
Renaissance and Reformation
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eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Boccaccio*

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Book Reviews / Comptes Rendus

Armstrong, Guyda, Rhiannon Daniels, and Stephen J. Milner, eds.

The Cambridge Companion to Boccaccio.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. xxxv, 256. ISBN 978-1-107-60963-1 (paperback) US\$33.95.

Like other volumes of the same series, this new *Cambridge Companion* aims for a complete critical guide to the Italian “third crown,” Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75), while offering an argument for his status as “the pre-eminent cultural mediator of his age” (xiii). Boccaccio’s person as well as his books are seen at the crucial point of different moves: cultural, bibliographical, and of course historical.

After a very useful list of manuscripts (written or compiled by Boccaccio) and a chronology of the author’s life, the volume gathers essays written by the most outstanding scholars in the field, and takes advantage of the recent bibliography published in 2013 on the anniversary of Boccaccio’s birth. The collection is divided into four thematic sections and gives voice to various critical approaches.

Part 1 (“Locating Boccaccio” by Guyda Armstrong, Rhiannon Daniels, Stephen J. Milner, and Beatrice Arduini) underlines the strong relationship between Boccaccio and the material aspect of his writing practice—in his double role as author and civic officer—and how it matured over his life. Analyzing the actual manuscripts copied or possessed by him, the contributors point to Boccaccio’s handwriting and its versatility based on the type of text he had under his eyes and hands. Furthermore, the antiquated idea of an author deeply involved in love affairs, and therefore immoral, is definitively abandoned in favour of a more lucid vision; Daniels, in fact, presents Boccaccio’s dedications and theoretical declarations not as mere expressions of autobiographical sentiments but as rhetorical strategies to catch different audiences.

In part 2 (“Literary Forms and Narrative Voices”), contributions by Pier Massimo Forni, David Lummus, Milner, and F. Regina Psaki dwell on Boccaccio’s acclaimed masterpiece, the *Decameron*: its narrative form, poetics, and role of women. The *Decameron* is linked not only with other works by Boccaccio but also with other authors’ texts: with Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*, first of all, whose articulated structure must have been a model for Boccaccio. Boccaccio’s role both as author-narrator (that is, his literary persona) and as the actual writer of

his works is treated alongside the active role of readers in unfolding the textual doubling. The *Decameron's* characters are analyzed by gender; for instance, Psaki observes that a woman always speaks and acts both as an individual and as a sort of spokesperson of her sex, whereas a man is seen exclusively as an individual.

Part 3 (“Boccaccio’s Literary Contexts”) hosts essays tackling the relations between Boccaccio and the most famous contemporary authorities endorsed directly by him: Dante (Armstrong), Petrarch (Gur Zak), humanism (Tobias Foster Gittes), and of course women (Marilyn Migiel). Boccaccio admired Dante both in private and in public from his youth in Naples; later on in life he devoted himself to materially transcribing Dantean texts (we have three Boccaccian autographs of the *Divine Comedy*) for his personal library and for Petrarch. Armstrong also examines Boccaccio’s works on Dante and how he thus tried to add himself as the third “crown.” The influence of Petrarch, although part of a commonplace according to which Boccaccio would have been converted to a more austere life and literary style, is now put in perspective: Zak shows how Petrarch’s Latin works had a limited impact on Boccaccio’s (and vice versa), and how in general they differ greatly from each other on the question of whether the present is worthy (Boccaccio) or not (Petrarch) compared to the past.

Foster Gittes wonders if Boccaccio can be considered a humanist, and through the analysis of his works the scholar turns the question toward an even broader conclusion: not only did Boccaccio strive to rediscover the classical authors; he also used his awareness of the gap between them and his own peers to “[supply] a theoretical basis for the notion of renaissance” (168). Part 3 ends with an invitation by Miguel—after decades of feminist readings of the *Decameron*—to distinguish interpreters’ ideological perspectives from Boccaccio’s, both in his fictional and non-fictional works, even where readers tend to see the narrator and the author as one.

Part 4 (“Transmission and Adaptation”) explores how Boccaccio and his texts lived over the centuries: Brian Richardson gives an overview of modern and contemporary editions, and how scholars used manuscripts and print copies in their works. Cormac Ó Cuilleaináin investigates the different ways Boccaccio was “translated,” that is, not simply from his language into another but also, more broadly, into other literary genres, structures, and literatures through adaptations and censorship. *Decameron's* success in different media “beyond the text” is the focus, finally, of Massimo Riva’s essay: the field of fine and performing arts is rich with examples inspired by Boccaccio’s tales, and the

silent movies that were produced in the early days of the film industry represent a very precocious interest.

In conclusion, this new book enlightens readers from different disciplines and backgrounds about the works of Boccaccio. It offers a picture of him at the crossroads of media, political commitments, and a literary career, underlines his modernity, and explains why his genius continues to live—even through media he had no opportunity, for reasons of chronology, to exploit.

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Belleforest, François de.

***Le cinquième tome des histoires tragiques.* Édition critique par Hervé-Thomas Campagne.**

Genève : Librairie Droz, 2013. 804 p. ISBN 978-2-600-01569-1 (broché) 104 €.

En janvier 1572, au moment de faire paraître un nouveau recueil, un cinquième, qui pourra enfin consolider sa place parmi les grands « mythographes » de son époque, François de Belleforest s'appuie sur une réputation qui n'est pourtant plus à faire. En effet, son œuvre, bien plus que celle pourtant célèbre de l'Italien Matteo Bandello, a su remarquablement s'imposer dans les milieux lettrés en France et outre-frontières. Traduite en plusieurs langues, elle circule partout en Europe et fait de son auteur l'un des premiers grands écrivains du continent.

La versatilité de l'« histoire tragique » est remarquable. Belleforest reprend à maintes reprises chacun de ses récits pour les peaufiner et en adapter la morale aux événements en cours. C'est ainsi que la plupart des histoires de ce cinquième recueil, nonobstant l'introduction d'« un ordre tout nouveau » (4), ont déjà paru en d'autres lieux. Le format souple et l'effet dramatique de l'« histoire tragique », inspirée à la fois par les auteurs classiques et par les événements socio-politiques contemporains, vise à chaque fois à rejoindre un nouveau public lecteur plus diversifié et surtout plus exigeant.

Le parcours de Belleforest, historien et cartographe, l'amène naturellement à puiser dans une étonnante variété de fonds culturels et littéraires en Europe et ailleurs dans le monde. Par son exemplarité, le récit bref ne permet-il pas à son auteur de composer à chaque fois une mosaïque de cas exemplaires où