

Heliotropia - An online journal of research to Boccaccio scholars

Volume 1 *Volume 1* (2003)
Issue 1

Article 5

January 2003

G. Boccaccio, *Famous Women*. V. Brown, ed. and trans. Reviewed by Guyda Armstrong.

Guyda Armstrong

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/heliotropia>

Recommended Citation

Armstrong, Guyda (2003) "G. Boccaccio, *Famous Women*. V. Brown, ed. and trans. Reviewed by Guyda Armstrong.," *Heliotropia - An online journal of research to Boccaccio scholars*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/heliotropia/vol1/iss1/5>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Heliotropia - An online journal of research to Boccaccio scholars by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

Giovanni Boccaccio, *Famous Women*. Edited and translated by Virginia Brown. The I Tatti Renaissance Library. Cambridge, MA, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2001. Pp. xxv, 530, \$29.95/£19.95/€29.95.

This new translation of Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* is the first book to be published in Harvard University Press's new series, the I Tatti Renaissance Library. The stated aim of the series is to "mak[e] available to a broad readership the major literary, historical, philosophical, and scientific works of the Italian Renaissance written in Latin," and Brown's edition of the *Famous Women* is an excellent choice for the first volume to be published in this series, as it is of considerable interest to Boccaccio specialists and a more general scholarly audience alike. Surprisingly, this is only the second complete English translation of the *De mulieribus claris* ever to be published, the first appearing as recently as 1963.

Brown's book has been reviewed previously by Vittorio Zaccaria in *Studi sul Boccaccio*. Zaccaria's review largely concentrates on textual variants in the Latin text and explicitly does not seek to consider the book as English translation. In consequence, the main purpose of my review will be to consider the work in these terms.¹ I will begin my review with a survey of the history of the text in English translation, and then proceed to a discussion of the volume itself.

I. The history of the *De mulieribus claris* in English translation

The initial composition of the *De mulieribus claris* has been dated to the period 1361–62, although it seems likely that Boccaccio continued to revise the text until his death in 1375.² The book appears to have been an immediate success, to judge by the high number of manuscripts in circulation in the latter part of the Trecento, and was almost immediately translated into the Italian vernacular.³ The *editio princeps* was printed at Ulm by Johann Zainer in

¹ See Vittorio Zaccaria, review of *Famous Women*, in *Studi sul Boccaccio*, 30 (2002), 358–60.

² See Pier Giorgio Ricci, "Studi sulle opere latine e volgari del Boccaccio," *Rinascimento* 10 (1959): 3–12 ("1. Un autografo del *De mulieribus claris*"); 12–21 ("2. Le fasi redazionali del *De mulieribus claris*"). Reprinted, with some modifications, in P. G. Ricci, *Studi sulla vita e le opere del Boccaccio* (Milan and Naples: Ricciardi, 1985) 115–35. For an overview of the manuscript history, see Zaccaria's notes to his edition (pp. 455–59), and Brown's Introduction to her translation, pp. xii–xiv.

³ In the late Trecento, the text was translated into Italian by Donato degli Albanzani and fra Antonio di S. Lupidio (Brown, p. xxi). Donato's translation was finally published in the nineteenth century: *Volgarizzamento*

1473, the first of Boccaccio's texts to be published in an illustrated edition (GW 4483);⁴ in the same year the Zainer press also published an illustrated German version, translated by Heinrich Steinhöwel (GW 4486). Further incunabulum editions of the Latin text followed in 1474–5 in Strasburg (GW 4484), and 1487 in Louvain (GW 4485). Several translations were also printed, for example, German translations in Augsburg in 1479 (GW 4487) and Strasburg in 1488 (GW 4488); the French translation of 1493 in Paris (GW 4490); and the Spanish translation printed in Zaragoza in 1494 (GW 4491). It is interesting to note that no Italian translation of the text was printed until 1506, in Venice.⁵

As can be seen by the very high number of manuscripts and print editions in circulation during the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, there was a large and immediate demand for Boccaccio's biographies of women. This phenomenon was no less marked in the English language tradition than in other European cultures. The first English translation of part of the *De mulieribus claris* can be found in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, where his translation of the biography of Zenobia (Chapter C) forms part of the Monk's Tale.

