

Boccaccio: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works. Victoria Kirkham, Michael Sherberg, and Janet Levarie Smarr, eds.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. xix + 556 pp. \$50.

This volume, which serves as a kind of companion to *Petrarch: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works* (2009), arrives at an opportune moment in Boccaccio studies, as scholars are devoting increasing energy to rethinking some of the assumptions that have haunted the critical discourse on the third of Italy's *tre corone*. Critics have not only continued to unpack the complexities of the individual stories of the *Decameron*, especially in terms of sex and gender, but also explored new paths. They have reconsidered Boccaccio's relationship with Petrarch, for example, using material texts to show that Boccaccio is not simply a follower of Petrarch, but an independent thinker who resists the teachings of the preceptor, particularly on the matter of the vernacular. They have also reassessed his equally complex investment in Dante. Some have found it productive to situate Boccaccio in a Mediterranean context, at the crossroads of multiple cultural traditions, while others have underlined his influence on the Renaissance in a range of genres, from the novella to the encyclopedia. In their different ways, each of these critical investigations has challenged the conventional division of Boccaccio's career into two stages, the first dedicated to vernacular stories about love, the second concerned with Latin humanism.

This collection aims to participate in this critical reassessment by organizing its twenty-nine chapters into eleven sections, beginning with a section on "The Vernacular Master" that contains two essays on Boccaccio's *Decameron*, one on its literary structures and the other on its textual history. The introduction explains this

choice to put the *Decameron* at the beginning by analogy to the Petrarch volume, where the *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta* occupied the first position. This analogy offers another example of how Petrarch can over-determine interpretations of Boccaccio, since their literary careers are, in fact, quite different. Whereas Petrarch's vernacular lyrics are the outlier to his massive production in Latin, Boccaccio's masterpiece is best understood, as Martinez notes in the second paragraph of his essay on the *Decameron*, as the culmination of Boccaccio's early, wide-ranging experiments with literary form. Since other essays in the collection consistently make reference to this story of development, it is odd that the volume's organization obscures this narrative, which could have helped introduce Boccaccio's other works to nonspecialists. Although the introduction maintains that "it was impossible to arrange the sections of this volume in a neat chronological order," the constant appeals to such an order in the contributions suggest that rather too much force is being given to the word *neat* to justify this novel arrangement. I understand the desire to create new arrangements to excite discussion, but this conversation rarely occurs in the volume itself. It might have made more sense simply to indicate these other possible arrangements in the introduction while allowing the chronological sequence followed by the contributors themselves to structure the collection.

The volume's organization is also at odds with the charge given to the individual contributors, which was, according to the introduction, to situate the works in their historical moments, leaving aside questions of reception. While one can appreciate the impulse to interpret these works historically, the attendant danger is losing what makes Boccaccio's works alive in ways that Petrarch's works (his vernacular lyrics aside) are not. Some of the most successful contributions address questions of reception and relevance nonetheless, such as Shemek's illuminating essay on the *De Mulieribus*, which magisterially maps the reasons for the work's continued importance. Other contributions, such as Sherberg on the *Teseida*, Weaver on the *Filocolo*, and Lummus on the *Buccolicum Carmen*, convey the contours of complex works in clear expositions that will benefit readers, while still others, such as Cornish on the *volgarizzamenti* and Cachey on *De Montibus*, chart apparently intractable terrain with precision.

Many of these essays will be useful points of departure for scholars and students, but it would be a miracle on the order of Ser Cepperello becoming San Ciappelletto if all twenty-nine contributions were uniformly excellent. The essay on the *De Vita Petracchi*, for example, discusses neither its historical context nor its reception, but instead uses the occasion to reflect on biography in terms of invented binaries that it proceeds to unsettle, without ever discussing the vexed but fundamental problem of Boccaccio's motivations for writing the work. The essay on Boccaccio's *Carmina* is similarly out of place, since it consists largely of summary descriptions of, and annotations on, a few of those Latin poems. It was also perplexing to find Boccaccio's important codex of Dante, Petrarch, and Cavalcanti, now in the Vatican Library as Chigi L V 176, consistently referred to as "Chigiano 50.5.176," which may confuse some future researchers. Such slips are to be expected in such an extensive collection and the tensions between the editorial program and the individual

contributions will foster dialogue about what Boccaccio means today — a conversation that most of these essays helpfully advance.

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