

Rico, Francisco. *Ritratti allo specchio (Boccaccio, Petrarca)*. Roma-Padova: Antenore, 2012. 160 pp.

The cover portraits of Boccaccio and Petrarch, both poets in profile and both looking straight ahead, announce the philological honesty that distinguishes this book by Francisco Rico.

*Ritratti allo specchio* brings together some new and older publications on Petrarch and Boccaccio: the Prologue, *Come tu mi vuoi*; I. *La conversione di Boccaccio*; II. *Petrarca all'anagrafe*; III. *Se non casti, cauti*; IV. *La Valchiusa di Boccaccio*; V. *Di monte in monte*; VI. *Il Secretum di Boccaccio* and an appendix entitled "Tra il *De vita* e il *Notamentum*."

Page after page, the reader engages in meticulous investigation and is exposed to a methodological approach that uses philology as a tool to search for the truth. In all the studies collected in *Ritratti allo specchio*, Francisco Rico has one concern: to move away from the "fabulosi parlari degli ignoranti," if I may use Boccaccio's words from the *Filocolo*, and to attempt to make up for a narration full of "lacunae" in the relationship and friendship shared by Boccaccio and Petrarch. In each chapter Rico takes the reader through the texts, the letters and, with the philological precision that characterizes all his writing, he overcomes the popular image that has covered up the real relationship between the two poets in order to reach the "vero conoscimento" or, at least, to bring scholars of Boccaccio and Petrarch to reconsider what kind of friendship the two poets actually had. So far the literature has taken for granted and too often amplified a "legend" about the two. Rico's purpose is to study the cultural and human relationship between Petrarch and Boccaccio in the light of his detailed knowledge of Petrarch and his works. Petrarch, writes Rico, did not have a sense of humor: he could at times be sarcastic but very rarely can it be said that he "abbozza il fresco sorriso di uno scherzo." Boccaccio meanwhile devoted himself to literature to seduce women ("quella del primo Boccaccio era una letteratura per sedurre le dame") until 1351 when the Certaldese (now 38 years old) went to Padua to visit him. This visit was to mark, according to Rico, the beginning of a cultural, literary and personal conversion, a maturity characterized by Boccaccio's victory over "le angosce dell'amore" and a certain previously superficial style as a writer: Boccaccio had been anxious to "faire feu de tout bois" (33) and to make use of every literary hint or suggestion "come se temesse di dimenticarsene poi e di non approfittarne," but all this changed in 1351. Rico claims that literature and life were the same for Boccaccio and even that "a volte arrivava a confondere letteratura e vita" (35), but the example given by Pe-

trarch would determine Boccaccio's move towards a literature that focused on classical texts.

Before they met, according to Rico, Boccaccio had had only an imaginary Petrarch in his mind, while the real Petrarch jealously guarded his own writings (34). Consequently, Boccaccio did not read Petrarch's mature works and if he did, he generally had access to inferior copies. In order to provide proof of this claim, Rico focuses on *De Vita et moribus domini Francisci Petracchi*, which is, in his opinion, riddled with inaccuracies ("Boccaccio non sa quasi niente di Petrarca, e ciò che sa lo sa male," 48). Thus a shadow seems to be cast over a brilliant celebration of Petrarch that stems from "la stessa fascinazione per il Petrarca che il Boccaccio si era fabbricato nell'immaginazione" (63).

Boccaccio's *De vita et moribus domini Petracchi* is a mix of authentic information and fantasy, according to Rico. Petrarch in the *Vita Petracchi* emerges as having behaved "più 'caute' che 'caste'" (35). Boccaccio did not consult Petrarch for the *De casibus* or the *De mulieribus* but did consult the poet laureate for his *De montibus* (38) and this, for Rico, is an important element to keep in mind and one that starkly illustrates the fact that although Boccaccio was generous with Petrarch and would give him books, Petrarch rarely repaid the favor. In 1336 and 1337, Petrarch allowed him to copy some letters and the *Bucolicum*. The *Corbaccio* corresponds instead to Petrarch's *Secretum*, and represents the intellectual who at the age of 40, embraces philosophy and finally abandons the "amorosi laccauoli," just as Petrarch describes in the *Secretum*.

