

Olivia Holmes. *Boccaccio and Exemplary Literature: Ethics and Mischief in the Decameron*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 216 pp. ISBN 97810 09224338.

The connections between exemplary literature and the *novella* have been the subject of several studies in recent years, primarily focusing on the influence that the first had on the 'birth' of the second. Boccaccio undoubtedly played a relevant role in this exchange. Olivia Holmes' book aims to engage with this subject and brings a new perspective on this multifaceted and not entirely settled field. How the *Decameron* engages with exemplary literature is touched upon in several different aspects: the discourse on the goals of the collection, the structure of its tales and Boccaccio's ability to reinvent and elaborate on other genres' ideas. Holmes structures her book into five chapters, each dealing with a different genre — or subgenre — that can relate to the purpose of exemplarity: fables, hagiographies, *exempla* of classical literature and medieval preachers, and the *artes amandi*.

The scholar opens her study by analyzing the purpose of the *Decameron* and how this intersects with exemplary literature, one of the strengths of this book. By anchoring this relationship on authorial intentions, Holmes centers the work on solid ground, allowing for an immediate picture of the state of the question. The importance of entertainment and how it relates to compassion in Boccaccio's collection is an intelligent way to begin this analysis. The critical difference between Boccaccio's *novelle* and the *exemplum* is all about ambiguity: the poet allows his stories to be read in different fashions by different readers, to instruct according to one's interests, even in a direction that could be perceived as ethically questionable. After all, in the Conclusion of the Author, Boccaccio acknowledges the possibility that the *novelle* might also harm some readers (*le quali [novelle], chenti che elle si sieno, e nuocere e giovar possono...*). In a religious context, this possibility is not allowed: the *exemplum*'s entire existence stands on the notion that it must convey one specific and unequivocal message. Of course, this is a simplification, especially if one considers other collections of *novelle* (including the *Novellino*) that instead come even closer to resembling religious *exempla* and their goals.

After this initial broad discussion on the objectives of the *Decameron*, the following chapters center on one genre and/or one specific aspect of this overall relationship. The first of these chapters is titled "Ethical Fables and Antifeminist *Exempla*." It discusses the relationship between some of Boccaccio's *novelle* with Aesop's fables first, and then the *Disciplina Clericalis* and the *Book of the Seven Sages of Rome*, with particular attention to misogyny in Boccaccio's text vis-à-vis the general treatment of the issue in coeval literature. The second chapter ("From Sermon Story to *Novella*") instead examines the illustrative *exemplum* of the mendicant orders, concentrating on the Italian preachers active around the time of Boccaccio's life. These include Giordano da Pisa, Domenico Cavalca and Jacopo

Passavanti; the first is the famous preacher whose sermons were (partially) recorded by listeners, while Cavalca and Passavanti wrote religious treatises, more or less directly taken from their sermons. Boccaccio was familiar with several of their sermons and, most importantly, with the *exempla* they added to them.

The *novella* of Nastagio degli Onesti (*Dec.* 5.8) is usually seen as the brightest demonstration of a direct tie between the preaching *exemplum* and the *Decameron*. This tale seems to be an interesting elaboration on an *exemplum* told by Jacopo Passavanti, although enhanced with literary echoes to *Inferno* 13. Holmes here cleverly analyses this popular tale, showing how Boccaccio subverts the moral lesson of the *exemplum*, from the couple punished for adultery (in Passavanti) to the woman chastised for not reciprocating her lover's attentions (in Boccaccio). The story of Nastagio presents yet another important spin to Passavanti's story: where Passavanti's entire narration finishes with the hunt, Boccaccio presents it as a diegetic episode, thus turning the characters into spectators. Boccaccio gives a unique depth to the whole *exemplum*, showing how the genre can change people's behavior. Unlike the preacher's account, however, the story teaches something Passavanti would have indeed not condoned, demonstrating once more the parodic power of the writer of Certaldo. This tale teaches compassion — a recurrent theme in Boccaccio — and turns into a parody that was intended to instill repentance. This subversion is a frequent feature in the *Decameron*, and Holmes' investigation of the collection shows how often this happens.

Boccaccio regularly plays with his sources, satirizing moral certainty and behavioral superiority. The very first *novella* of the collection, dedicated to Ser Ciappelletto, demonstrates this and bridges the second and the third chapters: Holmes splits the study on this *novella* according to its ties with preaching *exempla* (the subject of the second chapter) and hagiographies (the focus of the third). First, the tale of Cepparello is seen as an anti-*exemplum*, with Holmes tying the "repentance" of the evil man to many *exempla* on a similar subject; the third chapter, more poignantly, sees Cepparello's tale as a subversion of the many lives of saints who describe (mostly) men of great humility and sacrifices. Holmes's study is here once more interesting and thought-provoking, although the choice of splitting the tale into different chapters (and this is not the only instance) does not help the reader, who needs to navigate across separate paragraphs to grasp Holmes's argument fully.

The third chapter more broadly discusses Cavalca and Boccaccio's audience — primarily women — and how courtly love plays a vital role in the *novelle*. Holmes fittingly links these tales to a courtly ideology of love and honor rather than the asceticism and the demonization of society often pushed forward by the exemplary genre. The fourth chapter describes Boccaccio's *Decameron* vis-a-vis *exempla* from classical traditions. It primarily focuses on his rewriting anecdotes from Latin

writers — specifically Livy and Valerius Maximus — while looking at the vernacularization of some of their texts (some even attributed to Boccaccio himself).

The last chapter, “*Magister Amoris*,” turns its attention from exemplary literature to investigate Andrea Capellanus’ *De Amore* and Ovid’s production to strengthen Holmes’ argument regarding the amorous message of many *novelle*. Although this chapter does not perfectly match the rest of the book insofar as it diverges from exemplary literature, Holmes addresses the question about love (and courtly love), thus explaining the Boccaccian subversion of readers’ expectations.

Holmes’ *Boccaccio and Exemplary Literature* is a very welcome addition to the study of Boccaccio and popular literature of his times. It is a rich and well-informed book that brings to the forefront the (still necessary) field of exemplary literature and its many different expressions. Perhaps it would have been interesting, for a broader understanding of the book’s goals, to include a definition of what constitutes exemplary literature for the author. After all, classical *exempla* differ from fables, and fables from religious *exempla* and hagiographies, and their relationship with the *novella* is not necessarily the same. Yet, the many examples of this book confirm, once more, the depth of rewriting in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and his power to subvert all readers’ expectations.

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