

Valerio Ferme. *Women, Enjoyment, and the Defense of Virtue in Boccaccio's Decameron*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. \$90.00. xvi + 248 pp. ISBN 978-1-137-48281-5.

In this volume, composed of an introduction, seven chapters and a conclusion, Valerio Ferme seeks to provide a “cohesive, diachronic reading” (3) of Boccaccio’s *Decameron* that gives “equal importance to the interplay between the characters in the overarching tale, the words they say to each other, and the actions they undertake through Boccaccio’s description of their behaviors, banter, objections, and responses” (3). Since Ferme is especially interested in how the ten young Florentine narrators, during their time spent outside plague-stricken Florence, seek to resolve the tension between pleasurable enjoyment and defense of women’s virtue, he focuses only on the first half of the *Decameron*, where he holds this debate emerges with particular urgency; he leaves aside the second half of the book, which he views as more focused on witty remarks and trickery, which involve qualities of intelligence and resolve that, in his view, will be crucial for them upon their return to Florence.

Ferme begins his analysis, in chapter 1, by highlighting Boccaccio’s ambiguous positioning of himself with respect to the kinds of pleasure that the book will offer. The focus of this chapter is the *incipit* to the *Decameron*, according to which the book is “cognominato prencipe Galeotto” ‘surnamed prince Galehaut.’ Reviewing the polysemousness of the word *galeotto* — Galehaut as intermediary, Galehaut as trickster, perhaps Galehaut as shield from oppressive authority figures, and perhaps the *galeotto* that was a hired or imprisoned oarsman on a boat — Ferme sets the stage for the reflection on what pleasurable enjoyment will mean for the *frametales* narrators and for us.

In chapter 2, Ferme turns to the description of the plague in the Introduction to Day 1. Of particular interest in this chapter is the information that Ferme brings to light regarding documentary records (eyewitness accounts and governmental records preserved in the city’s archives) that have been downplayed, even ignored, by traditional scholarship on the *Decameron*, which has tended to see alternate historical evidence as irrelevant to Boccaccio’s objectives in describing the plague and its social effects as he did. Ferme, relying on historical studies of the Florentine civic response to the plague, shows that, contrary to what is stated in the Introduction to Day 1, the governmental and ecclesiastical authorities did not abandon their duties, there was not utter lawlessness and, indeed, although social bonds were tested severely, the inhabitants of the city evidenced both civic commitment and compassion. Why would Boccaccio represent a level

of chaos that is inconsistent with the historical evidence? One reason Ferme offers, which leads to the subsequent part of his book, is that Boccaccio creates an “authority vacuum” that will allow the ten young Florentines to offer and celebrate a different kind of social and political order.

Each of the following five chapters is dedicated to Days 1 through 5 of the *Decameron*, with the analysis organized around the presiding rulers (Pampinea, Filomena, Neifile, Filostrato and Fiammetta), the stories that these frame-tale characters narrate on the days of their reign and the challenges that two of the men, Dioneo and Filostrato, pose to the women’s pursuit of an honorable way to entertain themselves. Dioneo’s role is crucial, as he is the first to propose a more provocative notion of pleasure (*sollazzo*) in the Introduction to Day 1; he reiterates this in his first story (1.4), and he does so yet again in his story about Bartolomea and Paganino da Mare (2.10), in a refusal to stay within the bounds set by queen Pampinea following 1.4 and in a refusal of queen Filomena’s attempt in 2.9 to turn the narration away from amorous and sexual content. The struggle to control the narrative about pleasure continues as queen Neifile tries to corral the narrative toward more virtuous love in her 3.9, only to have Dioneo yet again challenge a female authority with his story about putting the devil back into hell (3.10).

In a brief conclusion, Ferme summarizes the central arguments of his book, gestures briefly toward Dioneo’s speech justifying his choice of topic for Day 7, and connects the reflections on *galeotto* to the emphasis on wit, ruses and tricksters in the second half of the *Decameron*.

Although Ferme overstates the novelty of his project – perhaps because he situates his argument mainly in dialogue with Italian scholars who work in more traditional ways – and although we can debate whether the defense of women’s enjoyment happens primarily in the first half of the *Decameron* while the emphasis on wit, ruses and tricksters appears primarily in the second half, his argument about the frame-tale narrators’ struggle to control the kind of narrative they will present about themselves and their values is a worthwhile contribution to this ongoing critical debate.

In the course of Ferme’s explorations, there are some moments of fine literary insight, among them: the chapter 4 discussion of the similarities between Zinevra (2.9) and Bartolomea (2.10) that outweigh their differences; the documentation in chapter 5 of Neifile’s repeated insistence, in her story about Giletta di Narbona, on her women characters’ desire to preserve each other’s honor; the exploration of the way that Dioneo, in 4.10, engages previous tales on day 4 and undermines them in parodic fashion; and the analysis of the Conclusion of Day 5, which, according to Ferme, serves as a crucial moment in the defense of women’s pursuit of honorable enjoyment.

There are also, however, some readings that seem quite willful. I am hard-pressed, for example, to find textual evidence to support Ferme's claim that the women of the *frametales* narrative are "[d]isgusted with the behavior of other women who, in Boccaccio's description of the Plague and in their assessment of their fellow citizens, have too easily given themselves to carnal enjoyments" (5). This move, perhaps designed to emphasize the women's virtuous pursuit of pleasure by drawing a clearer "us" vs. "them" distinction, is not necessary. And while I would agree with Ferme's assessment of Pampinea's "muddled advocacy" (81) of women's virtue in 1.10 and also with his suggestion that Boccaccio appears to undercut both Pampinea and the characters of whom she speaks in this story, I find myself wishing for greater methodological caution here and elsewhere. As I have shown in my own work, the *Decameron* baits us with indeterminacies, tempting us to project onto the text our own assumptions about what motivates characters to speak and act as they do. So when, following Pampinea's story on Day 1, there is no information given about how her companions react, I would strongly caution us against rushing to judgment, to proclaim, as Ferme does that "Clearly, the rest of the *brigata* is befuddled. [...] The *brigata's* and especially the women's silence is significant, either because its members have nothing to add to what Pampinea has said or because they have not understood the moral of the story, given the divergence between what the queen purports the story to tell and what the story tells through its exposition" (80). I would note that these are fictional characters, that the Author (as primary narrator) of the *Decameron* functions as a filtering mechanism and that Boccaccio can use such communications about the narrators' reactions to the stories to alert us to puzzling discrepancies but also to prompt us to consider whether we are on firm ground when we think that we "clearly" understand the significance of the information we have been given.

Curiously, while it is standard practice in scholarship on the *Decameron* to cite passages by their numerical placement in the text, Ferme cites according to page numbers in Vittore Branca's 1980 edition, published by Einaudi.

In sum, Valerio Ferme has provided an interesting exploration of the tension between honorable, virtuous enjoyment and more provocative notions of pleasure in the first half of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. One hopes that readers will be judicious in parsing his arguments so as to accept the ones that are developed with methodological care and to question, when necessary, his hurried judgments.

MARILYN MIGIEL

CORNELL UNIVERSITY