Rico's philological honesty excels in the approach to this passage: "Religione christianissimus [...] quod caste nequivit explere, caute peragendo complevit" (63). Rico navigates through the text that is both transparent and problematic at the same time. He strives to unravel Boccaccio's subtext about Petrarch's *libido* while simultaneously attempting to attribute this inaccurate but still suggestive quotation of St. Paul to "le infinite anomalie sintattiche del Certaldese, in latino come in volgare" (64), an observation that could be unsettling to some Boccaccio scholars. Rico offers here a brilliant and lucid example of precise philological analysis: "non possiamo leggere questo brano con l'innocenza adamitica con cui ci si è posti finora di fronte ad esso: bisogna restituirlo alla sua tradizione e situarlo nel solco della citazione apocrifa che in effetti contiene" (65). Rico is making a point, and a good one too, that after a thorough analysis of the apocryphal tradition and the 14th-century cultural context, unraveling the mystery of how much Boccaccio knew about Petrarch's *libido* is not important; what is important, however, is the clarification of the intricacies of the relationship between Boccaccio and Petrarch and of the intellectual

bond, or legacy, that is established in their texts. As Zygmunt Barański puts it, this is “our responsibility as historians of literature” (92).<sup>1</sup>

Rico’s *Ritratti allo specchio* is not, as has been understood — or rather misunderstood — a book that belittles Boccaccio or attempts to demean him; instead, it is a book that all scholars of Boccaccio should read, if not in order to agree with Rico about Petrarch being somewhat superior to Boccaccio, but because it is time to rethink seriously the relationship between Boccaccio and Petrarch and the degree to which the former really did depend on the latter. Rico’s book, if we read it carefully as its author invites us to do, obliges us, all of us, to reconsider the relationship between the two poets so as to be able to discern more precisely the enormous contribution that Boccaccio brought and transmitted to Europe, independently from Petrarch.

Scholars of Boccaccio cannot deny the importance of this book, nor should they be disconcerted when Rico claims that Boccaccio confused life and literature and that he sometimes believed in his own invention. The main goal of Rico’s book is to “sfatare il mito,” dispel the myth, that Petrarch generously opened his library to Boccaccio and, in turn, to confirm the independence of the Certaldese from Petrarch. As a Boccaccio scholar I for one am grateful to Francisco Rico for reopening the question of the nature of the relationship between Petrarch and Boccaccio, and for doing it with the rigorous methodology and philological accuracy that characterize all his studies on Petrarch, Humanism and geography.

Rico clearly states that his intention is to free the two poets from the “tinta di rosa” created around their real relationship. In addressing the problem of an imaginary relationship between the two, he provides a portrait of a Boccaccio who is freed from Petrarch’s influence. Rico adopts a methodology that penetrates to the very core of Boccaccio’s poetics, as I tried to show in “Per difetto reintegrare”; indeed, Rico intends to “reintegrate the defect of the fanciful chatter of the ignorant.” He adopts the same methodology introduced by Boccaccio and employs it with the same commitment to wisdom, knowledge and truth. Thus scholars of Boccaccio and the Italian Trecento should welcome this book by Francisco Rico, a philologist and a scholar who has devoted his life to the rigorous study of Petrarch’s works as well as to Cervantes and 16th-century Spanish poetry. His scholarship and publications, known the world over for their philological precision, should show the younger generation of scholars that to

---

<sup>1</sup> Zygmunt Barański, “Petrarch, Dante, Cavalcanti,” in *Petrarch and Dante: Anti-Dantism, Metaphysics, Tradition*, Z. Barański and T. Cachey, eds., Notre Dame, Ind., University of Notre Dame Press, 2009, 50–113.

be a real scholar it is necessary to stay on track, to avoid “delirium,” and always to look for facts in the text and in the cultural context that generated them in order to avoid distorting their research with rose-colored glasses.

Rico’s *Ritratti allo specchio* offers a unique individual and intellectual portrait of the two poets: a complex double portrait, full of nuances where text and life, life and text, are constantly mirroring each other. Rico’s scrupulous use of the philological magnifying glass never fails to take the cultural context into account. He may not be crazy about Boccaccio and we might not like it when Rico calls him “il buon Giovannino” or when, during his discussion of the drawing of Valchiusa (in the Parisian ms. Lat. 6802, f. 143v), he feels the needs to add that Petrarch “aveva a cuore [Boccaccio] per di più, come un figlio: se non *ineptissimus*, certo non troppo sveglia” (75). We do not have to agree with his claim that as early as 1339 Boccaccio already saw in Petrarch the guide who would teach him not only to be rid of ignorance but also to overcome the anxiety of love or that the Petrarch whom Boccaccio met in 1351 was the same one who pushed him to obtain this victory over love.

*Ritratti allo specchio* is an honest book, beginning from its very cover, on which Rico elegantly places the two poets side by side, both looking ahead, to the future. Rico states, and *pour cause*, that the aim of Petrarch, the “father of the humanism,” was to build a civilization on the basis of the writings of the ancients (24) and that this was a project to which Boccaccio was not at all indifferent. Rico may say that Boccaccio felt more like “a builder” than an architect, but he does not deny Boccaccio’s independence with respect to Petrarch. Rico’s book definitely contributes to reestablishing the intellectual independence of the two poets while also telling us the story of Francesco and Giovanni freed from the “tinte di rosa”: “la vita è piena di andirivieni e in essi Francesco e Giovanni finirono per essere uomini molto diversi da quelli che erano” (82).

ROBERTA MOROSINI

WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY