

Silencing Female Reason in Boccaccio's *Teseida delle nozze d'Emilia*

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THE LEGENDARY Amazons of antiquity threatened social institutions that relied on communal adherence to the assumption of inherent female limitations; and confrontation between these viragoes and classical heroes provided a fruitful arena for exploring gender politics. Giovanni Boccaccio contributed to this tradition with a unique restaging of Amazonomachy and its consequences in his *Teseida delle nozze d'Emilia* (1339-1341?). An *ottava rima* poem written in Italian, the *Teseida* begins with Teseo/Theseus, the legendary Duke of Athens, waging war against the Scythian Amazons. Following his victory, a number of the warrior women marry their vanquishers. Teseo himself marries the queen, and the remaining text follows events that culminate in the nuptials of her young sister Emilia.

Boccaccio's Amazonomachy is a unique construction that diverges from previous lore in at least two critical respects: no heroes of antiquity ever sought to conquer the Amazon state, and no Amazon ever willingly relinquished her autonomy.¹ While modern critical consensus holds that

1. Most ancient accounts of Greek interaction with Amazons on Scythian shores feature Heracles, who was sent to procure the weapons of Queen Antiope as one of his twelve labors of atonement. Teseo is sometimes recorded as having accompanied the hero on this quest, and in the classical period the duke is credited with making his own voyage to Scythia. Minimal aggression is associated with the Greek incursion into Amazon territory, as the women are always caught unawares and respond with either little resistance or manifest hospitality. In one version, Teseo kidnaps and marries Ipolita, precipitating a failed rescue attempt fought on Greek shores. For Amazons in antiquity, see, for example, Josine Blok, *The Early Amazons: Modern and Ancient Perspectives on a Persistent Myth* (Leiden: Brill, 1994); Ilse Kirk, "Images of Amazons: Marriage and Matriarchy," in *Images of Women in Peace and War*, ed. Sharon Macdonald, Pat Holden, and Shirley Ardener (Basingstoke: MacMillan,

Teseo's subjugation of the Amazons redounds both to his heroism in particular and the wellbeing of society in general, I will argue that his unyielding repudiation of their desires and objectives is problematized throughout the text. These extraordinary women, consistently portrayed as personally and politically rational and just, defy entrenched assumptions of female alterity and inadequacy by demonstrating virtues intrinsic to the exemplarity of the duke's own leadership. Teseo's inability or refusal to acknowledge value in Amazon voices raises provocative questions associated with silencing the reasoning of reasonable women.

The *Teseida* Amazons are poorly represented in the robust misogyny/philogyny debate within Boccaccio criticism, perhaps because they are commonly seen to function predominantly as one of many trials intended to showcase the eponymous warrior-monarch's enlightened heroism.² The *speculum principis* tradition certainly permeates the text—Teseo's actions are frequently grounded, for example, in deliberations on justice, mercy, and magnanimity—but so too does French chivalric romance, which often cultivates reader ambivalence towards heroes, anti-heroes, and the very construct of heroism.³ The *Teseida* is also infused with allegory, strongly informed by classical epic, and pointedly aligned with the scholarly Latin tradition. Boccaccio's experimental engagement with established literary forms and traditions thereby provides multiple *entrées* for meaningful exegesis; as Disa Gambera notes, "its heterogeneous collection of poetic registers poses a complex challenge to readers, encouraging multiple and sometimes conflicting interpretations."⁴

1987), 27-39; and Mandy Merck, "The City's Achievements," in *Tearing the Veil*, ed. Susan Lipshitz (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 93-115.

2. For Teseo as *exemplum*, see, for example, James H. McGregor, *The Shades of Aeneas* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991); and Winthrop Wetherbee, "Romance and Epic in Chaucer's Knight's Tale," *Exemplaria* 2 (1990): 303-28, doi: 10.1179/exm.1990.2.1.303.

3. Neil Cartlidge, ed., *Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012) provides a sampling of recent scholarship that disputes the commonly held view that romance is a genre comprised of "ideologically and psychologically naïve texts" that do not aspire to "depth or complexity of characterization," 1.

4. Disa Gambera, "Women and Walls: Boccaccio's *Teseida* and the Edifice of Dante's Poetry," in *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism*, ed. Thomas C. Stillinger and F. Regina Psaki, *Studi e testi* 8 (Chapel Hill, NC: Annali d'Italianistica, 2006), 39-68; 43.

The opening *stanze* of Book 1 comprise an origin story that functions as a backdrop to the narrative that follows:

In the days when Aegeus was king of Athens, there were wild and ruthless women in Scythia, to whom it probably seemed intolerable that their husbands should lord it over them. They banded together, therefore, and in a haughty proclamation announced that they would not be kept in subjection, but that they wanted to govern themselves. And they found a way to carry out their foolish design. . . . Each one spilt the life blood of her men with her own weapon, leaving them in the icy embrace of death as the stone cold victims of her spite. (1.6; 1.7)⁵

The story proper begins when Teseo learns that the Amazons are exacting tribute from, and subsequently driving away, the men who venture near their borders. While early readers of the *Teseida* would have found nothing inherently awry in male opposition to aggressive female autonomy, Teseo's crusade is rendered problematic at its inception through association with an anger that is irrational and, therefore, destructive. The narrator observes that Mars "made his presence known to the enraged Theseus by leaving his own fierce heat in him" (1.15).⁶ In being thus stirred, Teseo is not in good company; Mars has recently and similarly afflicted the unambiguously maddened Creon (*re furioso di Tebe*, 1.14.3-4).