The first English translation proper of the *De mulieribus* is an anonymous verse translation, which has been dated to 1440–50.⁶ The Middle English text is written in seven-line Chaucerian stanzas, but only twenty-one lives are translated, along with the authorial prologue and conclusion.⁷ The first ten lives follow the ordering of Boccaccio's Latin text (Eve, Semiramis, Opis, Juno, Ceres, Minerva, Venus, Isis, Europa, and Libya), but the next eleven are selected from the following forty-five chapters, and do not seem to conform to any particular theme: we find a pair of Sibyls (Erythraea and Almathea), notorious women from classical literature (Circe, Manto, and Medea), queens (Camilla, Tamyris, and Artemisia),

di Maestro Donato da Casentino dell'opera di messer Boccaccio De claris mulieribus, rinvenuto in un codice del XIV secolo dell'Archivio cassinese, ed. L. Tosti, 2nd edition, Biblioteca scelta di opere italiane antiche e moderne, 426 (Milan: G. Silvestri, 1841). See also G. Manzoni, *Le donne famose di Giovanni Boccaccio traduzione di M. Donato degli Albanzani* (Bologna: G. Romagnoli, 1881).

⁴ All references to incunabula are taken from the *Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke* (Leipzig: Hiersemann, 1925-).

⁵ The British Library catalogue describes this edition as: "L'Opera de misser Giouanni Boccacio de mulieribus claris [Translated by Vincentio Bagli. With woodcuts] [...] *Z. de Trino, chiamato Tacuino: Venetia, 1506*" (British Library 10603. d. 5). Unfortunately, Brown omits this first Italian printed translation from her bibliography of editions, p. 506.

⁶ A manuscript is preserved in the British Library (BL Add. MS 10304), described thus: "Boccaccio's [sic] treatise *de Claris Mulieribus*, translated into English verse, in seven-line stanzas. Partly on vellum, partly on paper, of the XVth century. Quarto." *Additions to the Manuscripts of the British Museum in MDCCCXXXVI–MDCCCXL* (London: George Woodfall and Son, 1843) 28. There also exists a print edition edited by G. Schliech, *Die mittelenglische Umdichtung von Boccaccios De claris mulieribus, nebst der lateinischen Vorlage* (Leipzig: Mayer & Miller, 1924). The dating of 1440–50 is suggested by Josef Raith in his book *Boccaccio in der englischen Literatur von Chaucer bis Painters Palace of Pleasure* (Munich: R. Noske, 1936) 74.

⁷ For a fuller discussion of this translation, see H. G. Wright, *Boccaccio in England from Chaucer to Tennyson* (London: Athlone Press, 1957) 28–32.

and three women famous for their artistic and intellectual skills (Sappho, Carmenta, and Tamaris).⁸

The next English-language version of the *De mulieribus claris* was written by Henry Parker, Lord Morley, an intellectual in the court of Henry VIII.⁹ Morley's text, entitled "Of the ryghte renoumyde ladyes" was dedicated and presented to the King, and the manuscript is still extant, although in a private collection.¹⁰ Morley's text is not a complete translation, comprising only the first forty-six of the one hundred and six chapters of the original text (up to chapter 48 according to Brown's ordering of the text). Boccaccio's dedication to Andrea Acciaiuoli is replaced by Morley's own dedication to Henry, but he preserves Boccaccio's own preface to the work. The translation concludes with the biography of Lucretia, the epitome of female purity, who, after having been raped by Sextus, committed suicide rather than dishonour her family by the act.

