

Luca Fiorentini. *Petrarch and Boccaccio in the First Commentaries on Dante's Commedia: A Literary Canon Before its Official Birth*. New York: Routledge, 2020. 112 pp.

Succinct and focused, Luca Fiorentini's book will be of interest to scholars of Italian medieval poetry and literature, particularly those dedicated to the study of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. The four neatly formulated chapters of this work argue persuasively that the history of the canon comprising Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio "commences when it separates from those who created it and begins to lead an autonomous life" (6), and this, Fiorentini maintains, antedates by several decades the period generally believed to have given rise to its birth. According to his detailed examination, the formation of the canon falls squarely in the latter half of the fourteenth century.

In Fiorentini's view, the first verifiable recognition of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio as the "tre corone" of the Italian literary tradition dates to the winter of 1425–26 and a "rather bizarre" text authored by Giovanni Gherardi. Written during a period in which the vernacular was not broadly accepted or recognized as a literary language, Gherardi's *Paradiso degli Alberti* was itself composed in the vernacular. Here Fiorentini sets the groundwork for his study by discussing the well-known critical response to the writings of the "three crowns" not simply by a minor author like Gherardi but, for the most part, by some of the predominant literati of the fourteenth century. What follows highlights the well-known controversies surrounding the discussion of the vernacular as it applies to the literary activity of Giovanni Boccaccio and Francesco Petrarca, in particular, and their often contrasting views regarding Dante. The arguments are by now familiar to dedicated scholars yet still worthy of additional analysis, particularly so in the light of the thesis at hand, and while the reframing of this discussion and its elaboration might not seem particularly exhaustive, the study offers a meaningful contribution to the field.

The greater focus of this book is on the interplay among the "tre corone" within the nascent tradition of commentary on the *Commedia*. Given the chronology of their literary production, Petrarch and Boccaccio naturally take center stage, with Petrarch, as one might expect, playing the role of antagonist. His well-documented ambivalence toward the elder poet's work as well as his critical stance on the merits of the vernacular are discussed to some degree. Boccaccio, whose lessons would prove highly influential to contemporaries and successive commentators, is appropriately characterized as a significant admirer of Dante and the *Commedia*.

In the first of these chapters, "Poetry, language, allegory: Dante in the hands of Petrarca and Boccaccio," Fiorentini considers the discussion among Dante's earliest readers regarding his use of the vernacular. He considers the rather vexing if well-known letter of friar Ilaro, deeming it "a very peculiar origin myth" (9) and a

commentary in its own right. Despite the apparently fictitious nature of the epistle and the underlying goal of its mysterious author, the presumption that an exegetic scaffolding is needed in order to read the *Commedia* seems, on the one hand, to demonstrate the profound nature of the text and, on the other, to undermine the argument that it was intended for uncultured readers by an author unable to adequately express himself in Latin. Treatment focuses on Boccaccio's efforts to "disarm Petrarch's anti-Dantism" (19), which recalls the more salient judgments expressed by the two writers and theorists, in particular those regarding the merits of the vernacular as a poetic language and the notion of mutability. The chapter concludes with an analysis of Boccaccio's apparent "oscillation" in theoretical approach, specifically in the two decades between his writing of the *Trattatello in Laude di Dante* and the *Esposizioni sopra la Comedia di Dante*. This tension, too, brings to the fore the notion of mutability.

In the second chapter, "Interpreting Dante in the shadow of Petrarch and Boccaccio," Fiorentini considers early interpreters of Dante and the *Commedia*, namely those who explicitly refer to Boccaccio and Petrarch. Noting that Guglielmo Maramauro's *Expositione sopra "l'Inferno" di Dante Alighieri* preceded Benvenuto da Imola's *Comentum super Dantis Aldigherij Comoediam* and that the works of Francesco da Buti, the Anonimo Fiorentino and Filippo Villani were produced in close proximity to Boccaccio, he ventures to determine the degree to which these commentators were influenced by Boccaccio and Petrarch, were aware of the tension between the two writers with regard to interpreting Dante, or were, conversely, autonomous in their interpretations. The examination also brings into focus two early commentaries on Dante that were erroneously attributed to Petrarch, the former written by Jacopo della Lana, an early interpreter of Dante from Bologna, and the latter linked to two documents, namely manuscript 1036 of the Biblioteca Riccardiana of Florence and the manuscript known as Phillipps 247, which date to the last years of the fourteenth century and the first of the fifteenth century. Indeed, it becomes amply clear that these early interpreters were reading Dante through the eyes of Petrarch and Boccaccio, albeit to varying degrees and at times indirectly. Among the earliest interpreters of the *Commedia*, Petrarch and Boccaccio are characterized as "exegetic sources" and not referred to comparatively, that is according to their literary production and Dante's works. Nonetheless, despite their presence in early commentaries, there is no clear demonstration that the three writers had by then developed into a cohesive and readily identifiable literary group.

The second half of the study aims to identify with some precision the circumstances surrounding the explicit recognition of the three crowns of the Italian literary tradition. Titled "Against Petrarch, theoretician of poetry," chapter three examines the work of Benvenuto da Imola, who was personally familiar with Petrarch and Boccaccio, although not to the same degree with both. Benvenuto was a friend

and great admirer of Boccaccio, and Fiorentini sees evidence that Benvenuto was aware of the “oscillations” (70) present in Boccaccio’s interpretation of Dante. The elaboration of Boccaccio’s ideas and reaction to Petrarch’s critiques according to Benvenuto are discussed along with the influence that his commentary had on successive commentators, namely the Anonimo Fiorentino, Francesco da Buti and Giovanni Bertoldi da Serravalle, a pupil of Benvenuto. Fiorentini suggests that if it is possible to determine a “precise birthday” for the “canon of the *Tre Corone*,” then it can be ascribed to the years of Benvenuto da Imola’s activity, which dates from the mid-1370s to the first half of the 1380s.

Fiorentini concludes his work with a chapter titled “Contempt for the present: the revenge of Petrarch the moralist and historian,” in which Dante’s treatment of ancient and modern men and events is discussed in the light of a mysterious critique leveled by Benvenuto da Imola. Some attention is drawn to the judgment of discordant Dante interpreters and theorists of the era, in particular the positions held by Boccaccio and Petrarch. Petrarch’s Latin translation of the Griselda tale provides some insight into his reading of the story. Griselda assumes a “universal stature” (94) as an exemplary figure hearkening back to the poet’s beloved ancients. The chapter closes with an examination of Benvenuto’s indebtedness to Boccaccio. Fiorentini maintains that Boccaccio’s contribution to the early commentaries on Dante is hardly limited to his activity as interpreter. Indeed, the *Decameron* is duly noted as a source.

*Petrarch and Boccaccio in the First Commentaries on Dante’s Commedia* is a compelling, well-formulated study that leads readers to consider more than just the dating of the “tre corone” appellation. As stated by the author, it consists of a partial and condensed examination of the topic to which he — along with other promising scholars — appears ready to dedicate further study. Taking into consideration recent studies in the field, seasoned scholars of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio will find much of the discussion familiar. Nonetheless, Fiorentini succeeds in convincing readers that to examine the *Commedia* through the eyes of its fourteenth-century interpreters is to study also Petrarch and Boccaccio.

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