

Zak, Gur. *Boccaccio and the Consolation of Literature*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2022. Studies and Texts, 229.

*Boccaccio and the Consolation of Literature* posits that consolation is an under-considered facet of Boccaccio's lifelong, committed engagement with literature. Professor Zak argues that Boccaccio wrestled, deliberately and minutely, with the portrayal and power of consolation in the writings of the past. Boethius' *Consolatio philosophiae* is naturally a primary interlocutor, as are Dante and Petrarch; Boccaccio's philosophical underpinnings foreground Aristotle and Aquinas. Zak reads consolation as a load-bearing wall not just in the *Decameron*, which thematizes it so emphatically from the very beginning, but in the edifice of Boccaccio's entire production. By examining his vast and varied output in this light, Zak reorganizes our understanding of Boccaccio's sustained position on the intrinsic value of the phenomenal world of our daily lives, and the nature of the noumenal world which we intuit, crave, and cannot know.

Zak analyzes the structures of consolation that Boccaccio offers in his cornucopia of literary works and genres. In doing so, he shows both that Boccaccio was not, as sometimes claimed, principally "affirming the consolatory value of pleasure—whether aesthetic or erotic" (5), and that his play with various genres was neither marginal nor "lite." On the contrary, that very play allowed him to develop "a significant *ethical* alternative to the solemn medieval consolatory tradition," an alternative "practiced in and through literature" (19).

Zak identifies four models of consolation which Boccaccio deployed and probed. Two of these, "diversionary pleasure" or solace, and "identification with others' suffering" or empathy, offer a temporary respite from sorrow or pain (8). The other two instead allow the sufferer to rout suffering altogether: either by pursuing and attaining the object of desire, or by renouncing it entirely. Because these models can be incompatible, they are not equally present in each work, let alone equally endorsed; but they are consistently present throughout Boccaccio's corpus, in "his notion that there is no one universal solution to hardship and the administration of consolation should be attuned to the sufferer's *particular* circumstances and needs" (9). This many-faceted paradigm of consolation Zak

dubs “polyphonic.” The musical image is apt for a corpus so richly varied, the whole of which makes “differing voices join to sound sweet music” (“diverse note fanno dolci note,” *Par.* 6.124).

Through a series of close readings, principally but not solely of Boccaccio’s major fictions, Zak shows the continuity in the corpus between literature (as the locus of fictionality and play), and philosophy (as the locus of earnest seeking for truth). In the first four chapters, epic, romance, elegy, tragedy, and vituperation are represented by the *Filocolo*, the *Filostrato*, the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*, relevant *Decameron* tales, and the *Corbaccio*. The fifth and final chapter is dedicated to three of the later writings, which set aside narrative fiction: the *Buccolicum carmen*, the *De casibus virorum illustrium*, and the *Epistola consolatoria a Pino de’ Rossi*. Particularly persuasive is Zak’s meticulous attention to the specificities of each work within its genre context and history; he derives his models of consolation and his polyphonic paradigm from the works, rather than imposing the former upon the latter.

There is a great deal to praise in this book. Zak’s detailed but clear scaffolding of the history of ideas — Platonism and Aristotelianism, for example, particularly in the centuries immediately preceding Boccaccio — parallels the granular but clear critical background he presents for Boccaccio scholarship. Presenting the two levels, of trends and of examples, is a feat which mirrors Zak’s capacious treatment of the whole arc of Boccaccio’s writing life on the one hand, and his heightened focus on a substantial subset of it on the other. In both cases Zak avoids the rival dangers of leaning too hard on too few sources, and of drowning the reader in *copia* which would blur the argument.

Indeed, clarity is the defining feature of Zak’s prose; it is content-rich while remaining deft and limpid. He keeps the reader aware of his argument’s major themes and structures and where she is within it, as for example in his introduction to the *Decameron* chapter:

whereas Boccaccio’s earlier works frequently invited readers to seek comfort by identifying with tragic protagonists or by trying to disavow love altogether, in the *Decameron* these specific modes of consolation are marginalized, even if they are not entirely absent. Instead, the work gives center stage to ‘comic’ modes of consolation, stories which offer cheerful diversion and erotic pleasure, or otherwise encourage the active and wise pursuit of one’s worldly goals. (98)

Now that Zak has scrutinized the place of consolation in Boccaccio's *oeuvre*, I could wish for an entire book from him on consolation in the *Decameron* alone. Focusing his analysis on 2.6, 4.1, and 10.10, he suggests that "these stories' depiction of confrontation with hardship is emblematic of the work as a whole" (97); the claim is strategic, but overstated. Still, given how illuminating Zak's readings of these *novelle* are, I will hope for more of them with this focus.

The principle of selection is a notoriously distorting lens, bringing every element to center on a single topic, or every note into a single key. At the macrolevel of Boccaccio's entire corpus, Zak says that he "experiments with various genres in order to probe their consolatory potential and advance his consolatory message" (9). This claim, like the one that three *Decameron* *novelle* are "emblematic of the work as a whole," is a case Zak must make, not a consensus or a presupposition. I read the book with fascination, advantage, and true delight, yet still I would not say that Boccaccio's corpus was constructed in service to his exploration of consolation more than of, say, compassion, or any other of his abiding preoccupations.

That scholarship tends to take its impulse from demurral and dissent rather than inspiration and imitation imposes a hint of deprecation of readings which do not take the direction Zak's does. Like every academic work, this one must establish that there is an empty space that only it can fill, a misstep it must rectify. Zak's project is set in motion by a "prevalent perception of Boccaccio's attitude toward the consolatory nature and value of literature" that Zak calls "largely inadequate" (5). Yet his own procedure is to highlight the specific *positionality* of the reception and use of philosophical and literary forebears by Boccaccio and his contemporaries. For example, he notes that with the entry into the Latin West of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the "practical focus" of Aristotle's work and Aquinas' commentary on it comes to eclipse the "Platonic bent" of Boethius and his twelfth-century commentators (10). Surely the same is true of our own waves of critical focus and understanding: we see in the light and from the angle of our present location, and our work rests on the very predecessors we may chide for not occupying our focal point.

Overall, such areas of contestation are more useful than not, as they focus and sharpen our thinking. For example, despite acknowledging that Boccaccio uses narrative voicing and intertextuality to

offer “subtle ironic commentaries” “on narrators’ and protagonists’ actions and dispositions” (6), Zak largely reads the *Corbaccio* as portraying an earnest and successful example of helping a sufferer to eliminate the cause of his pain (in this case, erotic desire). Boccaccio’s thoroughgoing ironic subversion of both guide and narrator keeps me from agreeing. However, to argue that such narrative irony leaves intact a serious disavowal of love by the *Corbaccio* author, guide, and narrator, Zak makes a case that is meticulous and subtle, representing fairly the scholarly interpretations it opposes, and detailing the *Corbaccio*’s use of many works of Dante to ultimately depart from Dante’s “ideology of amorous ascent” (147) and to “focus squarely on the disavowal of love” (134). Even disagreeing with this conclusion, I won’t read the *Corbaccio* again without Zak’s interpretation in mind; for that matter, this is true of every work he examines here.

My occasional demurrals are proof that I found this book to be energetic, thought-provoking, and rewarding. Zak has given us both a substantial achievement in Boccaccio studies, and an exemplary work of scholarly criticism. The breadth and depth of its critical background, the explanatory force of its argument, the precision and nuance of its scrutiny, make *Boccaccio and the Consolation of Literature* immensely illuminating and gratifying to read and consider.

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