In a lengthy author's gloss devoted to the nature of anger, Boccaccio

5. "Al tempo che Egeo re d'Attene era, / fur donne in Scizia crude e dispettate, / alle qua' forse pareva cosa fiera / esser da' maschi lor signoreggiate; / per che, adunate, con sentenza altera / diliberar non esser soggiogate, / ma di voler per lor la signoria; / e trovar modo a fornir lor follia. / . . . ciascuna col suo telo / de' maschi suoi li spiriti sanguinosi / cacciò, lasciando lor di mortal gielo / tututti freddi, in modi dispettosi" (1-8; 3-6). All *Teseida* quotes are from Alberto Limentani, *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, vol. 2, ed. Vittore Branca (Verona: Mondadori, 1964). English translations are from Bernadette Marie McCoy, *The Book of Theseus* (New York, NY: Medieval Text Assoc., 1974). Boccaccio's source for this genesis story was Statius's *Thebaid*. Parenthetical references are to book and verse for both the Italian and the English. Line references to the Italian appear parenthetically in the footnote.

6. "si fé sentire al crucciato Teseo, / in lui di sé un fier caldo lasciando;" (2-3).

describes an allegorical house that reason cannot penetrate. Action devoid of reason is, among other things, immoral: “he who rushes to do something without reasonable deliberation sins blindly” (7.30, gl).⁷ He warns against indulging angry impulses, which he considers to be “demented, that is crazy” (*dementi, cioè pazi*, 7.30, gl) because angry men “quickly run to take up arms and go against others” (7.30, gl). The male capacity to temper passion with reason had, from antiquity, been credited with enabling and maintaining the civilization of humanity, and throughout the text, Teseo’s leadership will often manifest in rational oratory. His decision to attack the Amazons is, however, born of visceral outrage; their very existence triggers an uncharacteristic susceptibility to the unreliable demands of emotion.

The *female* constitution was thought far more likely to be governed by the destabilizing passions. In light of this and the damning origin story previously related, the Amazon queen’s first speech after learning of Teseo’s imminent invasion of her lands violates the understandable expectation that she will indulge in inflamed, misandrist rhetoric. Gathering her followers for a communal consideration of the crisis, she begins by defining her role as their leader: “Since you have crowned me in this, your kingdom, it is my duty to devote my energy and skill to your safety, whenever necessity demands, without exceeding the limits of my office in conferring rewards or inflicting penalties” (1.23).⁸ She then describes a polity constituted of women whose design is not to compete with men, but to emulate them:

“The sun wheeling ceaselessly about us does not see women as worthy of respect as you anywhere else on earth. You have declared war on Cupid if I am not mistaken, in order to display your virile courage. You fly from that which pleases other women most, while you dare to perform manly, rather than womanly, deeds.” (1.24)⁹

7. Gloss appears in a footnote to the Italian, endnote in the English, pp. 196–98.

8. “Perciò che voi in questo vostro regno / coronata m’avete, e’ s’appartiene / a me di porre e la forza e lo ‘ngegno / per la salute vostra u’ si conviene, / senza passar di mio dovere il segno / nel prestar guiderdoni o porger pene” (1-6).

9. “Non vede il sol, che senza dimorare / dintorno sempre ci si gira, in terra / donne quanto voi sete da pregare; / le qua’, se ‘n ciò il mio parer non erra, / per voler virile animo mostrare, / contro a Cupido avete presa guerra, / e quel ch’a l’altre più

Ipolita/Hippolyta then reminds the women that the duke has no right to re-impose the servitude from which they successfully fought to free themselves:

“Like me, you have heard that great Theseus is planning to attack us, deeming us troublesome because we are not satisfied with remaining subject to men and obedient to their whims like other women. . . . his reasoning lacks genuine merit, since anyone who helps himself in recovering the freedom he has lost is not doing anything wrong.” (1.26; 1.27)¹⁰

In a discussion that indicates a practice of solving problems through cooperative deliberation, the Amazons decide to defend their liberty.

