

Elsa Filosa. *Boccaccio's Florence: Politics and People in His Life and Work*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022. 360 pp.

This important book stands at the intersection of distinct yet sympathetic trends in Boccaccio studies: that is, between archival research performed in Italy, and the growing interest in historicizing approaches to Boccaccio's works in the United States. There are two parts to this book: the first part is titled "Power and Politics in Boccaccio's Time," while the second part is titled "At the Intersections of Literature and Politics." The first part, which is the book's greatest contribution to the field, focuses on the conspiracy of 1360 and Boccaccio's development as a political figure around that event, thereby offering a microhistory of Boccaccio as a poet and politician of his times. In so doing, it partially responds to the need of English-language biographical studies of Boccaccio, which has been woefully limited to Thomas Bergin's *Giovanni Boccaccio* (1981). Major archival work remains inaccessible to anglophone readers, such as the *Codice diplomatico* edited by Laura Regnicoli (2021), which Filosa widely and rightly incorporates in her work. Although the author claims that this is not a biography in her introduction, it is certainly at least a partial biography, or even a microhistory, that contributes to this lacuna.

The first part of her book covers the periods between 1341 and 1343, 1348 and 1355, and 1359 and 1365, the period during which Boccaccio composed most of his Latin and vernacular major and minor works. Filosa takes the one key event in Boccaccio's later political life — the failed conspiracy of December 31, 1360 — as the lens through which to view this early history. To do so, she illustrates in the first half of her book the social fabric of Boccaccio's Florence: the ways in which Boccaccio attempted to settle in Florence after his youthful years in Naples; the official and essential roles Boccaccio played on behalf of the commune during and after the plague; and then his collateral role in the 1360 conspiracy and the consequences his involvement had for himself and his friends. With verve and passion, Filosa transports us to the vibrant though discordant city in which Boccaccio lived and inserted himself politically.

The tone and focus on the political arena and its protagonists in the first part of the book show the excellence of Filosa's very clear prose, where these figures truly come to life. One strong example can be found in her pages on the first conspiracy, that of the Bardi family in 1340, and her assessment of the rise and fall of the Duke of Athens. Filosa reminds us that despite the presence of a robust local government, conspiracy was the only recourse for the disenfranchised to attempt to gain the upper hand. In the section titled "A Political Apprenticeship (1341–1343)," Filosa describes how Boccaccio began to insert himself into the diverse political landscape of the Oltrarno, which included the magnates, bankers' guilds, members of the Bardi, Frescobaldo, and Acciaiuoli societies, and old patricians and

nobles, such as the Rossi, at a time of great civil unrest. This section traces the period from the Bardi conspiracy to the arrival of the Duke of Athens, particularly insidious times for a young Boccaccio whose father was immersed in the mercantile world as the director of the Neapolitan branch of the Bardi firm. In other words, the affairs of the Bardi firm were personal.

As I note in my book, *Courtesy Lost: Dante, Boccaccio and the Literature of History* (University of Toronto Press, 2014), it is precisely how Boccaccio understands his position among magnates, bankers and the more established consular aristocracy that, I believe, was informed by Dante's works. Filosa's *Boccaccio's Florence* takes this perspective many steps forward, demonstrating how Boccaccio's pro-Guelph sympathies were determined by contemporary circumstances in mid- to late-fourteenth-century Florence itself. Indeed, Filosa expertly shows how Boccaccio avoided alliances with magnates and gravitated toward figures who hoped for the arrival of Walter of Brienne, Duke of Athens. This chapter is the first to evince the hopes that Walter would reign in the magnates and eliminate the debts that the Bardi and other merchant families had incurred after England defaulted on its loans. Tracing this extensive history of his arrival in the Oltrarno, Filosa demonstrates the implications for this history in Boccaccio's literature, such as in the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*, the *Decameron*, and select epistles. Some of the book's most engaging pages concern the historical figures behind the fictional characters in the *Centonovelle*, or even conjectures about certain trends within the stories, as she does on p. 46. These brief forays into the application of Boccaccio's biography to his literary production are of great utility to the current historicizing trends in the field.

