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Le muse in giardino: Il paesaggio ameno nelle opere di
Giovanni Boccaccio (review)

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It is instructive to view entries in relation to one another, for one finds that the plurality of voices that this encyclopedia provides puts into relief different interpretations of the same historical events. For example, if one compares the entries on Ghibellines with that on Guelfs, despite general agreement on the facts, there are slight differences in emphasis and interpretation. While one describes the labels of Guelf and Ghibelline as arising from “the dynastic wars of the mid-twelfth century between the Hohenstaufen emperors and the Welf dukes of Bavaria and Saxony” (415), the other points to the climax of the conflict in the disputed election between Philip of Swabia of the Hohenstaufen and Otto of Brunswick. While both describe the terms as ones that polarize already existing factions in Italian communes, the Ghibelline entry cites Frederick I as the main catalyst for the adoption of these divisive parties, and the Guelf entry cites his grandson, Frederick II. If both trace the evolution of the meaning of these terms, they provide differing and complementary views of this evolution. The Ghibelline entry holds that from 1268 on, and even after 1300, the papacy was involved in efforts to overcome Ghibelline resistance in the north, and that by 1300 the term Ghibelline meant opposition to the combined control of the papacy and the Angevins. While the entry on Guelfs agrees generally with this statement, it recognizes more clearly Florence’s new relations with the papacy and the Angevins. Indeed, focusing on Tuscany, the author of this entry holds that after 1266 Ghibellinism is redefined as anti-Florentine sentiment and resistance to this city’s hegemony in the region.

The different nuances in perspective and experience that different contributors provide enriches this collection of well-wrought entries. This fine point aside, the breadth of information on this long period in Italy history and the clarity of presentation found in the volumes make it an invaluable resource for students and teachers.

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Maria Elisa Raja. *Le muse in giardino: Il paesaggio ameno nelle opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*. Alessandria: Edizioni dell’Orso, 2003. Pp. 212.

The topos of the garden is a familiar point of departure for studies of the *Decameron*. But, although *Le muse in giardino* dedicates much space and energy to Boccaccio’s masterpiece, this study is a reading of the “garden-*locus amoenus*” in the complete works of Boccaccio, with the *Decameron* as the

high point. A number of books of North American criticism, such as Victoria Kirkham's *Sign of Reason* (1993) and Janet Smarr's *Boccaccio and Fiammetta* (1986), have sought to do the same in different contexts. Here the author's main purpose is to unearth the parallel between the garden and Boccaccio's own concept of "making literature" by tracing a system of loci from the *Caccia di Diana* to the *Decameron*. Unfortunately, the reader must wait until the last third of the study before the author's thesis is developed, although Raja eventually establishes a system that permits her to argue that the garden is a privileged place in Boccaccio's fiction for ethical growth and understanding, and that it is a model for the role of literature itself.

In the first chapter, "In giardino," the author briefly introduces the role of the "garden-*locus amoenus*" in ancient and medieval literature and gives a quick review of gardens in Boccaccio's works, both fictional and nonfictional. In the second chapter, "Il sistema," Raja walks the reader through the natural, poetic, and rhetorical components of Boccaccio's literary gardens. This chapter has two parts: in the first Raja catalogues the trees, animals, smells, and light of the gardens, while in the second part she adds the "constant characteristics of representation." Among these constant aspects of the garden are the *tempus amoenus*, or the idyllic weather of the garden, and the atmosphere of "lightness and *varietas*." Raja also notes that the garden is almost always presented by Boccaccio in contrast with the *locus horridus*, such as Dante's *selva selvaggia*. She lays the foundation for a system of the garden in a broad spectrum of Boccaccio's works, on the basis of which she will later argue that the model of the "garden-*locus amoenus*" becomes a privileged place for transmitting "un messaggio umano, poetico e letterario" (35). Despite the deferral of the book's main argument, Raja cogently considers Boccaccio's gardens in juxtaposition to the gardens in Boccaccio's sources (Virgil, Ovid, Dante, etc.), pointing out the intertextual network that is always present in the Boccaccian garden.

In the third section of this chapter, Raja discusses the various environments in which narrative action takes place and the different kinds of dramatic situations that take place within them. The most ambitious part of this section is her reading of the *selva*, or wood, as an example of an idyllic *locus amoenus*. As with her earlier discussion of the *locus horridus* / *locus amoenus*, she makes the case that the *selva* can be both Edenic wood and the wood of passions and error. Unfortunately she does not fully develop the contrast between the Dantean *selva selvaggia* and the *boschetto* of earthly plenitude, the models for the Boccaccian "system." Surely Boccaccio took advantage of the ambiguity and permeability of the two places in narrative action: upon entering a wood,

the character is never wholly sure if it will turn out to be *horridus* or *amoenus*. In this same section, Raja briefly discusses the “other” spaces of the city, sea, and countryside. As in her interpretation of the wood/forest, the otherness of these places in relation to the garden could have been more fully developed, for they often intersect with the garden.

In the third chapter, “Paesaggio e narrazione,” Raja traces the narrative action for which the garden is theater, from scenes of love, death, and epic action to ones of trickery, magic, metamorphosis, and dreams. She argues for a reading of the “garden-*locus amoenus*” as a place in which the character grows and reaches an understanding of himself or herself and of the world through an experience that is specific to the garden. In the last chapter, “La consapevolezza e il progetto,” which contains the main thesis of the study, Raja argues for the garden as a place of reflection and maturation, for both character and narrator/author. She says that the connection between action and landscape is not just a narrative expedient, but it creates a textual “release” that leads to a new awareness. The parallel that she draws between literature and garden implicates Boccaccio’s reader as well. If the author in his early works, such as the *Amorosa visione*, entered and experienced gardens, in the *Decameron* it is the reader, following the *brigata*, who enters and experiences the literary work as if it were a garden. Both garden and literature are places of separation from reality that lead to a new conception of reality. Boccaccio’s gardens, she argues, are meant to be entered, experienced, and left behind with messages that will remain valid upon the return to social life. According to her reading, the garden and the literary work are both projects that look beyond their own end. While the garden is a construction that systemizes and cultivates the elements of nature, the literary work is a parallel construction for the elements of rhetoric and composition.

Although this book might have benefited from more discussion of the “other” literary places in Boccaccio’s fiction and from a more synthetic treatment of the “elements” of the garden discussed in its first part, it is a thoroughly researched and rigorous study of its theme.

Given the recent interest in the topoi of literature, the importance and appeal of the book’s thesis makes reading it in its entirety well worthwhile. When all is said and done, it is a thought-provoking study that will surely be of interest to any serious reader of Boccaccio and to those who study the spaces created by literature.

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