It is perhaps worthy of note that a second Amazon foundation narrative was known in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries through the writings of Justinus and Orosius. This version was later reported by Boccaccio himself in a historicized rendering of the viragoes' lives.¹¹ Here, Scythian wives avenge the murders of their husbands at the hands of aggressors from neighboring settlements and, determined to avoid becoming subject to foreign overlords, acquire the skills necessary to live independently of men. Awareness of this alternative genesis story would not have been necessary, however, to recognition that Ipolita's rule—in marked distinction to that of Creon, the other monarch Teseo will soon dethrone—does not conspicuously disavow any precepts recognized as requisite for a civilized cosmos. The duke's attack on the Amazons is rendered equivocal not only by the passion that drives it, but also by the assumptions that give rise to the passion. His primal and predatory resolve intensifies at the first sighting of Scythian shores:

piace fuggite, / uomini fatti, non femine arдите” (1-8).

io. “perciò che voi, sì com'io intendeste / che 'l gran Teseo di venir s'argomenta / sopra di noi, avendoci moleste / perché nostro piacer non si contenta / di quel che l'altre, ciò è suggerire / a gli uomini, facendo il lor volere. . . . e questa ragione / assai è vota di degna onestate, / perciò che non fa mal que' che s'aiuta / per raver libertà, se l'ha perduta.” (3-8; 5-8).

11. Justinus, *Epitoma Historiarum philippicarum Pompei Trogi* 2.2.1-30; Orosius, *Historiae adversus paganos* 2.15.1-6; Boccaccio, *De mulieribus claris*, lives of Marpesia and Lampedo, Queens of the Amazons.

As the young lion, prodded on by hunger, becomes more savage and more daring as he scents his prey from afar, and with quivering mane and flaming appetite sharpens his claws and his teeth until he reaches his prey, so Theseus, gazing unrestrained at their kingdom, grew bold, and yearned to execute his design. (1.42)¹²

Although Teseo is caught off guard by indications that the viragoes are “wise women” (*savie donne*, 1.49.4) who are well prepared to defend themselves, he orders his men to attack. They soon undergo heavy casualties and must retreat to their ships, where they are met with a leader in the grips of hysteria, “all but consumed by rage. . . . He almost lost his wits in grief” (1.57).¹³ The Amazons’ exceptional military prowess does nothing to modify the duke’s conviction that women are submissive to the authority of men as a matter of teleological intent: “Would it not have been better for you now to have suffered the pangs of death with honor than to retreat shamefully and allow girls to advance?” (1.63).¹⁴ The five taunting *stanze* with which he assails his bloodied soldiers comprises tireless reiteration of a single message, viz., the price of female power is male emasculation.

Teseo has not misjudged the male psyche; a potent dose of humiliation provides the needed impetus for the Greeks to rally and ultimately lay siege to the Amazons’ stronghold. When the men begin to undermine the walls, Ipolita writes to Teseo with an appeal to the reason, honor, and justice she expects from a peer:

“I certainly do not know the reason for all this, for I have never offended you.

. . . I had a great desire to see you and even wanted to make your acquaintance, so much did your excellent prowess please me.

12. “E come lioncel cui fame punge, / il qual più fier diventa e più ardito / come la preda conosce da lunge, / vibrando i crin, con ardente appetito / e l’unghie e’ denti aguzza infin l’aggiunge; / cotal Teseo, rimirando espedito / il regno di color, divenne fiero, / volenteroso a fare il suo pensiero” (1-8).

13. “di rabbia tutto in sé si consumava, . . . e quasi uscia per doglia della mente” (3-6).

14. “or non v’era e’ miglior che onorati / di morte aveste sostenute pene, / che con vergogna indietro rinculare / e a donzelle lasciarvi avanzare?” (5-8).

. . . You have not behaved like a knight who takes up a just war against an equal. But like some treacherous cheat, you have suddenly assailed my country.(1.102.1-2, 6-8, 1.104.1-4)¹⁵

The crux of her disillusionment resides in Teseo's failure to treat her as he would an equal, and, indeed, there is no apparent basis for dismissing her assertion of equality on grounds of congenital disparities. She also accuses him of foul play: "you have sounded out your might and, if you reflect, you have found it useless. So you have found other ways underground to have me safely in your prison. . . . fighting in dark places is neither the craft nor the art of a good warrior" (1.106).¹⁶ The Greeks have resorted to a stratagem that concedes their inability to best the Amazons "like men," in face-to-face combat. Nonetheless, Teseo's brief, contemptuous response withholds any acknowledgement of parity: her letter is addressed to "Theseus, exalted duke of Athens" (*alto duca d'Attene*, 1.99.2), his, to "Hippolyta, exalted and mighty queen *whom the race of women honors*" (1.109, my emphasis).¹⁷ He then expresses his intention to humble her pride and slaughter her people simply because it pleases him. Upon receiving this response, Ipolita "felt the heaviest sorrow in her heart and so did everyone present" (1.115).¹⁸ She decides to capitulate to Teseo's demands for surrender in what is generally viewed to be a poorly conceived metamorphosis from epic heroine to romantic chattel!¹⁹

15. "e di vederti gran disio avea, / e ancor disiava tua contezza, / tanto gradiva tua somma prodezza. . . . Tu non hai fatto come cavaliere / che contro a par piglia debita guerra, / ma come disleale uom barattiere / subitamente assalisti mia terra." (1-2, 6-8; 14).

