

Kristina M. Olson. *Courtesy Lost: Dante, Boccaccio, and the Literature of History*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014. x + 248 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4426-4707-7. \$65.

The question of Dante's influence on Boccaccio's literary and intellectual works has long occupied scholars of both authors. Readers of Boccaccio's works have often seen — and in some cases still do see — a corpus that could not measure up to that of his great predecessor and an author who undermined the more serious poet's structures of meaning. Recent studies on Boccaccio and Dante have shed new light on the intellectual program behind Boccaccio's editing of Dante's texts and on the complexities of his re-fashioning of Dante's ideas and persona within a public context, showing that works such as the *Decameron* cannot be considered mere parody or camp. If, in the conclusion to the *Filocolo*, Boccaccio tells his work to “fly low” and to feel “no ambition to be where they sing the measured verses of the Florentine Dante” whom it “should reverently follow as a mere servant,” then we are now beginning to understand that behind such a deliberately humble stance lies an elaborate cultural paradigm developed by Boccaccio over the course of his career. Dante was a single part — albeit an integral one — of Boccaccio's larger ambitions to establish a new Florentine literary and intellectual culture. By reconstructing the historical and political contexts of Boccaccio's engagement with Dante in the *Decameron* and the *Esposizioni*, Kristina Olson's book offers excellent new interpretations of key tales from the *Decameron* and formulates a clear and convincing vision of how Boccaccio sought to reshape Dante's politics for his own world.

As the title makes clear, the book focuses on the evolving valences of the concept of *cortesia* in the years between Dante and Boccaccio and endeavors to answer the question of how we should “figure the bivalent concept of *cortesia*,” which is for Boccaccio “an ethic of generosity that is also associated with violence” (28). She finds that we can see in the *Decameron* a contradictory “nostalgia for an aristocratic past on the eve of civic humanism” (28). Thus, her principal thesis across the book does much to help dismantle, on the one hand, long-standing interpretations of the *Decameron* as being governed by a mercantile ethos, and, on the other, wholly apolitical readings of the work that see politics and history as mere background noise to the otherwise playful *novelle*. She deftly navigates the complexities of Boccaccio's political ideology, which lies somewhere between the court and the marketplace. Olson shows how Boccaccio's understanding of *cortesia*, as an ethic based on the practice of acts of civility, broadens the framework of the concept so that he can incorporate it within his “republican spirit”

(26). Thanks to her attentive readings, we can see how Boccaccio both highlights the factionalism of the Florentine aristocracy, whose social code was linked to the outdated rituals of a courtly past, and criticizes merchants and clerics for lacking such a unitary ethos. Nostalgic for a code of conduct that would be of broad social benefit, Boccaccio — Olson suggests — anticipates the moral and political thought of the civic humanists.

In the introduction, after tracing a history of the concept of *cortesía* both as a sociological practice and as a literary phenomenon, Olson clearly lays out the range of meanings that both Dante and Boccaccio associated with the word *cortesía* within their different historical contexts. The first chapter provides incisive interpretations of *Decameron* 1.8 and 6.9, framed by readings of chronicle accounts of the Florentine elite and by readings of *Inferno* 16 and Boccaccio's interpretation of that canto in his *Esposizioni*. The chapter opens with a historical reconstruction of the transformation of the Florentine elite between the early *comune* and Dante's time and quickly turns to the complaint about the *gente nuova* of Florence in *Inferno* 16. This leads to a discussion of the intertextual relationship between this canto and tales 1.8 and 6.9 of the *Decameron*. Both tales are linked to *Inferno* 16: the first by Dante's naming of Guglielmo Borsiere, the protagonist of 1.8; the second by Boccaccio's repetition of language about the *brigata* of 3.9 in *Esposizioni* 16. From this perspective, Olson traces the failure of invective to change human behavior and the success of the quick response in *Decameron* 1.8, as the former becomes the latter in the transformation of the Dantean subtext into a new, superior narrative form. The famous vignette about Guido Cavalcanti and Betto Brunelleschi's *brigata* represents, for Olson, a reduced *mise-en-scène* of the factional violence historically carried out by the Brunelleschi and Cavalcanti families. We are thus to understand Boccaccio's stance vis-à-vis Dante's historical vision between optimism and pessimism, as both proposing a solution for the future and diagnosing a problem inherited from the past.

