given the vital function that material has on the work as a whole; and it can be defined as "fundamental" insofar as the *Genealogie* has contributed greatly to revamping a literary genre. The paper's subject is Boccaccio's "inventor of things," upon which he touches in his *Genealogie*. He did not devote any special section to it, instead discussing the topic in a number of passages of varying length, ranging from one paragraph to entire chapters, scattered throughout the work. Yet taken together these fragments create a discourse that, properly put into context, sheds light on Boccaccio's notion of myth, mythical language, and the relationship between myth and history. By dealing with the subject of the "inventors," Boccaccio brought to light an ancient theme that had been forgotten for many centuries; most importantly to us, he developed the essential notion of "historical truthfulness" in myths, thus touching upon the crucial debate over the nature of myths: are they pure fiction, or do they refer to historical realities under the disguise of fabulous language?

Inventors were so highly esteemed in the classic world that a literary genre was "invented" to celebrate them; "heurematic" literature had origins dating back to the ancient Sophists, according to Plato.[1] In his *Protagoras*, Plato notes the importance of inventors when he touches on the story of Prometheus (320C–344A), the myth that focuses on the man as maker and shaper of things, as the creator of the *techné* that fosters the development of societies, frees man from limitations of the *physis*, and gives a decisive role to the *nomos*, the law.

---

1 For the scholarship on the heurematic literature see Karl Thraede: Erfinder II. In: *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*. Edited by Theodor Klauser/ Ernst Dassmann/ Franz Joseph Dölger. Stuttgart: A. Hiersemann 1950. Vol. 5, coll. 1191–1278; Karl Thraede: *Das Lob des Erfinders: Bemerkungen zur Analyse der Heuremata-Kataloge*. In: *Rheinisches Museum zur Vorgeschichte* 105 (1961), p. 158–186; Brian Capenhaver: *The Historiography of Discovery in the Renaissance: the Sources and Composition of Polydore Vergil's 'De inventoribus rerum'* I–III. In: *Journal of Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 41 (1978), p. 192–214; Patricia Falguières: *Les inventeurs des choses. Enquêtes sur les arts et naissance d'une science de l'homme dans les cabinets du XVIᵉ siècles*. In: *Histoire de l'art et anthropologie*. Actes de Colloques Musée du quai Branly. In: www.actesbranly. revues.org/94; Catherine Atkinson: *Inventing Inventors in Renaissance Europe*: *Polydore Vergil's 'De inventoribus'*. Tubingen: Siebeck 2007.

A considerable contribution to the theme of the significance of inventors came from Herodotus who, viewing things from an historical angle, maintained that many inventions had come to Greece from Egypt and Babylon (2:53), where inventors were held as divinities. This notion pointed the heurematic theme in a theological direction and led to the thinking of gods as benefactors of humanity, especially insofar as they invented all sorts of things useful to mankind.

These ideas were elaborated upon by Euhemerus in a work that has been lost to us. However, ample sections of it were preserved by Lactantius (*Inst*. I; XI; XIII; XIV; etc.) one of the Fathers of the Church. From Euhemerus we have "Euhemerism:" the theory that gods must be seen as creations of the human imagination, which transformed great rulers, legislators, and inventors into superior and eternal beings after their deaths.

There was a third way of seeing the inventors; in this view, they were merely fantastic creations of the human imagination because the inventions themselves were the results of incidental factors. For example, the melting of metals was not the invention of any particular man but rather the result of volcanic activities or of stones or ores burning in some forest fire (we can see this kind of explanation in Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, V. 1241–1268).

These varying opinions led to the three types of theology described by Varro. The first was "natural" theology, which excluded the figures of the inventors because the inventions themselves were the fruit of nature; the second was "mythical" theology, which considered the inventors mythical figures; and the third was the theology of "religious cults," which considered the inventors to be divinized creatures, worthy of religious devotion. This classification by Varro was borrowed by Saint Augustine, and Boccaccio refers to it in the *Genealogie*;[2] it is clear that he was well aware of this tradition.

The ancient world dealt repeatedly with this topic and often produced catalogues of "inventors of things." Confining ourselves to the Latin world, we see Lucretius dwelling on the inventions of things worked out by nature; we have seen the fusion of metals, and we may add now hunting, farming, and other inventions of this kind. Pliny thought the inventors were real people, only some of whom were divinized; for him the inventions were the result of the *techné* or *ars*, and not of chance or Nature. Pliny made a list of over two-hundred inventors, gathering them in a chapter of his *Naturalis historia* (VII 56), a passage that would become

---

2 Prohemium 1, 18, p. 50. Our references here and henceforth are to *Genealogie deorum gentilium*. Edited by Vittorio Zaccaria. 2 vols. Milan: Mondadori 1998. This edition – which constitutes vol 7 and 8 of *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio* edited under the direction of Vittore Branca – contains the Latin text and the translation into Italian.

an indispensable piece of the heurematic literature, referenced and plagiarized endlessly. To the Greek and Latin tradition we must add the Biblical one, headed by Josephus Flavius, who maintained that all inventors of things were present in the books of the Bible, and the pagan inventors did nothing more than carry the knowledge forward; for example, Moses taught the art of music to Orpheus.

With the advent of Christianity the theme experienced a rapid decline as the pagan divinities faded away or were degraded to demonic figures, and the inventions were thought to be gifts of divine providence, sent to provide mankind with the tools to live increasingly well. Mythology, too, saw a remarkable decline to the point of disappearance, since it was considered a dangerous carrier of pagan values. In Fulgentius and Macrobius, mythology is a "typological" interpretation that sees myths as precursors to Christian truths; in this context the inventors are all but forgotten. The brief chapter that St. Isidore devotes to them in his *Origenes* (or *Etymologiae* VII 11) has a purely informative function, a simple entry in his *summa*.

Rumblings of a revival were heard in the so-called "Twelfth Century Renaissance." In that climate of cultural curiosity, ancient mythology did not awaken fears of contaminating the Christian creed; in fact, it aroused so much curiosity that several mythographic collections were produced. These handbooks told the mythical stories and occasionally explained their allegorical meanings, in order to satisfy the needs of readers of ancient texts containing mythological references, chiefly poetry.[3] Among the best-known collections are the so-called *Mythographi vaticani*: three books, each by a different author, each different in the arrangement and wealth of materials, all three helpful for reading and commenting on ancient authors. Boccaccio mentions them often – especially the third, which he attributes to Alberico. In the works of these mythographers the qualification of "inventor" crops up only occasionally in the story of some individuals, and on those few occasions their inventions are recalled merely as part of their memorable deeds.

The first notable consideration of "inventors" occurs in Hugh of Saint Victor's *Didascalicon*, in which all of the arts and disciplines have their inventors. It is easy to understand why the author is interested in pointing out the "inventors"

---

3 A survey of the Medieval mythographic literature in: Robert Earl Kaske/ Arthur Gross/ Michael W. Twomay (eds.): *Medieval Christian Literary Imagery: A Guide to Interpretation*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1998, the chapter 6 "Mythography" p. 104–116. A wealth of data can be found in Jeane Chance's studies on mythography, of which I recommend the last volume published because of its relevancy to our subject: Jean Chance: *Medieval Mythography. Volume 3: The Emergence of Italian Humanism, 1321–1475*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press 2014.

of philosophy, of grammar, of weaving or ironwork, because these disciplines constitute a knowledge which must be transmitted through teaching; thus it is normal to think about their "first teachers," who must also be considered their inventors: they know *per causas*, and nobody can teach something better than its inventor.

About a century later in Italy, in a culture already tinged by proto-humanistic curiosity, the *De viribus illustribus et de originibus* by Guglielmo da Pastrengo appeared.[4] It presents a very long catalogue of "firsts," among which are listed the "inventors." Opening the list is Abel, the "first to offer gifts to God," and Adam, the first man. This gives us a hint that the list follows an alphabetical order. In it we find not only biblical characters but also persons like Cato the Censor, Gorgias the Sophist, Epicurus, a Roman who created a tank to breed eels, and an endless number of people who were the "firsts" at something or otherwise distinguished themselves. One has the impression that Pastrengo is composing a "heuristic" catalogue rather than a "heurematic" one; that is, he has compiled a catalogue useful to writers of histories and encyclopedias.

