

Reviews

Jason Houston. *Building a Monument to Dante: Boccaccio as Dantista*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010. x + 228 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$55. ISBN: 978-1-4426-4051-1.

If we believe, as the cover flap suggests, that “the full extent of Boccaccio’s relationship to Dante remains largely unexplored,” then Houston’s book has much to offer. Such a contention may ring true for students of Italian literature at large, but it is likely to come as some surprise to scholars of Boccaccio, for whom most of what this book considers is well-trodden ground.

The book begins with a curiously misdirected anecdote. Apparently the nineteenth-century Florentine committee responsible for commissioning Dante’s statue in the gallery of great men along the façade of the Uffizi chose to misspell Allighieri on the authority of Boccaccio. Houston is quick to point out that this homage to the first Dantista misfired, since modern philology has shown that Boccaccio consistently spelled Alighieri in the standard way. The anecdote, which is meant to stand as an exemplar of Boccaccio’s influence on Dante’s *fortuna*, warns us instead of the risks inherent in interpreting Boccaccio’s own take on things. It is not only a question of which Dante we are receiving but also a matter of which Boccaccio is handing him over.

The book is divided into sections that describe Boccaccio’s various ways of preserving and packaging the works of his great predecessor. Chapter 1 talks about Boccaccio’s work on Dante’s texts. The second focuses on biographical works such as the *Trattatello in laude di Dante*. Chapter 3 takes on the issue of Petrarch’s attitudes toward Dante and Boccaccio’s efforts to reconcile the poetics of his two mentors. This is an interesting and important theme both from a psychological and a historical point of view. What accounts for Petrarch’s repeated failure to acknowledge Dante’s achievements and his influence? (One might also ask what accounts for his smug and unremitting patronizing of Boccaccio himself.) How are the three father-figures of Italian literature interrelated historically? Are they founders of the vernacular epic, lyric, and prose strains respectively, with little commerce among them, or are their contributions to be evaluated as a common if poorly coordinated effort to establish new norms of “modern” composition in both vernacular and Neo-Latin genres? To that second query, Houston’s analysis of Boccaccio’s campaign to reconcile the other two offers important answers. Section 4 concentrates on Boccaccio’s work as a Dante commentator and expositor. Its main focus is the incomplete series of lectures on *Inferno* that Boccaccio delivered in Florence near the end of his life.

In the final chapter, Houston takes on another important topic, namely, the way that the *Decameron* engaged Dante. Not surprisingly, Houston’s point of entry into this question is the most blatantly Dantean novella of the *Decameron*, 5.8, the story of Nastagio degli Onesti. According to Houston, in this revealing pastiche of

Dante, Boccaccio, “privileges the public and present value of literature, over the private and philosophical. He prefers that his Dante reach a wide, public audience rather than remain with the confines of elite, literate culture of Latin humanism” (165). In short, Dante is a stalking horse for Boccaccio’s own poetics. While this certainly answers the question of what Boccaccio’s Dante represents in relation to his Petrarch, it is hardly an adequate response to the literary question, “what does it mean for Dante’s poetics to enter the ironic labyrinth of the *Decameron*?” That question, of course, is at the heart of Hollander’s work as it was arguably at the heart of De Sanctis’s concerns more than a hundred years ago when he labeled the *centonovelle* as the human response to the *Divine Comedy*.

Houston should be congratulated for the questions he raises and the determination with which he pursues them. As a literary historian in the emerging neo-positivistic mold he is skilful. As a reader of Boccaccio’s mischievous and falsely disingenuous texts he comes up short. In *Decameron* 5.8 Boccaccio may be ridiculing Dante rather than introducing him to a new crowd, or he may be situating his own poem as a tongue-in-cheek “antidote” to the dolorous *Commedia*. The Boccaccio Houston invokes may once again fail to confirm an author’s preferred writing of Dante’s name.

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