

Gittes, Tobias Foster. *Boccaccio's Naked Muse: Eros, Culture and the Mythopoeic Imagination*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008. 369 pp.

Erudite in its command of sources and impassioned in its style, exhaustive in its detail and panoramic in its breadth, Tobias Foster Gittes' first book, *Boccaccio's Naked Muse: Eros, Culture and the Mythopoeic Imagination*, is a formidable work that will copiously serve both specialist and generalist readers in medieval studies for many years to come. Gittes advances a new framework for understanding Boccaccio as a humanist, not only by scrutinizing how the Certaldese author relied upon ancient texts, but by viewing him as a mythographer who transformed traditional motifs and also forged new interrelated tales, both universal and local, from those of the Golden Age as well as narratives of the origins of Tuscany and Florence. Gittes accomplishes this task by means of a systematic collection and study of these tales in the author's Latin and vernacular works, and has essentially created a critical compendium whose sheer breadth is a match for the encyclopedic parameters of Boccaccio's corpus. Gittes concludes that Boccaccio values intellectual and artistic accomplishment (what Gittes defines as "culture") as requisites for spiritual transcendence and civic survival. Furthermore, Gittes argues, civic growth itself is dependent upon miscegenation and cross-cultural exchange, and sheds light upon the sense of cosmopolitanism that could go unnoticed in Boccaccio's works.

Gittes necessarily introduces his study by confronting another, pervasive myth, that of Boccaccio's rhetoric of self-deprecation, one that casts the writer's own intellect and talent as inferior, namely to Dante and Petrarch. If, as Gittes states, the "collective imagination," ranging from scholars (who go unnamed, except for Singleton), to Coleridge, to the cultural mainstream (such as David Leland's superficial B-movie, *Virgin Territory*), has cast Boccaccio as the author of a playful eroticism, then Boccaccio himself is also responsible for the critical tradition's historic reluctance to view depth, and not only erotic *leggerezza*, in his works. But, as Gittes' work itself proves, we are the ones still at fault for this critical oversight, and it is incumbent upon current generations of *boccaccisti* to continue the work of reading Boccaccio's "sovrasensi" by contextualizing his works within larger discussions of literary form, history and culture. Gittes' book securely places itself amongst those works that venture in that direction, such as Simone Marchesi's *Stratigrafie decameroniane* and Marilyn Migiel's *A Rhetoric of the Decameron*. Further uncovering the "Naked Muse"

of Boccaccio's writing, or the ways in which his *novelle* can be defined as hybrids of tradition and innovation, is the work that remains.

In the first chapter, "Universal Myths of Origin: Boccaccio and the Golden Age Motif," Gittes surveys the classical repertoire of Golden Age myths available to Boccaccio, including those forged by Hesiod, Ovid, Horace, Vergil, Seneca, Juvenal and Boethius. Gittes highlights the ambivalence with which Boccaccio viewed both primitivist and anti-primitivist accounts in inheriting this tradition. The result of this ambivalence is a syncretistic methodology by which ideas of epochal degeneration are harmonized. When faced with the choice between a degenerative model and a non-degenerative one, Boccaccio opts for the latter, viewing the Golden Age as a state of beatitude that can be attained on earth. Thus, erotic and cultural ignorance are not aspects of a Golden Age moral innocence, but separate and oppositional. Especially interesting in this chapter is Gittes' interpretation of the figure of the merchant as a "culture-hero" who restores cultural sophistication and intellectual vitality through his travels. This cosmopolitanism, I would argue, could also serve as a motif to describe Boccaccio's literary style as viewed through the lens of modernity: Boccaccio as our merchant of ancient and medieval cultures from all corners of the Mediterranean.

The second chapter, "Local Myths of Origin: The Birth of the City and the Self," highlights Boccaccio's syncretic methodology in forging local myths of origin for Certaldo, Fiesole and Florence, tales that he models on accounts of multicultural origins from such sources as Vergil's *Aeneid* and Livy's Roman history (*Ab urbe condita*) in contrast to the ethnocentric histories written by chroniclers such as Giovanni Villani. In his exploration of etiological tales set in the surrounding area of Florence as the "fertile loam of Tuscany," as in the case of the conception of Pruneo in the *Ninfale fiesolano*, Gittes illustrates how Boccaccio viewed the transformation, or debarbarization, of rustic populations into cosmopolitan ones as a step towards the process of nation-building. Gittes convincingly argues that Boccaccio necessarily includes native populations for Fiesole for personal reasons pertaining to his own genealogy. Indeed, this chapter concludes with a compelling interpretation of Boccaccio's alter ego in Idalogos (*Filocolo*) and in Ibrida (*Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine*) and thus of the figure of the poet as a social and ethnic hybrid. This chapter stands out for its potential implications for studies of Boccaccio and the later Middle Ages in general. It inspires us to understand the deeper significance of instances in which the medieval Italian canon's "bastard" son (for whom a definitive city of origin is unknown) legitimizes miscegenation, especially for the creation of