16. "Ma poscia c'hai le tue forze provate, / e 'l tuo pensiero hai ritrovato vano, / diverse vie hai sotterra trovate / per avermi in prigione a salva mano; / . . . e di combattere in oscura parte / non è di buon guerrier mestier né arte" (1-4, 7-8).

17. "Ipolita, reina alta e possente, / la quale il popol femminile onora" (2-3).

18. "nel cor senti gravissimo dolore, / e simile sentiron tutte quelle / ch'eran presenti" (3-5).

19. For example, Carla Freccero, "From Amazon to Court Lady: Generic Hybridization in Boccaccio's *Teseida*," *Comparative Literature Studies* 32, no. 2 (1995): 226-43, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40247000>, argues that Boccaccio's suppression of "Ipolita as warrior" signals a "complete character reversal" (239).

“You see clearly, ladies, to what a pass the gods have brought us, and not unjustly. . . . Venus is angry with us with just cause, and along with her friend Mars shows him her favor. . . . It will not be a disgrace for us to be conquered by such an excellent man, since every man realizes that we are women, and so we are, and that he is the duke of Athens.” (I.II6, I.II7; I.I21)²⁰

But does Ipolita actually deviate from the code of leadership articulated in her opening speech? Her primary duty is to ensure the safety of her women, and while neither this fundamental goal nor her essential approach to problem solving has changed, she is now faced with conciliating an invincible enemy. The queen calibrates her characterization of safety to meet the fluctuating exigencies of war; when safeguarding Amazon liberty becomes impossible, she safeguards Amazon lives. The reasoned rhetoric that encouraged defense through warfare is now engaged to support surrender that is grounded in honor, morality, and reason: if the gods have allowed the women to be vanquished, the women must have been mistaken in believing their cause to be just. Ipolita wears the mask required to make the claim that surrender will not deprive the Amazons of their dignity, a strategy that derives organically from her portrayal as a committed and principled leader—a portrait that does not rely on the observations of others, but is generated by Ipolita herself.

The *Teseida*, like many of Boccaccio’s other texts, engages with ideologies purporting that it is in the nature of women to undercut the success of men. While modern scholars often take rhetoric that appears to promote this fear at face value, there is growing support for the view that the intention behind some of the author’s most exaggerated misogyny is to sabotage it. F. Regina Psaki argues, for example, that medieval notions regarding the power of “women’s secret knowledge” to impair the reason-based functioning of society are parodied in both

20. “Chiaro vedete, donne, a qual partito / ci abbian gl’iddii recate, e non a torto. . . . Venere, giustamente a noi crucciata / col suo amico Marte il favoreggia; . . . non ci sarà e’ desinore / se vinte siam da uom così sovrano, / perciò ch’ogn’uom per femine ci tiene, / come noi siamo, e lui duca d’Attene” (I-2; I-2; 5-8).

the *Decameron* and the *Corbaccio*.²¹ While Teseo never openly accuses the Amazons of employing enchantments and sophistries unique to their sex, his drive to subjugate a people that pose no threat to his sovereignty as a ruler signals a more fundamental anxiety that untethered women imperil his preeminence as a man. Book 1 of the *Teseida* belies this concern; Ipolita never behaves in such a way as to suggest that she either hates men or seeks to dominate them, and there is no evidence that her followers conspire to remake society in accordance with their own peculiar ways of being. In short, the Amazons' methods of governing and protecting themselves evince none of the otherness that would give Teseo's victory the sheen of having restored civilization to a chaotic corner of the world.²²

As noted earlier, there is no precedent for the response of the *Teseida* Amazons to their defeat:

Many other women happily married the Greek knights and willingly took them for their lords as they had done the former ones. They promised with most sacred and true vows that they would never return to their folly as long as they lived, and that they would always hold their husbands dear. (1.135)²³

21. F. Regina Psaki, "‘Women Make All Things Lose Their Power’: Women’s Knowledge, Men’s Fear in the *Decameron* and the *Corbaccio*," in *Heliotropia 700/10: A Boccaccio Anniversary Volume*, ed. Michael Papio (Milan: LED, 2013), 179–90. The *Corbaccio* itself, long considered to be Boccaccio's most misogynist text, is read by some critics as an extended parody of misogynous discourse; see, for example, Gian Piero Barricelli, "Satire of Satire: Boccaccio's *Corbaccio*," *Italian Quarterly* 18 (1975): 95–111; Robert Hollander, *Boccaccio's Last Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988); and F. Regina Psaki, "Giving Them the Bird: Figurative Language and the 'Woman Question' in the *Decameron* and the *Corbaccio*," *Studi sul Boccaccio*, 41 (2013): 207–37.

22. Allegorical exegesis usually views Teseo's victory over the Amazons as the triumph of reason and order over passion and chaos; see, for example, Janet Levarie Smarr, "The *Teseida*: Boccaccio's Allegorical Epic," *NeMLA Italian Studies* 1 (1977): 29–35; Victoria Kirkham, "An Allegorically Tempered *Decameron*," *Italica* 62, no. 1 (1985): 1–23.