What's interesting about Pastrengo's work is that it was composed around the same time Boccaccio was composing his *Genealogie*. The proximity highlights the huge difference between the two works: Pastrengo was composing a work of erudition, drawing on classical and biblical sources in the proto-humanistic style, whereas Boccaccio was set to claim the legitimacy of myth both as history and as poetry. In Boccaccio's ambitious and original plan the "inventors" acquired a new and important role.

To begin, we must say that the inventors' theme in the *Genealogie* does not occupy the space one would expect in a work focusing on "origins," as the title implies. In fact it is fair to say that the inventors' presence is disappointingly scarce, especially if we consider the opinion that the *Genealogie* is an euhemeristic work.[5] I find such a reading generally unacceptable, because even though the *Genealogie*

---

[4] Guglielmo da Pastrengo: *De viris illustribus et de originibus*. Edited by Guglielmo Bottari. Padova: Antenore 1991.

[5] The bibliography on the *Genealogie* is relatively limited compared to other works of Boccaccio. For our purposes we point out some of the most recent studies: Manlio Pastore Stocchi: *Giovanni Boccaccio. La «Genealogia deorum gentilium»: una novità bibliografica*. In: Piero Gibellini (ed.): *Il mito nella letteratura italiana*. Vol. 1, *Dal Medioevo al Rinascimento*. Ed. by Gian Carlo Alessio. Milano: Morcelliana 2005 (Biblioteca morcelliana, 1), p. 229–245; Luigi Canetti: *Boccaccio teologo. Poesia e verità alla fine del Medioevo*. In: *Intersezioni* 31, 2 (2011), p. 179–196; Bodo Guthmüller: *Il mito tra teologia e poetica*. In: *Intersezioni*, 31, 2 (2011), p. 219–230; Jon Solomon, *Gods, Greeks, and Poetry* (Genealogia deorum gentilium). In: Victoria Kirkham/ Michael Sherberger/ Janet Levarie Smarr (eds.): *Boccaccio: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2014, p. 235–244; Jon Solomon is in the process of editing the *Genealogy of the*

contains euhemeristic elements, Boccaccio's general way of approaching myths is not based on the "rationalization" that was typical of euhemeristic analysis. What can be euhemeristic in the description of Demagorgon, that primitive divinity utterly invented by Boccaccio, which opens the work? In fact, the *Genealogie* inverts that course: it is not that men are deified because of their extraordinary achievements, as Euhemerus maintained, but rather that the divinities descend to the world of men through the concept of "genealogy" – or, at best, both meet at the intermediate level of a "superior man," who, like Prometheus, steals the power of the gods and bestows it upon mortals. We will come back to this important point.

In order to characterize the *Genealogie* we might define it as a study, indeed a true epos of the art of interpretation, of the exegetical and hermeneutical labors and travails of many generations through the myths, an attempt to understand whether they are pure fantasy, how and when they were formed, what truths they hide, which language they use, and how they are related to history. The *Genealogie* holds an immense legacy of stories that have fascinated generation after generation from the early philosophers on. Hence the most conspicuous aspects of the work. First, the congestion of the ancient sources, or *auctoritates*. Second, the position taken by the author: Boccaccio places his own interpretations of the myths alongside those of the other *auctores*, who only chronologically precede him. He does not impose his own interpretation, nor does he take sides; rather, he simply adds his proposals to the others, and he is far from giving them as definitive. All proposals are more or less acceptable because the interpretation of myth is like that of poetry; these are opinions rather than definitive statements. This is because the language of myth is polysemous – their meanings are inexhaustible, and Boccaccio must have thought future interpreters might come along with new interpretations.

In this sense he was aware that his *Genealogie* was an *opera aperta* ("open work"), able to expand infinitely that exegetical epos of which he was just one bard. If we see the *Genealogie* in this way, then we may understand why Boccaccio added two books to the main corpus of his work, but did not examine any new myths. Books fourteen and fifteen are dedicated to the defense of poetry, one of the earliest and most important in medieval times, just at the threshold of the Humanistic period. Far from being the appendix many critics have seen, these

---

Pagan Gods. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 2011 (The I Tatti Renaissance Library, 46) the only volume (bks I–V) that has appeared so far. Special mention deserves the essay of David Lummus: Boccaccio's Poetic Anthropology: Allegories of History in the "Genealogie deorum gentilium libri". In: *Speculum* 1987, 3 (July 2012), p. 724–765: "special" because I was not able to see it in time to use it for this present work, and special because of its quality and originality. It gives me great comfort to see that some of the ideas I present here coincide in some points with Lummus's notion of "historic anthropology."

books are an integral part of the larger work, one that grows organically from the main conception of the *Genealogie*, offering the "aesthetic" key to the thesis that the work advances in a different way.

The accumulation of myths and interpretations makes the work feel like a *summa*, and it is often seen and used as such. It is a plausible characterization, and the presence of the *Genealogie* in the histories of mythographic literature and the pictorial arts – as well as the constant consultation by poets and writers – confirms the *summa* role it has played. Boccaccio himself may have contributed to the view of his work as an attempt to impose order on myth, to classify the intricate legacy of ancient mythologies. He pretends to have undertaken this enormous task at the request of the King of Cyprus, who confesses a strong wish to have a clear picture of the distant and confused world of myth, where kinships are multiple, where histories have many variations, where different names designate the same individual, where discrepancies are only too frequent. But we have learned to be cautious with similar authorial statements, since they often turn out to be a rhetorical device used to explain the birth of a work, and a noble one at that. The lengthy research the *Genealogie* required makes it hard to believe that Boccaccio started planning the work only when the king of Cyprus put forth his request, which, from what we can gather from Boccaccio's indications, must have occurred in 1362 or thereabouts. Since the first edition of the *Genealogie* was ready in 1365, the time span for the composition would have been just three years, too short for a work of such magnitude.

We have clues that Boccaccio was exposed to the idea of a "genealogy of gods" in his Neapolitan days; sketches on this subject were jotted down in his *Zibaldone*. Would it be too daring to say that he began toiling with the idea at the time he closed the *Decameron*, and began dealing then with the problem of how to interpret a tale? In that epilogue – so similar to the two final books of the *Genealogie* – Boccaccio had the surprise of seeing his *novelle* interpreted in ways he did not intend. As the author, he saw interpreters take his tales out of context, extrapolating words and expressions and freely twisting their meanings. It was a lesson in hermeneutics that found its ideal testing ground in ancient mythology.

Myths are stories with no known author, therefore there is no way to go back and settle a dispute among different readings, nor is there any test to distinguish a good interpretation from a bad one except good sense. This holds true when interpreting any text, especially those that are quite distant from us in time, as Petrarch tells us.[6] However, myths present additional difficulties that

---

6 Petrarch makes this point in his *Seniles* IV 5. In: Pétrarque, *Lettres de la vieillesse. Rerum senilium libri*. Edited by Elvira Nota. 4 vols. Paris: Les Belles Lettres. 2002–2006; our letter is found in vol. II, 2003, p. 73–103.

literary texts in general may not present, and the majority of these difficulties depend on our ignorance of the culture that produced them: what was their context, where and when were they born, who listened to them, and how did they understand them?

Moreover in most cases myths are "unbelievable," utterly fantastic. The task of a mythographer, as Boccaccio sees it, is not to collect myths, but to enlighten their contexts, because only then may we appreciate them not just as beautiful stories but as a chorus of voices from a remote and primordial past, when people spoke a different language and filtered the world through a different mentality. But how can we understand that language and that mentality, since we do not have documents besides the myths themselves? We do it through interpretation and by organizing the mythological material into a system in which one myth explains the nature of another. These interpretations reconstruct a language that was a way of understanding the world, and the resulting linguistic system reconstructs the history in which that language existed.

First, let us examine the interpretations. The process of reconstructing something through its effects is quite unusual, but not inconceivable. It depends upon what we intend to reconstruct. If we want to reconstruct the "fabula," or the plot of a given myth, the problem is fairly simple, and any philologist or comparatist can identify the original tale, its variations, and even the stages through which it traveled and eras in which it appeared. But the problem becomes much harder if we try to reconstruct its meaning. Often this difficulty is dictated by the fantastic nature of the story and its characters; we tend to assume they must have a hidden meaning. The interpretations flourish and multiply, and the "meaning" as a single result vanishes. Boccaccio reports as many interpretations as he is able to find, even adding his own, to prove the only truth that can possibly be found: that myths are told by a language that personifies things and gives them a soul, a language that represents reality in symbolic terms. It is a language very similar to that of poetry, which conveys truth by disguising it in fantastic clothes.

