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Recommended Citation
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The work of Teodolinda Barolini is well known to scholars of medieval Italian literature. For the most part her reputation rests on two important books published by Princeton University Press: *Dante’s Poets: Textuality and Truth in the Comedy* (1984) and *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (1992). These have both been translated into Italian — by Bollati Boringhieri in 1993 and Feltrinelli in 2003, respectively — a still rather unusual privilege extended to Dante scholars not from the peninsula and a mark of the importance and esteem in which her work is held. This is further evinced by the fact that the volume presently under consideration is the recipient of the Premio Flaiano 2007, an award made to a work on an Italian subject published outside of Italy. In the Spring Issue of *Italian Studies* (vol. 62, 2008), Barolini was interviewed by the dantista Simon A. Gilson.

This book gathers articles that have, all but one, appeared since *The Undivine Comedy*, covering the fifteen years between 1989 and 2004. They have been highly visible contributions, appearing in such canonical academic contexts as *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, *Speculum*, *Dante Studies*, *MLN* and *Studi sul Boccaccio*. Even those articles that are ostensibly a little more difficult to find, such as those in *Seminario dantesco internazionale / International Dante Seminar*, Zygmunt G. Baranski, ed. (Florence: Le Lettere, 1997) or in *La gloriosa donna della mente: A Commentary on the “Vita Nuova”*, ed. Vincent Moleta (Florence: Olschki, 1994) will nonetheless be familiar to color che sanno since they represent such important publications. The act of collecting these articles, then, is more interesting for the fact that it affords Barolini an opportunity to look back at her previous work, contextualizing it and providing an exegetical narrative. The volume also looks forward to the commented edition of Dante’s *Rime giovanili e della Vita nova* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2009), prepared with Manuele Gragnolati.

As with any collection of essays written over a long period of time, the paratexte of the volume is going to be how the reader navigates the material. Here, a twenty-page introduction entitled ‘Reading Against the Grain: Musings of an Italianist, from the Astral to the Artisanal’ sets out in broad strokes some of the concerns of the work that may be discerned in the book. She sees her critical trajectory as guided by wanting ‘to understand the cultural ground that produced not only Dante himself but also the interaction between Dante and his readers’ (2). The question of literary tradition, or rather Tradition, is one to which Barolini pays particular at-
tention, especially where she sees it in a process of shifting and then stabi-

lizing and becoming canonical. Examples are Boccaccio’s ‘reading’ of Inferno 5 and the subsequent reception of Francesca, and Petrarch’s ordinatio of the RVF, and its treatment by Bembo and subsequent editors. A re-

sistance to received and preconceived ideas, then, marks her work: ‘Italian culture is somewhat heavy — pesante — in its attention to authority and its reflexive genuflections to the past’. All of this requires an ‘unlearning’ as much as a learning.

Only those articles that treat of Boccaccio will be discussed in this re-

view, but it might be opportune to briefly provide an account of its con-

tents so that the structure and ordinatio of the volume can be appreciated. The first section is entitled ‘A Philosophy of Desire’ and comprises four es-

says dealing with: Dante’s lyric past; Guittone’s Ora parrà as lyric interlo-

cutor in Dante’s Doglia mi reca and the Commedia; Dante and Caval-

canti’s Donna me prega; and the ‘multiculturalism’ of Dante’s theology of Hell. The second section is entitled ‘Christian and Pagan Intertexts’ and comprises four essays dealing with Dante and the visionary tradition; the figure of Minos; Dante’s hope for Virgil’s salvation; Ovid’s Arachne, Argus and St John, a study of ‘transgressive art’ in Dante and Ovid. The third section is entitled ‘Ordering the Macrotext: Time and Narrative,’ and com-

prises articles on anti-narrative in the Vita nuova; Petrarch’s Rerum vul-

garium fragmenta; on the Decameron; and a recent article on the editorial history of Dante’s Rime. The fourth, and final, section is entitled ‘Gender’ and comprises articles on selected tales in the Decameron; Dante and Francesca da Rimini; the lyrics of Dante and Guittone; and a final piece entitled ‘Notes toward a Gendered History of Italian Literature, with a Discussion of Dante’s Beatrix Loquax.’

The first article to deal with Boccaccio is that which originally appeared

in 1983 in Romance Philology: ‘The Wheel of the Decameron’ and appears here as Chapter 11. It attempts to read the narrative structure of the tales as circular rather than linear and proposes that the present of plague-rid-

den Florence is a constant narrative ‘other’ as the tellers move from Flo-

rence to the various story-telling locations. The injunction that no news from the outside world be allowed to infiltrate their tales is seen as being incorporated into the stories as they become less fabulous. ‘The point of the novelle, which are not “stories” but “news,” carriers of the real, is what the ladies of the Proem knew all along — that life is the only antidote for life’ (244).

