

Simone Marchesi. *Stratigrafie decameroniane*. Firenze: Leo S. Olschki, 2004. xxii 154 pp. 2 b/w pls. index. tbls. €19. ISBN: 88-222-5403-1.

The *Decameron* is, superficially at least, easy to read: its hundred stories are entertaining, direct, and highly relevant to its readers, even nearly 800 years after they were written. But, as the opening to Marchesi's study underlines, this readability and narrative pleasure belies the work's undeniable complexity. The *Decameron* is, after all, an extremely difficult book to interpret. Behind the pleasure of good stories, well told, lies a complex system of references and allusions to other texts, which both the contemporary reader and the modern critic must work hard to appreciate. Of course, it is not new to suggest that the *Decameron* alludes to other texts; indeed, a large proportion of criticism focuses upon the identification of sources. Difficulty is productive, and context is vital to the work's interpretation. In this original study, however, Marchesi offers a new methodological approach to analyzing the sources of Boccaccio's text and in so doing proposes rewritings of several of the text's major episodes.

In his concluding discussion, Marchesi codifies what he considers to be the principle critical responses to the *Decameron's* sources: a 'philological' approach, which seeks to forge reliable connections between textual references and the historical author's interpretation of his sources; and, contrastingly a 'semiotic' approach, which instead identifies and promotes a continually renewing process of interpretation on the part of the reader, where he or she draws personal meaning from his or her own knowledge of the source material. As many medievalists already know too well, both these strategies of interpretation have their attractions and their flaws. Rather than restrict himself to either, Marchesi seeks a compromising strategy, characterised by its flexibility and its responsiveness to the individual example. The assertion Marchesi makes is deceptively simple: there is no single Ideal reader of the *Decameron*, but there are (were) different readerships who enjoy(ed) the work. Moreover this multiplicity of readership is, Marchesi brilliantly argues, prefigured in the text itself by a similarly varied and stratified bank of allusions to other texts. Different readers might infer different connections. Certain allusions resonated with certain readers. And so, to appreciate the nuances of the text, the critic needs to engage with this ventriloquism. Such an observation tantalisingly places the critic somewhere between the catalogue of Boccaccio's library, and the continually renewing, open-ended process of signification. And it locates the text of the *Decameron* as the central force in this dramatization of interpretation.

The study is organised into five sections, each of which advances a close reading of a significant moment in the text. In the study's Introduction, titled 'Mosaico e stratificazione: tra ambiguità ermeneutica e selezione del pubblico,' Marchesi identifies interesting connections between the famous plague description in the text's Introduction and Livy's *Ab urbe condita*. The first chapter, 'Favole, parabole, istorie: teoria letteraria e pratica dei generi nella cornice esterna del *Decameron*,' reconsiders the often-discussed question of Boccaccio's tripartite categorisation of the *novella*. In the light of his identification of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* as a possible source, Marchesi then proposes that the other two significant interventions of the Author into his text (the introduction to Day 4 and the Conclusion) might be usefully reconsidered. To this end, he explores the interaction between Boccaccio's text and the works of Quintilian and Ovid.

In the second chapter, 'Satira e commedia nell'introduzione alla quarta giornata,' Marchesi systematically demonstrates how Horace's *Satire* 1.4 can be used to further understand the unusual and dramatic poetic apology at the start of Day Four. And in Chapter Three, 'Didone e Lisabetta da Messina: fabula e historia nel reticolo delle fonti di *Decameron* IV.5,' Marchesi proposes that the tragic protagonist of IV.5 combines allusions to the figure of Dido, drawing upon descriptions by both Virgil and Jerome. The historical and the poetic are thus combined in a complex and highly significant discussion of misogyny. In the final chapter, 'Un tempo per ogni cosa: precetto biblico, mitologia e necessità ermeneutica in due novelle di Calandrino,' Marchesi identifies references to Ovid, Augustine, Jerome and Ecclesiastes, each of which combines with the others to pose questions regarding interpretation and the role of the reader.

As with any study which emphasises hypothesis and circumstantial connections between sources, there is an inherent risk in Marchesi's readings of particular examples. Indeed, many readers will question some of the links he makes, in spite of the skilful and sensitive manner with which they are handled. Nevertheless, any doubt the reader may have over the certainty of a particular source should not devalue the study as a whole: his is a skilful exploration of reasonable probability in the individual example and, most importantly, the ventriloquism that Marchesi identifies in the mosaic-like text of the *Decameron* is highly persuasive. Although some readers will necessarily dip into particular chapters, it is only when engaging with the broader methodological programme of the study that they will fully appreciate the subtlety with which Marchesi dissects his examples. Through impressive close reading, and a nuanced appreciation of his own participation in the interpretation of the text, he has done much to reveal its sophistication. What emerges is a fascinating multiplicity, and

each chapter ultimately (re)constructs a context of reading, a discussion of hermeneutics, which is, indeed, a major element of the *Decameron* itself. Through its stratified use of multiple sources, as identified by this study, the *Decameron* can be seen to dramatise, perform and thus amplify one of its principle characteristics: the ethical act of interpretation itself.

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