Filosa adds further brushstrokes to her portrait of the author as a young political figure with status in the section entitled "Boccaccio and Politics (1348–1355)." Here she delves into Boccaccio's emergence as a *paterfamilias* who inherited wealth and property and was entrusted with numerous public offices, many more than commonly acknowledged (e.g., in addition to serving as Camerlengo of the Camera del Comune, Boccaccio served as an ambassador several times over). The bubonic plague of March–April 1348 radically changed the communal government, with the death of many who were on the electoral rolls. Filosa brings a compelling and novel economic perspective to this moment: this is when Boccaccio, in fact, had money, freedom, and political power. This is not the usual portrait of the author that many of us have in mind, especially in the context of his relationship with Petrarch, which is explored tangentially through the Ubaldini war at the end of this chapter. Here Boccaccio is bold, powerful, and knows how to negotiate circumstances to his and his family's benefit.

Fortune then takes a negative turn in the lives of Boccaccio and his friends and allies. In the third chapter, titled "The Conspiracy of 1360 (1359-1361)," Filosa re-

veals how they attempt but fail to save themselves in a changing political landscape. Filling the scholarly silence around the failed conspiracy of 1360, Filosa brings to life the vicissitudes of Boccaccio and his many friends — Niccolò di Bartolo del Buono, Pino de' Rossi, Andrea di Tello da Lisca, Luca di Feo Ugolini, and Pazzino di Apardo Donati — who end up being declared traitors to the Republic and conspirators against the city's peaceful state. To be clear, Filosa does not claim that Boccaccio was a protagonist in this conspiracy, but as a close friend and neighbor of these individuals, one can safely assume his complicity, or at least his sympathies. Filosa condenses the important history of oligarchy as the dominant force and Guelphism as the *sine qua non* of all Florentines, who would otherwise risk admonition, condemnation and exile. In addition to recalling the conspiracy with dramatic suspense (one wonders when Filosa will sign the film rights to these pages) she mentions well-known characters from Boccaccio's life who deserve more attention in our field, namely Niccolò Acciaiuoli and Pino de' Rossi. Acciaiuoli's suspect dealings are foregrounded in these pages, as Filosa draws not only on Giovanni but also on Matteo Villani's *Cronica* to discuss this story.

In the fourth chapter, entitled "The Conspiracy's Consequences (1361–1365)," Filosa illustrates the extensive fallout for Boccaccio and his friends after the failed conspiracy. The failure of the conspiracy, in fact, permanently altered Boccaccio's relations with his city, forcing him to flee to Certaldo in dire straits. The section on defamatory portraits, what she calls the modern predecessor of "wanted" posters from the American frontier, shows us the broad nature of the damnation of these individuals, as infamy would follow the accused forever. After detailing the terms of the libel for Boccaccio's friends, Filosa elaborates on the political consequences and economic realities for Boccaccio, now forced to beg for money by offering to sell his books to Petrarch. Filosa does not see his claims in the *Consolatoria* as sincere, asserting that Boccaccio was probably not content with his "big clothes" and "peasant food" (140). After a failed attempt to move to Naples, where he was poorly received by Acciaiuoli, Boccaccio returned to Certaldo and retired from political life.

The first part of Filosa's new book, detailed here, reads as the primary focus of the work. Her readings of tyranny in the *De mulieribus claris*, her interpretation of the *Consolatoria a Pino de' Rossi* as a manifesto of Pino's innocence to save his friend and obtain his forgiveness, and of the redactions of the *Trattatello*, and of the presence of conspirators in the *Decameron*: all these chapters deserve equal praise for their clarity. In this section, Filosa reads various works in the light of the historical context elaborated in the first part, but she also emphasizes the breadth of Boccaccio's affective communities, his ties with neighbors and friends in the Oltrarno. Equally important are the not one, nor two, but three appendices to the book: the first, a genealogical table; the second, a transcription of documents she

found in the State Archives in Florence; and the third, a list of prosopographical notes on the conspirators themselves.

To conclude: this book marks an important moment in the shared fields of Boccaccio studies on both sides of the Atlantic: from those interested in the man and his times, to those who look beyond literature to the environment in which the author lived, thrived and struggled. Filosa's book rediscovers and revives Boccaccio's most local stories, the people, families, and Florentine feuds that shaped his literary output with true passion and rigor.

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