Angelica's Book and the World of Reading in Late Renaissance Italy.
Brendan Dooley.
Cultures of Early Modern Europe. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. x + 202 pp. $114.

"Questo libro si è di langelica Baldachini": so appears an inscription on the verso of folio 144 of a 1570 copy of Giovanni Francesco Straparola's popular *Piacevoli notti* that Brendan Dooley chanced to find tucked into a piece of furniture in a Florentine junk shop. This single scribble led Dooley on a research adventure that has resulted in a wide-ranging cultural history. He discloses not only his attempts to discern the real identity of "Angelica Baldachini" (attempts that yield a plausible but ultimately unproven candidate), but also, and more importantly, he offers a cinematic tour of literary life in the late Cinquecento. We consider anew Straparola's text, contexts, and audiences, as well as the constraints and opportunities of print culture after the Council of Trent. We revisit the varieties of early modern reading and book collecting familiar from the work of Christian Bec, Robert Darnton, Lucien Febvre, and Armando Petrucci. Dooley also uses this book and the shadowy figure of its owner to reflect on the problems of textual preservation and the value of the humanities across time and space. Instead of a cohesive argument, then, we find in *Angelica's Book* a meditation on the possibilities for readers (especially late sixteenth-century readers) to encounter and appropriate texts.

Angelica's Book has considerable charm, and may lure that wide audience of educated but nonspecialist readers that scholarly books seek but often miss. Historiographical discussions appear rarely; the notes and bibliography are kept to a minimum. Yet the presence of some critical apparatus makes the book appropriate for use in undergraduate courses. Swaths of quotations appear both in the original Italian and in English translation, moreover, which in the aggregate offer undergraduates a helpful primer of Renaissance literature. And the author's candor throughout about what he could and could not learn about his protagonist would make this an interesting book to assign in graduate methods courses as well.

For their part, professional scholars have in *Angelica's Book* a model for writing to engage general audiences. Dooley might have resisted making so many first-person intrusions, as well as gesturing toward theories of serendipity, handwriting analysis, numerology, and 1960s models of reader response that (doubtless for a host of reasons) he does not ultimately pursue as explanatory frameworks. Overall, however, the prose has a freshness that academic histories tend to lack. And Dooley moves with admirable deftness from specific passages in the *Piacevoli notti* to broad cultural trends—for instance, in his moving transition from a story concerning death to the realities of plague omnipresent for Straparola and his readers. Yet historians should read this idiosyncratic work with perhaps a bit more than the usual grain of salt, particularly since it engages previous scholarship in a patchy way. Given that "Angelica" remains at the heart of

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the study, it was especially odd that Dooley gave at best passing glances to studies of women's education, women as readers and writers, and conceptions of educated women. And while it was refreshing to see him construe his female reader as more representative than exceptional, without more empirical evidence or detailed analysis such an image could lead readers (especially undergraduate readers) to some problematic conclusions.

All of which is to say that *Angelica's Book* is an intriguing and provocative narrative to be enjoyed alongside more data-driven studies of early modern Italian books and their owners. In particular, readers are encouraged to consult recent works in a similar vein but based on wider sets of archival documentation, such as those by Renata Ago, Brian Richardson, and Marino Zorzi.

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The Pleasant Nights. Giovan Francesco Straparola.
Ed. and trans. Suzanne Magnanini. The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series 40; Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 481. Toronto: Iter Press; Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2015. xxiii + 502 pp. $49.95.

Well into Giovanni Straparola's sixteenth-century collection of tales, *The Pleasant Nights*, one of the young female narrators yields her storytelling turn to a man: "As you know, he is clever and witty and has all the good qualities that befit a very courteous person. And we, simple women, would be better off with needle in hand than telling tales" (98). But this lady may protest too much or too coyly, for the story-fest itself is hosted by a woman, most of the seventy-three tales in this work are recounted by female narrators, and the interchanges between individual tales are frequently occupied with spirited debate over questions of gender, authority, and authorship.

In the introduction to her excellent new translation of Straparola's *The Pleasant Nights*, Suzanne Magnanini confronts straight on issues of gender and the privilege of authorship and publication, but in this case she begins by defending the placement of this work written by a man in a series almost exclusively devoted to female authors. In the past twenty years, the Other Voice in Early Modern Europe has done extraordinary work of textual recovery, publishing dozens of works by women whose writing had been neglected, and most of them translated into English for the first time. But as Magnanini convincingly argues, Straparola's work, though male authored, is critical to the discourse of early modern female authorship. Although *The Pleasant Nights* unapologetically owes its structural premise and design to Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Straparola's work distinguishes itself by its focus on gender issues and its creation of a newer, more sophisticated version of the female narrator—especially a teller of a particular type of tale: the literary fairy tale. For this is perhaps the most signif-

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