The next essay on the Decameron is entitled ‘Le parole son femmine e i fatti sono maschi: Toward a Sexual Poetics of the Decameron (Decameron 2.9, 2.10, 5.10)’ and first appeared in 1993 in Studi sul Boccaccio. It takes
the proverbial equation of word with women and deeds as masculine as
the point of departure ‘for conceptualizing a pervasive Decameronian
thematic regarding the relation of words to deeds and both to gender’
(281). Tracing this dichotomy of words and deeds as belonging to two sep-
arate gendered spheres, she reads Dioneo’s navigation of these spheres in
his stories told at the end of the second and fifth days. The result is an as-
sertion that the Decameron ‘depicts parole/femmine as conduits to
fatti/maschi and fatti/maschi resulting in parole/femmine in a mighty
interwoven skein of word and deed, male and female, interconnected and
unsunderable,’ concluding pithily le parole fanno fatti.

The article immediately following this, the book’s Chapter 14, is en-
titled ‘Dante and Francesca da Rimini: Realpolistik, Romance, Gender’ and
it originally appeared in Speculum 75 (2000). It was a bold article then
and remains a probing and challenging exploration of literary tradition
and the necessity of ‘unlearning’ before reading can be fully meaningful.
Here she explores how Francesca is presented with minimal detail in In-
ferno 5 and how subsequent commentators, and especially Boccaccio,
reinscribed her as romance. Boccaccio’s esposizione on Inferno 5 is, for
Barolini ‘a canny and aggressive move’ and has him ‘emerge as the shaper
of the canonical and definitive — and definitively romanticized — Fran-
cesca’ (321).1 Barolini then proceeds to re-historicize Francesca in political
and social terms which drives a repristinated reading of Inferno 5.

Perhaps the most obviously and self-consciously polemical article in
the collection is that which appeared originally in Lettere Italiane 56
(2004), here as Chapter 12, entitled: ‘Editing Dante’s Rime and Italian
Cultural History: Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarca … Barbi, Contini, Foster-
Boyde, De Robertis.’ This work emerged out of Barolini’s commented edi-
tion of the Rime for the Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli and sought to enter
into a difficult dialogue with the editorial decisions made by Domenico De
Robertis in his monumental five-volume Rime for the Edizione nazionale
delle opere di Dante Alighieri. The polemic is not based on philology, for
which Barolini claims no expertise, but rather in the cultural history that is
embedded in this editorial history. De Robertis’s edition, she asserts,
chooses to forego questions of chronology in favour of following the traces
of the editorial history via the manuscripts: ‘he substitutes the history of

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1 Boccaccio’s Esposizioni are now available in English, for the first time, in Boccaccio’s
Expositions on Dante’s Comedy, trans., with introduction and notes by Michael Papio,
The Lorenzo da Ponte Italian Library (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); in a
symmetry worthy of Dante himself, Barolini is the Lorenzo da Ponte Professor of Italian
at Columbia University.
the transmission of the poems for the history of Dante’s development as a poet.’ Occupying a central position in this problematic is Boccaccio. For Barolini, De Robertis’s ordering of the rime ‘is a bizarre grafting of Boccaccio onto the Giuntina’ (253).² Boccaccio is a brilliant reader of Dante but is anything but neutral and extending him the reverence evident in De Robertis’s philological approach merely hampers rather than enlightens.

The polemic is also with the exclusivity of philology and she notes just how difficult it is to use De Robertis’s edition, to get a clear idea of what he is doing. She cites Guglielmo Gorni’s review of De Robertis’s edition, published two years previous in the same journal, in which he worried that the difficulties of using the edition might risk its poor reception ‘specie all’estero e presso chi guarda alla filologia come un mondo a sé’.

³ Us and them, those for whom this is easy, second nature, and those all’estero, the extra-comunitari of Dante philology.

The article is a culmination of many of the strands that run through Barolini’s work, and which were picked out for attention in Gilson’s Italian Studies interview with her. Resist authority, unlearn tradition, suspect conventionalization. It is indebted too to radical trends in medieval studies in the 1980s and 1990s in North America, such as the New Medievalism and the New Philology, drawing on philology, manuscript studies, and theory.⁴ The volume is also in some ways, then, a scholarly autobiography. Indeed, it is interesting that for a scholar who has done so much to pick apart the strategies of establishing authority in Dante, such strategies are often in evidence in her own work: she assiduously cites her own work and has a very light touch in updating the bibliography of older articles. The Gilson interview reveals a scholar whose ear has been as finely tuned to her own reception as it has to Dante’s and who is fearless in her acknowledgment of such.

The central importance of both philology and hermeneutics (in their very varying guises) is fully and eloquently attested to in this stimulating and perhaps epochal collection of essays. The only problem is that Teodolinda Barolini is in grave danger of herself becoming an institution and so perhaps it is only to do her justice to say that Dante and the Origins of

² Sonetti e canzoni di diversi antichi autori toscani (Florence: Giunti, 1527; and repr. in facsimile with an introduction by Domenico De Robertis, 2 vols [Florence: Le Lettere, 1977]), an important early witness to Dante’s Rime.


⁴ An approach exemplified with great acumen and skill by her former doctoral student Martin G. Eisner in his excellent Columbia PhD thesis ‘Boccaccio Between Dante and Petrarch: The Chigiano Codex, Terza Rima Trilogy, and the Shaping of Italian Literary History.’
Italian Literary Culture must be read critically and interrogated with the ferocity she herself so often brings to her reading.

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