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A Rhetoric of the Decameron (review)

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Italian Culture, Volume 23, 2005, pp. 173-175 (Review)

Published by Michigan State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/itc.2006.0026>



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Marilyn Migiel. *A Rhetoric of the Decameron*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. Pp. xi + 219.

Marilyn Migiel's voice in her recent book on Boccaccio's masterwork, *A Rhetoric of the Decameron*, is strong and authoritative throughout, both while outlining her argument and while substantiating her views with incisive readings of the novellas. Hers is neither an apologist's reading of the *Decameron* nor a strictly feminist one. As to taking a side one way or another on the issue of Boccaccio's misogyny, she remains tactfully (and wisely) agnostic. In sum, the confidently polemic voice behind *A Rhetoric of the Decameron* is a welcome contribution to Boccaccio studies.

Migiel's book takes up again this elusive text and faces the challenge that awaits any reader who tries to understand Boccaccio's position vis-à-vis the representation of women in the *Decameron*. As Migiel rightfully claims in her introduction, any reading of the *Decameron* that attempts to understand its discourse, and ultimately how meaning is created in the text, will have to look first in a responsible and critical way at its discourse on women. This means avoiding facile interpretations about Boccaccio's alleged misogyny or protofeminism, and, rather, taking up the challenge of engaging with the work to produce meaning. By this, Migiel means at attempt at a "rhetorical" reading of the work that recognizes and analyzes its "syntactic" strategies, along with its "grammatical" and "semantic" structures, as previous critics have done. This approach may not only subvert the author's narrative strategies, which, Migiel argues, continually seek to displace the reader's subject position, but it also squarely puts the onus on the reader in terms of responsibility for deciding, quite literally, what to *make* of the *Decameron*.

This critical stance already represents a substantial shift from classical interpretations that have sought to trace a Dantesque trajectory of transcendence for the *Decameron* and, ultimately, for its readers who are wise enough to learn from its example. As Boccaccio himself advises in his dedication to the ladies, "useful advice" can be had from reading his book by "learn[ing] to recognize what should be avoided and likewise what should be pursued." Such readings, following in orthodox fashion the interpretation originally posited by Vittore Branca, and often both eloquent and erudite, do not necessarily question the idea of a unified authorial voice in the *Decameron* that purports to teach readers by example.

Migiel's criticism is wonderfully astute not only in how she engages these and other critics of the work (her command of the history of

Boccaccio criticism is one of her book's greatest assets), but also in how she acknowledges and engages with the different authorial and narratorial voices incorporated into the *Decameron*. It is in the "gendered" exchanges of these different voices that Migiel identifies a distinctive Boccaccian hermeneutic. With painstaking attention, often focused on the minutest syntactical patterns, Migiel's reading deftly moves from the formal details of writing to the larger rhetorical strategies they implicate. Ultimately, Migiel's book is committed to showing how a sustained effort at analyzing how sexual difference is rhetorically utilized by Boccaccio to create meaning will enlarge our understanding of this richly polemical text.

Her argument hinges on the idea of "woman as witness," established in her first chapter, a radical reversal of all traditional interpretations of the plague at the beginning of the *Decameron*. Although I would argue that the chapter suffers for lack of a deeper engagement with the notion of "witness," Migiel shows how the perceived agency of women such as Pampinea and Filomena, female protagonists of the *brigata* and actual witnesses to the sufferings of the plague, is continually being shifted to support a male-oriented narrative perspective. No matter how much the women in this text are made to "plan" and "devise," she argues, the system in which they are inscribed invariably relegates them to the position of having to bear witness to men and their authority. Her argument, built on the most subtle rhetorical nuances, is somewhat hampered by its strict dependence upon specialized linguistic categories; however, the conclusions she reaches are compelling enough to make one proceed with the book, which fortunately richly rewards the effort.

Subsequent chapters effectively destabilize any possibility of easy or comfortable interpretations of novellas traditionally seen as vindicating women and/or their speech. Well-known novellas—such as that of the marchioness of Monferrato and her chicken banquet (1.5) in chapter 2; or of the abbott/princess (2.3) in chapter 4; or of Madonna Oretta (6.1) in chapter 5—are offered as evidence of how woman's discourse is subsumed into a larger and all-pervasive scheme of male rhetoric. This last is a particularly daring reading in which Migiel sets out to show how Madonna Oretta's wittiness in response to the tongue-tied knight, rather than being an affirmation of the power of feminine discourse, as has been classically argued, is actually an act of deference to male authority. Skillfully negotiating the fine line between ideological and rhetorical expression, these new readings describe a true gender divide that enriches the discourse surrounding the figure of woman and her representation in the *Decameron*, and at the same time complicates it.

Migiel's last chapter on domestic violence in the *Decameron* boldly takes up an often neglected issue in criticism of this work, doing so through a detailed reading of a less-known novella, that of Melisso and Giosefo and the Goose Bridge (9.9). Migiel's critical tools, which at this point in her book are surgically precise, skillfully expose the inner workings of the tale, revealing not only its subtle interplay with other tales of the day, but also with Dante and his *Commedia*. Domestic violence, she argues (and she admits to focusing specifically on violence by men on women), should not and cannot be interpreted away by "ironic" readings of the text, but in fact must be responsibly contended with as something that remains part of the fabric of the *Decameron*. Her considerable efforts at making the point serve a more salient purpose: to show how the *Decameron*, whether intentionally or not on the part of Boccaccio, has a built-in check on any move toward female empowerment, rhetorical or otherwise.

On this last point, Migiel is careful to make important qualifications in her book's conclusion. Any message or "knowledge" that we may come away with from our reading of the *Decameron*, and here I suppose we are to assume even her own, is mostly our own responsibility as readers. The complex interplay between many levels of authorial figures in the work eschews the possibility of one unified prescriptive reading, and Migiel's criticism certainly exploits this intertextual dynamic to an almost unprecedented extent. Migiel seems to suggest that such an approach may even allow us to contribute to meanings for which the author himself may not be responsible, perhaps readings he may never have imagined, but which he certainly seems to invite from a (discriminating) readership. It is here that Migiel's reading of this great masterwork, although in some ways troubling in its insistence on a plurality of truths, is most innovatively productive.

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William J. Kennedy. *The Site of Petrarchism: Early Modern National Sentiment in Italy, France, and England*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003. Pp. xiv + 383.

William J. Kennedy has already made an outstanding mark on the study of Petrarch and Petrarchism, with his 1994 *Authorizing Petrarch*. Although *The Site of Petrarchism* also involves an adept fusion of very close readings of Petrarchan texts with the ways that they were read throughout Europe in the