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Margaret Franklin. *Boccaccio's Heroines: Power and Virtue in Renaissance Society*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006. 205 pp. $94.95/£47.50.

The focus of Franklin's study, although not immediately obvious from the title, is Boccaccio's catalogue of famous women, *De mulieribus claris*. Whilst it cannot compete with the *Decameron* for attention, *De mulieribus* has provided a rich source of material for critics in the mainly Anglo-American field of gender studies for some years. *Boccaccio's Heroines* is situated in this context — it is published as part of Ashgate's series entitled 'Women and Gender in the Early Modern World' — and confronts an issue that has continued to vex feminist writers: the apparently contradictory praise for 'manly women' meted out by Boccaccio in *De mulieribus*.

Franklin goes beyond the gendered view that biographies of women are exempla for women and argues convincingly that Boccaccio's biographies were intended to function as guides for *male* behaviour. In fact, these models were deliberately placed out of the reach of women who, if they had followed the example of powerful pagans and overstepped their domestic boundaries, would have upset the delicate social order. Shifting the moral lens from women to men allows Franklin to argue that there is no ambiguity or contradiction in the message of *De mulieribus*, which allows Boccaccio to praise women for 'nontraditional achievements while stopping short of championing their "liberation" through political reform' (p. 7). The focus is less on arguing the extent of Boccaccio's misogyny or pro-feminism, and rather on demonstrating the consistency of Boccaccio's moral message: that women are praised when they achieve power through legitimate means (but ultimately go back to deferring to men), but criticized if they seize power through personal ambition.

This perspective is established through some conventional textual analysis, but *Boccaccio's Heroines* is also an interdisciplinary study of the reception of Boccaccio's text in the fifteenth century, concerned with the impact of *De mulieribus* on Italian visual culture in this period. The work is divided into four chapters; broadly speaking, the first two deal with Boccaccio's text, while the final two evaluate the influence of *De mulieribus* on selected visual images. These chapters are supplemented by an introduction, conclusion, select bibliography, and index of names. There are also eighteen black-and-white figures, which cover most of the images discussed in the text.

In the introduction, Franklin sets out the critical and methodological context for her work, establishing her distance from critics such as Pamela Benson and Stephen Kolsky, who have emphasized the ambiguous and fragmented nature of *De mulieribus*, and outlining the use of heroic

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women in Renaissance art works. Chapter 1 evaluates Boccaccio's dedication to Andrea Acciaiuoli as a reflection of the author's conception of the relationship between the sexes, and uses an analysis of the preface to argue that the text was aimed at a male audience. The main body of textual criticism is then carried out in Chapter 2, which focuses on a series of examples of 'bad women' from *De mulieribus* to demonstrate how Boccaccio selects and distorts his source material in order to illustrate the dangers inherent in powerful women. No space is devoted to engaging with the issue of Boccaccio's misogyny across his *oeuvre*, and especially in relation to the *Decameron* and *Corbaccio*, but this is no doubt because Franklin's main interest lies in tracing the influence of *De mulieribus* outwards and away from Boccaccio and literary works by other authors, into the visual medium.

Chapter 3 begins by presenting a selection of 'heroines' from *De mulieribus*. The natural complement to the 'villains' already discussed in Chapter 2, they are not subjected to the same degree of analysis, but their profiles are sketched in order to illustrate the type of models preferred for visual representations in Renaissance Italy. This leads rather uneasily into a synthesis of previous scholarship on 'contemporary cultural practices' relating to women, such as education, the dowry system, treatment of widows, and so on, which acts as the socio-historical context for the real thrust of Chapter 3, and effectively the second half of the book: an analysis of visual images of illustrious women in order to establish the degree of their dependence on Boccaccio's text, and thus how artists adhered to or subverted Boccaccio's intentions regarding his models.

Franklin focuses on Tuscan images first of all — a cycle of frescoes in the Villa Carducci, and an image of Cloelia used on a *descho da parto*, which she argues has a Tuscan provenance — and explains how the images have progressed from their textual source and are able to serve as guides for both male *and* female behaviour. In the final chapter, she demonstrates how the role of Boccaccio's heroines have been subverted yet further in a selection of images produced in the courts of Eleonora d'Aragona d'Este and Isabella d'Este, where powerful pagans were finally allowed to function fully as role models for increasingly powerful contemporary women.

The presentation of *De mulieribus* as a coherent whole with a consistent message to offer to men is compelling and offers a new dimension to the debate over Boccaccio's misogyny, while the art historical research adds material to the field of reception studies, where much of the previous work on *De mulieribus* has tended to focus on intertextuality or illuminated French manuscripts. It is largely left to the reader, however, to dis-

cern how these two approaches work together and can benefit each other. The transition from textual to visual analysis and the way that these methodologies intersect is not made explicit either in the prose or in the structure of the work. Franklin comments in the introduction that 'defining the relationship between literature and the visual arts can be challenging' (p. 14), but does not engage with this potential methodological problem, or attempt to suggest why an interdisciplinary approach might be beneficial for an understanding of Boccaccio's reception. The conclusion is extremely short and limited to summing up the main arguments rather than bringing together the two halves of the book.

The physical structuring of the book is also far from clear at times. Each chapter is subdivided several times, but the abundance of divisions does not aid orientation greatly, since the titles do not indicate clearly how subsections relate to the overall structure, and not all the subheadings are indexed in the contents page. Unfortunately, some poor editing means that the summary of contents presented at the end of the introduction seems to reflect an earlier redaction of the work, rather than the published version.

Franklin writes primarily for an English-speaking audience. Quotations from *De mulieribus* are taken from Virginia Brown's English translation, and quotations from other texts, including Boccaccio's sources, are also in English, although additional references are sometimes given to the original-language text. In general, references to secondary sources are extremely full, making *Boccaccio's Heroines* eminently suited to art historians who have little prior knowledge of Italian or familiarity with Boccaccio studies. Equally, while the literature surveys included (for example, in 'A Woman's Place,' Chapter 3) are not always fully integrated into the analysis of primary sources, they make *Boccaccio's Heroines* a very useful starting-point for anybody new to the study of women in Italy.

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