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Thomas C. Stillinger and F. Regina Psaki, eds. *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism*. Annali d'Italianistica, Studi e testi, vol. 8. Chapel Hill, NC: Annali d'Italianistica, 2006. 273 pp.

Any review of the volume in question should begin with a necessary preface: it is no small feat to organize a collection of essays that explores perhaps the most polemic aspect of modern Boccaccio scholarship. Having said that, Stillinger and Psaki's *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism* deserves lavish praise: the essays address a multitude of critical and thought-provoking topics in an examination of Boccaccio's relationship to the mutable and often elusive "feminine." The collection uses the frontispiece of a 1573 Florentine edition of the *Decameron* as its axis; the woodcut portrays facing profiles of *il nostro amato* Boccaccio and an unidentified noblewoman. Stillinger and Psaki use this "carefully framed blank" as the central metaphor for their integrative introduction: "it insists that Boccaccio must be seen as linked to a woman, but also that 'a woman' is a problem for interpretation" (2). Though careful to address the limitations of the collection (insofar as the enormity and variety of the Boccaccian corpus, and the diversity of scholarly opinion, make any sort of conclusive compilation virtually impossible), this introduction lays the groundwork for the intricate web of essays that follows. Stillinger and Psaki highlight several key aspects of Boccaccio's engagement with women, furnishing both a textual and an ideological basis for the readings included in the collection. Primarily, it is a consideration of women within the realm of Boccaccian discourse: they are the subject of what the editors aptly refer to as "his personal *querelle des femmes*" (3), both objects of discourse as well as active agents, endowed with the powers of expression and interpretation. Given Boccaccio's multi-faceted representations both of women and of attitudes toward them, the diversity of the readings and opinions in the essays offers us a provocative sample of a spectrum of Boccaccio criticism, and also reflect the many possibilities of interpretation that Boccaccio himself offers his readers. Thus, these "focused and far-reaching explorations" serve as an indispensable foundation not only for feminist considerations of Boccaccio's work, but for any modern approach to the author and his texts.

Victoria Kirkham's essay seems a logical and necessary starting point: "Maria a.k.a. Fiammetta: The Men Behind the Woman" centers on the role of Boccaccio's leading muse, exploring both her historical and textual significance. In her consideration of the woman *behind* the muse, Kirkham teases out some essential elements of Boccaccio's use of Fiammetta as a metaphorical — dare I say allegorical? — symbol of textual reinterpretation on multiple levels, including the political, the mythographic, the psycho-

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logical and the ethical (20). Kirkham's percipient analysis keenly emphasizes Fiammetta's multi-faceted presence, and how her versatility mirrors that of her authorially created counterpart.

The delicacy of historicized textuality is explored further in Janet Smarr's "Speaking Women: Three Decades of Authoritative Females." Smarr emphasizes the historical authority Boccaccio grants his female characters, thus presenting them as "'real' physical or historical women and not simply allegorical figures" (29). This contrast — or, in fact, combination — of "real" and "allegorical" plays an important role in Smarr's analysis of Boccaccio's representation of the feminine, which, Smarr notes, is firmly rooted in a historicized reality, which, in turn, is bestowed upon his female characters in an assertion of their own textual authority.

Disa Gambera's essay, "Women and Walls: Boccaccio's *Teseida* and the Edifice of Dante's Poetry," continues the insistence on reading Boccaccio's women as a distinct reinterpretation of his literary predecessors. Gambera specifically explores the connection between the Dantean feminine and Boccaccio's own self-assertion as a vernacular writer. Eugenio Giusti further considers Boccaccio's literary heritage in the essay that follows, "Boccaccio's *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*: First Signs of an Ideological Shift." Analyzing both the literary and didactic qualities of the *Elegia* (including, notably, its lack of a "feminine" rhetoric as based on Carlo Delcorno's notes to the text), Giusti discerns a distinct shift, one that "conveys to his readers simultaneously a new, practical message and a critique of a literary mode" (78–9), namely, the tradition of courtly love. In this confrontation between the traditional and the new, Giusti sees the creation of a decidedly Boccaccian ideology of love, which becomes much clearer in the *Decameron*, and which is "made possible only by reconciling reality with fiction, history with literature" (82).

