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The Decameron First Day in Perspective:
Volume One of the Lectura Boccaccii. Elissa
B. Weaver, ed. Reviewed by M. U. Sowell.

Madison U. Sowell*

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The Decameron First Day in Perspective: Volume One of the Lectura Boccaccii. Ed. Elissa B. Weaver. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. Pp. viii, 270. Paperback. \$27.95 / £18.00.

Founded in 1975, the sexcentenary of Giovanni Boccaccio's death, the American Boccaccio Association celebrates its own thirty-year anniversary in 2005. In these three decades Boccaccio scholarship in North America has burgeoned, particularly as regards the publication of book-length studies. Prior to 1975 the number of scholarly books (excluding translations) devoted exclusively to the Certaldese author and printed in North America likely could be counted on the fingers of one hand. Since the six-hundredth anniversary celebrations, however, American and English-language scholarship devoted to both the major and minor works of Boccaccio has increased exponentially, in terms of both quantity and quality. Furthermore, most of the major players in creating what we generally call "American" Boccaccio scholarship have contributed to the impressive volume under review. These contributors include Marga Cottino-Jones, Pier Massimo Forni, Robert Hollander, Victoria Kirkham, Millicent Marcus, and Janet Levarie Smarr, all of whom have authored books in English on Boccaccio. My own mentor, Dante Della Terza, as well as Thomas Stillinger, Franco Fido, Ronald Martinez, and Michelangelo Picone make up the remainder of a distinguished group of participants. (Only Picone has a rather tenuous American connection, given that he writes in Italian and teaches in Switzerland.) Elissa Weaver, who edited this first volume of the *Lectura Boccaccii* series and composed the critical introduction, deserves congratulations for assembling and editing such a remarkable group of readings of the Proem, the title, and the first ten stories of the *Decameron*.

Weaver's cogent introduction not only reviews salient points made individually by each of the dozen contributors but also raises questions that slice across many of the readings. She queries, for example, "Is the *Decameron* First Day, a day ostensibly without theme, a study of vices? Is there an implicit theme that unites all ten tales?" (3). In addition, she touches on familiar issues, such as the complexity of the work's embedded narratives, Dante's presence in Boccaccio, and the metanarrative nature of many of the tales. Her overall assessment of the "American" school, as represented by the lectura she edits, is that "the historicist and the allegorical school predominate..., reflecting the principal currents of American Boccaccio criticism today" (11). She hastens to add, however, that "semiotic, structuralist, and deconstructionist methods are also well represented, although most essays would better be labeled pluralist for their willingness to let the texts themselves suggest the most appropriate method of analysis" (*ibid.*). This reviewer agrees wholeheartedly with her summation.

With theatrical flourish Hollander opens the collection proper with a discourse on the Proem, “probably the most neglected part of the *Decameron* ... frequently forgotten and almost always underattended” (12). The *Decameron* itself, he boldly asserts, “is one of the worst read masterpieces that the world possesses” (*ibid.*). (One assumes that he means “worst-read masterpieces” and not “worst masterpieces that are read.”) In any event, once the critic moves beyond rhetoric to the meat of the matter, he adduces a plethora of provocative insights. I would agree, for example, that Boccaccio’s *ballate* “remain a closed book to the vast majority of critics who concern themselves with the *Decameron*” (13). I also find the connection of Boccaccio, “as a narrator who wishes to ease the pains of love, to the Ovid of the *Remedia amoris*” (15) quite genial. In fact, I am so moved by these arguments that I raise my eyebrows only slightly when Hollander goes so far as to proffer the tantalizing possibility that Boccaccio’s “friend” (*amico*) whose “pleasurable conversations” (*piacevoli ragionamenti*) saved the author from death was none other than Ovid. Equally daring, and perhaps even more convincing, is the claim that, “beginning with his subtitle, Boccaccio wanted his reader to entertain the possibility that the *Decameron* is to be read as Dantean moralization” (23). Although Hollander goes on to problematize this assertion, it remains one of the most intriguing of the entire collection of pluralist readings.

