

Stephen D. Kolsky. *The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio's De mulieribus claris*, New York: Peter Lang, 2003.

Over the centuries, Boccaccio scholarship has concentrated on the work that the author perhaps considered one of his least worthy literary accomplishments: the *Decameron*. There are comparatively few monographs dedicated to his minor works in the vernacular, and, above all, Boccaccio's Latin corpus has been greatly overlooked. Until recently, very little has been written on Boccaccio's Latin compilation of biographies of famous women, the *De mulieribus claris*. Thanks to Virginia Brown's elegant, erudite, and approachable English translation published in 2001, readers not proficient in Latin (or Italian) have been granted access to this somewhat ignored text. Stephen Kolsky's *The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio's De mulieribus claris* is an ideal companion to Brown's translation, providing readers with a substantial introduction to Boccaccio's encyclopedia of famous women.

Kolsky's book does not focus on one particular aspect of Boccaccio's *De mulieribus*. Rather, it offers exactly what its title promises: a series of studies that analyze Boccaccio's collection of women's biographies. Throughout the work Kolsky addresses several questions, including: For whom was the *De mulieribus* written? What were Boccaccio's sources and criteria for selecting the women? What is the relationship between the *De mulieribus claris* and the *Decameron*? What is the genre of the work? The author discusses these issues and many more in his deeply engaging analysis of one of Boccaccio's lesser-studied works. Kolsky's book is not only valuable to new readers of Boccaccio's *De mulieribus*, but also useful to scholars familiar with the work who wish to deepen their knowledge of it and revisit it with the guidance of an expert.

*The Genealogy of Women* consists of eight chapters, plus an introduction, a conclusion, notes, and an extensive bibliography. The introduction places this study within the scholarly tradition. Kolsky notes how feminist criticism has categorized the book as misogynistic and for the most part has therefore dismissed it. He cites the positions of contemporary feminist scholars such as Carolyn G. Heilbrun, Constance Jordan, Natalie Zemon Davis, Carol Meale, Diana Robin, Valerie Wayne, and the "less harsh" judgment of Laura Torretta, suggesting that the negative press generated by these critics has discouraged others from reevaluating the work. The introductory chapter also emphasizes the tendency of scholars to compare Boccaccio's work with imitations, in particular Christine de Pizan's *Cité des dames*. From the beginning, Kolsky clearly distinguishes his study from others. Unlike many studies of feminists and comparatists, his book

“[...] aims to bring together seemingly ‘old-fashioned’ critical processes, such as the examination of sources and the manner of composition to clarify Boccaccio’s humanism, especially with respect to Petrarch” (13). Kolsky proposes a series of studies on a work he feels has unjustly received little attention.

The most engaging chapters are those that bring to the forefront questions about the composition of the text and Boccaccio’s connection to the work. Chapter II raises the issue of Boccaccio’s relationship to the humanistic movement, discussing his bond with his friend and literary inspiration, Petrarch. This chapter emphasizes his admiration for Petrarch’s works (especially the *De viris illustribus*), and the classical tradition. Kolsky points out that although Boccaccio was not the first to compile a series of biographies of famous women (Boccaccio was not aware of the fact that he indeed had a predecessor in Plutarch’s *Mulierum virtutes*), he believed that he was a pioneer in this literary form. Boccaccio intended to create a new genre inspired by Petrarch’s biographies of men while borrowing from classical authors including Livy, Valerius Maximus, and Tacitus.

After analyzing Boccaccio’s possible sources (classical, Christian, medieval) and noting the polysemantic qualities of the biographies, Kolsky introduces the problem of classifying the genre of Boccaccio’s work. Is it a work of history or a collection of *exempla*? In Chapter III Kolsky contrasts Boccaccio’s historical methodology with that of Petrarch, his *maestro*. He points to Petrarch’s aversion to historians who collect all available versions of a story and therefore fail to construct a definitive historical text. Although Boccaccio, for the most part, does exactly this in the *De mulieribus*, Kolsky is less severe than Petrarch in judging Boccaccio as a historian. Indeed, he classifies Boccaccio a “humanist historian in embryo” (69). Kolsky concludes the chapter by addressing the moral discourse of the book and pointing to the fact that it is flawed because of its changing focus from chapter to chapter. The *De mulieribus* not only presents women who are neither saints nor martyrs as examples; it actually focuses on “problematic women,” suggesting that Boccaccio has actually renewed the genre of “*exempla* collection” from a humanist perspective.

One of the most innovative ideas discussed in this book is the notion of the *De mulieribus* and the *Decameron* as parallel texts. Chapter V traces the presence of women of antiquity in Boccaccio’s vernacular works (in particular in the *Decameron*, the *Amorosa visione*, and the *Corbaccio*). Kolsky hypothesizes that the *De mulieribus* may be a sort of “over-writing” of the *Decameron*, perhaps inspired by Petrarch’s lack of enthusiasm for the collection of *novelle*. In comparing the two works, the author illus-

trates the relationship between the texts as a stylistic evolution: the *Decameron* consists of 100 tales, while the *De mulieribus* contains 106 biographies; the *novelle* are replaced by histories; the vernacular is substituted by the more elegant Latin. Kolsky later sustains (Chapter VI) that this stylistic change also reflects Boccaccio's moral evolution:

[...] it appears fairly sure that Boccaccio did, in fact, become a priest, perhaps with parish responsibilities, in the period of 1360–61. This biographical 'fact' helps us to understand the hardening of his position towards sexual purity in women, such that in practical terms he silenced the language and subject matter of the *Decameron* (109).

It seems that the more mature and pious Boccaccio of the *De mulieribus* was not as concerned with entertaining his audience as he had been with the stories of the *Decameron*; instead, he wanted to educate readers and inspire them to lead an upright, moral life by offering *exempla* of behaviors to imitate (and, in some cases, to avoid).

Throughout his study Kolsky reminds readers of a significant difference between the *Decameron* and the *De mulieribus*: the absence of the frame tale in the latter work. He notes that this dissimilarity is relevant not only stylistically, but also ideologically. The lack of a *cornice* maintains the practical scope of the text. Although he dedicates the *De mulieribus* to women as he had done in the *Decameron*, Boccaccio eliminates the veil of fiction associated with the frame and fictional *brigata*. The stories of the *De mulieribus* are for the readers of the work — his audience, not a fictional audience. Therefore, the examples set by the famous women carry more weight because they should directly inspire people to lead a virtuous life and steer them far from vice.

Kolsky's study concludes with a thorough bibliography of the primary and secondary sources consulted — a valuable springboard for further inquiry on the *De mulieribus claris*. The author's writing is clear and coherent, and his arguments are substantiated with numerous examples from the biographies. Throughout the text, Kolsky cites mostly in English, from the Brown translation, so it would be useful to have this particular volume available while reading his study if one wishes to have easy access to the original Latin.

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