Such a language, so distant from our normal process of denotation, is by nature polysemic. No interpretation is definitive, all are relative; but taken together they are a testimony to the poetical nature of the language of the myth. This is, I believe, the great novelty offered by the *Genealogie*: the rapport between context and interpretation, a virtual circle in which the two feed each other. We should not see this rapport as dialectical, but rather as a relationship in which both elements work simultaneously. As the interpretations multiply, the nature of their object becomes clearer: a semantic field of inexhaustible potential. This is the secret of myths's longevity in the memory of mankind.

The systematic arrangement of this immense collection of stories is the other strategy that helps us understand the nature of myths; this is another of the great

innovations offered by the *Genealogie*. One single myth does not offer sufficient elements to apprehend its "nature," the particular way in which it combines language and meaning. A system, on the other hand, can give insight into mythical patterns and, at the same time, provide an overview of the culture in which myths were the only method of explaining the world. Thus interpretation and system work together to make myths understandable.

The system devised by Boccaccio is structured around the notion of "genealogy." The idea of "genealogies of gods" was not an original one: Boccaccio could have drawn it from the *Mythographus Vaticanus II* or from Paolo da Perugia, whom he met in Naples and who authored a dry *Genealogia deorum*.[7] However, no antecedent can explain the complexity of the system built by Boccaccio because the "genealogy" structure carries a meaning and a thesis hitherto unknown. We know that it was a useful tool for organizing the immense amount of mythological materials. However, it was not completely successful since Boccaccio had to find several Jupiters and Junos in order to create "genealogical families" capable of hosting the innumerable characters of the work. He did not make up these family trees; many mythographers provided information about kinships, and in spite of the inevitable gaps and holes he did not hesitate to use them. He could not do without them once he understood what great potential they brought into his plan: the idea of a genealogy developed the notions of society and history, the two bases upon which his grandiose project found its cornerstone. These notions created a chronology resembling that of any society where real men live, procreate, think, and speak.

Of course, when a character in the *Genealogie* offers genealogical data about him or herself, it is limited to indications of the closest relatives (mother, father, children) and not of a complete genealogical tree. Boccaccio reconstructs these familial ties, collecting the data from other mythographers who supposedly had access to oral sources or to documents that are lost to us. The genealogical thread gives an aura of realism to the lives of the characters, locating them in space and time. But it has a further function. All myths are presented as a complete body, which in its wholeness gives the picture of a society with its own language patterns.

We can understand the value of this genealogical grouping if we compare the *Genealogie* with the fragmentary system adopted by previous mythographers or with the large contemporary mythographic collections known as the *Ovidius moralizatus* by Pierre Bersuire, or Bercorius. Clearly, Boccaccio departs from

---

7 On Paolo da Perugia's model, see Manlio Pastore Stocchi: *La 'Genealogia deorum gentilium': una novità bibliografica*, p. 230–232.

the myth-by-myth analysis adopted by his predecessors and inaugurates an "all myths" panorama, considering a culture as a whole that unifies all myths; within that union one finds the key to reading each individual myth. In other words, the genealogies are maps that offer the coordinates to locate and interpret any single myth, as in the *Decameron*, where the single *novelle* would be devoid of any justification if they did not relate to the "cornice," which not only unifies them all, but also explains each one's role in the work as a whole.

The notion of a genealogy implies the chronology that is the skeleton of history. Although he never states it explicitly, Boccaccio confines the world of myths to the period of the common language found in the myths themselves: a language capable of transforming real events into fabulous stories, a language that mixes realistic and unrealistic elements, that blurs space and time, that personifies abstract concepts and gives physical bodies to natural forces, that records historical information through metaphors, a language in which fantastic elements take the places of logical ones. It is the language of a civilization circumscribed to a remote past, at the origins of time.

Boccaccio marks the beginning of this civilization at the dawn of the world of men – which are not those indicated by the Bible with Adam and Eve – commencing with the disaster of the Tower of Babel, when men, deprived of their "original" language, began to group into nations, cultivate land, and build houses; that is, he begins when civilization began to take shape, when large communities started to embrace common living patterns and share the same beliefs. Boccaccio traces the end of this civilization to the time of the Trojan War.

We must remember that the *Genealogie*'s chronology can occasionally be compared with the *Chronologia* of Eusebius/Hieronimus, the standard medieval chronology wherein biblical events are set down in chronological order, and each one is dated by the year. But in order to put their time into a world perspective, the Biblical chronology is set side by side with the heathen chronology. So, for example, in the *Genealogie* we see that Abraham's days were the same as those in which the Theban wars took place, (Prohemium I 10, p. 50). Boccaccio encloses the civilization of myths within that indefinite space and time, and he does not include any myths of a more recent period. He explicitly refuses to incorporate in his work the myth of the divine births of Alexander the Great and Scipio the African, since they bear no mark of authenticity and are purely encomiastic (*Genealogie* XII 71). With the mention of these two inauthentic myths Boccaccio closes his genealogies; here is a clear sign that the modern age has begun and the old mythical one is over and already remote in time. In general, Boccaccio avoids being precise as far as historical coordinates go, not for lack of documentation but because vagueness helps to create the aura of remoteness and enchantment that surrounds the world of myths.

Identifying a civilization of myths is indispensable for understanding the nature of these marvelous stories; the myths are more intelligible if seen within an epistemic system, a cognitive system, a communication system (David Lummus calls it "poetic anthropology") that narrates its own world through metaphors, fables, and other semantic methods that create the mythical language.

But settling these questions of civilization, language, and chronology is just the beginning of our inquest. Other questions remain, and two of them are crucial: First, how do we know that Boccaccio really envisioned a world with a particular language and epistemic system? Second, how do myths relate to some truth, to some real event?

The first question is foundational, and we can answer it in several ways. Boccaccio says in the prefaces and in the concluding books of the *Genealogie* that myths are like poetry and have a language unlike the usual one based on denotation; the wealth of myths and their anonymity is a clear indication that once upon a time this was the spoken language – a sign of a different mentality.

Another proof of Boccaccio's idea of a separate epistemic system is the use of genealogies of gods rather than ordinary genealogies. The genealogy structures a world and shapes it into a form of history where families are the nuclei of a society. When these genealogies cease to produce any more branches and fruits, then it means that their world is finished and a new world has come to take its place – the mythical world is over and the historical world has begun. The choice of the gods for the genealogy was in part inevitable: mythology has an abundance of gods and their offspring. But this was not the only reason. Mythology is also filled with heroes, supermen fighting the forces of fate and vengeful gods; besides, the mythical world was originally populated by individuals born of gods. The presence of gods in the genealogy makes it clear that mythology belongs to the pagan world, so there is therefore no danger of contaminating the Christian faith. Furthermore, myths could not exist without a superior system of powers to move the world, to make its rivers run and its heavens go in circles. The mythical world's people must be responsible to a superior will: the divine is an indispensable element of the mythical mentality.

The second question is much more difficult. The relationship of myths to truth was a crucial one in the culture of Boccaccio's day, and indeed throughout much of the Middle Ages. Myths are fiction, and fiction is mendacious. So was poetry, which tells lies in the same way that myths do; their language and content are fictional, metaphorical, fantastical. Medieval theologians regarded poetry as dangerous because its seductive language was a deceptive representation of the real world. Boccaccio and the so-called "proto-humanists" led a memorable battle to defend the value of poetry, to redeem it from accusations of deception, to prove its moral value and its truthful depiction of history and of reality in general.

In fact, in the last two books of the *Genealogie*, Boccaccio defends poetry by defending myth. He does not defend any specific myths, however, but rather the fantastic language that is the language of both poetry and myth. In these books the defense is articulated in a sort of theoretical treatise, but there are other defenses to be found in the main body of work. One defense, the most pervasive, is represented by the myths themselves, or at least the major ones.

Our traditional view of the *Genealogie* as a *summa* has caused us to neglect the work as a narrative jewel. Among the hundreds of myths collected in this vast work, a large number of them could be collected as a book of short stories, a book that would be among the best produced in the fourteenth century. Some myths read as beautiful *novelle* or pithy *exempla*, wholly worthy of Boccaccio the great writer. It does not matter that he rewrites well known stories; the way he does so puts him far above mythographers who retell the same myths. We cannot dwell on this neglected aspect of the *Genealogie*, but if scholars chose to analyze it as a literary work, chances are they would enlist it as a new masterpiece.