This English translation provides a curious footnote to one of the more notorious events of Henry's reign. It has been suggested that the biographies selected by Parker appear to condone the punishment of female promiscuity, and as such, this translation can be seen as a response to the adultery and execution of Henry's wife Catherine Howard.¹¹ Morley's own daughter, Lady Rochford, was one of Catherine's ladies-in-waiting, and was executed alongside her mistress for the crime of abetting her adultery.¹² Morley's translation should thus be seen as a highly political, not to say personal, document, given that the text was probably produced within a year or two of his own daughter's execution for high treason. To present such a collection of biographies of famous and infamous women to the cuckolded king was an act of considerable bravery, and one which manifestly demonstrated the superiority of the homosocial bond between king and courtier over the blood bond between father and daughter. By concluding the translation with the example of Lucretia, Morley explicitly uses

⁸ The remaining biographies in order are Camilla (Brown XXXIX); Erythraea (XXI); Almathea (XXVI); Circe (XXXVIII); Medea (XVII); Manto (XXX); Sappho (XLVII); Carmenta (XXVII); Tamyris (XLIX); Tamaris (LVI); and Artemisia (LVII).

⁹ The complete text of Morley's translation has been published: *Forty-six Lives, translated from Boccaccio's De claris mulieribus by Henry Parker, Lord Morley*, ed. by H. G. Wright (London: Early English Texts Society, 1943). Wright concludes that Morley used as the basis for his translation the 1487 Latin text published at Louvain by Egidius van der Heerstraten (*GW* 4485), and supplies the parallel Latin text of this edition alongside Morley's translation: Wright, *Forty-six Lives*, p. lxx.

¹⁰ "Chatsworth, Devonshire Collection MS. 'Of the ryghte renoumyde ladyes.' [...] i + 47 + i leaves. 245 x 195 (185 x 138) mm. Ruled for 31 ll. per page. Vellum. 1542-46/7 (Henry is 'of ... Irelonde Kynge'). Heavily cropped. Leaf missing between fols 3 + 4. Written in anglicana format by C. Strapwork initials with scrollwork and grotesques, animals or flowers on almost every folio. The royal monogram HRVIII is found in the scrollwork of the capital T on fol. I^r; the scrollwork of the capital M on fol. 12^v contains the first words of the Angelical Salutation: *ave maria gratia*. Text ends fol. 47^r 10." James P. Carley, 'The Writings of Henry Parker, Lord Morley. A Bibliographical Survey', in *Triumphs of English: Henry Parker, Lord Morley, Translator to the Tudor Court. New Essays in Interpretation*, ed. by Marie Axton and James P. Carley (London: The British Library, 2000) 31.

¹¹ Carley 43.

¹² See James Simpson, "The Sacrifice of Lady Rochford. Henry Parker, Lord Morley's Translation of *De claris mulieribus*." in *Triumphs of English*, 154.

Boccaccio's text to underline his approval of Henry's action in executing his wife and Morley's daughter for the (apparently) political good of the realm.¹³

After Morley's translation, there were no further English versions of the *De mulieribus* until Guido A. Guarino's 1963 translation.¹⁴ It is hard to believe that the very first complete translation of this text into English did not appear until this date, almost five hundred years after its first appearance in a European vernacular. (As previously mentioned, the first German translation was published at Ulm in 1473, the same year as the *editio princeps*.) Unfortunately, Guarino based his translation on the 1539 Bern edition, whose text was derived from an earlier redaction of the manuscript than that used by Zaccaria for his critical edition.¹⁵ The textual unreliability of the Bern edition can be seen in the fact that the editor added an extra biography before Queen Giovanna, that of "Brynhild, Queen of France" (which was derived from Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium*). Guarino omits the extra biography in his translation, mentioning it in a note, but, as is typical of his translation, fails to note its source.¹⁶ Like his predecessors, Guarino's comments on the style of his translation reveal the sexual mores and assumptions of his time, in his case the early 1960s. His analysis of the problem of voicing betrays a comically reductive view of female behaviour: "It would be incongruous to have a goddess speak as if she were chatting while holding a glass at a cocktail party, or noble Lucretia proclaim her determination and love of chastity as if she were a secretary reading the minutes at a board meeting!"¹⁷

Because of the problems with the Latin text, Guarino's translation is considered to contain numerous mistaken readings and textual inaccuracies. Overall, it is a straightforwardly readable book, but clearly more suited to a general audience than to the Boccaccio specialist. One point of particular interest in this edition, however, is the inclusion of reproductions of the original woodcuts which accompanied the text in the 1539 Bern edition (although this fact is not mentioned anywhere in the book). The modern book reproduces the printer's colophon on the title page, and includes all but one of the illustrations, in their correct place in the text.¹⁸

¹³ Simpson 164–65.