The second chapter follows a similar strategy of linking historical context, Dante's *Commedia*, and Boccaccio's *Esposizioni* in order to interpret tales of the *Decameron*. Olson first offers a detailed survey of how the Florentine elite's political and economic life changed in the years between Dante and Boccaccio. Reading backwards from Boccaccio's interpretations of the *Commedia* to the *Decameron*, it offers readings of *Decameron* 9.8 and 6.9 as enacting, in the first instance, the Dantean prophecy of violence from *Inferno* 6 and, in the second, the political relationship between magnates and the *popolo*. Olson interprets these stories from a perspective that links eco-

nomics to politics. In 9.8, she maintains, Boccaccio shows sympathy for noble families such as the Donati, who no longer possessed the means to carry out fully the code of *cortesia*, while he criticizes families such as the Cerchi, of the *gente nuova*, for their greed. Olson’s interpretation of 6.9 similarly shows how Boccaccio links the ideals of *cortesia* to the *popolo*, in the form of Cisti il fornaio, in a Dantean critique of the mercantile elite, which is represented by Geri Spini. The portrait she paints of Boccaccio reveals that his political views, unlike Dante’s, run along “personal and moral, rather than institutional” lines (71).

In the third chapter, Olson tackles the “ethical structure” of the *Decameron*, which she shows as having taken shape independently, both in response to a changing social and economic context and in contrast to Dante’s moral and political invectives. She sees the dialectic between courtesy and greed manifesting itself once more in figures linked to Dante’s life and works: Pope Boniface VIII and Cangrande della Scala, but also Ghino di Tacco. For Olson, Boccaccio portrays the two secular figures as key adapters of the ethic of courtesy as it becomes representative of “the idea of hospitality and the virtue of liberality” (99), while he uses Boniface as the embodiment of the avarice of the Church. She offers an impressive reading of the figure of Cangrande in *Decameron* 1.7 in relation to *Paradiso* 17, but also in dialogue with Boccaccio’s *Trattatello*, the early commentaries on the *Commedia*, and Petrarch’s *Rerum memorandarum libri*. This reading is followed by a similarly contextualized reading of *Decameron* 10.2, as an “oblique criticism” of Boniface (100), and by a reflection on Boccaccio’s critique of mercantile avarice in *Decameron* 1.1 and in the *Esposizioni*. She finds good evidence to qualify the so-called mercantile ethics of the *Decameron*, but not to eliminate the idea altogether. Moving on to an intertextual reading of *Decameron* 10.3, she reads the *novella* of Mitridanes and Natan as a “dramatic enactment of the issues raised by [Boccaccio’s interpretation of] *Inferno* 1” (133). Thus, Olson establishes the ethics of the *Decameron* as framed between the avarice of the Church (and to some extent that of the mercantile class) and the courtesy, viz. *magnificenza*, of the aristocracy. Boccaccio roots his ethical vision in a reflection on Dante’s world as it is represented in the *Commedia*. Even as Boccaccio aligns his intentions with those of Dante, he modifies the mode of representation from invective and prophecy to admonition and exemplum.