23. "Molte altre donne a greci cavalieri / si sposarono allora lietamente, / e per signor li *preser* voluntieri, / com'avean gli altri avuti primamente; / con iuramenti santissimi e very / lor promettendo che, al lor vivente, / nella prima follia non tornerieno

Gambera voices the prevailing view that this transformation occurs “with almost comic haste.”²⁴ I agree, but argue that this haste is designed to engage the reader’s incredulity regarding the sincerity of the women’s conversion. Ipolita and her followers “felt the heaviest sorrow” upon defeat, but because the duke never veers from his conviction that they are an aberration awaiting restoration to normalcy, he does not question the authenticity of their joy in assuming a position of subjugation. Upon receiving her surrender, he conjures an image of a tamed woman that, in the manner of a *stil nuovo* description, is as artificially conventional as that previously held of the wild one: “She seemed like the morning star or a fresh-blown rose in the month of May. She was very young and still a maiden” (1.125).²⁵ The girl of his reverie, whom he resolves to marry, does not accord with the woman described by the narrator as being an accomplished mistress of warcraft (*mastra di guerra*, 1.8.8) when she was elected queen of the Scythian widows several years (*più anni*, 1.12.1) prior to the Greeks’ arrival. While the narrator’s reliability is moot, Carla Freccero perceptively demonstrates Boccaccio’s early establishment of “an analogy of heroism” between Ipolita and Teseo that establishes the queen to be “a serious epic warrior.”²⁶ Freccero considers Ipolita’s heroism to be undermined by the *stil nuovo* portrayal. I suggest, however, that this rhetorical convention establishes the distorted nature of the duke’s perception of his wife that will persist throughout their marriage. His firsthand knowledge of her intellect and eloquence are so quickly displaced by ingrained assumptions of female deficiency that, even before the newlyweds return to Athens, Teseo’s attitude towards Ipolita is one of condescension, and he speaks to her “in words women understand” (2.8).²⁷

It is perhaps worth noting that Boccaccio revisits Teseo in his proto-humanist *De casibus virorum illustrium* (ca. 1355-1374), where he attributes the ruler’s downfall to decisions made in anger and without due

/ e che lor cari sempre mai avrieno” (1-8).

24. Gambera, “Women and Walls,” 55.

25. “ella semiava matutina stella / o fresca rosa del mese di Maggio; / giovine assai e ancora pulcella” (3-5).

26. Freccero, 230-33.

27. “con donnesco parlar” (2).

consideration of consequences. Teseo's rage ultimately results in the deaths of both his wife Ipolita and their son Ipolito, and, in contemplating Teseo's fatal flaws, Boccaccio notes: "The prudent man refuses no one's ideas, weighs each according to its worth, then deliberates carefully so that he does not make a mistake by a too precipitous conclusion concerning something he does not know anything about."²⁸ Traits that ultimately condemn Teseo to a joyless old age, lonely and powerless, are arguably already discernable in Teseo's response to the *Teseida* Amazons.

That Ipolita's marriage has neither led her to renounce her convictions nor quenched her desire to act in their service is made evident early in Book 2, when Teseo enters Athens in a triumphal chariot with his bride at his side. Before the couple is able to dismount, the duke is accosted by a throng of Argive women seeking a champion to challenge Creon's refusal of burial rites to those who died fighting for Polynices in the Theban war of succession. His decree not only condemns the corpses to rot in the sun, but also denies the souls of the dead entrance into Hades. The temperament with which Teseo assents to this new crusade differs markedly from that with which he embraced his quest against the Amazons. The passion-driven avenger of Book 1 is now the levelheaded servant of justice, calling for volunteers to aid him "to elevate reason again in its glory" (2.47).²⁹ Ipolita is the first to respond, mirroring the convergence of morality and military prowess valued in her husband. The duke once again declines to acknowledge this equivalency; his unspoken response to her request for permission to take up arms against Creon is to hand her down from the chariot and into the care of his father. In spite—or perhaps because of—a history of shared proficiencies, Teseo condemns Ipolita to inaction, and the plea to fight at her husband's side at Thebes represents her last recorded words.³⁰

28. "Circumspecti quidem viri atque constantis est negligere neminem, sed unumquemque pro meritis pendere, et, ne possit de incognitis precipiti sententia falli, se in se ipsum colligere." Giovanni Boccaccio, *De casibus virorum illustrium*, ed. Pier Giorgio Ricci and Vittorio Zaccaria, in *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, vol. 9, ed. Vittore Branca (Verona: Mondadori, 1964), 60. English translation from Louis Brewer Hall, *The Fates of Illustrious Men* (New York, NY: Frederick Ungar, 1965), 24.

29. a ragion rilevare in sua gloria;" (7).