However the *Genealogie*'s beauty seems to play into the hands of the enemies of poetry, as seductive fiction with no truth to show. It may appear as such, but Boccaccio brings forth a host of respected scholars who attempt to grasp the inner meanings of these beautiful stories, and they cannot be all wrong. Their authority and number carry the weight of the work, for in medieval times the *auctoritas* held the value that scientific proof would possess in modern times. They may disagree on the meanings, but they are convinced that some truth exists within the myths; the languages they read and the ways in which the stories are constructed lead them to believe it must be so. The process of interpreting begins when we do not understand something, and myths and poetry use language and imagery that solicit interpretation. The principal difference may be that myths "spontaneously" create their fantastic language, whereas poetry builds its own language with the purpose of communicating in a highly artful form. The difficulty in finding a meaning or interpretation upon which everyone agrees depends precisely on the polysemic nature of that language.

Boccaccio demonstrates that myths are close to reality in a way that is more direct than the ones just mentioned, and this demonstration is provided by the "inventors of things." So, after a long detour, we come to our main theme, and what we have heretofore seen will now acquire a fuller sense.

When we gather the dates that concern our inventors, perhaps we feel slightly disappointed by the scarcity of our findings; we might expect a richer harvest, considering that the *Genealogie* deals with the founders of large families, and therefore the notion of a "first" is central, as it is in heurematic literature where

any inventor is by definition a "first." Here is the list of inventors; they are arranged in the order in which they are found in the work, as indicated by the book and chapter listing. Whenever possible we have added in square brackets the possible source for Boccaccio's data, indicating them as *Myth* for the *Mythographi Vaticani* with their respective number,[8] and as *Pl* for Pliny's *Naturalis historia*, precisely to Bk. XXXVII, ch. 56, as previously mentioned.

I, 4: the Arcadians invented music; I, 12: Tagetis taught haruspicy; II, 2: the first Jupiter (in fact, a certain Lisania) was the first to give laws, civic institutions, and marriage to the Attics; II, 3: Minerva was the inventor of numbers, of spinning, of weaving, and of many other arts; II, 55: Phoenix was the first to give alphabet letters to the Phoenicians; he also invented the vermillion or Phoenician color, called also punic (scarlet); II, 63: Cadmus was the inventor of marble quarries, and he was able to melt gold and other metals; III, 19: Chiron was the first to recognize the virtues of herbs and medications [*Pl* quoted as a source]; III, 25: Tossius invented mud bricks [*Pl*]; IV, 31: Atlas was the inventor of astrology [*Pl*, quoted as a source together with Lactantius and Augustine]; IV, 42: Epimetheus, who was the first to build a mud statue; IV, 44: Prometheus created the human body [*Myth* II]; Apollo was the first to recognize medicinal herbs [*Myth* III]; Orpheus invented the cither [*Myth* II], but the same invention is attributed to Apollo, and some attribute it to Amphion or to Linus; V, 21: Asclepius was the inventor of medicine; V, 23: Arabe revealed medicine to the Babylonians; V, 25: Bacchus or Liberus was the first to plant the grapevine; VII, 23: Phoroneus was the first to sacrifice to Juno [*Pl* and *Myth* II]; VII, 26: Phegoo invented the shrine to the gods and taught primitive men how to divide time by months and years; VII, 35: Daphnis was the first shepherd in the woods; VIII, 2: Mercury invented measurements and weights for the merchants; he was called by the Gauls the inventor of many arts and a guide of routes and travels; VIII, 2: Mercury and Isis taught the alphabet letters [*Myth* III]; the Athenian Buzige found the oxen and the plow [*Pl*]; VIII, 8: Chiron invented surgery [*Pl*, and *Myth* I; according to the latter he invented also the irrigation of orchards]; VIII, 10: Pico found the way to fertilize the fields with animal dung [see his relation to Stercutio/Saturn. According to Pliny he invented the playing ball]; IX, 41: Romulus was the first to divide the year into twelve months; XII, 30: Amphitrio was the first to interpret prodigies and dreams [*Pl*, quoted as the source]; XII, 35: the Achemenides invented the sacrifices to Apollo; XII, 40: Perses was the first to invent arrows [Pl]; XIII, 45: Amphiaraus was the first to invent pyromancy, the art of divining through fire

---

(but Boccaccio doubts Pliny's testimony because he recalls having read about the same art from the Chaldeans, as brought to them by Nembrot).

This list elicits some considerations. Leaving aside the reduced number of "inventors" – though it is a feature that begs explanation – we notice that the names are for the most part fairly well known. Boccaccio does not want to surprise us with rare data because his novelty lies somewhere else. It is noteworthy that the dependence on Pliny and on the Vatican mythographers is sporadic and not systematic. We quote these two sources to show that Boccaccio's philology was not limited to the authority of Pliny, the most important source for a Pastrengo, and also to show that mythographers were not particularly interested in inventors. Boccaccio's philology had an unusual range; indeed, it was unique among his contemporaries. Furthermore as we have seen, philology, understood primarily as exegetical tradition, plays a fundamental role in the *Genealogie.*

The inventors are mostly men, though some gods like Bacchus and Minerva keep their title of inventor, as established by long tradition. The inventors are more frequent in the central books, and they are practically absent from the first and last two books: the first is of "cosmogonic" nature, and the human presence is rare (the myth of Pan we will see is "cosmogonic" in nature); the last two books deal with "literary theory."

The "inventors" are distributed throughout the other books, covering a period that extends from the origins of time down to the beginning of historical time. There is no demonstrable sequence in the inventors' history, but it is plausible to infer a sequence from the narrative of the work, which lists music as the earliest invention and arrows as the last invention. This beginning holds a metaphysical aura, while the end evokes an image of war, announcing, as it were, the beginning of the Iron Age that succeeded the golden civilization of myths. Boccaccio focuses on what modern mythographers call "the age of gods and men," an age where gods mixed with humans and mortals were heroes.

The most interesting element in our list is the nature of the inventions themselves. Essentially they consist of music, the wool arts, architecture (the invention of the brick), medicine, writing, the division of time, agriculture, religious cults, and finally weapons for war. It would seem, therefore, that Boccaccio was interested only in the foundational inventions of human civilization, inventions that mark the greatest leaps forward in the history of mankind, wherein mankind moved from the caves and woods into societies capable of building houses, working the fields, and using herbs to cure physical problems. The attention to these culture-changing events explains why Boccaccio remembers only a reduced number of inventors. These inventors disappeared – they likely never existed – but their inventions survived and were still present in Boccaccio's day, as they are

in ours. Thus we can assume those myths refer to something real; consequently they are in essence truthful. Myths are not the truths they carry, but the way in which they tell those truths.

To see how these truths grow into a fiction or how a fiction envelops a real event, let us take two myths, the first and last of those gathered in the *Genealogie*. The first, quite long, appears in the first book and takes up the entire chapter 4:

De Pane secundo Demogorgonis filio.- Pana Demogorgonis fuisse filium iam satis supra monstratum est. De quo talem Theodontius recitat fabulam. Dicit enim eum verbis irritasse Cupidinem et inito cum eo certamine superatum, et victoris iussu Syringam nynpham arcadem adamasse, que cum satyros ante lusisset, eius etiam sprevit coniugium. Pan autem cum illam urgente Amore fugiente sequeretur, contigit ut ipsa a Ladone fluvio impedita consisteret et nynpharum auxilium precibus imploraret, quarum opere factum est ut in palustres calamos verteretur. Quos cum Pan motu ventorum sensisset, dum invicem colliderentur, esse canoros, tam affectione puelle a se dilecte quam delectatione soni permotus, calamos libens assumpsit, et ex eis septem disparibus factis, fistulam, ut aiunt, compsuit, eaque primus cecinit, ut etiam testari Virgilius: «Pan primus calamos cera coniungere plures Instituit, etc.». Huius preterea poete et alii insignes viri mirabilem descripsere figuram. Nam, ut Rabanus in libro *De origine rerum* ait: «Is ante alia fronti habet infixa cornua in celum tendentia, barbam prolixam et in pectus pendulam, et loco pallii pellem distinctam maculis, quam nebridem vocavere prisci, sic et manu virgam atque septem calamorum fistolam». Preterea inferioribus membris hirsutum atque hispidum dicit, et pedes habere capreos et, ut addit Virgilius, purpuream faciem. Hunc unum et idem cum Silvano arbitrabatur Rabanus, sed diversos esse describit Virgilius dicens: «Venit et agresti capitis Silvanus honore, Florentes ferulas et grandia lilia quassans». Et illico sequitur: «Pan deus Arcadie venit». Et alibi: «Panaque Silvanumque senem nymphasque sororores» etc.