The fourth and final chapter examines the intertexts between the *Decameron* and Dante’s angry nostalgia for a bygone noble Florence. It focuses on Boccaccio’s effort to recover from a Ghibelline past a culture of *cortesia* for the future. Olson begins by analyzing *Decameron* 2.6, featuring

Currado Malaspina, relative of Dante's host Franceschino Malaspina. She interprets the story as a performance of Boccaccio's engagement with Dante's treatment of nobility in *Purgatorio* 7 and 8. This relationship is not defined merely in terms of a concretization of abstract concepts; instead, the novella dramatizes the same question posed by Dante, whether nobility is inherited or performed, and thereby seeks to reconcile the contradictions between the two cantos. She sees in this story an expression of Boccaccio's hope in the survival of courtesy via displacement outside of the court. The chapter continues with an examination of courtesy in terms of sublimated sexual desire in 10.6 and 10.7, stories that see as protagonists Peter III of Aragon and Charles I of Anjou. Following Dante's association of virility with genealogy, Boccaccio links *cortesia* to a tradition of courtly love, according to which virility is portrayed as a "sublimation of sexual potency" (167). Charles I is portrayed as virtuous, but he requires a forceful sublimation of sexual desire, whereas Peter III is portrayed as a virtuous leader able to convert desire to compassion. After linking this diptych to Boccaccio's *Esposizioni* on *Inferno* 10, Olson moves on to read, in relation to *Purgatorio* 14, two stories set in Romagna (5.4 and 5.8), which again connect sexual desire to the propagation and renovation of courtesy. *Decameron* 5.4, she argues, responds to the lament of courtesy lost in *Purgatorio* 14 by dramatizing the transformation of courtesy in the marriage of Caterina and Ricciardo, Guelph and Ghibelline. Here female desire takes on an active role in the union, while in *Decameron* 5.8 it is subjected to male violence. With its well-known Dantean references, the story of Nastagio degli Onesti highlights the violence at the heart of continuing a solely Ghibelline political and ethical program. The chapter concludes with an optimistic reading of the story of Federigo degli Alberighi (5.9), a character whom she links to Corso Donati. This tale, she maintains, documents the adaptation of courtesy through the marriage of the impoverished, though virtuous, nobleman with a wealthy and fiscally responsible widow.

The book concludes by reiterating the claim that holds such a rich variety of readings together. Boccaccio's engagement with Dante is not sarcastic or parodic. Rather, it is indicative of a tension in his ideology between dedication to the civic ideals of the Florentine Republic and nostalgia for the ethical unity of an older, aristocratic Florence, which both manifest themselves in his devotion to Dante. If I must take issue with some part of Olson's impressive interpretative apparatus, I only note that her interpretations stop at the historical level of representation, which — from my perspective — is just the beginning of Boccaccio's system of meaning in the *Decameron*. At most, her interpretations link history and politics to ethics, but not to larger

questions also important to Boccaccio. For example, there must be something more than political behavior behind a tale like *Decameron* 6.9, where the critique of the Florentine new elite's relationship with the papacy pivots around the bread and wine that would be used to celebrate the Eucharist. This is not, however, a real criticism of her approach, since she does not deny validity to other forms of interpretation. In fact, by taking the historical, and therefore the ethical and political, seriously, she recovers a key part of the *Decameron's* structures of meaning that has heretofore been cast aside either as mere chaff or as a simple by-product of its realism. If there are figural interpretations to be made of the *Decameron* and its tales, they must be rooted in history. Indeed, as Olson shows, we should take into account Boccaccio's engagement with the historical world in the *Decameron* just as seriously as we do that of Dante in the *Commedia*. By placing Dante and Boccaccio on equal ground, then, Olson's book gives readers the means to see past the hierarchy of value embedded in Italian literary history, to read further into the *Decameron's* ideology, and to find, after all, the creation of a serious author.

*Courtesy Lost* is an excellent book about Boccaccio and his productive transformation of Dante's historical vision in the *Decameron* and *Esposizioni*. The ease of expression with which it is written makes the immense erudition behind it accessible to a wide range of readers. It is furnished with a full bibliography, extensive notes, and a useful index. Olson's book will make a lasting impact on the field of Boccaccio Studies and will surely become required reading not only for readers of Boccaccio and Dante, but also for any scholar interested in exploring the interrelation between history and literature in the Middle Ages.

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