¹⁴ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women*, trans. by Guido A. Guarino (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1963).

¹⁵ Brown 477. This edition is described in the British Library catalogue thus: "Ioannis Boccatii ... de claris mulieribus. [With woodcuts.] ff. 81. *M. Apiarius: Bernae*, 1539. fol." (BL 612. l. 5 (l.)).

¹⁶ Guarino 247. See also Wright, *Forty-six Lives*, p. lxxv, note 4.

¹⁷ Guarino xxxi–xxxii. I will confine myself to the comment that the majority of Boccaccio's subjects, if transplanted out of their historical period, would be more likely to be chairing the board meeting than reading the minutes.

¹⁸ Guarino's edition omits the woodcut which accompanies the biography of Tamaris, Daughter of Micon (Brown LVI). However, in the Bern text, the illustration which accompanies this chapter is the same as that which accompanies the biography of the other Tamyris, the Queen of Scythia (Brown XLIX), and can be seen on page 104 of Guarino's edition.

II. Virginia Brown's new translation of the *Famous Women*

In keeping with the aims of the I Tatti Renaissance Library, Virginia Brown's new translation contains a rigorous critical apparatus alongside the text. Brown supplies a detailed introduction, which summarizes some of the principal critical literature to date. This feature is particularly useful for the English-speaking audience, who may safely rely on the information she provides without having to struggle with sources written in languages other than English. It is worth summarizing the topics covered here. Brown begins with the manuscript history and *fortuna* of the text (pp. xii–xiv), based on Zaccaria's work in his 1967–70 Mondadori critical edition.¹⁹ (However, Zaccaria himself notes in his recent review of this book that Brown does not take into account his subsequent discoveries in the manuscript tradition.²⁰) This is followed by a discussion of the dedication to Andrea Acciaiuoli and the dating of the text (pp. xiv–xvi). Brown then provides a survey of the text and its literary and historical sources (pp. xvi–xviii), and comments on the perennial critical issue of Boccaccio's view of women (pp. xviii–xx). The Introduction concludes with a summary of the text's bibliographical and translation history (pp. xx–xxii).

The end matter of Brown's edition also contains additional critical material: a *Note on the Text*, where she describes the translation, followed by the *Notes*, the critical apparatus. This is necessarily very short in comparison with Zaccaria's edition, but supplies essential information on Boccaccio's sources and some aspects of the text. The *Notes* are followed by a short but relatively thorough critical *Bibliography* (pp. 505–09). This comprises a list of the various print editions of the *De mulieribus claris*, in Latin and translated into various European vernaculars; and a partially annotated selection of secondary material pertaining to the text. The end matter concludes with the Index (pp. 511–30) which cross-references the English forms of proper names with the Latin where necessary.

The Latin text of the *Famous Women* reproduces that established by Zaccaria, with facing page English translation. Structurally, the organization of the text shows marked similarities to Boccaccio's best known work, the *Decameron*. The *Famous Women* comprises the *Dedication*, *Preface*, the one hundred and six biographies, and an authorial *Conclusion*. Given Boccaccio's fondness for formal architectural schemes, it seems likely that the *Famous Women* was envisaged at one time as a collection of one hundred biographies, which would reflect his narrative scheme employed in the *Decameron* and in other lesser-known works such as the *Amorosa visione*. In fact, a study of the various editorial phases of the composition of the text shows at no stage a grouping of exactly one hundred chapters²¹; nonetheless, the importance of this model can be seen in the fact that the autograph manuscript contains one hundred and six lives, exactly one hundred of which are women from the ancient or classical world, and with only six moderns. As has been noted, several of the biographies show narrative

¹⁹ Giovanni Boccaccio, *De mulieribus claris*, ed. and trans. by Vittorio Zaccaria, in *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio* (Milan: Mondadori, 1964–) 10, 2nd ed. (1970).