His igitur premissis, ad intrinseca veniendum est. Et quoniam supra Pana naturam naturatam esse dictum est, quid sibi voluerint fingentes eum a Cupidine superatum, facile reor videri potest. Nam quam cito ab ipso Creatore natura producta est, evestigio cepit operari, et suo delectata opere, illud cepit amare, et sic a delectatione irritata amori succubuit. Syringa autem, quam aiunt a Pane dilectam, ut dicebat Leontius, dicitur a syren grece, quod latine sonat deo cantans et sic poterimus dicere Syringam esse celorum seu sperarum melodiam, que, ut Pictagore placuit, ex variis inter se motibus circulorum sperarum conficiebatur, seu conficitur; et per consequens tanquam deo et Nature gratissimum, a natura conficiente diligitur. Seu volumus potius Syringam esse circa nos agentibus super celestibus corporibus Naturae opus tanto organizatum ordine, ut dum in certum et determinatum finem continuo deducitur tractu, non aliter quam faciant rite canentes armoniam facere, quod Deo gratissimum fore credendum est. Cur autem hanc nynpham arcadem fuisse dixerint et in calamos versam, ideo dictum puto quia, ut placet Theodontio Arcades primi fuere, qui, excogitato cantu, emictentes, per calamos longos et breves, spiritum, quattuor vocum invenere discrimina, et demum addidere tria, et ad postremum quod permultos faciebant calamos, in unam contraxere fistulam, foraminibus oriflantis proximis et remotioribus excogitatis. Macrobius vero hoc repertum dicit Pictagore, ad ictus malleorum gravium atque levium. Iosephus vero in libro Antiquitatis Iudaice dicit longe vetustius Iubal inventum fuisse ad tinnitum malleorurm Tubalcayn fratris sui, qui ferrarius faber fuit. Verum quoniam fingentibus verius visum est Arcades invenisse, eo quod illo forsan evo ceteros excderent fistula,

arcadem nynpham fuisse voluere. Syringam autem lusisse satyros et Pana fugientem, atque a Ladone moratam et nynpharum suffragio in calamum versam, circa nostros cantus iudicio meo aliquid bone considerationis abscondit. Hec enim spretis satyris, it est ingeniis rubdi-bus, fugit Pana, id est hominem natura aptum natum ad musicalia, nec equidem actu fugit, se existimatione cupientis, cui in dilatione videtur cessari quod optat. Hec tunc a Ladone sistitur donec instrumentum ad emictendam meditationem perficitur. Est enim Ladon fluvius in ripa nutriens calamos, in quos versam Syringam aiunt, ex quibus postmodum confectam fistulam novimus; ex quo sumere debemus, uti calamorum radix terre infixa est, sic et meditatio musice artis et compertus exinde cantus tam diu latet in pectore inventoris, donec emictendi prstetur organum, quod ex calamis suffragio humiditatis a radice emissis conficitur, quo confecto , sonus premeditatus emictitur suffragio humiditatis spiritus emictentis. Nam si siccus esset, nulla sonoritatis dulcedo, sed mugitus potius sequeretur, ut vidimus ex igne per fistulas emisso contingere; et sic in calamos versa videtur Syringa, eo quod per calamos resonet. Possibile preterea fuit a compertore fistule calamos ad hoc primo fuisse compertos Ladonem sucus, et sic a Ladone detenta. (I 4, §§ 1–9, pp. 88–92)

[We have already shown that Pan was the son of Demogorgon. Theodontius tells a fable about him. He says that Pan irritated Cupid with words, and he lost a contest that had been started by Cupid; Pan was ordered by the winner to love Syrinx, an Arcadian nymph, who used to play with the satyrs but had rejected Pan's company. Pan, however, urged by love, pursued the fleeting nymph, who came to a halt, impeded by the river Ladon. She implored the aid of the nymphs, who turned her into a swamp of reeds. When Pan noticed that the wind caused those reeds to produce a sound while colliding with one another and made melodious sounds, he was moved both by the love for the girl and by the delight of the sounds. He gathered the reeds and, as it is said, out of them he made a pipe of seven differ-ent lengths. He was the first to sing, as Vergil also testifies: "Pan was the first to show how to join several reeds with wax." In addition, poets and other celebrated men described his remarkable figure. As a matter of fact, Rabanus in his *On the Nature of Things* said: "Most remarkable were his upwardly bent horns, set on his forehead, his long beard reaching all the way down to his chest, and instead of a cloak he wore a pelt marked with spots which the ancients called *nebris*, and also as a wand in his hand and the seven-reed pipe." He added that his lower limbs were hairy and shaggy, and his feet were goat-like, and his face, as Vergil added, was purple. Rabanus thought that this was one and the same as Silvanus, but Vergil described them as being different: "And Silvanus came with a rustic honor on his head, shaking flowering fennel plants and tall lilies." It goes on, saying: "Pan, the Arcadian god, came." And elsewhere: "Both Pan and the old Silvanus and their sister nymphs." Given these preliminary facts, we must now move on to the innermost part. Because it was said above that Pan was *natura naturata*, I think that we can easily understand what the ancients meant when they imagined that he was conquered by Cupid. Indeed, as soon as Nature was created, she immediately began to work, and being delighted by her work, she fell in love with it. According to Leontius, Syrinx, whom Pan is said to love, takes her name from the Greek *syren* which means "singing to the gods," so we can say that Syrinx is the melody of the heavens and spheres, which, according to Pythagoras, is generated by the various interrelated motions of the orbits of spheres. Because this motion is so pleasing to God and nature, it is loved by Nature that forms it. Or we could rather say that Syrinx, because of the effect of the bodies circling around us, is a work of Nature organized in such an order that while it is forced to go into a certain and predetermined end, produces harmony not

differently from those who sing according to roles. And one has to believe that this was pleasing to God. The reason why we said that this nymph was Arcadian, I think, is due to the fact that – as Theodontius likes to say – Arcadians were the first ones who, once they found a melody, discovered four distinct tones by blowing into pipes long and short, and then added three more; finally they contracted into a single pipe all that was previously done by many reeds, placing newly created holes closer and further from the blower's mouth. Macrobius instead says that this an invention by Pythagoras, obtained through the percussion of heavy and light hummers. Then Josephus in his *Jewish Antiquities* claims that it was an earlier discovery made by Iubal, while hearing the pings of hammers of his brother Tubalcain, who was a blacksmith. Yet, since some more truthful poets believed that the inventors were the Arcadians, perhaps because they excelled in pipe playing, they decided that the nymph was an Arcadian. Concerning Syrinx and her playing with satyrs and running away from the desiring Pan, and being turned into a reed with the approval of the nymphs, in my opinion this hides some useful things regarding our songs. Syrinx, spurning the satyrs, that is, the unruly passions, flees Pan, that is, the man who is by nature fit for music. In reality she flees only in the opinion of he who desires her, but he sees in the delay of reaching her the vanishing of what he ardently desires. She is stopped by Ladon, until she becomes the instrument that produces the sound she has imagined. As a matter of fact Ladon is a river that on its banks grows the reeds into which it is said Syrinx was transformed, and out them was formed the pipe that we know. From this we could deduce that, as the reed's root is fixed into the earth, in the same way the conception of the art of music and the ensuing songs remained hidden in the heart of its inventor until the instrument for emitting it was ready. This emission is done by reeds, which sprung from the roots with the help of moisture, and as the instrument was formed, the sound earlier imagined was released through the humidity of the breath that emits it. If the breath were dry it would come out not a sounding sweetness but a noise similar to that of fire released by a reed. So Syrinx seems to have been transformed into reeds because she produces sound through reeds. Moreover it is possible that the pipe's reeds were found by the inventor for the first time near the Ladon river; and this is why it said that Syrinx was detained by the Ladon.]

Before analyzing this myth, let us transcribe the story of Perses, the last inventor of the *Genealogie*. In fact the last inventor should have been Amphiaraus, but Boccaccio seems to have doubts about his story because the testimony of Pliny is disproved by the Bible; consequently we have not included it in our list – biblical inventors are not taken into account by Boccaccio.

