Illustrator in Fabula:
Visual Interpretations of Boccaccio’s Stories about the Human Heart

Marina Della Putta Johnston

The figure of the heart is one of the richest and most intriguing elements of Giovanni Boccaccio’s (1313-1375) Decameron, and the complexity of that figure can be best understood and fully appreciated only if we read the author’s text in relation to its illustrations. The present study, part of an ongoing investigation of the human heart in the Decameron, will therefore offer an interpretation of some Italian, French and German illustrations of Boccaccio’s stories centered on the heart. The focus will be on illustrations produced between the fourteenth and sixteenth century. A contextualized analysis of some visual representations of the heart by Boccaccio and by other artists shows that an illustration can be an interpretation of, or a variation on, the heart in the text. Such analysis also lays the foundation for further investigation of the relation between word and image in editions of the Decameron produced at different times and in different cultures.

The illustrators of literary texts and the visual artists who have been inspired by works of literature play a significant role in the interpretation or re-interpretation of the text they depict, in this case the Decameron, by readers and viewers. While not necessarily a lector in fabula, to borrow a phrase from Umberto Eco, a medieval illuminator’s work nonetheless has an effect on the fabula.1 In other words, his intervention in the text necessarily consists of an interpretation, which may be direct, as when the illustrator is also a reader, or mediated by a translator. An illustration may depict a frozen instant in the story or the basic sequence of actions by the main characters with different moments synchronically present in one image. In either case, the illustrator often invests the fabula with details that do not necessarily belong to the original narration.2 Details, in fact, are shaped by the illustrator’s culturally dictated reading of the story as well as by his personal style and considerations of the audience for which the manuscript was produced. Consequently, the readers of an illuminated manuscript are not simply reading the text penned by the writer but a version of it, modified by added visual elements. This is especially true when we consider the anticipatory function of illustrations.
placed at the beginning of a narration.

In the case of Boccaccio, this issue acquires even greater significance. He influenced the visual arts more than any other Italian writer because his works, especially the Decameron, soon became—and remained for centuries—an important source of popular subjects for paintings. Vittore Branca calls one of those subjects, which is primarily centered on Ghismonda’s story (IV, 9), “the ostentation of the heart in the thematic of Love and Death.” Most importantly, Boccaccio demonstrates a keen interest in painting and visual imagery, and he was the first illustrator of some of his works. The first novella of each giornata, as well as other parts of the Decameron in ms It. 482 of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris appears to have been illustrated by the author himself (Fig. 1). The text was copied in the early 1360s by a young Giovanni d’Agnolo Capponi, member of a prominent mercantile Florentine family close to Boccaccio. The illustrations are, however, in a different hand, very likely Boccaccio’s own. Likewise, the Decameron in the autograph Codex Hamilton 90 at the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin (ca. 1370) also contains drawings of some of the characters in Boccaccio’s hand. We therefore have the opportunity to compare the author’s original visualization of the stories with illustrations made by other artists at later times and in different cultural settings.

Boccaccio’s interest in painting and his notion of how it is perceived by, and what effects it has on, the viewer find frequent expression in the Decameron, most amusingly in the stories centered on the beloved Giotto (VI, 5) and on the Florentine painters Calandrino, Bruno and Buffalmacco (VIII 3, 6, and 9, and IX, 3 and 5). Steeped in the tradition of ut pictura poesis and in the relation between word and image established by Saint Augustine, Boccaccio greatly appreciated painting as an art that offers the viewer pleasure and edification. He considered the art of painting to be akin to poetry, and in his novelle he coupled his ideal painter’s graphic skills with great oratorical ability. Ugly Giotto, for example, is said to be a “bellissimo favellatore,” a wonderful—literally, the most beautiful—conversationalist, besides being the greatest painter. Likewise, Bruno’s verbal trickery at the expense of Master Simon occurs while he paints a battle of cats and mice for the gullible doctor (VIII, 9). Conversely, Boccaccio viewed poetry as rivaling painting in creating visual images. The characterization of Homer quoted by Boccaccio from Cicero’s Tusculanae disputationes (5: 114) in the Comento sopra il Dante (Lez. XII) offers a great example of his view. Boccaccio recalls Cicero’s admiration for the Greek poet, who, though traditionally believed to have been blind, excelled in the ability to create vivid visual images in