In her essay, "Boccaccio and the Infernal Body: The Widow as Wilderness," Guyda Armstrong confronts what is possibly the most problematic of Boccaccio's works. The *Corbaccio* continues to incite a vast range of criticism; yet through a careful literary comparison with Dante's *Inferno*, Armstrong recognizes the importance of what she calls the "Dantean matrix" in Boccaccio's text, a mosaic of textual references that create the foundation for the "infernal female" of the *Corbaccio*: "Boccaccio draws on the topography of Dante's *Inferno* to create a monumental anatomical landscape of the body" (94). Armstrong ties this in with Boccaccio's "taste for encyclopedism," which allows for the *Corbaccio* to be read as an exploration — even, as Armstrong attests, the "summa" — of the antifeminist tradition.

Thomas C. Stillinger's essay, a reprint of the 1983 article "The Language of Gardens: Boccaccio's 'Valle Delle Donne'," offers a sweeping and insightful analysis of the women's excursion in Day Six of the *Decameron*. Noting the textual references within the scene itself, Stillinger observes the key relationship between women and language: "at the center of the *Valle delle Donne*, inscribed on the blank space of the "corpi candidi" ('white bodies'), there is a fusion of absence and presence, subject and object, language and what is outside language" (124). Stillinger's consideration of the women as the Boccaccian "Other" — and his insistence on Boccaccio's own reliance on this Other — mark an undeniable highlight of the collection as a whole.

In the next essay, also a reprint of a previous article (and, like the preceding work, also of great importance), Millicent Marcus offers an essential reading of another controversial text in her essay, "Misogyny as Misreading: A Gloss on *Dec*. VIII:7." Stressing the "meta-literary" importance of Boccaccio's authorship, Marcus places the infamous tale of the scholar and the widow in a clearly-defined literary context, insisting "it should come as no surprise that misogyny, as a literary tradition and as a premise for storytelling, would be included in Boccaccio's stylistic inventory" (132). Marcus concludes, however, by acknowledging the loss of "critical distance" between the author and his scholar in the writing of the *Corbaccio*, which, Marcus argues, surrenders to antifeminism. The defender of women, therefore, seems to become their relentless detractor; Marcus thus brings a momentous aspect of Boccaccio criticism to the foreground, one that is, without question, worthy (even demanding) of further study.

Olivia Holmes, in her essay "In forma della donna": In the Woman's Place (A Reading of *Decameron* III.5)," uses the seemingly one-sided interaction between Zima and his love to illustrate the "communicative exchange" between writer and reader, and the "cuckolding" of the knight as representative of Boccaccio's own figurative cuckolding of "all the fathers, mothers, brothers and husbands who have restricted the young women, who are his readers" (154), including the "restrictive" luminaries of the Italian lyric tradition. Holmes concludes with a thoughtful and personal reflection (with which I couldn't agree more) on the effects of Boccaccio's assertion of women as "speakers" as well as "spoken."

In the essay that follows, "*La peste e le papere*: Textual Repression in Day Four of the *Decameron*," Myra Best uses the Introduction to Day IV as a lens through to examine the underlying presence of the plague in the *novelle*. She asserts a textual tension between the threat of nature, and its repression, evident in the overwhelming presence of death that is at the very root of the *Decameron*. Through Balducci's reaction to his son's curiosity,

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Best illustrates the "parallel between the threat and repression of the feminine and the threat and repression of the plague" (167), thus emphasizing the importance of expression as a means of personal and social recovery.