²⁰ The articles in question are Guglielmo Zappacosta, "Per il testo del *De mulieribus claris*," *Studi sul Boccaccio* 7 (1973): 239–45, and Zaccaria's response: "Ancora sul *De mulieribus claris*," *Studi sul Boccaccio* 7 (1973): 247–70.

²¹ See Zaccaria, *Note*, pp. 458–59, and Ricci, "Le fasi redazionali del 'De mulieribus claris.'"

similarities with tales from the *Decameron*. This can be seen most clearly in the biography of Paulina (XCI) and the tale of Lisetta and Frate Alberto (*Dec.* IV.2), where both the gullible female protagonists are tricked into having sex with a mortal who claims to be a supernatural being.²² In another interesting correspondence, in his conclusion to the *Famous Women*, Boccaccio anticipates the arguments of his supposed detractors in order to refute their criticisms, just as he does in the authorial conclusion to the *Decameron*.

To conclude, I would like to compare Brown's translation with the preceding translation by Guarino. This type of comparative assessment will necessarily be subjective, but I will attempt to assess the success of the translations through a direct comparison of several passages taken from different parts of the book. Unlike a work such as the *Decameron*, there is very little variation in stylistic register within the *Famous Women*, and thus I have decided to compare the translations of three passages which each characterize a certain type of Boccaccio's writing. The first one is taken from the authorial framework of the text and is a sample of his highest register; the second is a sample of his typical biographical style; and the third demonstrates his exhortative style when reworking a literary *topos*.

The first example is taken from Boccaccio's dedication to Andrea Acciaiuoli: "Pridie, mulierum egregia, paululum ab inerti vulgo semotus et a ceteris fere solutus curis, in eximiam muliebris sexus laudem ac amicorum solatium, potius quam in magnum rei publice commodum, libellum scripsi" (*FW*, Ded., 1).²³

Guarino: "Some time ago, illustrious lady, while away from the crude multitudes and almost free of other concerns, I wrote a little book in praise of women, more for the pleasure of my friends than as a service to humanity" (p. xxxiii).

Brown: "A short time ago, gracious lady, at a moment when I was able to isolate myself from the idle mob and was nearly carefree, I wrote — more for my friends' pleasure than for the benefit of the broader public — a slim volume in praise of women" (p. 3).

Brown's translation of this passage is generally more elegant in its pacing and lexical choice. Her language is more fluent and colloquial in its usage, without striking any incongruous notes: e.g., "idle mob" in place of "crude multitudes"; "the benefit of the broader public" in place of "a service to humanity." However, I prefer Guarino's rendering of "libellum" as "little book," rather than Brown's "slim volume." Boccaccio's "libellum" recalls the previous use of this term in Dante's *Vita Nuova*, surely for Boccaccio the canonical work in praise of a woman *par excellence*.²⁴

²² For a discussion of the narrative similarities between the two texts, see Guarino, xvi–xxii.

²³ The Latin is quoted from Brown's volume, and therefore does not always correspond to the text used by Guarino. I have compared the two texts, however, and in the passages under discussion here, the Bern edition differs from Brown's text only in the matter of archaic spellings and the inclusion of abbreviations.

²⁴ "Sotto la quale rubrica io trovo scritto le parole le quali è mio intendimento d'assemblare in questo libello": *Vita Nuova*, I. In the most recent English translation of the *Vita Nuova*, by Mark Musa, "libello" is indeed rendered as "little book."

The second example is taken from the concluding paragraph of the biography of Lucretia: “Infelix equidem pulcritudo eius et tanto clarius, nunquam satis laudata, pudicitia sua dignis preconiis extollenda est, quanto acrius ingesta vi ignominia expiata; cum ex eadem non solum reintegratum sit decus, quod feditate facinoris iuvenis labefactarat ineptus, sed consecuta sit romana libertas” (*FW*, XLVIII, 9).

