

Marilyn Migiel. *A Rhetoric of the 'Decameron.'* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. Pp. 219. ISBN 0802085946.

"For if one always risks meaning something other than what one thinks one utters, then one is, as it were, vulnerable in a specific linguistic sense." (Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, 87)

*A Rhetoric of the 'Decameron'* aims to "reflect on the way that gender is far more controversial in the *Decameron's* views of sexuality and moral choice than has previously been thought" (63). Indeed, Marilyn Migiel has written an important and provocative text that avoids the pitfalls of simplistic interpretations that try to align Boccaccio with either a misogynist or proto-feminist position by managing to underscore the *Decameron's* nuanced and complex reflections on sexual difference. By concentrating on Boccaccio's rhetoric, Migiel argues that consideration of gender is not accessory but, rather, intrinsic to the author's structural and linguistic choices, and thus central to the text's construction of meanings. Bringing a welcome contribution to Boccaccio, Gender and Early-Modern Studies, Migiel asserts that "the discourse about narration and reading in the *Decameron* is intimately bound to its production of a discourse about woman" (12).

The centrality of sexual difference is emphasized through the gendering of the narrators in Boccaccio's masterpiece, which "depicts how social and discursive power is divided between sexes. The fictional storytellers of the *Decameron* are marked by their gender and by their express views on sexuality and sexual difference" (82). Obviously, that is not to negate the differences among different narrators of the same gender, as they do not compose two monolithic blocks. Nevertheless, through a precise and insightful study of many of the *Decameron's* stories in relation to their narrators, Migiel shows how "male and female narrators in the *Decameron* express fundamentally different views" (81).

Whereas it is true that the *Decameron* does not neglect the agency of women in history and does not ignore the effects of religious, institutional and cultural power on women, Migiel makes the case that the stories also "appear to open up the possibility of the expression of female desire at the same time that they describe severe limits placed on the way in which women can speak out" (15). For example, in the first chapter, "Woman as Witness," Migiel maintains that from its very introduction the *Decameron* dislocates women's active subjectivity as passive witnessing. Thus, no matter how much the women protagonists might seem to be in charge of the planning of the project, the rhetorical choices necessarily demote their agency by making them bear witness to men's authority.

The challenges and insights of this book are additionally bolstered by Migiel's sense of her own interpretive relationship to and analysis of previous scholarly opinions and approaches. For example, in the first chapter, she furthers Michel David's insight in "Boccaccio pornoscopo?" that in the *Decameron* voyeurism is a principal means to affirm power by underlining the complexity of the multiplicity of gazes, while underscoring the difference between men's and women's subject positions: men do not have to plan in order to influence discursive configuration. She follows Millicent Marcus' suggestion in *An Allegory of Form: Literary Self-Consciousness in the 'Decameron,'* that meanings depend on the variety of codes one applies, and takes issue with Aldo S. Bernardo's "The Plague as Key to Meaning in Boccaccio's *Decameron*" by affirming that "the description of the plague and its moral effects serves to identify conflicts in gender relationship that will be 'worked through' — and not necessarily to woman's advantage" (22). In the second chapter, "Fiammetta v. Dioneo," Migiel capitalizes on Janet Smarr's book *Boccaccio and Fiammetta: The Narrator as Lover*, showing that the dialectic between Fiammetta and Dioneo is central to the development of the discourse on sexual difference. Through an insightful reading of the stories of Day one based on both a careful study of their sources and their interlacement, Migiel shows that the dialogue between the two narrators sets the tone of the contrast from Day one.

However, the mere fact that Fiammetta has a voice and tries to oppose Dioneo does not imply that the two are on equal footing. In fact, in the third chapter, "Boccaccio's Sexed Thought," Migiel argues that whether it is true that the *Decameron* gives voice to female desire in unprecedented ways, "the voice of female desire appears to emerge more clearly when female desire is consistent with male desire" (82). Migiel points out in the fourth chapter, "To Transvest Not to Transgress," that even the stories that deal with cross-dressing are not necessarily proto-feminist as, while recounting many role infractions, most stories reaffirm the necessity of those very roles, thereby reaffirming the virtues that traditional gender roles help to foster.

