

Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Boccaccio's Expositions on Dante's Comedy*. Translated, with introduction and notes, by Michael Papio. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009. Pp. 764. \$140. ISBN: 978-0802099754.

In addition to being one of the greatest Italian authors, Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-75) is renowned as the first biographer of Dante. Across the several redactions of his *Trattatello*, Boccaccio describes the life and works of Dante Alighieri. Additionally, his *Expositions* figure among the most important fourteenth-century commentaries on Dante's *Comedy*. The *Expositions* have been available in their original Italian for decades, and they can also be accessed through online databases like the Dartmouth Dante Project (<http://dante.dartmouth.edu>) and the Princeton Dante Project (<http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante>). As important as those resources are, Michael Papio's volume is an important contribution to Dante scholarship. It is a highly exacting English translation of the complete work that allows readers to experience the *Expositions* as an integral work, rather than as distinct passages. With its lengthy introduction, Papio's volume offers a full perspective on Boccaccio's interpretation of Dante's poem.

Commissioned in 1373 by the Florentine Republic as a series of public lectures, the *Expositions* cover the first seventeen cantos of *Inferno*; afterwards, Boccaccio became too ill to carry on the work. The *Expositions* are rich in biographical and historical detail, and in the literary analysis of Dante's *magnum opus*. Each exposition is dedicated to a canto of *Inferno*, and is divided between a literal explanation of Dante's language, and an allegorical reading of the passage. In all cases the literal exposition comes first. At times, the literal explanation becomes pedantic, as in the passage below from canto 4 (the statements in italics are passages from Dante's poem, while those in Roman letters are Boccaccio's exposition):

We came to the foot of a noble castle, of noble design, encircled seven times by high walls and guarded al round, surrounded, by a beautiful stream. We crossed it, the stream, as over dry land, just as if it were solid earth. (p. 198)

When reading these passages, the reader may be confused why Boccaccio dedicated so much ink to clarify Dante's already clear language. Yet they are a fundamental part of Boccaccio's commentary, and therefore absolutely essential to a complete volume of the *Expositions*. The fault, therefore, is Boccaccio's, and not Papio's, who renders them with clarity.

Other portions of the literal explanations, however, offer expanded analyses of the episodes and characters that go well beyond the surface of

Dante's text. For example, Boccaccio provides the following portrait of Ciaccio the glutton in canto 6:

This Ciaccio was not exactly a habitué of the courts of the great families; rather, because he had very little to spend and was, as he himself says, completely given over to the vice of gluttony, he performed the role of jokester and in this way regularly passed his time in the company of noblemen and the rich, especially with those who ate and drank sumptuously and extravagantly. When he was summoned by noblemen to supper, he gladly obliged. Similarly, when they did not invite him, he invited himself and became, on account of this vice, very well known among all the Florentines. (p. 307)

As the passage illustrates, in portions such as this Boccaccio employs his substantial literary talents to bring Dante's characters and episodes to life. The passage, above, provides insights into Ciaccio's personality and habits, as well as into the social, economic and historical context of the Florence in which he lived. It is in these moments that Boccaccio's literal expositions truly engage the readers. Yet these moments are comingled with the word-for-word explanations of Dante's text, and cannot be easily separated from them.

The second half of each exposition is dedicated to an allegorical reading, although for several cantos (e.g., cantos 10, 11, 15) Boccaccio explains that no allegory is to be found. In the allegorical portions, Boccaccio brings his extensive knowledge of theology, the liturgy, and literature to bear on the episodes. Boccaccio, for instance, explains the presence of Pluto in canto 7 through the use of Roman mythology:

At the time of the flood that took place in Thessaly during the reign of King Osyges, a merchant called Iasion happened to find himself in Crete. He had a great deal of money because he had collected an enormous amount of grain, which had sprung up on account of the fertility of the then finished growing season. [...] By selling it all in this way, he made so much money that he amazed even himself. Thus, it is said that from Ceres (his grain) he generated Pluto (boundless wealth). Pluto, then, who represents worldly riches, is situated in this place in order to torment those who used their money poorly, as we shall soon see. (p. 355)

The allegorical portions present readings that are, strictly speaking, Boccaccio's interpretations. They may not necessarily be, in other words, what Dante intended. There is nothing in canto 7 that suggests the story of Iasion. Strictly speaking, the allegorical passage is the interpretation of Boccaccio the proto-Humanist, and not necessarily that of the medieval Dante. This is not to say that they are unimportant. On the contrary, they are important precisely on account of Boccaccio's stature as a literary au-

thor and as a *dantista*. As the passage also exemplifies, Papio's translation renders Boccaccio's medieval Italian into clear, readable English.

In conclusion, Michael Papio's volume opens up Boccaccio's literary criticism to scholars unfamiliar with Italian. It marks an important contribution to the field of medieval Italian literature.

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