

Totaro, Luigi. *Ragioni d'amore: Le donne nel Decameron*. Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2005. <<http://digital.casalini.it/editori/default.asp?isbn=8884532523>> 335 pp.

Luigi Totaro's *Ragioni d'amore: Le donne nel Decameron* proposes a re-reading of the *Decameron* "come fonte storica — di storia della mentalità, del costume, della cultura nella *società dei mercanti* agli albori dell'Età Moderna." Thus states Totaro in his *nota introduttiva*, whose modest scope contrasts with the breadth implied by his title, as considering women in the *Decameron* is clearly a staggeringly broad topic. Additionally, the echo of Dante's ladies of the *Vita Nova* possessed of "intelletto d'amore" in the title's "ragioni d'amore" is quite intentional. Totaro proposes a re-reading of the *Decameron*, one that tracks the *ragionare* and *ragioni* of those loving and lovelorn ladies to whom Boccaccio dedicates his work in the prologue. Setting aside the question of whether the *Decameron* does in fact simply mirror the mercantile society of its day or is rather a text consciously critical of its milieu, Totaro tends on the whole to offer synthesis rather analysis. He defines and traces for us certain strands, *filoni*, related to women in the *Decameron*. This gives me the impression that Totaro views the *Decameron* as a great human laboratory in which similar experiments are conducted under varying circumstances, yielding diverse outcomes.

One strength of Totaro's work is his imitation of Boccaccio. This imitation is most evident structurally, as Totaro moves forward sequentially through the *Decameron's* ten *giornate*. Providing some focus — a focus which strengthens Totaro's conceit of ladies and "ragioni d'amore" — is his selection of stories from each day. This structure enables the reader or student to handily reference specific *giornate*, stories, or narrators, while adeptly displaying the resonances among the experiences of the *Decameron's* female characters. By frequently employing Boccaccio's own vocabulary, e.g. "lieto," "né di ferro né di diamante," to sum up *filoni* and/or their differences, Totaro also pithily reminds his audience of key moments in the stories. As he writes in his *Nota conclusiva*, "il significato delle novelle sta dentro di esse" (329).

Moreover, when the work is read linearly, the accumulation generated by his approach illuminates the *filoni* that interest Totaro in a sort of hypertextual way. For example, in describing the conclusion to the story of Violante, narrated in the fifth day by Lauretta, Totaro writes, "Teodoro/Pietro come Giusfredi/Giannotto, come Ricciardo Mainardi: tutti vissero felici e contenti. Guiscardo, invece, dovette morire. Era *di vivissima condizione, e povero*" (158).

Yet, in my opinion, Totaro's structuring of his book in this fashion also has the perhaps unintended consequence of making the book richer by the time one reaches his discussion of the last few *giornate*. I would imagine that for readers who are less steeped in the *Decameron* and who are searching for more guidance, this might become a more serious drawback. I found such close contact with Boccaccio — Totaro in fact has a penchant for regularly interspersing indented paragraph-length quotations from the *Decameron* — quite enjoyable, insofar as they provide almost literally a re-reading of the *Decameron*, though probably not in the sense Totaro meant in his introduction. However, I found that these quotations also diluted the analytical side of Totaro's writing, which as I note above, already tends towards gathering, tracing, and presenting key thematic threads from Boccaccio rather than towards argumentation. Totaro's words had to compete with Boccaccio's vivacious prose for my attention and even literally for space on the page. Thus there is a certain amount of meandering in charting Totaro's own arguments as one reads.

Still, Totaro does make interesting and important points along the way (though I wished for a clearer recapitulation or emphasis of these points before reaching his *Nota conclusiva*). The analysis he most strongly and strikingly offers returns to his initial notion of the *Decameron* as the reflection of a mercantile society: in short, he describes the *Decameron's* human economy as it is embodied by women and the transactions of the human and ideological capital they represent, so to speak. The ladies' "ragioni d'amore" are, he demonstrates, inextricably entwined with other "ragioni" — the *ragion di mercatura* being one repeated example, which returns us indirectly, as he observes, to "Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore," ladies as subjects and objects of bourgeois love (333). Totaro concludes that Boccaccio in fact resists the reduction of human interactions to an economy of exchanges of calculated value, that Boccaccio speaks, though ironically and ambiguously, to a select audience susceptible to love's caprices and irrationality, those who possess an "intelletto d'amore": "E in nome dell'amore si oppone alla *ragion di mercatura* che tutto contamina. Con ironia, però, senza enfasi. E senza clamore, appunto come Griselda, come le donne del suo *Decameron: resistenti*, con inevitabile ambiguità" (335).

In conclusion, while Totaro traces a fascinating topic skillfully throughout the *Decameron*, his work will, I believe, best serve those seeking a guided tour of the *giornate* with attention to gender; or those interested in the interface of the mercantile with the literary. One lingering question for me is the extent of Totaro's acceptance of the interpretative terms set forth by Boccaccio in such authorial moments as the *proemio*.

All the same, readers may find Totaro's approach — in its mimicking of a complex, sweeping text which is arguably much more than the sum of its individual episodes — refreshing in its attempt to explain the origins of the multifarious destinies of women in the *Decameron*.

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