

Migiel, Marilyn. *The Ethical Dimension of the Decameron*. Toronto: University of Toronto, 2015. Pp. xi + 197. ISBN 978-1-4426-3188-5.

Marilyn Migiel's 2015 book, *The Ethical Dimension of the Decameron*, is a rigorous reflection upon our practices of translating and reading Boccaccio's vernacular opus. Underlying Migiel's premise is the understanding that the *Decameron* is not intended to entertain us, but to test our analytical abilities as readers of unpredictable narratives. As in her earlier book, *A Rhetoric of the Decameron*, Migiel grapples with the ethical nature of Boccaccio's interpellation of readers as participants in Boccaccio's project. Our interpretation of the characters and their vicissitudes across one hundred tales reveals the rigidity of our preconceptions and, consequently, our obligation to remain faithful to the word of the text. In comparison to the focus on gender and language in *A Rhetoric of the Decameron*, here Migiel broadens her area of inquiry to a wider consideration of ethical concerns, especially the formation and perception of bias in Boccaccio criticism and English translations. The audience of this important book thus includes multiple readerly communities: translators, scholars and students of the work in the original and in translation.

The first chapter posits that the ethical dimension of the work can escape the reader because of choices made by translators. I read this chapter as the foundation of Migiel's project, originating in concerns about English translations (those by McWilliam, Musa and Bondanella, and Waldman) and, specifically, how those choices have been received by first-time students of the *Decameron*. She offers her translation of the exchange between Dioneo and Pampinea from the Introduction to Day One as an example of how these different renditions can blind us to the Aristotelian precepts guiding Pampinea's interest in living the good life, namely that happiness is the ultimate goal of human activity. Her reading aptly shows us the subtle ways in which the gendered and ethical ambiguities of the text are lost in translation. She concludes with an exhortation to scholars to understand why translators have made such choices and to offer correction when necessary.

In the chapter that follows, Migiel reprises her arguments from her earlier work, *A Rhetoric of the Decameron* (2003), namely that sexually figurative language is the prerogative of men, an idea dually and unwittingly sanctioned by men and women. She argues that we as readers play a crucial role in filling in the ambiguity created by metaphor, a role that she sees as carrying ethical implications. In order to carry this burden responsibly, Migiel argues that we must read such rhetorical situations in a thorough and bal-

anced way, keeping in mind our own preconceptions and tendencies to privilege certain moments of the text. Here, the tenth tale of the First Day is her example. The author aptly shows how scholars and translators have willfully privileged Maestro Alberto's suffering and coded the analogy of the leek, believing the white part of the leek to refer to the elderly, and the green part to the young. She argues that this is contrary to what is in the text. Instead, as Migiel convincingly demonstrates, Pampinea stacks the odds against Madonna Malgherida, setting the stage for Maestro Alberto's favorable reception by critics and for Madonna Malgherida to lose in this particular "sex war."

The third chapter turns from a consideration of male privilege to class privilege. While not considering the historical contexts that create class difference, she instead illustrates the difficulty of translating "moral vocabularies" (39) over time with a close reading of *Decameron* 3.2 and the contrast between the royal wisdom of Agilulf and the equal wisdom of the stablehand. She reviews how various editions and English translations have attempted to frame this story as the competition of "senno" (wisdom) between the two male protagonists, thereby unreasonably leveling class difference. Yet Pampinea foregrounds the king's wisdom and knowledge, a privileging of the upper classes that is reinforced, according to Migiel, by the reader's "unconscious schemas" that shape their reception of people from different classes.

Migiel turns to *Decameron* 3.8, the tale of Ferondo, in the fourth chapter, which considers, as she writes, the "language we use to describe and assess human conduct" (54). More specifically, she focuses on the deceptive nature of language in ascertaining the truth of a situation. The role of this tale for Migiel is to highlight our readerly abilities to judge and evaluate the evidence presented. Again, this tale serves as a way for us to reflect upon our own "abilities of discernment" (55), for readers tend to mimic the story's own characters in their leaps of judgment, accepting atypical and unlikely realities as true. Various translations render the tale of Ferondo's wife, in particular, a test of the reader's inclination to sympathize or blame a female character whose motivations are not clearly described by the text.

The alacrity with which critics have judged behavior is highlighted in her reading of *Decameron* 7.4, the tale of Tofano and Ghita, in chapter five. As she convincingly argues, readers tend to frame their reception of Ghita's behavior in Lauretta's terms, agreeing that Tofano got what he deserved and that Ghita's inconsistent conduct is still nonetheless excusable and even laudable. Migiel's extended close analysis shows how this tale "like any successful ideology, must absorb and neutralize opposing views" (74). As a tale

that itself exemplifies a hasty judgment, we should ask ourselves if we wish to mirror the tale's structure or maintain a distant, critical eye. (However, is Wallace truly saying that Ghita's behavior is virtuous or that it is simply "extraordinary" [173 n7]?)

Chapter Six opens with an important question: how careful are we of the "filtering mechanisms," as she puts it, that present the situations we rush to praise or blame? She examines how translators have variously characterized Zinevra's indirect discourse in divergent ways, assigning both insult and injury without letting us appreciate the truth of her story, nor of her attempts to speak that truth to power. Also under examination here is the tale of Cattella (3.6), who expresses her outrage against the injustice and violence done to her, but who is nonetheless disadvantaged by Fiammetta's choice to give more space to Ricciardo's justification; Giletta (3.9), who adopts Zinevra's strategy of speaking to authority but has the support of the narrator, Neifile; or, conversely, Monna Giovanna (5.9), whose lack of courtesy causes the reader to rush to blame her. The frame characters exploit direct and indirect discourse to influence our positive and negative judgment.

The relationship between irony and the ethical dimension of our reading the *Decameron* is the focus of chapter seven, which is an engaging reading of the function of irony as revealing the underside of magnanimity, such as scholarship has rarely read in Day Ten tales, especially 10.4 (Gentile de' Carisendi). Ironic readings, however, are difficult to find when readers carry the expectation that authors bring gravity to their tone. We are more willing to identify irony when we believe that moral judgment is erroneous, and the topic is fitting for such ironic treatment. Though the tales of Day Ten are rarely seen in this light, Migiel urges us to see their range and extremes as a test of our ethical standards.

The final chapter articulates how difficult and futile it can be to arrive at a conclusion for the *Decameron*, given the "illusion of stability and finality" provided by the text (139), and most specifically the Author's claims, which too often elide questions about the stability of the Author.

*The Ethical Dimension of the Decameron* is an important work. It reads as both the culmination of a years-long meditation on the act of reading Boccaccio's vernacular opus and as an exhortation for wide reflection on narrative analysis within the field. My quibbles with the book, the absence of translation theory and of bibliographic items pertaining to gender studies, are few and do not detract from the great contribution that this book makes to our field. *Ethical Dimension* is at once a wake-up call to Boccaccio scholars, a pedagogical tool for use in explaining the impossibility of arriving at conclusions and the narrative structure of his work, and a voice that

ably situates the *Decameron* within current rhetorical concerns over information, truth and narrativity. Her writing is lively and engaged, and does not let us off the hook – much like Boccaccio’s own voice.

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