> *De Perse, Persei filio*: Persem filium fuisse Persei in libro Naturali hystorie testatur Plinius, de quo nil aliud comperi, preter quod idem Plinius asserit, eum scilicet primum sagittarum repertorem fuisse, quod forsan apud suos verum est, cum apud alias nationes illas longe antiquiores legerimus. (XII 40, p. 1202)

> [Of Perses, Perseus' son: Pliny testifies that Perses was the son of Perseus. I know nothing of him except what Pliny himself says, that is that Perses was the first inventor of the arrows. This is perhaps true according to his people, but we have read that, according to other people, arrows were invented earlier.]

The differences between the two myths are obvious, beginning with the dimensions of the stories and the number of *auctoritates* that dealt with them: Pan's fable is a compilation of different testimonies, whereas Perses's story is found only in one source, and it is a rather unreliable one at that. The major difference, however, is that no story is told about Perses and consequently there can be no interpretation as in other myths; thus it is left to us to understand what justifies the presence of this inventor and his invention among so many other myths in the *Genealogie*.

A few explanations come readily to mind. One may be the position Perses's story has in the work; being placed toward the end makes it a supreme relic of a vanishing world, a borderline story, as it were, between the world of myths and the world of history. Another explanation may simply be that no ancient mythographers or poets known to Boccaccio told any story about Perses, not even Pliny, and Boccaccio never invents a mythological fable because it would go against his own idea of myths as spontaneous creations of a specific age in the history of mankind. Both explanations may be correct, but they are perhaps not necessary. The only certainty we have is that Perses's story is in the *Genealogie*, and the family or linkage structure that organizes the work is sufficient to justify it; with its bareness, Perses's story highlights the function of the "genealogy." In any case, this bare-bones story juxtaposed with that of Pan, so sophisticated, tells us a good deal about the wealth and variety of materials contained in this encyclopedia of sorts.

Boccaccio's analysis of Pan's myth sets up a pattern that he almost always repeats: he begins by presenting the "literature" on the subject, and then he presents his own reading. The literature offers two kinds of information: one, we may say, is iconographic in nature – the pictorial representation of Pan, his "concrete" physical appearance – the other is exegetical insofar as it attempts to explain "allegorically" or symbolically some points of the story. Boccaccio accepts them all because together they prove the vitality of the myth, its capacity to stimulate the imagination and to challenge the ingenuity of the interpreter to find its inner meaning. He does not take a position against or in favor of any of them, but he seems to go alongside them, adding to them without imposing his own thesis.

Yet, in spite of this modest presentation, it is clear that his interpretation, questionable as it may be, is different in its approach. For one thing, it is holistic in the sense that it does not dwell on details as other interpreters do, but instead envisions the whole story in order to understand better its particulars. This approach delves not so much into the meaning of the story but rather into the psychology of the story's maker.

In other words, Boccaccio tries to understand and describe the mechanism by which a certain type of mind sees and understands events or facts, a mind that

functions in a cognitive way and may be called pre-logical or fantastical. It is a mind that needs personifications to explain concepts, concrete figures to explain abstract facts. Thus in studying myths the first step is not to look for their meanings, but instead to hunt for a system of communication that bears no resemblance to our "logical" language. It is a language that we can call mythopoetic because it creates fictions, characters, and stories not intending to mean something different but rather to mean exactly what they say. We allegorize myths in order to legitimate them as truthful, but they were not conceived in any allegorical fashion, for they were meant to be "true" stories in their own right. Boccaccio enters into this creative mechanism, which is very similar to the poetic one. This language is born in the same way the pipes and the melodies were: first it was "contemplated" in our souls, and then it burst out in the form of a harmony, a representation of what was inside of us. This is one of the reasons Boccaccio takes the "psychological" approach previously mentioned, shunning rationalistic and euhemeristic explanations.

In this respect, the myth of Pan and Syrinx is particularly instructive; not only is it the first, or one of the first, of the *Genealogie*, but it also deals both with an inventor and an invention. It is also a good example of that "natural theology" described by Varro: a fabulation of a natural phenomenon. The advantages it offers are multiple. First, we can be sure that this myth contains a truth, which we do not have to guess: music exists today, as it must have existed in the mythological civilization. Thus Boccaccio, contrary to other students of myths, can start from a fact and see how it was perceived, rather than starting from the myth and figuring out what it means. That perception coincides perfectly with the myth it creates, because the perceiving does not occur through words or conventional signs, as later cultures would know them, but rather through a process that imagines any object perceived as a living thing that is better understood by knowing what produces it and what it produces.

For example, wind is understood through its maker: behind the wind there must be an agent that causes the air to move and to make a sound. Once an agent is invented a story must go with it, imagining the reason for the action. If one perceives feelings or passions, the same process gives them a face and a story, creating a *fictio* in its original meaning of a "personification." In other words the creators of myths have an animistic conception of the world, a primitive mind that creates religions, superstitions, and magic. In this creative process myths must be understood as a language, a body, and a system of signs rather than the creations of a wild and baseless imagination or, equally wrong, a device used to disguise profound truths. Myths are both: they are an imaginative creation, but they are not "baseless," or devoid of any connection to the real world; they contain some truth, but they were not purposefully created to disguise it.

We must decode this special language, as we must with all ancient languages, especially if they use a different system of representation (hieroglyphics, for example); but we should not assume that the language of myths was "in code" just to enclose some higher meaning; that is, we should not confuse our reading or interpreting process with the creative one. Myths have an immediacy of communication that allegorical fables do not have, and even though they can be read allegorically they are not created by a mind that says one thing in order to mean something else. They are "spontaneous" creations without interference from the intellectual faculties. Myths, like all fables, can be read allegorically; however, the purpose of such a reading is not to bring to light the truth they hide, but instead to see how those truths are transformed into stories, into images. We must justify our interest in myths because of their beauty and not because of the "truthfulness" of their content. We must read them as we read poetry, appreciating their beauty and knowing that they contain a truth. We may disagree on what that truth may be (a good part of the *Genealogie* is devoted to these different interpretations), but this only proves that basic similarity between poetry and myth, insofar as both convey a plurality of meanings due to the nature of their non-logical languages.

To appreciate Boccaccio's new way of looking at mythological fables we can compare his readings of Orpheus and Eurydice's story to that of his contemporary Bercorius. The myth is well known, so it is not necessary to quote the long text from the *Genealogie*. Boccaccio bases his reading on Ovid's version of the myth. Orpheus' persuasive voice means that the character was a great orator; his lyre represents his oratorical skills. The bushes and the plants that he moves with his eloquence indicate the persuasiveness of his speech, which eradicates passions and tames the fiercest beasts. Eurydice culling flowers represents her concupiscence, therefore she runs away from Aristaeus, who represents virtue and courts her. While fleeing she is bitten by a snake, which represents the temptation hidden among temporal things. When Eurydice (concupiscence) falls into Hell, man with his oratory skills demonstrates his appeal of goodness and tries to bring her up to the highest reality. On his way upwards man should not turn back to look at her – that is, at his sexual desire – because if he does so it may mean that he is still tempted by earthly and perishable things.

If we remove the *integumentum* it appears that the story deals with the power of the word over human appetites: abstract notions like oratory skillfulness are personified by the music-like voice of a man, concupiscence is personified by a woman, and liberation is represented by the upward journey. Around these elements the myth builds an enchanting story that is truthful in the sense that it dramatizes real and universal feelings concerning the fascination men have for words and their weakness for sexual passion. Yet this understanding of the

story takes nothing away from its beauty – the powerful tale of a singer who stills all passions around him, who causes trees to dance with the spell of his voice, and who finally is won over by the love of lady who embodies grace and physical beauty. If anything, the interpretation makes one appreciate even more the myth's value because it is not "pure" invention but fictionalizes very beautifully a drama that every man lives in his soul. It is a combination also found in great poetry.