30. The subject of a wife torn between private gratification and public duty

The clear polarization of desires in this brief interaction invites evaluation of Teseo's intent to impose rigid adherence to marital conventions of passivity upon his new wife. Will the principles that drove his first crusade diminish or enhance the effectiveness of his second? Whose interests are promoted, and whose jeopardized, by the duke's decision to bar a proven female warrior from participating in a righteous war? The multifarious ramifications of his uncompromising stance allow for widely varying assessments of his strength as a leader and virtuous exemplum. While Boccaccio's own body of work is inconsistent regarding the advisability of promoting the ideas of intelligent women, there are certainly instances of husbands profiting from the active intervention of their wives. For example, Janet Levarie Smarr, in her exploration of male acceptance of female moral authority in Boccaccio's work, points to Giletta (*Dec.* 3.9), who earns her husband's respect because her perseverance and wisdom surpass that of educated men.³¹ There is no evidence, however, that these qualities are valued in the Duchess of Athens; Teseo marries the accomplished ruler because she is beautiful, and it is for her beauty that his subjects will admire her.

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Ipolita's fifteen-year-old sister, Emilia, is introduced through Teseo's perception of her as a virgin whose beauty renders her worthy of marriage to his friend Achatas. After Ipolita's marriage, Emilia becomes the woman around whom the attention of men revolves for the remainder of the text. At the conclusion of Book 2, she is ensconced in the Athenian court to which her brother-in-law, following his victory over Creon, returns with two young Theban captives. Incarcerated in the duke's palace, Arcita/Arcites and Palemon/Palaemon see Emilia (whose betrothed has since died) walking in the garden and fall prey to an ever-intensifying desire for her. Arcita, who is eventually released from prison but exiled from Athens, is driven to return incognito in the hope of seeing her again. Unrecognized by everyone but Emilia, he is given work in the

is explored in another of Boccaccio's early vernacular works; see Eugenio Giusti, "Boccaccio's *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*: First Signs of an Ideological Shift," in Stilling and Psaki, *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism*, 69-82.

31. Janet Levarie Smarr, "Speaking Women: Three Decades of Authoritative Females," in Stilling and Psaki, *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism*, 29-38.

palace. Although she does not love Arcita, Emilia chooses not to inform Teseo that his enemy is moving freely beneath his roof; the years she has spent under her brother-in-law's guardianship have not engendered loyalty in this youngest of the Amazons, whose reticence now becomes an act of subversion. When Palemon escapes his confinement and a royal hunting party surprises the reunited Thebans dueling for love of Emilia, she is once again alone in recognizing the duke's adversary. She says nothing as Teseo grants amnesty to the men for any crimes they may have committed if they will but disclose their identities. The duke is angry when the Thebans reveal that they have repaid his clemency with subterfuge and would surely have been aghast at Emilia's silent collusion with their subterfuge. His anger is soon supplanted, however, by enthusiasm for a scheme that will elevate their duel to a civilized plane: Emilia will marry whichever man proves victorious in an elaborate tournament of the duke's own devising.

On the eve of the extravaganza, a year in the planning and comprising innumerable Greek warriors, Emilia stands in acute opposition to the competition for which she is to be the prize. Speaking aloud for the first time in the text, she asks Diana to thwart Teseo's plan, for the upcoming battle "displeases me very much indeed" (7.82).³² She fears the goddess will be angry if she breaks her Amazon vow of chastity, but is nonetheless compelled to obey the duke: "I am subjected to another, and . . . it behooves me to do what pleases him" (7.83).³³ This reference to forced compliance is evocative of the Amazons' original capitulation and intimates their continued resentment. Why else would a girl who has lived for years among married former Amazons now fear divine retribution for following their example? Emilia's prayer associates her virginity with prudence: "You know well our will was harder than a rock against unbridled Venus whom, instead of reason, the will of the foolish pursues" (7.81).³⁴ Amazon chastity was both a result and a signifier of female autonomy, and I would argue that insofar as Emilia's reasoning may be read as sound, her prayer represents rational advocacy of female independence.

32. "ché certo molto, e tu il sai, mi dispiace" (8).

33. "ch'ad altrui son suggiugata, / e quel che i piace, a me convien di fare" (5-6).

34. "la tua memoria, bene ancor sapere / dei quanto fosse più duro che petra / nostro voler contra Venere sciolta, / cui più che ragion segue voglia stolta" (5-8).

As the royal family gathers to watch the tournament, the narrator identifies the duchess in a manner that encapsulates her *raison d'être*: “Hippolyta arrived, blithesome to behold. She was certainly more beautiful than anyone else” (7.113).³⁵ He also observes that her Amazon mettle endures: “Hippolyta attentively watched the twofold throng with a fearless spirit, . . . and if her noble Theseus had desired it, she would have wanted to bear arms, so much valor did the magnificent heart of that lady still feel!” (8.93).³⁶ Accordingly, as the process of selecting a husband for her unhappy sister commences, the reader is reminded of the duke’s continued hobbling of the great warrior queen. As an epic hero and quasi-historical *paterfamilias* and *pater patria* in a late medieval text, Teseo’s legal and cultural prerogatives to dictate the trajectory of these women’s lives is, of course, unassailable. I suggest, however, that the descriptions of Ipolita’s and Emilia’s institutionalized impotence problematizes the necessity, advisability, and perhaps even humanity of dichotomizing autonomy and authority on the basis of gender.