Diane Duyos Vacca explores the gendered significance of expression in her essay, "Carnal Reading: On Interpretation, Violence, and *Decameron* V.8." With the story of Nastagio at its center, the analysis concentrates on what is ultimately a key aspect of the collection as a whole: "How the self interacts with the other" (169), namely people and texts. Vacca pieces together the act of reading itself, in which the reader plays either an active or a passive role, depending on both our consideration of the text, and how the reader chooses to interact with it. This notion of "gendered reading," Vacca argues, is crucial to our understanding of textual authority, and the violence of V.8 — violence that links the feminine and the textual, given such precedents as Jerome and Dante — is indicative of the violent traditional paradigm of textual reading. Gregory Stone's essay, "The Prick of the Rose: Boccaccio's Bisexual Hermeneutics," continues this analysis of gendered reading. By opposing a reading based in theory and one based in philology, Stone illustrates the potential extremes involved in a literary analysis that relies too heavily — or too little — on personal involvement. Using the story of Pietro and his wife in *Decameron* V.10 as his basis, Stone calls for a "continual dialectic" between these two potential readings; this "bisexual reading" (terminologically grounded in the sexual rhetoric of the novella) allows for a more balanced analysis, in which the assertions and denials of both theory and philology can be balanced into a more conscious, self-aware interpretation.

Ronald Martinez, in "Apuleian Example and Misogynist Allegory in the Tale of Peronella (*Decameron* VII.2)," takes up the issue of gendered narrative discourse, particularly that of Filostrato in Day Seven. Comparing Apuleius' story with Boccaccio's retelling (including both its constancies and its modifications), Martinez navigates the terrain between precedent, author and narrator to shed light on the "dangerous possibilities" at work in the intertextual and narrative games of the *Decameron*. The final essay, Barbara Zaczek's "Creating and Recreating Reality with Words: The *Decameron* and *The Women's Decameron*," examines the issues of representation and interpretation at work in both Boccaccio's text and that of the Russian author Julia Voznesenskaya. Zaczek highlights "Boccaccio's narrative strategy of guiding readers through a rhetorical maze that opens up the unexpected twists and turns of a social reality" (237), a reminder of Boccaccio's authorial stance that is arguably crucial to any scholarly approach. Zaczek extends this authorial analysis to Voznesenskaya, illustrating the ways in which Voznesenskaya uses the rhetoric

of the *Decameron* to explore the importance of oral communication and the gendered notions of language in a society steeped in official propaganda. Thus, the juxtaposition of the authority of language — both textual and experiential — is exhibited in Zaczek's perceptive comparison of Boccaccio's and Voznesenskaya's representation of language and its social effects.

I've left the penultimate essay, Marilyn Migiel's "The Untidy Business of Gender Studies: Or, Why It's Almost Useless to Ask if the *Decameron* is Feminist," for last, perhaps (given its title) for obvious reasons. Expanding on ideas first published in her book *A Rhetoric of the* Decameron, Migiel opens here with the question, "Why do we long for tidy representations of gender and power, even in literary texts of considerable complexity and irony?" (217). What follows is an argument toward a defter and more profound interaction with a text whose ideologies are not always (if ever) easily categorized. With this in mind, *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism*, as a whole, can be seen as the jumping-off point for a much more thorough, much more sensitive critical approach to one of Western Literature's most versatile and flexible writers. In confronting the variety of the Boccaccian corpus, the potential for feminist readings — and a wide variety, at that — seems an undeniable indication that gender is, indeed, a crucial analytical category, as noted by the editors and contributors to this collection. As Migiel concludes in her essay (233):

> For all that the *Decameron* asserts that it is a pander ("Galeotto, Proem I.1), its veiled dialogue about gender relations demands a dynamic and critical reading from us, a reading that refuses to grant absolute values to narrative components, but repeatedly revises the value it ascribes to them as it seeks to determine the ideological force of given narratives within a specific social and historical context.

As each contributor demonstrates, in various approaches to a range of Boccaccio's works, Migiel couldn't be more right.

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