And as happens with poetry, Boccaccio's interpretation of Orpheus and Eurydice's myth is not the only possible one. Around the same time Pierre Bersuire, or Bercorius, read the same myth from a totally different perspective. In his *Ovidius moralizatus* Bercorius sees the myth in a Christian key.[9] Orpheus is the son of the Sun as Christ is the son of God; he makes a covenant with Eurydice as God does with the human soul; the snake that bites Eurydice is the devil, and he bites her while she culls flowers, which are the desire of the forbidden fruit; the snake kills her and sends her down to Hell. When Orpheus sees, as Christ did, the soul in Hell he goes in person to rescue her. Christ rescued mankind from the hellish darkness, but Orpheus cannot rescue Eurydice because he contravenes the agreement not to look back to see whether she is following him. Bersuire's interpretation is a "typological" one, namely one that sees in an ancient story as a precursor to a Christian one.[10] Boccaccio would not dispute the plausibility of this kind of interpretation, yet he would miss in it the lack of attention to the beauty of the story and the neglect of the myth's "origin." For Bersuire the truth of the myth lies in its fulfillment outside of the myth itself, in another story, in the same way that the "figural" interpretation of history appreciates events only in light of what they have prefigured, typically a Biblical event and its fulfillment in the world of Revelation.

Boccaccio's approach is just the opposite. He looks *ad intrinseca* at what causes a myth to be born, at the ways it goes about shaping itself into a "complete" form of knowledge, that is, into a story or a character that "narrates" reality. Bercorius looks *ad extrinseca*, verifying the truthfulness of myths on the bases of "revealed" truth, indeed the very word of God. This does not mean that Boccaccio was insensitive to the problem of truth. Quite the contrary. After all, one of the basic premises of the *Genealogie* was that of dispelling the notion that myths are frivolous and mendacious fables. But Boccaccio has in mind a different

---

9 Bersuire's text can be seen in *Metamorphosis ovidiana moraliter explanata*, wrongly attributed to Thomas Walley, first published Paris: Badius 1509, where Orpheus story is at fols. 58r–59r. This edition is reprinted by Stephen Orgel: New York: Garland 1979.

10 For a comparative analysis of Orpheus' myth in Boccaccio and in Bersuire, see Bodo Guthmüller: *Il mito tra teologia e poetica*, p. 224–226.

kind of truth: neither that of philosophers nor of theologians, but rather that of poets, a truth that must be unchanging, expressed in a language of its own.

Of course it is very difficult, if not impossible, to "verify" the truthfulness of myths if we understand "truth" to be a faithful retelling of specific "historical" facts. The best proof we can offer is to see myths as poetry, that is, they have coherence as stories at the literary level (*sensus historialis*) and a credible meaning in their content. As for the latter point, experience offers the best testing ground: an interpreter who relies as much as possible on psychological and natural observations has a better chance of being convincing, because his arguments are of a universal nature. Myths, like poetry, transform particulars into universals, and Boccaccio seems to stick as much as possible to these guidelines of interpretation. For those who demand "evidence" of such truthfulness, the mythical "inventors" offer the best evidence with their historically "verifiable" inventions.

Boccaccio was not a heurematologist in the way Pastrengo was, and he would not be seen as such even if we took into account the few additional inventors mentioned in the *De mulieribus*.[11] It was not his intention to be one. Yet the few instances where he happened to touch on the subject are of the highest cultural significance. Boccaccio presented a new way of looking at myths, and in that new way he taught generations to come how "inventors were invented," that is, how a past culture was able to make sense of itself by creating heroes and a universe and telling about them in an imaginative language that later generations called "mythological."

Like many masterpieces, the *Genealogie* had a profound impact but not an immediate one; its innovative weight had to be absorbed. Its first immediate impact is visible in *De laboribus Herculis* (1406) by Coluccio Salutati, who is considered to be a close "student" of Boccaccio's, indeed we know for sure that he owned a copy of *Genealogie*.[12] Like his master, Salutati defended poetry, paying close attention to the exegetical tradition that guaranteed not only the vitality of myths but also their inexhaustible meanings. He saw each of the labors of Hercules as marking the phases of civilization; thus he gave a "cultural" interpretation to the myth, just as Boccaccio had done. The Quattrocento made ample use of ancient mythology in different ways, ranging from the satyr of

---

11 *De mulieribus claris*. Edited by Vittorio Zaccaria. Milano: Mondadori 1967, chapter 27, §§ 12–13 where we find Carmenta as the inventor of the letters of the alphabet, and chapter 44, § 3, where we find the inventor of spinning.

12 See Ernest Hatch Wilkins: *The University of Chicago Manuscript of 'De genealogia Deorum Gentilium' of Boccaccio*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1927.

Leon Battista Alberti's *Momus* to the dramatic use in Politianus's *Orfeo*; but it did not have the ample resonance it had in the Cinquecento.[13]

The sixteenth century was the most glorious for the triumph of the *Genealogie*. It featured several imitations: *De deis gentium varia et multiplex historia* by Lelio Gregorio Giraldi (1548), the *Immagini colla sposizione degli dei antichi* by Vincenzo Cartari (1556), and the *Mythologiae, sive explicationum fabularum libri X* by Natale Conti (1568). Furthermore, the following century saw Spain's *Teatro de los dioses gentiles* by Baltasar de Victoria (1646), to cite some of the most famous imitations. And when the interest in ancient mythology abated by the end of the seventeenth century, the *Genealogie* survived long into Neoclassical art thanks to iconographic masterworks like the *Iconologia* by Cesare Ripa, published in 1598 and reprinted in many editions up to 1786, a work that looted the *Genealogie* in the Italian translation of Betussi (1547). But of course, it was an imitation of a different nature; limited to single episodes, the iconographic imitation lost the sense of "genealogy" that Renaissance imitators had preserved with some variations.[14]

This genealogical notion was more than a device to organize the luxuriant world of myths. Boccaccio himself was not fully aware of the consequences it would have. The "genealogy" was a physical chain that bound the divinities to men, and it was not always a chain pointing upwards to the gods. In general we assume that ancient divinities were men divinized because of their great deeds, but in Boccaccio this kind of "euhemerism" is not a central thesis of the work, and certainly not when it comes to the "inventors," the "great benefactors" of mankind. In the *Genealogie* inventors are gods as well as men. Not any men, of course, but those that belong to the lineage of the gods. The last "inventor" on our list, Perses, was neither a god nor even a semi-god, but nonetheless he belonged in a lineage of gods, and this was sufficient reason to include him in the *Genealogie*.

This link between gods and men is an important point because it opened the way for the Hermetic traditions, which flourished by the end of the Quattrocento. One of the mythological heroes who became the symbol of that movement was Prometheus, the son of Japetus, a descendent of Titanus. The Prometheus who

---

13 On this aspect, some data in Susanna Gambino Longo: *La fortuna delle 'Genealogie Deorum Gentilium' nel '500 italiano da Marsilio Ficino a Giorgio Vasari'*. In: *Cahiers d'études italiennes* 8 (2008), p. 115–130.

14 It is interesting to notice that when the Inquisitions raised concern about the "pagan" mythology, the works censured were the ones that interpreted the myths in a typological way (Bersuire's is an example), and not the *Genealogie*. The explanation is that Boccaccio never saw the myths as forerunners of a Christian message. Indeed in the *Genealogie* Boccaccio limits his interpretation to the literal and allegorical senses, and almost never uses the moral and anagogic ones.

creates a mud statue of man and gives him a rational soul, the Prometheus who steals fire from the gods and gives it to man, is a hero who embodies the "renaissance man," the maker, the godlike man who builds his own world into which he brings the "creative" powers he takes or inherits from the gods. Boccaccio gave ample space to Prometheus (*Genealogie* IV 44–47), but he did not foresee the symbolic or emblematic value that Prometheus would attain. Boccaccio, however, was aware of the fact that the idea of "genealogy" would ultimately show the presence of the divine in man, it would "transfer" the divine powers into man's ability to create a world in his own likeness, even creating a language in which naming things meant creating them, as in the age of myths when creation was an anthropomorphic process by which the entire universe took on a human face or could be explained in human terms. This "transferring" of the divine to man was an epochal event, even if it was only implied in the *Genealogie*. The man who understood those implications was Coluccio Salutati, whose Hercules got from his divine parents those superhuman powers that he used to civilize the world.