Teseo’s attempt to channel his captives’ brute passions into a display of decorous pageantry proves misguided as the tournament devolves into a conflict of unanticipated savagery. Emilia bemoans the wickedness and folly of the Greek warriors, but when Arcita’s forces prevail, she, like her sister before her, determines to embrace an ineluctable future: “aware of the agreement that there was between them, she now firmly believed that she belonged to Arcites and without delay she turned her thoughts to him, and became fervent in her love for him” (8.124).³⁷ Moments later, the victor is crushed beneath his horse, prompting a hasty wedding ceremony followed by a protracted process of reallocating the soon-to-be-widowed bride. Arcita bequeaths his wife to Palemon, and Teseo, having convinced the survivor to accept his friend’s bequest, turns to his sister-in-law and says, “Emilia, have you heard? You will see to it that what I want is done” (12.38).³⁸

35. “Ipolita vi venne, in veritate / più ch’altra bella” (6-7).

36. “Ipolita con animo virile / la doppia turba attenta rimirava, . . . / e s’elli avesse il suo Teseo gentile / voluto, arme portarvi disiava, / tanto sentiva ancora di valore/di quella donna il magnifico core! (1-2, 5-8).

37. “sappiendo qua’patti eran tra loro, / già d’Arcita credendo fermamente / esser, l’animo suo senza dimoro / a liu voltò, e divenne fervente / dell’amor d’esso” (2-6).

38. “Emilia, hai tu udito? Quel che io vo’ farai che sia fornito” (7-8).

Hearing that she is once again, for the second time and in rapid succession, to muster devotion for a man she never loved, Emilia tearfully asks the duke to listen to her.³⁹ This is the last time she will speak, and, employing reason rather than pathos, she attempts to convince her brother-in-law to allow her to remain a virgin: “As you have been able to hear, all the Scythian ladies were vowed to Diana when they first desired their freedom and you well know that she quickly wreaks vengeance on those who oppose or do not keep what they have promised her, as those know whom it awaits” (12.401).⁴⁰

Therefore, she continues, “I think that it would be better, without any further test of the will of the gods, to let me serve Diana and to live and die in her temples” (12.424-8).⁴¹ To this entreaty, Teseo delivers the peremptory riposte that will consign Emilia, like her sister before her, to a future of silence: “This talk means nothing” (“*Questo dire è niente*,” 12.43.1). Her words are meaningless because they do not align with his plans. From this point onward Emilia is silent, and the reader is denied access to her thoughts. Fifteen *stanze* of a conventional eroticized *effictio*, reminiscent of the *stil nuovo* description of Ipolita, signal her imminent masquerade as a contented wife. The battle over Amazon autonomy that was launched in the opening pages of the *Teseida* concludes when Emilia is denied her plea to remain a virgin and made to marry a man whose prodigious sexual appetite is indulged seven times on their wedding night. Hence, a typically humorous literary convention is soured as the prolonged extermination of Amazon liberty is clinched in this carnal display of domination.

* * *

Marilyn Migiel writes that the *Decameron*'s “ideologies and its potential to question ideology are so intertwined that we may not be able to

39. “m’ascolta un poco” (12.39.7).

40. “Si come tu hai potuto udir dire, / tutte le donne scitiche botate / furo a Diana, allor che in desire / ebber primieramente libertate; / e tu sai ben quel ch’è contravenire / o non servare alla sua deitate / le cose a lei promesse, che vendetta / subita fa, qual sa quei che l’aspetta” (1-8).

41. “. . . crederei / che fosse il me’, senza più provazione / fare oramai del poter dell’iddei, / che mi lasciassi a Diana servire / e ne’suoi temple vivere e morire” (4-8).

distinguish them.”⁴² So, too, I suggest, are the *Teseida*’s. Arguments for limiting the authority of women traditionally draw on grounds of incompetency and/or malicious intention, both antithetical to the interests of men. The *Teseida* Amazons, like women found elsewhere in Boccaccio’s oeuvre, erode these premises by directing their capacity to function rationally towards promoting action that is tenably interpreted as being honorable and just. No one benefits from Amazon wisdom, however; having proven their ability to exercise authority in line with male standards, they are nonetheless prevented from wielding it. The text does not deliver an unambiguous verdict as to the desirability of this suppression—after all, Teseo reflects, in many ways, the model prince of the medieval *speculum principis* tradition and anticipates the exemplary Renaissance *uomo famoso*. Further, the narrative ends on a tidy upbeat; all the survivors are married and settled into the patriarchal status quo.