The next essay, Stillinger’s “The Place of the Title (*Decameron*, Day One, Introduction),” shines with insights. Inter alia, Boccaccio’s titular strategies for presenting his tales are revealed as truly ingenious. For instance, when the *Decameron*’s authorial persona claims that his tales are of little value because they are “senza titolo,” Stillinger sees in the phrase a translation of the Latin *Sine titulo*, a medieval label for Ovid’s *Amores*. Insight: “Thus in a single gesture Boccaccio disparages his own writing and puts it on a par with a canonical text” (30). Stillinger expands the notion of title to include much more than the word *Decameron*, “modeled on that of Saint Ambrose’s *Hexameron*” (31). He sees titles in Boccaccio’s summaries, or “story rubrics,” interpreted as “clearly legible signs, standing for their referents as miniatures or metaphors” (33). The names of the ten narrators also reflect titles that “refer to earlier writing by Boccaccio and other writers in Boccaccio’s tradition” (37). Not surprisingly, he finds the subtitle, “Prencipe Galeotto,” a particularly felicitous epithet, “that fuses character, work, and author” (39). Stillinger’s most expansive interpretation of the notion of a *titulus*, however, lies in his argument “that the Introduction of the First Day is both a powerful totalizing rubric for the *Decameron* and a critique of such rubrics” (49). The dual nature of the Introduction emerges from the description of the plague and the death and disorder it metes out, on the one hand, and, on the other, the rationale for the brigata’s life-giving and orderly experiences.

Fido’s analysis of “The Tale of Ser Ciappelletto (I.1)” segues. Commencing with a detailed and systematic review of the major hermeneutical approaches that have enveloped this initial tale, Fido deftly summarizes the critiques of Momigliano (a “too severe, scandalized reading”), Croce (“Ciappelletto [is] an artist”), Russo (clarifying that the character is “an ingenious and disinterested artist”), and Branca (“Ciappelletto [is] the champion of the new and inexorable power of money”); he then covers the more recent and familiar writings of Getto, Cottino-Jones, Baratto, Mazzotta, Almansi, Potter, and Hollander (60–64). Fido’s contribution to the almost bewildering array of disparate interpretations is to explore Ser Ciappelletto’s “intertextual connections with the other tales, ... in the macro-text of the *Decameron*” (71). Connecting lines are then drawn clearly between I.1 and the tales of Melchisedech, Ber-

gamino, Madonna Oretta, and Cipolla. To his credit, Fido is not afraid to address directly his conviction that the first tale focuses on “the relationship between religion and literature,” the “obscurities and ambiguities” present both in Holy Scriptures and in *Decameron* I.1 (73).

Cottino-Jones supports Fido’s intertextual approach in her reading of “The Tale of Abraham the Jew (I.2),” as she aligns I.2 with I.1 and I.3. She highlights “the mercantile ideology that clearly inspires the novella” (86). While Stewart, the reader of “The Tale of the Three Rings (I.3),” does nothing to dispute these connections, her approach to the third tale differs in that she focuses much more on sources for Melchisedech’s tale as well as its *Nachleben*. Nevertheless she concludes that, “Strategically situated in a position of prominence, the [first] three tales form rather a triptych on the paramount value of our faith in God” (98).

It falls to Martinez to note that, starting with “The Tale of the Monk and His Abbot (I.4),” there is “a shift in subject matter from the theological casuistry of Ciappelletto, Abraham the Jew, and Melchisedech, to the passions of the flesh” (113). The fourth tale’s narrator, after all, is Dioneo, who in his licentiousness balances the restraint of the day’s queen, Pampinea. Martinez sees in the Pampinea-Dioneo dialectic, “the classic tension between Apollonian restraint and Dionysian energy,” which is “one of the defining characteristics of the whole book” (115). He then reads the tale largely in light of St. Benedict’s Rules, demonstrating how the roles of the Monk and the Abbot are essentially reversed and how the tale exemplifies the “subversive celebration of nature” (123).

