

Alfano, Giancarlo. *Introduzione alla lettura del «Decameron» di Boccaccio*. Roma-Bari: Editori Laterza, 2014. Pp. 216. €20,00. ISBN: 9788858110522.

Alfano's *Introduzione alla lettura del «Decameron» di Boccaccio* has its very distinctive feature in the author's ability to ground Boccaccio's book solidly in its historical context. From the very beginning — Alfano seems to maintain — the *Decameron's raison d'être* originates in the darkness of the moral, sociological, environmental and political changes brought about by the calamity of the Black Death that developed in Central Asia around 1341, spread to the west and all the way to Russia and the Black Sea, reaching Constantinople between the end of 1346 and the beginning of 1347. In that same year of 1347, the plague travelled from Messina to Marseille and then to Genoa from where it finally reached Florence in 1348. Alfano analyses in detail the devastating consequences of this disease which generated, as its main byproduct, a sort of "cognitive shock" (5) among the cohorts of intellectuals, scientists, philosophers and physicians who attempted to provide an interpretation of this phenomenon by referring to known and unknown value systems, natural and supernatural paradigms.

Among those intellectuals, Petrarch chose to internalize the plague, so to speak, and to convert it into the trigger of a path to moral regeneration that would lead him to reorganize the material of his *Canzoniere* around the process of acquisition of self-consciousness initiated by Laura's death during the Black Death. However, as noted by Alfano, Petrarch not only offered no description of the plague but made no reference to it throughout his work.

Conversely, Boccaccio "sigilla la sua raccolta di racconti chiudendola in una cornice che non solo offre una rappresentazione dettagliata del morbo e dei suoi effetti sugli esseri umani, ma ne fa il presupposto dell'opera, il suo nucleo centrale" (6). The decision of the ten frame story youths to gather together in the church of Santa Maria Novella, alongside their subsequent resolution to flee from the city of Florence and take refuge in the countryside, is thus emphasized as their answer to a social and moral emergency that is the main result of the sanitary emergency brought about by the eruption of the pandemic. Alfano's precise introduction, mirroring Boccaccio's description of the ravaging effects of the disease in the *Decameron's* introduction, enables the readers to grasp the full extent of the book's "political agenda," which is expressed through the action of the ten frame story youths leaving the agonizing body of the city of Florence to

re-found a viable, reasonably healthy and ethically organized community in the countryside:

L'incontro in chiesa sigla il passaggio dalla peste alla vita lieta, dalla distruzione alla ricostruzione. La vita dei giovani in campagna va infatti intesa come un'esperienza di rifondazione della vita associata, basata su leggi condivise, su comportamenti ispirati alla correttezza reciproca, sulla scansione regolata dal tempo. (9)

The purpose of telling stories and the model of “piacere onesto” realized by the act of storytelling is therefore central and closely linked to the representation of that world from which the ten youths have departed to undertake their regenerative journey. Far from being an abstract concept or an idealized construction, this world, Alfano says, is mainly the city of Florence, in which one-fifth of the novellas are set, and that “assume nell'opera una particolare rilevanza simbolica, narrativa e ideologica” (111). This is not to say that Boccaccio is not exploring in detail other topographical and sociological “places,” such as Naples for example — which the empirical author of the *Decameron* knew particularly well — though it is clear that the city of Florence is of paramount importance to decoding the web of symbolic allusions and double meanings built by Boccaccio around the shared knowledge of anecdotes, historical characters, toponyms and gossip that was readily available to the audience of his times.

In this perspective, by assisting the contemporary reader in the act of decoding such encrypted meanings, Alfano fulfils the horizon of expectation generated at the beginning of his book when he clearly set the historical and sociological scene in which the *Decameron* originated. His approach is consistent with the methodological paradigm (or one of the paradigms) adopted in his analysis of the *Decameron's* realism, which would not be revealed — according to Alfano — in the representation of certain historical facts or characters described in the novellas, but would become apparent “nel sistema di coordinate spaziali e cronologiche che configurano l'azione” (103). Taking inspiration from the studies of Mikhail Bakhtin on the “chronotope” — a concept that describes the configuration of time and space in literary discourse — Alfano explains how the organization of space throughout the narrative of the *Decameron* is consistent with a corresponding organization of time. Among the examples provided, one of the strong (and maybe the strongest) chronotopes of the book is identified in the model of the garden, which is the ordered stage of the storytellers' performance and in which the action is organized according to an extremely ritualized time. Another important chronotope pinpointed by Alfano is the journey, linking the act of exploring a wide space and the

suspension of time experienced in this narrative mode through the world of trade and profit built by the merchants.

Following Alfano's logic, which aims at emphasizing the complexity of spatial and temporal coordinates that intersect in the *Decameron*, it clearly follows that the realism conveyed by the book is grounded less on the act of mirroring Boccaccio's society and more on the dialogues performed by the different characters and storytellers through the comparison of the various chronotopes and interpretation of the numerous tales discussed by the ten youths in the garden. In a sense, using another Bakhtinian term, we would dare put forward the hypothesis that Alfano sees Boccaccio's realism as dialogic and polyphonic. This speculation would also be confirmed by another remarkable aspect underlined by Alfano, as he illustrates the typicality of the *Decameron's* characters that, in his opinion, depends on their "identikit" — or, as Giancarlo Mazzacurati firstly proposed, their "carta d'identità" — which qualifies the narrative with substantial elements of verisimilitude. Despite the fact that characters are described in great detail, to the extent that one may be able to predict the unfolding of the novella and its moral meaning from that "carta d'identità" that is attached to the characters, more often than not our expectations may be betrayed when we discover that the stories are more complex, convoluted and morally opaque than we had originally anticipated. This is due to that dialogic element that I have mentioned above — seemingly, one of the key methodological features of Alfano's interpretation of the *Decameron* — that permeates the "new morality" expressed by Boccaccio and his storytellers. This new morality, "si ricava sia dalla più attenta individualizzazione dei personaggi, sia da un più complesso rapporto tra discorso e racconto, ossia tra situazione comunicativa e contenuto narrativo" (77). In other words, the readers are not offered the illustration of a ready-made *Weltanschauung* conveyed by the novellas and their characters but instead have to formulate their own judgment on the case-study portrayed by each novella "a partire dai dati identificativi dei personaggi, dall'ambientazione delle loro storie, dal rapporto del racconto con altri racconti e altra letteratura" (78).

To conclude, even though its title might lead us to believe that this volume aims to fulfil primarily an educational role for Boccaccio's students of third-level educational institutions, we are pleasantly surprised to discover that Alfano has managed to build his original scholarly research on Boccaccio into this work, which should be read in parallel with the new edition and commentary of the *Decameron* published by Rizzoli in 2014 for which Alfano compiled the introductory notes of each novella and Boccaccio's biographical profile (Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Decameron*. A cura di Amedeo

Quondam, Maurizio Fiorilla e Giancarlo Alfano. Milano: Rizzoli. BUR Classici. 2013).

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