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Elisabeth Arend, *Lachen und Komik in Giovanni Boccaccios* Decameron, Analecta Romanica Heft 68, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2004. Pp. 474.

Elisabeth Arend identifies Boccaccio's *Decameron* as a key text in the history of laughter and the comic. Working from the premise that there is no comic without at least implicit laughter but that laughter can occur without the comic, she deconstructs this nexus in order to pursue hitherto unexamined topics in the social anthropology of the *Decameron* as these find expression in smiling and laughing. In Boccaccio's conception, laughter, like literature, is therapeutic, and an important component of the medicine of the humors. The comic becomes a mode for the exploration of scientific, philosophical, and ethical issues as norms and values are questioned, and problematic relationships among social beings are disarticulated. Encoded in laughter and masked by the comic, the author contends, the stories of the *Decameron* and its framing tale, the *cornice*, provide answers to social and moral questions that preoccupied Florentine society as a consequence of profound transformations in society and the economy during the *Età communale*. In this the *Decameron* is a central text between the Middle Ages and the early modern period.

Typical of the organization of the doctoral dissertation in which this work originated, the book seeks first to establish a historical and theoretical basis for the examination of laughter and the comic. The smile and the laugh are distinguished, and both classical and Christian assessments of their status and signification are reviewed. Among modern theories of the comic, the dynamic of incongruity receives the closest attention. This leads to the proposal of a social anthropology of laughter and the comic, which introduces part two of the study, the *Decameron* as the site of entertainment, with paired laughter and seriousness. From Boccaccio's other writings and the medical theories of the times emerge key terms such as *delectatio* and *recreatio*. As within the framing story — the exodus from the city before the threat of the plague — stories, like gaiety and laughter, are *remedia*. But laughter must have a moral basis and here the author generally finds Bakhtin's theory of the carnevalesque inadequate to address the questions prompted by a close study of Boccaccio's complex work.

Parts three and four are very detailed examinations, firstly of the vocabulary of laughing and smiling, secondly of the mechanics of the comic. Laughter in the tales themselves is less problematic than smiles and laughter among the *brigata* on the heels of a well told tale. The smile differs from the laugh, as male responses differ from female. Often such expressions, originating with one or other of the young people, serve as cues to recommend a specific stance toward the matter of the tales. Laughter and, in particular, its social modulation are seen to have occupied other literary works and authors such the *Novellino* collection, books on women's manners, Machiavelli, and Dante. In the discussion of the comic, in which the framing tale is left for the tales themselves, many readers will feel on more familiar ground and here it should be noted that Arend's work presupposes a very detailed knowledge of the *Decameron*. Only in the latter half of the book is there any extended analysis of individual tales. The author discusses in turn what she identifies as *motto* tales and *beffa* tales, witticisms contrasted with practical jokes. An essential tie is established between the comic and corporeality (*Leiblichkeit*), in particular physical force and the life of the senses. Central to this

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physicality in the context of the tales and their comic nature is human sexuality, a quintessential source of humor. With the prompts supplied by the tales and the evaluation of them implicit in the *brigata*'s laughter or overt statement, sexual fulfillment is seen as a basic human need, even right, one that transcends the restrictions of marriage, not least for the numerous young women who are *mal mariées* or perhaps unwillingly in religious orders. The study concludes with a consideration of the relationship between the obscene and the comic on one hand, the profane and the comic on the other.

Arend's detailed discussions are never without interest but the decision to focus first on the under-studied and under-theorized phenomena of laughing and smiling will prompt some readers to judge that we have the cart before the horse. This creates a rhetorical imbalance in the work as a whole, top-heavy with its initial theoretical chapters and then curiously simplistic as we dissect a variety of rather mechanical comic effects in the closing pages. The latter half of the book is the more convincing but the first half is undeniably the more interesting, however complex the questions it raises and only partially answers, less because of the very astute and informed inquiry led by Arend than because of the apparently irreducible complexity of humor and human laughter.

To exemplify the kinds of unresolved issues that this very solid work nonetheless leaves, I judge that the author has paid insufficient attention to the sexual tension that informs the social intercourse of the *brigata*, most specifically as this affects reactions to stories and the often accompanying laughter. Our knowledge of medieval Florentine society would suggest that in realistic terms, few of the young women who had taken refuge from the plague in the company of members of their age cohort and in the *loci amoeni* of the countryside would return to the city without sexual experience. The framing tale, while never formally addressing the closer relationships among the *brigata*, does hint that one or more liaisons have been established, and the tales told and judgments passed on them legitimate, *grosso modo*, these love affairs. While it would be unjust perhaps to speak of sexual aggression within the fiction of the *cornice*, Dioneo stands out both because of the preferential status accorded him and because it is he who most forcefully pushes the sexual envelope. Thus, the laughter of the *brigata* may contain elements of coercion and collusion, the desire to enjoy group solidarity, laughter betraying embarrassment, innuendo — or a girl supporting her lover's story by leading the group's response to it. And what of the girls' laughter when they sneak away to bathe? Arend's study, while never formally addressing the question, suggests that the comic is confined to the tales and absent from the framing tale. But is this quite true? The various sly digs, like the young women's clandestine bathing, deserve consideration in this respect.

One might also have looked for a more thorough discussion of irony (and its reaction, the faintest of smiles), especially in view of the ironic, circuitous casuistry that the author employs in his epilogue to justify his telling of the tales as he did — how could he do otherwise? Even in the sphere of laughter, the epilogue relativizes all that has gone before. Affinities between word play (puns, arch circumlocutions, the mixture of registers) and metaphor might also have been explored in greater detail, both exploiting the disparity between the nominal collective reality of the moment and an alternate reality — personal, surrealistic, obscene — adduced by the speaker.

The study of laughter, like so much else in social anthropology, returns us to the Nature-Nurture debate. Arend's study takes us a long way toward identifying the culturally determined elements of laughter during Florence's *Età communale* and its definition of the comic, but not all the way. This said, Arend's thesis of laughter in Boccaccio as remedy and therapy

is conclusively proven in this multifaceted and solidly documented study, which is a most worthwhile addition to the respected *Analecta Romanica* series.

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