

Franco Cardini, *Le cento novelle contro la morte: Giovanni Boccaccio e la rifondazione cavalleresca del mondo*. Roma: Salerno Editrice, 2007. Pp. 153. € 11.

Franco Cardini, the prolific literary essayist, novelist, and medieval historian, introduces his reading of Boccaccio's collection humbly: "l'aver voluto proporre una riflessione sul *Decameron* da parte di chi non è specialista di tale testo e del suo autore non vuol aver alcun carattere né di sfida, né di arroganza. [...] E lontanissima da me è la presunzione dello sfondator di porte aperte e dello scopritor d'acqua calda" (15–6). *Le cento novelle contro la morte* revisits much of the critical and historical terrain already covered by Boccaccio scholars but it also displays Cardini's vast erudition as a medieval historian and, more personally, his lifelong passion for Boccaccio's collection. His interpretation of the *Decameron*, clearly stated in the subtitle, is inextricably linked to his own nostalgic view of medieval chivalric ideals, a view he likens to that offered by C.S. Lewis in *The Discarded Image*. Reading the collection as "una sorta di *Bildungsroman*," in which the *brigata* undertake "una vera e propria 'terapia di gruppo'" by way of cathartic storytelling (113), Cardini argues that Boccaccio's overarching message to his readers is a call for a return to Christian and chivalric values as the only viable way of rescuing a society spiritually crippled by the rise of mercantilism and materially devastated by the plague. The book's four principal chapters and closing appendix offer discrete essays on the *Decameron* within some of its most immediate socio-historical contexts, as well as historicized analyses of largely unexplored documents and cultural artifacts.

The first chapter, "La peste nera," presents a synthesis of past and current historiography on the devastating fourteenth-century epidemic known since the 1830s as the "Black Death." Cardini's overview of the etiology, dissemination, and consequences of the plague, as well as the myths about it circulating in medieval Europe, brings together a vast corpus of available data from fourteenth-century chroniclers to recent scholarship. While much of this material will be familiar to scholars of medieval Europe, Cardini's lucid and succinct account provides a useful frame of reference for his reading of the *Decameron* in the rest of the volume.

In chapter II, "Una novella mai scritta," Cardini examines a letter by a Vallumbrosan monk called Benigno, dated May 6th (1348, Cardini surmises), which was discovered in the archives of Siena's Opera del Duomo in 1975. Benigno shares news about the impact of the plague in Avignon, reported to him by an abbot who had just returned from France, that corroborates other available evidence including descriptions of the plague in

the *Decameron* and in Giovanni and Matteo Villani's chronicles of Florence. Starting from this document, Cardini skillfully steers his reader through the broader historical context and a variety of popular notions about the plague that circulated through missives, anecdotes, and novellas, including the fourteenth-century revival of the cult of Saint Sebastian, seen as the protector of the sick in general and of those afflicted by the plague in particular.

The third chapter, "Terapia di gruppo, catarsi civile, metanoia," argues for the *Decameron's* "struttura unitaria" and its "itinerario ascensionale" (78) from social chaos to order. This is by no means an unprecedented perspective, and Cardini notes many of the critical readings by Boccaccio scholars that posit the unified structure and progressive development of themes through the ten days and hundred stories until the *brigata's* return to Florence. Less common, perhaps, is his emphasis on the psychological and moral transformation that each member of the *brigata* undergoes at the personal, reciprocal, and communal level as a result of what Cardini defines "una sorta di psicoterapia di gruppo *avant la lettre*" (83). For Cardini, by placing the mixed-gender group in a circular storytelling setting outside Florence, Boccaccio did not intend to convey the urgency of fleeing the dangers brought on by the plague, nor a human but ultimately futile attempt to forget that calamity and its consequence. What matters to Boccaccio, according to Cardini, is not survival, but the possibility of rebuilding society through cathartic and introspective narration. He writes: "si direbbe che, col disporsi in cerchio delle 'sette giovani donne' e dei tre 'giovani' e col suo mutar quotidiano, mutino sia lo spirito personale di ciascuno degli appartenenti alla 'brigata,' la minuscola comunità di questi *happy fews* [sic] sfuggiti al contagio, sia quello reciproco, sia infine quello comunitario che essi riescono ad esprimere" (67–8). With Pampinea at the helm, then, the ten youths and ladies seek to "rifondare' l'ordine sconvolto dal contagio e dal polverizzarsi delle istituzioni e dei costumi" (72) in order to resuscitate the ethical and civic values of liberality, magnanimity, and loyalty that characterized chivalric culture and that distinguish the tales of the final day.

In the fourth chapter, "L'esempio del falcone, ovvero l'amante mangiato," Cardini sees the tale of Federigo degli Alberighi (V, 9) as a quintessentially courtly narrative that exemplifies the values and ideals of chivalric culture. His multi-layered reading of Fiammetta's novella includes reflections on the eating habits of fourteenth-century knights, analyses of the novella's sources, and an engaging intratextual discussion of three other novellas that feature the motifs of eaten hearts, tragic banquets, and/or murdered birds of prey: Tancredi and Ghismonda (IV, 1), Guglielmo Ros-

siglione (IV, 9), and Lidia, Pirro, and Nicostrato (VII, 9). In Cardini's analysis, Federigo's falcon is an erotic symbol of his heart and soul, of his love for Madonna Giovanna, and of courtly devotion and sacrifice. The protagonists' consumption of Federigo's beloved bird of prey and companion is thus tantamount to a "*coitus convivialis*" (91), a consummation of their own erotic relationship.

In his "Congedo," Cardini sums up his reading of the *Decameron*. In contrast to Vittore Branca's view that the collection is "l'epopea e l'apologia della società borghese fiorentina e dei suoi valori," Cardini argues for its "condanna e [...] superamento di quella e di questi alla luce d'un pieno recupero del messaggio cortese cavalleresco: l'amore come dedizione totale e disinteressata, il disprezzo del danaro e delle ricchezze materiali, la valutazione dell'amicizia e della solidarietà come principii fondanti di vita" (122-3). The book concludes with a brief appendix, "Lisabetta e l'archetipo," in which Cardini begins by suggesting a parallel between the novella of Lisabetta and the pot of basil (IV, 5) and the thirteenth-century reliquary cup of Saint Elisabeth of Hungary. From here, Cardini traces a compelling cultural history of the symbolic significance of legends of severed heads and other images of heads and head armor. From the decapitated Saint John the Baptist to the myth of Perseus and Medusa; from the helmets and crests used in military combat to insignias representing the heads of vanquished enemies in epic literature; from episodes in *The Lives of the Fathers* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to John de Mandeville's *Travels* and Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*, among many texts considered. Cardini's closing excursus on a dominant image of medieval chivalric culture opens up several avenues for further study.

In sum, Cardini's analysis of a limited number of novellas and the weight of his own cultural longings make for a somewhat circumscribed interpretation of the collection. Nevertheless, *Le cento novelle contro la morte* is a clearly articulated and often thought-provoking contribution to both Boccaccio studies in particular and medieval studies in general that will be of value to scholars and students alike.

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