Della Terza, a protégé of the late Luigi Russo, treats the fifth tale of “The Marchioness of Monferrato.” The story is recounted by the dignified Fiammetta and is here interpreted as a chiasmic response to the preceding novella narrated by the mischievous Dioneo. (This juxtaposition reoccurs in Day 5 when Fiammetta’s tale of the faithful Federigo degli Alberighi [5.9] is followed by Dioneo’s story of the unfaithful Pietro da Vinciolo [5.10].) Della Terza analyzes Boccaccio’s syntax, the tale’s incorporation of Capellanus’s *De amore* (as freely quoted by Fiammetta), and the Provençal motif of *amor de lonh* that is mirrored in the behavior of the king of France. He touches on other critical approaches to this novella, but in the end he returns to his primary focus, the role of the female narrator: “Fiammetta tells us how to read the truth of Boccaccio’s tales” (145). Such an emphasis on the attributes or functions of any of the ten narrators constitutes a valid and welcome approach to understanding possible reasons for who narrates what.

“The Tale of the Inquisitor (I.6),” one of the shorter in the *Decameron* and the only First Day tale set in Florence, is taken up by the very capable Smarr. Her approach is to investigate the historical basis for the story; to examine the interesting array of “opposed terms” (150), such as “coins” and “words,” as well as references to Dante and the first gospel; and to speculate on the possible significance of the setting (Florence), the day of narration (mercoledì, or the day of Mercury, god of commerce), and the possible pun in the reference to St. John Chrysostom (Giovanni Boccadoro vs. Giovanni Boccaccio). In the end she finds, not surprisingly, that “[t]his tale is also meant to be effective medicine for the avarice of churchmen” (158).

Smarr’s insights are followed by Picone’s penetrating interpretation of “The Tale of Bergamino (I.7)” as a “story within the story” and “the story of the story” (161, emphasizes his). He establishes his reading in the context of both the First Day (“meta-narrative par excellence,” *ibid.*) and of the collection as a whole. He identifies the “one theme [that] runs

through this apparently themeless day ... [as] the presence of the liberating and exalting word" (164). He makes much of the fact "that the curtain of the *Decameron* rises on Paris" (ibid.) and reads this as "a passage ... of the art of the tale from its land of origin, France, to its new home, Italy" (165). He further sees in the First Day's ten stories "a precise need to represent the great genres of medieval narrative" (166). Within these marvelous parameters he then places the tale of Bergamino and Bergamino's own tale of Primas.

"The Tale of Guiglielmo Borsiere (I.8)" falls to Victoria Kirkham, and this brief story is indeed well served. She opens with the familiar reference to "Dante's *Inferno* XVI, where Guiglielmo Borsiere lately of Florence is named a newcomer to the circle of sodomy" (180). But she quickly goes beyond such pejorative allusions to uncover in Ermino Grimaldi "an archetype of greed" (183) and "a Miser of All Times" (184) and in Guiglielmo Borsiere "the hero" (188) and the emblem of "Cortesia" (189). Ermino's conversion becomes a parable worthy of both Dante and Boccaccio: "For Dante, the rising bourgeoisie were destroying Florence. For Boccaccio, their prosperity can be beneficent to the collective, provided gain not mean greed, provided money be wed to manners, provided the purse be carried by Courtesy" (201).

Pier Massimo Forni discusses "The Tale of the King of Cyprus and the Lady of Gascony (I.9)," noting that it is "allegorical" and "the shortest in the book" (208). He compares it to the even briefer version found in the *Novellino* and then centers his straightforward interpretation on "data pertaining to the author's life" (220). Millicent Marcus, on the other hand, delivers a creative tour de force in presenting "The Tale of Maestro Alberto (I.10)." She focuses on the image of the leek, "whose metaphoric significance has much to teach us about sexuality and textuality in the *Decameron*" (222). Her subsequent discussion discloses that Maestro Alberto's story, like the multi-layered leek, contains "a plurality of readings which contradict and subvert one another in defiance of interpretive closure" (227). She posits that Boccaccio's tales, and literature in general, "must be free from absolute systems of meaning and their consequent imperatives to teach univocal truths" (239). This seems a fitting conclusion to a collection of readings that sustain and illustrate her point.

This multivocal book will serve as an essential resource for both students and teachers of the *Decameron*. Smartly conceived and executed, it presents several cutting-edge readings and an up-to-date bibliography that is extensive yet manageable. Although I noted but a handful of minor type-setting errors (see pp. 43, 51, 184, 216, and 227), I should point out that the prominent medievalist R. Allen Shoaf is referred to twice (pp. 151 and 255) as "Alan Shoaf," which should be corrected in subsequent printings.

MADISON U. SOWELL

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY