

Anna Cerbo. *Metamorfosi del mito classico da Boccaccio a Marino*. Firenze: Edizioni ETS, 2001. ISBN 88-467-0480-0.

Anna Cerbo's choice of title for her book is in effect a succinct synopsis of what she offers, namely an insightful, well documented and very well researched examination of how authors from Boccaccio to Marino have altered, to specific ends, specific elements of classical myths in their writings. The volume has nine chapters, of which the first five focus exclusively upon Boccaccio, with particular attention paid to his Latin works. In these five chapters, Cerbo uses as a constant reference point Boccaccio's view that an unprejudiced examination of stories (especially myths) of the ancient past reveals their remarkable value as repositories of human wisdom and truth.

In her first chapter, Cerbo traces the progress of Boccaccio's approach to myth and poetry as cultural products. She examines the progressive development of Boccaccio's poetics as they eventually come to be expressed in his *Genealogie deorum gentilium*, with a clear focus on the central importance of his position that myths are the foundation upon which poetry is created. Cerbo asserts that, although Boccaccio's early works bring in moments of reflection upon literature and poetry, it is not until he writes the *Genealogie* that his theoretical discourse on this subject becomes truly systematized and individual. Boccaccio's early works are the result of his desire to narrate his own biography through the lens of literary and cultural models, particularly mythic ones; in *De mulieribus claris* Boccaccio chooses to set aside the recounting of his own life and instead to focus upon exalting and celebrating Roman literary works; by the time of *Genealogie* Boccaccio becomes a harbinger of "l'ermeneutica umanistica [humanistic hermeneutics]" in so far as his eulogies to the Romans are replaced by serious study of the literature of the past, with particular emphasis upon pagan myths from all over the known world outside of the confines of the Greco-Roman tradition. The Boccaccio of the *Genealogie*, having by this time become more culturally open by way of his having read 'barbarian' myths, expressed a desire to become more globally inclusive in his exposition and exegesis of human fables. Drawing upon what Boccaccio says in *De casibus* and in the *Esposizioni sopra la Comedia*, Cerbo closes this chapter with a look at the ways in which Boccaccio both maintains and breaks away from medieval exegetic tradition. He advocates for allegorical interpretation of poetry while also demonstrating his pre-humanism in his marked interest in historical and philological approaches to literature.

The second chapter begins with an iteration of and elaboration on Boccaccio's view of myth as not only a literary model, but also a key instrument for identifying correlations (literary and non-literary) between various cultures. Cerbo demonstrates how for Boccaccio the poetic language of images transmits truth and knowledge in a veiled way that is different from, but not inferior to, the language of philosophy and theology. Such a perspective brings myth and poetry to a level of importance equal to that of philosophy/science, and by extension it makes the poet and the mythographer as socially valuable and influential as the philosopher.

Cerbo then examines the ways in which our author both utilizes and overturns traditional functions of classical myths (particularly the Acteon and Circe myths) in several of his works. She pays particular attention to elaborating upon one of the points that she made in her first chapter, namely the idea that Boccaccio's early works are in part a projection of his own biography. Cerbo argues that Boccaccio, through the Acteon myth in *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine*, is demonstrating his penchant for hiding the narration of his own path of intellectual development behind myths, allegories and literary constructs, and in so doing is following in Dante's and the Stilnovo's literary footsteps. Dante adapted Ulysses' journey as an icon of the flight of the intellect untethered by Faith and then employed this icon as an antithesis to his own — and, hence, allegorically the Christian pilgrim's — journey of soul. Boccaccio adapts the Acteon myth to the same autobiographical purpose as he uses it to represent and trace his own gradual human and spiritual development that was fostered by the regenerating properties of love and feminine beauty. Cerbo also makes the point that even as Boccaccio follows in Dante's footsteps, he is also overturning classical tradition by having his protagonist Acteon transform from beast to human rather than the conventional transformation from human to beast as had been done from Ovid onward. The Acteon myth thus becomes a function of Boccaccio's desire to signify and to represent with images his own intellectual position. His literary variances, along with his very liberal abidance by medieval rhetorical proscriptions, implicitly place Boccaccio's adaptations of myths in a new perspective that Cerbo sees as representative of the soon to come "conflicted yet creative and innovative humanistic world" (42).

In the third chapter, Cerbo explores the extent to which Boccaccio superimposes a Christian point of view upon his reading of the Ancients. One of Cerbo's main objectives for this chapter is to demonstrate how Boccaccio, with his well-focused etymological and exegetic work, makes a significant contribution to the birth of Christian Humanism. Cerbo discusses the point that *Genealogie*, *De mulieribus*, and *De casibus* all demonstrate the

high level of attentiveness Boccaccio employed in his tracing of the moral and cultural continuity that exists between paganism and Christianity. She makes the point that the aforementioned works also demonstrate Boccaccio's original contribution to the development of a modern understanding of the prefigurative role that paganism played for Christian revelation.

Chapter four, in its relative brevity, is a notional counterbalance to the previous two chapters' affirmations of Boccaccio as proto-Humanist, as Cerbo now shows us the ethical chasm that exists between Boccaccio and Renaissance critics regarding the issue of poetic licence. Cerbo focuses her effort upon the example of the respective parties' attitude toward Virgil's distortion of documented history in his *factio* of the love affair between Dido and Aeneas in *Aeneid* IV. Contrary to Virgil's account, Dido and Aeneas' love affair is unlikely to have happened, not only because Dido is recorded by several reliable Roman historians as having been a chaste widow who opted for suicide over remarriage, but also because Dido's life is documented as having ended around one hundred years before Aeneas' time. Boccaccio advocates for Virgil, listing various plausible functional reasons for the Roman poet's conscious deviation from documented history about Dido, while the likes of Renaissance critics Tommaso Campanella and Sertorio Quattromani censure Virgil as they cannot accept such blatant departures from the truth.

The fifth chapter delves deeper into some ideas from the previous chapters while it also puts forth interesting ideas about the motivation behind Boccaccio's methods. For example, Cerbo adds to an earlier point that she had made about Boccaccio's exegesis as being to some extent a following of Fulgentius in his Christianisation of Classical myths. She elaborates on this point by stating that Boccaccio, in his citation of contemporary authors (Dante, Petrarch, Barlaam, Paolo da Perugia to name a few) alongside Classical greats like Cicero and Seneca, is historicizing contemporary writers and, by so doing, is filling the void of glosses that demonstrate a literary continuity between pagan and Christian authors.

Cerbo also argues that Boccaccio's "modern" incessant search for original sources of knowledge and wisdom as expressed in myths is an implicit declaration of a new hermeneutic method of study and philological research. Historians of myths, by employing comparative readings and verification of authenticity by way of direct citation of original sources, can improve the impression of their works as being just as rigorously researched and hence legitimate as are works of science, medicine and law. She closes the chapter with a series of citations from *Genealogie* that illustrate in practical terms what she has just put forth about Boccaccio's penchant for as wide a selection as possible of source materials.

Chapter six shifts our attention from Boccaccio's approach to myth in general, to how the Prometheus myth specifically was received in various periods of history. There is particular attention paid to Tommaso Campanella's reception of Prometheus' story, but the chapter's diachronic scope involves much more than just the late Renaissance, as it begins (arguably) with Aeschylus, takes us through the medieval period and ends with Marino. Cerbo here delivers a clear and concise delineation of each period's dominant interpretations — negative and positive — of Prometheus' plight.

Chapter seven maps Campanella's position in relation to literary utopias in both the Classical and Renaissance traditions. Approaching the issue from the perspective of literary utopian cities being an implicit criticism of a particular society's dominant political structure, Cerbo argues that Campanella's *City of the Sun* makes a radical break from tradition. While most other utopian cities previous and subsequent to Campanella's are created as a passive reactionary escape from relatively inhospitable political conditions, Campanella's text by contrast contains an implicit proposal to eradicate completely the extant socio-ethical — and hence political — system and begin afresh with a less individualistic, more collectively based universal Christian republic. Cerbo points out that, as opposed to other utopias, Campanella's unique proposals for social reform are far more systematic and executable because they are to a large extent informed by the author's actual experience with trying to found such a city in Calabria rather than being based, as are all the others, upon poetic imagination and invention.

Chapter eight moves from Campanella to his contemporary Giordano Bruno, and with this move is a return to examining the Acteon myth. Cerbo begins by examining how Bruno's concept of divinity as an immanent entity — which implicitly negates the possibility of transcendence from the physical world — influences his interpretation and writing of Acteon's encounter with the goddess Diana. She then moves on to comparing the autobiographical aspects of Bruno's final Italian dialogue *Eroici furori* to the same aspects of the authors that she treated in the preceding chapters. The chapter concludes with a brief look at the effect of Bruno's Acteon in the respective work of nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors Clemente Rebora and Giorgio Caproni.

The ninth and final chapter opens with a brief discussion of Giambattista Marino's liberal adaptation of certain classical myths as a signifier of his typical Seicento attitude toward literature and culture. Following this discussion is a short comparison of Bruno's and Marino's respective versions of the Acteon myth. Cerbo maintains that the end purposes of both

authors — Bruno's aimed metaphorically to exemplify the results of his natural philosophy upon the human soul and Marino's to recreate the ancient myth in a way that would appeal to the contemporary reader's linguistic and stylistic sensibilities — inevitably determined each of their narrative choices from genre to style. Cerbo then moves on to elucidating the various ways in which Marino's narration of the Acteon myth in his *Sampogna* separates itself from classical, and particularly Ovidian, tradition. The chapter closes with an insightful section that discusses how Marino is at the same time innovative and bound to tradition in his adaptation of classical myths in his masterpiece *Adone*.

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