those civic populations who were praised by chroniclers and others for their racial purity. Boccaccio's support of miscegenation speaks to contemporary issues that have arisen centuries after the texts treated in this chapter were composed. What, in fact, would Italy's Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, who has come out against an "Italia multiethnica," have to say about these etiological tales ("Immigrati, Maroni insiste sulla linea dura," *La Repubblica*, May 9, 2009)? In this sense, then, this chapter is particularly rich for the study of the origins of Italian nationalist rhetoric and of the history of ethnic integration on the Italian peninsula.

The third chapter of the book, "The Myth of a New Beginning: Boccaccio's Palingenetic Paradise," argues that the *Decameron* is intended to preserve culture from the effects of the plague. As opposed to other biblical and classical catastrophic accounts that value the preservation of human life, Boccaccio's reworking of this myth takes into account the necessity for "cultural continuity." Boccaccio reconstructed these new etiologies of cataclysm and rebirth from diverse sources but took particular inspiration from Plato's *Timaeus*, which describes the Saïtic district of Egypt. It is Boccaccio's concern for the preservation of material culture, his bibliophilia, that renders his tale of rebirth unique. The *brigata* stands as the micro-society endowed with cultural sophistication that will preserve and transmit this knowledge to those who survive the plague, existing as a living "Saïtic seed," as Gittes puts it (153). The last two parts of this chapter, which have appeared elsewhere in different form, interpret Boccaccio in his role as a Prometheus-like culture-hero and advance a view of the Valle delle Donne as a living *remedium*.¹

If the third chapter suggests ways in which the *Decameron* stands as the material object of cultural continuity, the fourth, "The Myth of Historical Foresight: Babel and Beyond," elaborates on ways in which the *Decameron* preserves humanity by offering to its readers the gift of historical foresight. Against the backdrop of the plague, which Gittes suggests may be an example of divine determinism, choices based on free will — such as whether to escape vice (the plague) and follow virtue (in Fiesole) — undergo greater scrutiny. Boccaccio thus produces a "secular scripture" to reconstruct society and lead individuals toward proper ethical choices. This chapter, and thus the book itself (in the absence of an explicit conclusion), ends with a compelling reading of the *brigata's* course of education

¹ See: "St. Boccaccio: The Poet as Pander and Martyr," *Studi sul Boccaccio* 30 (2002): 125–57; "Boccaccio's 'Valley of Women': Festishized Foreplay in *Decameron* VI," *Italia* 76.2 (1999): 147–74.

throughout their stay in Fiesole as a preparation for the martyrdom that might be encountered upon their return.

There are a few bibliographical omissions and some theoretical considerations that should be noted here. Gittes' discussion of medieval concepts of embryology lacks a reference to Manuele Gragnolati's important work on this subject (*Experiencing the Afterlife: Soul and Body in Dante and Medieval Culture*, Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 2005). Also missing is Joan Ferrante's article, "History is Myth, Myth is History" (in *Dante. Mito e poesia*, Picone and Crivelli, eds., Firenze: Franco Cesati Editore, 1999, 317–33), which offers an important reading of medieval narrative that would add to Gittes' treatment of mythography and historiography. Modern theoretical discussions of medieval narrative are not touched upon, nor are highly theorized terms such as "culture" defined accordingly (at times terms such as "cultural" and "intellectual" seem to be used interchangeably). Gittes' own critical language is limited to Boccaccio's world despite the timely nature of his discussions of ethnicity and race to the discipline at large (something particularly clear in moments when he discusses colonization and sexual violence).

In compensation, his knowledge of Boccaccio's worlds, the ancient one that he inherits and transforms as well as the medieval one in which he stakes his claim of artistic expertise, is a gift to those scholars who choose to pursue readings of Boccaccio within contemporary theoretical discussions of race and ethnicity. If, as Gittes proves, Boccaccio artfully transformed the classical and Christian imagination of his predecessors and contemporaries, then Gittes himself has recast Boccaccio's fabulous wealth in this thought-provoking and delightful narrative, one that is both useful and pleasurable to read — as would be pleasing to both types of authors.

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