Guarino: “Hers was an unfortunate beauty. She cleansed her shame harshly, and for this reason she should be exalted with worthy praise for her chastity, which can never be sufficiently lauded. Because of her action, not only was her reputation restored, which a lewd young man had tried to destroy with the stain of sin, but Rome was made free” (p. 103).

Brown: “Hers was an unfortunate beauty. Her purity, which can never be sufficiently commended, should be extolled all the more highly as she expiated with such severity the ignominy thrust violently upon her. Her action not only restored the reputation that a dissolute young man had destroyed with his filthy crime, but led ultimately to freedom for Rome” (p. 199).

Guarino succeeds in conveying the general sense of the passage, but his language almost suggests that Lucretia was in part responsible for the rape inflicted upon her (as, for example, in the construction “she cleansed her shame harshly”). Brown’s rendering of the passage conveys a less judgmental tone, and de-sanitizes the act of rape through her use of the phrase “the ignominy thrust violently upon her.” In addition, Brown’s punctuation allows the text to proceed in a logical manner, while Guarino’s multi-claused sentences create a disjunction in the narrative flow and a certain confusion in the sense.

The final passage which I will consider is an example of Boccaccio’s exhortative style, in this case as he reworks an antifeminist *topos* at the conclusion of the biography of the exemplary widow, Pompeia Paulina: “Heu miseri, quo nostri corruere mores? Consuevere veteres, quibus erat pronus in sanctitatem animus, ignominiosum arbitrari, nedum septimas, sed secundas inisse nuptias; nec posse de cetero tales honestis iure misceri matronis. Hodierne longe aliter; nam libidinosam pruriginem reticentes suam, formosiores carioresque se existimantes, quoniam crebris sponsalitiis, viduitatis superata fortuna, totiens placuerint maritis variis” (*FW*, XCIV, 10–11).

Guarino: “Alas, how wretched we are! To what depths have our morals fallen! The ancients, whose spirit was prone to saintliness, were accustomed to think it shameful to marry a second time, not to speak of a seventh, and they thought that such women should not righteously mingle with honest women. But the women of our day are quite different. For they conceal their lust and think they are more beautiful and esteemed because, having overcome the fortunes of widowhood with their frequent marriages, they have pleased so many husbands” (p. 213).

Brown: “Alas, what wretches we are! To what depths have our morals plunged! The ancients, who were naturally inclined to purity, used to regard a second marriage as disgraceful, much less a seventh; they also

held that after remarriage it was wrong to permit such women to mingle with respectable wives. The women of our day are quite different. They conceal their itching lust and think they are more beautiful and beloved for having pleased so often the various husbands of their frequent marriages and for having overcome the misfortune of widowhood" (p. 403).

Once again, Guarino's prose is less elegant and more disjointed than that of Brown. His translation is much more literal, leading sometimes to the effect of a loss of meaning. This can be seen most clearly here by his rendering of "quibus erat pronus in sanctitatem animus" as "whose spirit was prone to saintliness," which lacks the simplicity and significance of Brown's phrase "who were naturally inclined to purity." In addition, the fact that he begins a sentence with the subordinating conjunction "for" adds to the clumsiness of this passage. Brown's inclusion of the word "itching" in her translation of "libidinosam pruriginem" (omitted by Guarino), adds greatly to the sense of invective and recalls the rabid condemnations of female lust of the misogynist authors of the antifeminist canon.

In conclusion, Brown's translation of the *De mulieribus claris* is a superb achievement. In terms of prose style and accuracy, the translation is clearly superior to that provided in the only previous complete translation, and the critical apparatus is an excellent and reliable tool for the specialist and non-specialist alike. Two textual errors in the bibliography should, however, be noted. As I have already mentioned, Brown omits the first Italian translation of 1506 from the list of editions. In addition, a cryptic typographical note remains after the reference to the Branca/Zaccaria article in the Varia section: "(Los Angeles, Private Collection, S.N.)." This may well be a reference to the location of the manuscript, but adds little to the reference. These small quibbles aside, I have only the highest praise for this volume, which should remain a model for scholarly translation.

GUYDA ARMSTRONG

BROWN UNIVERSITY