

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Margaret Franklin. *Boccaccio's Heroines: Power and Virtue in Renaissance Society*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006. 205 pp. \$94.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-5364-6.

Reviewed by Martin Marafioti (Department of Modern Languages and Cultures, Pace University)

Published on H-Italy (October, 2007)

Compared to the number of studies produced over the centuries on Giovanni Boccaccio's vernacular story collection, the *Decameron* (c. 1351), there are relatively few monographs dedicated to the author's works in Latin. And of the studies dedicated to Boccaccio's Latin opera, only a handful has been written on his histories of famous women, the *De mulieribus claris* (*DMC*). The 2001 publication of the English translation and new edition of Boccaccio's *DMC* by Virginia Brown (*Giovanni Boccaccio's Famous Women*, I Tatti Renaissance Library), has brought Boccaccio's famous women to the attention of many scholars and readers and several monographs have been published in recent years.

One new book that stands out is Margaret Franklin's *Boccaccio's Heroines: Power and Virtue in Renaissance Society*. This volume, which includes Italian literature, art history, gender studies, cultural history, is a solid contribution to Boccaccio studies. The work consists of a substantial introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, images, a bibliography and an index.

The introduction is lucidly written and offers detailed background information on Boccaccio, his histories of famous women, and the contemporary reception of these works. Even a reader with little or no knowledge of the *DMC* can make use of Franklin's introduction as a point of departure. The author begins her study by contrasting her work with that of earlier critics who have presented Boccaccio's *DMC* as a "conflicted" and fragmented text, suggesting that instead it "offers a remarkably consistent, coherent and comprehensible treatise concerning the appropriate functioning of women in society" (p. 2).

In chapter 1 Franklin analyzes Boccaccio's authorial intent, especially his desire to please his male readers by establishing a power framework that penalizes women who overstep social boundaries by behaving like men. She also focuses on Boccaccio's anti-heroines, the power-seeking women who ruthlessly aspire to positions of command and distinction. Franklin cites examples such as Clytemnestra, Semiramis, Cleopatra, and Agrip-

pina and demonstrates that it is their illegitimately seized power that ultimately leads to their downfall. These women are included in Boccaccio's *DMC* as negative exempla; they demonstrate the dangers of not respecting limits and encourage readers to accept the established protocol of gendered behavior.

Chapters 2 and 3 offer examples (both positive and negative) of how women should curb their ambitions in life or else they are "doomed to fall" (p. 40). Franklin reminds us that one of the most pertinent messages of Boccaccio's *DMC* is that women must accept roles imposed upon them by society and live a chaste life serving their husbands, fathers, and brothers. Moreover, Boccaccio suggests that the subjects of his biographies, by living their lives as they were meant to be lived, serve not only as role models for women in general but specifically for women and men in positions of emerging authority.

Chapter 3 stands out as the most innovative section of Franklin's study. Here she reads Boccaccio's *DMC* as a source for Renaissance visual artists. She analyzes the role played by women in Andrea del Castagno's Villa Carducci frescoes, emphasizing that the female characters depicted in the frescoes performed significant and commendable deeds deserving male admiration and emulation and were therefore considered worthy of representation in this pictorial cycle. Franklin also studies the iconography inspired by Boccaccio's account of Cloelia in the Renaissance, citing examples from several pictorial versions of her myth. According to the author, Cloelia is represented as "a paragon who does not shrink from engaging in risk-taking measures to preserve the physical and moral well-being of her family, friends, and countrymen" and "an exemplum with whom the Renaissance patriarch could proudly identify" (p. 102). This demonstrates how Boccaccio's histories of famous women have not only inspired artistic expression, but have also played, albeit indirectly, a key role in defining emerging social values.

The final chapter demonstrates the influence of Boc-

caccio's text on northern Italian dynastic courts, particularly the Este of Ferrara and the Gonzaga of Mantua. Franklin focuses on the careers of two fascinating "court consorts": Eleonora d'Aragona d'Este of Ferrara, and Isabella d'Este Gonzaga of Mantua. Both of these women were highly influential in their societies, counseling their husbands, acting as ambassadors under appropriate circumstances, and stepping into their husbands' shoes when necessary. Neither Eleonora nor Isabella was perceived as power-hungry or ruthless; instead, these women espoused the virtues that Boccaccio praised in his positive role models and became paragons of excellence for women in Renaissance society. This chapter looks also at how these exemplary figures (who were in-

spired by Boccaccio's ideals) in turn inspired a corpus of gynophilic writings on female virtue. Franklin discusses texts by Bartolommeo Goggio, Agostino Strozzi, Mario Equicola, Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti, Fra Iacopo Filippo Foresti da Bergamo, and Antonio Cornazzano. Although these authors varied in their genre and style, they all focused on defending the worth and merits of women.

The bibliography includes primary sources consulted as well as a substantial list of secondary works of interest to scholars of Renaissance social and cultural history. Franklin's book will benefit students of Boccaccio's *DMC* and can also serve as a tool for scholars of early modern Italian culture, especially those interested in gender.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Martin Marafioti. Review of Franklin, Margaret, *Boccaccio's Heroines: Power and Virtue in Renaissance Society*. H-Italy, H-Net Reviews. October, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13688>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.