Indeed, in the following chapters, Migiel expands on her examination of cross-dressing to consider the possibilities of language for transgression in order "first to show how the narrators of the *Decameron* construct the limits placed on women's use of language, then to show how both Author and narrators construct the readers by means of a gendered use of figurative language" (108). In the fifth chapter, "Women's Witty Words: Restrictions on Their Use," Migiel engages the episode of Liscia and Tindaro in the introduction to Day six in connection with the stories of Madonna

Oretta and Madonna Filippa to emphasize how the *Decameron* problematizes the issue of women's linguistic transgression. This is done (in all three cases) without offering a simple univocal solution, "but because he [Boccaccio] understands the importance of having us weigh the available alternatives and ask whether these alternatives are indeed the only ones available to us" (122). Thus Migiel shows that woman's discourse is often subsumed into a larger and all-pervasive scheme of male rhetoric.

Male rhetoric is one of the privileged spaces where males assert their dominance. In the sixth chapter, "Men, Women and Figurative Language in the *Decameron*," Migiel observes that if figurative language is always already a performance of gender and class, "this is most markedly the case when figurative language is used to talk about sexual intercourse" (123). If "the *Decameron* gives the impression that women will be on equal footing with men in these demonstrations of rhetorical power, in the final analysis the book empowers men, far more than women, to use figurative language about sexuality. This is one of the principal ways in which the *Decameron* consolidates male power" (123).

More specifically, the preponderance of figurative language is also used as a means of construing and limiting the female reader, as Migiel sees the gendered opposition replicated in the relationship between the Author and the women readers, saying that although "the message always reaches them in the encoding of subject positions that the *Decameron* appears to encourage, these women readers are not ever supposed to fully grasp the meaning" (146). Furthermore, the pleasure of the text is predicated on their not understanding: "the pleasure of the male narrator, the pleasure of the male Author, and the pleasure of the male reader depends upon keeping the woman reader at least partially in the dark" (146). However, Migiel is also careful to underline that the position of the female reader is not as doomed as it might first appear, for "while the Author participates in delimiting the role of the female reader and renders it more difficult for the female reader to arrive at a critical reading, he also places the impetus for responsibility and empowerment into the realm that is properly the reader's, be that reader male or female" (146).

In the seventh chapter, "Domestic Violence in the *Decameron*," Migiel argues that, as the text unfolds, the specter of violence against women becomes more real, thus allowing us "to reflect on our implicitly constructed narratives about domestic violence; it also illustrates the challenges that beset readers who are committed to political and ethical change" (148). Whereas in Days six and seven women appear to be empowered to control their own lives, "many of the stories of Days 8 and 9 try to delimit the power that women might wield. Not surprisingly, a number of these stories

described ‘just retaliations’ against women who have mistreated men, placed limits on them, or called their authority into question” (149). In this sense, Emila’s story in Day nine is exemplary in both affirming violence against women and providing the reader “the very means by which to undo the oppressive logic she argues for: reading and interpretation” (158). Thus, the *Decameron* “reveals the limits placed upon women who would choose to speak out and to claim for themselves liberties (expressive, sexual, vocational) that are not always considered within the purview of women” (163).

This is not to say that Migiel thinks that there is a univocal interpretation and plan to the *Decameron*, as she carefully takes to heart Erich Auerbach’s insight that the *Decameron* provides a univocal moral message but underscores the plurality of voices and views present. We could say that one of the symptoms of the complexity of the plurality of voices is replicated by Migiel’s choice to compose seven chapters, the same as the number of women narrators in the *Decameron*. This does not appear incidental as Migiel herself draws a direct comparison between the reading of her book and the reading of Boccaccio’s, by affirming, “in the course of inviting the reader to witness — and participate in — the *Decameron*’s vibrant debate about the issues, my book offers several stories of its own” (162). In the end, what is truly exceptional about Migiel’s book is the way it interpolates us as both reader and storytellers, calling “upon us to respond to the questions it poses with our own retellings and rewritings” (165).

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