The most influential aspect of Boccaccio's lesson was more explicit, namely that of contextualizing myths, seeing them as part of a culture, "historicizing" them; this, Boccaccio's epoch-making approach, was favored by Petrarch's new understanding of history and culture. The combination of these factors brought the Humanists to emphasize the "dignity of man," a confidence that provided the background for the celebration of man as an "inventor." The heurematic literature received a great impulse from this combination. Some of this literature followed the "archeological" path of the Pastrengo (Marcantonio Sabellico, *De rerum inventoribus*), and some followed the Biblical line (most famously Polydorus Virgilius, *De rerum inventoribus*, 1499), but others can be seen in Boccaccio's line (Giovanni Tortelli, *De orthographia*, [1471] specifically in the article "Horologium", and Guido Ponciroli, *De rerum memorabilium libri duo, quorum prior deperditarum posterior noviter inventarum est* [1599]), who in general examine the "new inventors," that is the inventors of the compass, printing, gunpowder and such, "modern" inventions that were by necessity "inventions in their history." But Boccaccio's lesson was most unquestionably vital to the Renaissance mythographers, who understood that inventors were invented, as Boccaccio had pointed out, and through them (especially Natale Conti) Boccaccio's lesson reached Vico.[15] However, by this time the mythographers were not interested in proving the veracity of myths so much as in confirming Boccaccio's thesis, namely that myths were the language spoken at a time when language was not regulated by a grammar based on logical categories.

---

15 Vico mentions the *Genealogia* in his *Scienza nuova*, paragraph 586 in the edition by Fausto Nicolini, Milano-Napoli: Ricciardi 1953, p. 229.

Bibliography

Primary Literature

Alberti, Leon Battista: *Momo o del principe*. Edited by Rino Consolo. Genova: Costa & Nolan 1996.

Bersuire, Pierre: *Metamorphosis ovidiana moraliter explanata*. Paris: Badius 1509. Rpt. by Stephen Orgel. New York: Garland 1979.

Boccaccio, Giovanni: *De mulieribus claris*. Edited by Vittorio Zaccaria. Milano: Mondadori 1967; vol. X *of Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*. Edited by Vittore Branca. Milano: Mondadori 1964–1998.

Boccaccio, Giovanni: *Genealogie deorum gentilium*. Edited by Vittorio Zaccaria. Milano: Mondadori 1998. Vols. VII–VIII *of Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*.

Boccaccio, Giovanni: *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*. Books I–IV. Edited and Translated by Jon Solomon. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 2011 (The I Tatti Renaissance Library, 46).

Boccaccio, Giovanni: *Zibaldoni: Edizione diplomatico-interpretativa codificata*. http://rmcisadu. let.uniroma1.it/boccaccio

Cartari, Vincenzo: *Le imagini. Con la spositione de i dei degli antichi*. Venezia: Marcolini 1556.

Conti, Natale: *Mythologiae, sive explicationum fabularum libri decem*. Venezia: Comin da Trino 1568.

Giraldi, Lilio Gregorio: *De deis gentium varia et multiplex historia*. Basilea: Oporinus 1548.

Hugh of Saint Victor: *Didascalicon: A Medieval guide to Arts*. Translated from the Latin with an Introduction and Notes by Jerome Taylor. New York: New York University Press 1961.

Lactantius, Firmianus: *Divinae Institutiones*. Edited by Eberhard Heck/ Antoine Wlosk. Berlin-Boston: Walter de Gruyter 2009.

Lucretius Carus, Titus: *De rerum natura*. With an English Translation by William Henry Denham Rouse. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 1982 (Loeb Classical Library, 181).

Mythographi Vaticani in *Scriptores rerum mythicarum latini tres*. Ed. Georg Heinrich Bode. Cellis: Schulz 1834.

Panciroli, Guido/ Heinrich Salmuth: *De rerum memorabilium iam olim deperditarum et contra recens atque ingeniose inventarum libri duo*. Ambergae: Typis Fosterianis 1599–1602.

Pastrengo, Guglielmo da: *De viris illustribus et de originibus*. Edited by Guglielmo Bottari. Padova: Antenore 1991.

Pétrarque: *Lettres de la vieillesse. Rerum senilium libri*. Edited by Elvira Nota. 4 vols. Paris: Les Belles Lettres 2002–2006.

Plato: *Protagoras*. Edited by Christopher Charles Winston. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1976.

Pliny the Elder: *Natural History*. With an English Translation by H. Rackham. 10 vols. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press. 1939–1962 (Loeb Classical Library 330, 352–353, 370–371, 392–394, 418–419).

Poliziano, Angelo: *Orfeo*. Ed. by Antonia Tissoni Benvenuti. Padova: Antenore 2000.

Ripa, Cesare: *Iconologia overo descrittione di diverse immagini cavate dall'antichità et di propria inventione*. Roma: Faci 1603.

Sabellico, Marcantonio: *De rerum et artium inventoribus*. (See: Vergilius, Polydorus)

Salutati, Coluccio: *De Laboribus Herculis*. Edited by Berthold L. Ullman. 2 vols. Zurich: Thesaurus Mundi 1951.

Sardi, Alexander: *De rerum inventoribus* (See: Vergilius, Polydorus)

Tortelli, Giovanni: *De orhographia dictionum e graecis tractarum*. Venezia: Jenson 1471.

Vico, Giovan Battista: *Scienza nuova*. Edited by. Fausto Nicolini. Milano-Napoli: Ricciardi 1953.

Victoria, Baltasar de: *Teatro de los dioses de la gentilidad*. Madrid: Imprenta Real 1623–1688.

Vergilius, Polydorus: *De rerum inventoribus libri octo*. Argentorati: Zetzer 1606. (In this edition are found also the works of Alessandro Sardi, p. 13–68, and Marcantonio Sabellico, pp. 69–76, which we mention; they are found, among others, including Pliny, in a separate section, "Scriptores varii" with an independent pagination).

Secondary Literature

Monographs and Anthologies

Atkinson, Catherine: *Inventing Inventors in Renaissance Europe: Polydore Vergil's 'De inventoribus'*. Tübingen: Siebeck 2007.

Canetti, Luigi: *Boccaccio teologo. Poesia e verità alla fine del Medioevo*. In: *Intersezioni* 31, 2 (2011), p. 179–196.

Capenhaver, Brian: *The historiography of discovery in the Renaissance: the sources and composition of Polydore Vergil's* De inventoribus rerum I–III. In: *Journal of Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 41 (1978), p. 192–214.

Chance, Jean: *Medieval Mythography. Volume 3: The Emergence of Italian Humanism, 1321–1475*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press 2014.

Kaske, Robert Earl/ Arthur Gross/ Michael W. Twomay (eds.): *Medieval Christian Literary Imagery: A Guide to Interpretation*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1998.

Articles and Papers

Falguières, Patricia: *Les inventeurs des choses. Enquêtes sur les arts et naissance d'une science de l'homme dans les cabinets du XVIᵉ siècles,* in *Histoire de l'art et anthropologie*. Actes de Colloques Musée du quai Branly. In: www.actesbranly. revues.org/94.

Gambino Longo, Susanna: *La fortuna delle Genealogie Deorum Gentilium nel '500 italiano da Marsilio Ficino a Giorgio Vasari*. In: *Cahiers d'études italiennes* 8 (2008), p. 115–130.

Guthmüller, Bodo: *Il mito tra teologia e poetica*. In: *Intersezioni* 31, 2 (2011), p. 219–230.

Lummus, David: *Boccaccio's Poetic Anthropology: Allegories of History in* the Genealogie deorum gentilium libri. In: *Speculum* 1987/3 (July 2012), p. 724–765.

Pastore Stocchi, Manlio: *Giovanni Boccaccio. La 'Genealogia deorum gentilium': una novità bibliografica*. In: Piero Gibellini (ed.): *Il mito nella letteratura italiana*. Vol. 1: *Dal Medioevo al Rinascimento*. Edited by Gian Carlo Alessio. Milano: Morcelliana 2005 (Biblioteca morcelliana, 1), p. 229–245.

Solomon, John: *Gods, Greeks, and Poetry* (Genealogia deorum gentilium). In: Kirkham, Victoria/ Sherberg, Michael/ Janet Levarie Smarr (eds.): *Boccaccio: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2014, p. 235–244.

Thraede, Karl: Erfinder II. In: *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*. Edited by Theodor Klauser/ Ernst Dassmann/ Franz Joseph Dölger. Stuttgart: A. Hiersemann 1950. Vol. 5, coll. 1191–1278.

Thraede, Karl: *Das Lob des Erfinders: Bemerkungen zur Analyse der Heuremata-Kataloge*. In: *Rheinisches Museum zur Vorgeschichte* 105 (1961), p. 158–186.