

Timothy Kircher. *The Poet's Wisdom: The Humanists, the Church, and the Formation of Philosophy in the Early Renaissance*. Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 133. Leiden: Brill Academic Press, 2006. 316 pp.

The critical literature concerning the phenomenon of Italian Humanism, from Burckhardt to Kristeller, has privileged the rediscovery of Latin authors that took place in the *Trecento* and *Quattrocento*. A crucial aspect in this history remains to be written, despite the efforts of scholars such as Garin and Grassi: does Italian Humanism contribute to the history of philosophy only through philological advances, or do these philological developments signal a change in direction from the dominant medieval philosophical modes of Scholasticism and Aristotelianism? In both these cases, scholars have firmly rooted the study of Italian Humanism within the field of Latin literary, historical and philosophical culture.

Timothy Kircher's new study of the early protagonists of Italian Humanism explores new ground by locating the development of Humanist philosophy in the debates between the poets and Dominican authors and preachers in Tuscany. Although the debates do not exclusively dwell in the realm of vernacular culture, Kircher shifts the focus from erudite intellectual writing — intended for the select few — to vernacular literature that appealed directly to the semi-literate citizens of Tuscany. Kircher argues that Giovanni Boccaccio and Francesco Petrarca contrasted the static moral framework of Dominicans such as Domenico Cavalca (d. 1342), Bartolomeo di San Concordio (d. 1347) and Jacopo Passavanti (d. 1357) with a provisional and qualified intellectual perspective. For Kircher, the Humanist point of view emerged in the aftermath of the Black Death's devastating Italian epidemic in 1348. Kircher's consideration of these contemporary religious thinkers represents the most important contribution of his study to the understanding of the question of the poetry and philosophy of Italian Humanism.

A virtue of Kircher's study materializes from his close and illuminating readings of his two main subjects, Boccaccio and Petrarca, in the light of these Dominican *Trecento* authors and preachers. Each of the chapters contrasts the secular writings of these two foundational figures with one or more of these religious thinkers. One of the very few faults of this study is that Kircher does not adequately distinguish between his two subjects. Too often, Kircher speaks of Petrarca and Boccaccio as if they shared a univocal intellectual perspective. Kircher does, at times, distinguish between a local point of difference between the two authors. For instance, in discussing their employment of the sea metaphor he says, "Petrarch's use of the sea-image is therefore more explicitly attuned to the moral and reli-

gious purposes of Passavanti than is Boccaccio's tale" (209). Kircher never offers a broad basis for accepting that Boccaccio and Petrarca were jointly engaged in this intellectual project. While their sympathy for each other is well known, it is equally well known that they disagreed over some details of their poetic praxis (for example, the role of the vernacular, and the importance of Dante).

For readers of *Heliotropia*, the extensive readings of Boccaccio's *Decameron* will be of particular interest. The second chapter examines the Introduction to the First Day of the *Decameron*, a text that has seen its fair share of critical readings. While admirably updated on other critical opinions, Kircher offers an original reading of the philosophical crisis that subtends the plague narrative. The varieties of perspective that many readers have located in Boccaccio's antithetical prose, including Petrarca, signal Boccaccio's skepticism of all types of authority: literary, civic, ecclesiastical. In the end, it is the eyewitness account of Boccaccio the narrator, however provisory and self-consciously limited, which prevails: "Boccaccio's inquiry into the concrete basis of historical events is always screened by the human condition" (73). Kircher contrasts this account with Matteo Villani's account, which firmly assigns the plague's causation to divine justice, however unknowable. Wisely, Kircher's argument here is not metaphysical but purely epistemological; Boccaccio questions what it is for humans to know the cause or results of history.

The third chapter takes up the vexing question of the *Decameron's* morality, yet another frequently traveled interpretive path. Kircher approaches this task by comparing the stories from Day I of the *Decameron* as well as selected other stories to the religious *exempla* found in the *Vitae Patrum* (*Lives of the Fathers*), translated into Tuscan by Cavalca, and the *Specchio della vera penitenza* (*Mirror of True Penitence*) of Passavanti. Kircher contrasts the static morality of the mendicants' *exempla* to the spontaneous and idiosyncratic morality portrayed by the stories and storytellers in the *Decameron*. This chapter features valuable close readings of the matrix of language common to both Boccaccio and the contemporary Dominican preachers useful for situating Boccaccio's thought in contemporary intellectual debates. As Carlo Delcorno has shown, and Kircher here reaffirms, Boccaccio's stories were in close competition with the mendicant preachers who traveled from village to village in *Trecento* Tuscany.

The fourth chapter considers the metaphor of the sea and its differing valences in the humanist and mendicant intellectual idioms. This chapter features both Boccaccio and Petrarca as subjects, but Kircher's reading of *Decameron* II.4 is especially fruitful. Kircher finds linguistic parallels be-

tween Passavanti's description of the sea as a metaphor of the corrupt secular life and Landolfo's twice-unexpected fortune on the seas. Kircher uses close analysis of both Passavanti and Boccaccio to construct a viable reading of this tale as a parody of the preachers. Passavanti posits the church as safe haven for humanity adrift on the sea, while for Boccaccio the sea ebbs and flows with time and fortune. "In the humanists' use of the sea-metaphor, the Church's morality is itself adrift, like the board of Landolfo Rufolo" (225). Of all the readings of the *Decameron*, this one does the most to convince this reader of Boccaccio's intellectual difference from the Dominicans. The remaining part of the chapter treats Petrarca's *Secretum* and *Canzoniere*.

The fifth chapter delves into the wide chasm that separates the Dominicans and Boccaccio and Petrarca concerning the treatment of women. Kircher contends that Boccaccio escapes the traditional Mary/Eve dichotomy of the feminine that defines clerical misogyny in general and of Bartolomeo di San Concordio's *Ammaestramenti degli Antichi* (*Teachings of the Ancients*) in particular. Instead, Boccaccio, specifically in *Decameron* II.9, VIII.7, IX.9 and X.10 gives equal voice to the female storytellers and characters. Consistent with his entire argument in this book, Kircher shows how Boccaccio fractures the universalizing system of Dominicans through his presentation of the idiosyncratic moral positions of the stories and storytellers. The many feminine perspectives that Boccaccio stages in the *Decameron* overwhelm the static representation of women as the root of evil in the writings of Bartolomeo di San Concordio.

The final chapter provides a too-brief epilogue to the entire study. Kircher shifts from his detailed reading of the *Decameron* to a quick overview of Boccaccio's entire Latin production as well as the *Esposizioni sopra la Comedia di Dante*. Kircher's conclusion in this epilogue is conventional: "Boccaccio retreats within the pale of a recognized morality, one which he subversively countered in the *Decameron*" (287). This conventional take on the later works of Boccaccio is out of sync with the rest of Kircher's incisive analysis of the *Decameron*. This small point aside, Kircher has given the field an important work of literary criticism and philosophical investigation worthy of consideration from all scholars of Giovanni Boccaccio, challenging the reader to regard the *Decameron* as a foundational text of the philosophy of Italian Humanism.

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