

Brenda Deen Schildgen. *Boccaccio Defends Literature*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2025. 287 pp.

Brenda Deen Schildgen's latest book constitutes an important contribution not only to Boccaccio studies but also more broadly to literary studies as a whole. Among its many merits is the clarity and authority with which the author brings together and organizes multiple strands of recent scholarship on Boccaccio's defense of poetry, engaging in particular with the work of David Lummus, Martin Eisner, Justin Steinberg, Teodolinda Barolini, and Gur Zak, among others. The monograph advances a compelling central argument: that for Boccaccio, poetry is not merely useful and pleasurable; it is useful precisely because it is pleasurable.

What makes Schildgen's monograph such a deeply engaging and rewarding read is the intellectual freedom with which she pursues her inquiry. In an era when the demand for originality in scholarship has often been pushed to its limits, Schildgen offers a refreshing alternative. Instead of chasing innovation for its own sake, she follows her intellectual curiosity with honesty and rigor, demonstrating that there is still much to be savored along even the most well-trodden paths.

Although Schildgen characterizes her work as "a comparative literature study rather than an Italian historicist approach to the subject" (xviii), she nevertheless succeeds in grounding her research both historically and critically with remarkable ease. The introduction offers a concise and thorough account of the history of the debate surrounding the relationship between poetry and truth (or the absence thereof), laying the foundation for her discussion of Boccaccio's original and nuanced intervention in this longstanding contention.

In the first chapter, Schildgen analyzes the proem and chapters 14-15 of Boccaccio's *Genealogie deorum gentilium*. As she discusses, the very existence of Boccaccio's mythographic endeavor reveals that his defense of poetry carries enormous intellectual and cultural stakes: like Dante and Petrarch before him, Boccaccio seeks to rescue poetry from its detractors in order to reassert the value of classical culture in its entirety. To this end, Boccaccio brings together classical and modern poetic traditions, arguing that these traditions not only function similarly but, as Schildgen puts it, "be-

long to the same lineage” and “discourse community” (41). Furthermore, neither classical nor modern poetry differs significantly from Christian and biblical poetry in terms of their poetic techniques and their affective impact on human souls and emotions. Because it is experienced through the senses — sight and hearing — all poetry has the capacity to “alleviate the pain of those plagued by mental and physical exhaustion” (48), which allows Schildgen to argue that the usefulness of poetry resides precisely in its pleasurable nature.

Given the scope of Boccaccio’s undertaking, in which classical poetry legitimates modern poetry and vice versa, any investigation into his defense of poetry must necessarily engage with Petrarch’s own poetics. Schildgen does so in the second chapter, where she places Boccaccio’s theory in dialogue with Petrarch’s. The latter’s stance on poetry, whether it be classical poetry or his own, is complex and multilayered. Through close readings of a selection of texts — including letters, the *Bucolicum Carmen*, *De vita solitaria*, *Secretum*, and *De otio religioso* — Schildgen constructs a detailed and insightful portrait of Petrarch’s unresolved and often ambivalent poetics. While Boccaccio defends both classical and contemporary literature without reservation, Petrarch remains caught within the dichotomy, inherited from the Latin Church Fathers, and Augustine in particular, according to whom literary pleasure and moral truth are irreconcilable. Petrarch vacillates between advocating for poetry’s capacity to offer solace and consolation, and promoting a monastic ideal that entails the renunciation of all earthly pleasures, including literary pursuits. In contrast, Boccaccio’s defense of poetry remains consistent and unflinching in its affirmation of poetry’s ethical utility which is rooted in its pleasurable effects.

Chapter Three traces Boccaccio’s evolving yet consistent views on the value of poetry across several works, including his intellectual biographies of Petrarch and Dante and his commentary on the first sixteen cantos of *Inferno*. According to Schildgen, these texts — composed over a span of twenty-five years — bear witness to Boccaccio’s enduring conviction that poetry ranks among the highest achievements of the human intellect and should not be regarded as subordinate to other sciences. By constructing a poetic canon that spans from classical authors to Dante and Petrarch, Schildgen argues, Boccaccio is not only placing the modern poets on equal foot-

ing with the ancients but is, in fact, elevating them above their classical predecessors. The chapter culminates in a reading of Boccaccio's commentary on *Inferno* 4 and 15, where the argument is made that poetic glory should be held in far greater esteem than civic or military greatness.

Chapters Four and Five shift focus to the *Decameron*, exploring how the work enacts the unity of *utile et dulce* in ways that align with the later theoretical reflections found in the *Genealogie*. Starting from the premise that poetry affects both the mind and the body, Schildgen investigates how the *novelle* ease the mind from pain, relieve anxiety, console, and invigorate the mind. The primary agent of pain relief in Boccaccio's *novelle*, she argues, is humor. Chapter Four presents a wide-ranging and illuminating overview of classical and medieval theories of humor. While wit and laughter were condemned by figures such as Plato and Saint Benedict, they were also defended in the Aristotelian tradition, which culminates in Thomas Aquinas's reevaluation of Aristotle's concept of *eutrapelia*, the virtuous mean between boorishness and immoderate fun. According to Aquinas, *eutrapelia* and games (*ludi*) are essential for alleviating the weariness of an overworked mind, a notion that clearly resonates throughout the *Decameron*. As Schildgen demonstrates, Boccaccio's work aligns decisively with this Aristotelian framework. More significantly, by weaving together ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary perspectives on humor, Schildgen persuasively argues that "play, as recreation, and in contrast to the seriousness of work, privileges laughter, but it does not exclude meaning" (139). In this sense, comedy in the *Decameron* functions not merely as a narrative effect but as a mode of understanding and experiencing the world.

In Chapter Five, Schildgen continues her exploration of the *Decameron* and asks how poetry consoles and invigorates the mind. While the previous chapter focused on laughter as the primary affective mechanism, the first half of this chapter explores the cathartic power of tragedy. After a succinct but comprehensive review of scholarly discourse on consolation and compassion in Boccaccio — particularly drawing from the work of Barolini and Zak — Schildgen provides close readings of three key *novelle* (*Dec.* 2.1, 4.1, and 4.8), illustrating how they invite readers into a space of emotional reflection. In the second half of the chapter, she considers how Boccaccio uses fiction to expose social truths. By examining a series of *novelle*

that grapple with issues of social coercion and the violent enforcement of gender norms, Schildgen highlights the *Decameron's* power to reveal “truths about human beings and their social behavior that fiction brings out in the arena of the undiscussed” (170). In this way, the *Decameron* emerges not only as a text of entertainment and relief but also as a critical lens through which to engage with the social and political dimensions of human life.

Schildgen's monograph is a deeply learned and thoroughly researched study that skillfully weaves together classical and contemporary theory to offer a compelling portrait of Boccaccio's extraordinary regard for literature. While the notion that poetry is useful because it is pleasurable may seem self-evident to readers of Boccaccio, Schildgen persuasively demonstrates that his sustained effort to elevate poetry as a discipline capable of offering emotional, social, and cultural solace was among the central — if not the foremost — concerns of his intellectual life. This is an important, rewarding, and highly recommended work.

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