Teseo’s subjugation of the Amazons thus represents a complicated engagement with the potential for moral and intellectual equivalency between the sexes and the implications of such equivalency for the functioning of society. This very complexity may account, in part, for the text’s popularity among a diverse readership during the period when Boccaccio was most revered in Italy and widely read throughout Europe.⁴³ The reception history of the *Teseida* through the fifteenth century is shrouded by a lack of contemporary commentary, and a vast body of modern scholarship comprises widely ranging views regarding the treatment of women within Boccaccio’s own writing. Feminist sensibilities discernable in the *Teseida* appear to be contradicted by, for example, his Latin *exempla*, which repeatedly portray the ambitions of women as a pernicious threat to the birthrights of men. Boccaccio’s proto-humanist writings not only endorse a metanarrative that distribution of power

42. Marilyn Migiel, “The Untidy Business of Gender Studies: Or, Why It’s Almost Useless to Ask if the *Decameron* is Feminist,” in Stillinger and Psaki, *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism*, 217–33; 220.

43. For the *Teseida*’s readership and influence in late medieval and Renaissance Europe, see Jane E. Everson, *The Italian Romance Epic in the Age of Humanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), esp. 107–14; and Rhiannon Daniels, *Boccaccio and the Book: Production and Reading in Italy 1340–1520* (London: Legenda, 2009), esp. 48–51.

between the sexes is a zero-sum game, but also that the compliant façades of women often veil a desire for supremacy and the drive to fight for it. In *De casibus virorum illustrium*, for example, he writes, “Women have complete contempt for the laws of God. . . . they try to achieve sovereignty by a sort of inborn diligence.”⁴⁴ *De mulieribus claris* (ca. 1360–1374), a compendium of the biographies of famous women that was highly valued by humanist commentators, frequently frames female ability to equal or outperform men as a distortion of providential intent.⁴⁵ From the moment Eve disobeyed God in the hope of attaining greater glory than was her due, women have exercised their intellects and influence to the detriment of society in general and men in particular. Among the lives crafted to reinforce this assertion, Princess Iole stands out as an object lesson in the artful emasculation of strong men by conniving women. Forced to marry Hercules, the man who conquered and killed her father, Iole realizes that feminizing this icon of masculinity would be far greater revenge than simply killing him. Using her beauty as a tool of enslavement, she soon has the hero wearing garlands in his hair and recounting stories of his labors to the servant girls while they spin thread together—an exquisitely vivid vignette contrasting the zenith and nadir of his manhood. This story propels Boccaccio into a diatribe against male complacency: “It is clear that a strong and powerful enemy threatens us, and those concerned for their own well-being should be very much afraid and rouse themselves out of their indifference.”⁴⁶

Read in the light of this and the many other *De mulieribus claris* biographies in which women enslave men with their beauty, the miraculous

44. “Hae quidem, quodammodo Dei vilipenso iudicio, non ad societatis gradum reassummendum. . . . malitia quadam innata, in miseros fere omnes coniuverare viros.” Ricci and Zaccaria, 90; Hall, 41.

45. See, for example, Margaret Franklin, *Boccaccio’s Heroines: Power and Virtue in Renaissance Society* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2006); and Constance Jordan, “Boccaccio’s In-famous Women: Gender and Civic Virtue in the *De mulieribus claris*,” in *Ambiguous Realities*, ed. Carole Levin and Jeanie Watson (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 25–47.

46. “Quod non modicum salutis sue sollicitis debet iniecit timoris et torporis etiam excussisse, cum pateat quam validus, quam potens hostis imminet.” Giovanni Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, ed. and trans. by Virginia Brown (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 94–95.

transformation that follows upon the Amazons' surrender takes on a potentially sinister cast: "The ladies had altered their appearance as they placed their weapons on the ground and returned to the way they used to be: beautiful, charming, fresh, and graceful" (1.132).⁴⁷ The facility with which the women recast their facades is consonant with the possibility that pleasing demeanors mask enduring hostility. Have the warrior women simply exchanged one weapon for another—the very one, in fact, with which they lulled their former husbands into a lethal sense of security? If so, the repeated invocation and exaggeration of women's beauty in the *Teseida* may warn of a ubiquitous undercurrent of female cunning and duplicity.

This strongly misogynist reading fails, however, to acknowledge the moral balance that Boccaccio constructs between Teseo and the Amazons. With the full weight of social and cultural history on his side, the duke enters the narrative with powerful leverage on the sympathies of late medieval and Renaissance readers. By contrast, the Amazons can garner support only by exonerating themselves from the charge of scorning the virtues that underpin civilized society. The *Teseida* allows them sufficient opportunity to accomplish this; whether engaging in cooperative self-government or graciously submitting to Athenian subjugation, the Amazons show themselves to be rational, just, pious, valorous, and desirous of living on terms of mutual respect with men. The righteousness of their continued suppression diminishes in proportion to the extent that they gain the reader's compassion, and their prospect for generating empathy is strengthened by Teseo's unyielding deprecation; without exception, his communications with the women take the form of commands, threats, or insults. The multivalent nature of their sacrifice encourages reevaluation of an archetype in which savagery and female independence are coextensive and raises the question of whether the silencing of thoughtful women is a mark of the civilized or the barbaric.

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47. "Le donne avevan cambiati sembianti, / ponendo in terra l'arme rugginose, / e tornate eran quali eran davanti, / belle, leggiadre, fresche e graziose" (1-4).