

The Decameron Eighth Day in Perspective. Ed. William Robbins

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***The Decameron Eighth Day in Perspective*. Ed. William Robbins. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. Pp. 284. ISBN 9781487506902.**

A set of masterfully edited essays by William Robbins, *The Decameron: Eighth Day in Perspective* provides sophisticated and learned insights into the philosophical and artistic complexity and subtlety of the *Decameron*'s Eighth Day. The day's theme is *beffe* or practical jokes played with equal opportunity by men on women and vice versa, or men on men, and so forth. This would seem like a jovial and light theme, but this collection of essays demonstrates superlatively that these novellas are anything but slight. The original research by leading scholars of medieval Italian literature both breaks from and expands on Vittore Branca's conclusion "that the novella of Day Eight were derived more or less directly from local, oral, 'municipal anecdotes'" (17). Thus, it provides some stunning new readings of the tales that will spur further thought about Boccaccio's mastery of the *beffa* genre, which, as the collection shows, he has used here to probe issues of justice, retribution, law, gender, social status, "Florentine polity" (17), and Aristotelian ethics, among other themes.

The *beffa* in Boccaccio's hands, Robins writes, tends to celebrate "the triumph of cleverness and wit over gullibility and folly" (3), often to expose the stupidity, greed, or meanness, particularly of those outside ruling power structures. But, this collection also demonstrates Edoardo Sanguineti's point in *Lettura del Decameron* that Day Eight's *beffe* possess a meta-literary purpose as they examine the genre itself. Robins' concise but insightful introduction covers three central features of the day: the nature of *beffe*, the role of repetition and amplification in the development of the tales (whether internal to the novella or across novellas), and the geographical coordinates of the novellas, "a neat 'cartographic' arrangement of tales ... unique to Day Eight" (11). At the same time, and as occurs in many of the essays, Robins shows how Day Eight develops central themes of the entire collection and how it fits into the "realistic" turn away from the idealized countryside to return to urban life and a focus on Florence itself. Implicit in the day's stories also is the role of Florence as a protagonist.

This point is particularly evident in the two Calandrino stories (VIII.3 and VIII.6). Taking up the first of the Calandrino novellas, in "The Artist and the Police" (VIII.3), Justin Steinberg develops an enticing, profoundly historical, and intellectually rigorous new reading to argue that "Boccaccio uses Calandrino's fantasy of invisibility in *Decameron* VIII.3 to explore why we should act lawfully when there is no one around to see" (59). Avoiding the convention of either

focusing on the novella's interest in visual culture and on the nature of fiction or on Calandrino's moral failure, Steinberg's essay takes these two positions to analyze them in the context of "contemporary innovations in the 'art' of policing" (63). Rhiannon Daniels, pointing out that Bruno and Buffalmacco's *ingegno* at Calandrino's expense is "a typically Florentine quality," in "The Tale of Calandrino and the Stolen Pig" (VIII.6), in a subtle argument, demonstrates how the tale of the stolen pig is equally a "potent meditation on the art of telling tales" (147). In another example of the focus on Florence, in "The Jokesters and the Judge" (VIII.5), William Robins and Leah Faibisoff move beyond the idea that this tale recounts a silly prank to show how Boccaccio is expanding the *beffa* genre. Through this simple joke, they demonstrate how "Florentines, even the disenfranchised, were to participate in juridical structures of communal governance" (108). In VIII.9, another example of Florentine cleverness, Bruno and Buffalmacco expose a Bolognese physician, as Elisa Brillì points out in "The Three Faults of Master Simone" (VIII.9). But she expands from this carnivalesque surface to recognize the novella's satiric elements. Deferring to Petrarch's *Invective contra medicum* as an important intertext, she argues persuasively that "beyond the charges of materialism and devil worshipping, Petrarch's physician and Boccaccio's Simone are also accused of lying to their patients" (217). Roberta Morosini's "The Tale of Salabaetto and Iancofiore" (VIII.10), following Dioneo's prerogative, appears to break from the Florentine ambience, traversing as it does, the port cities of the Mediterranean, as Morosini shows, but the land-locked Florentine protagonist, Salabaetto, successfully uses the sea "as the instrument of the *beffa*" (242).

Kenneth Clarke's essay on VIII.1, "The Tale of Gulfardo and Ambruogia," notes the unsettling tonal qualities of the tale, its "flat note" (21), which he argues were noted in four fourteenth-century responses to it. Katherine A. Brown in "Monna Piccarda, Ciutazza, and the Provost of Fiesole: An Absence of Beauty" (VIII.4) discusses the tale as a *ragionamento*, the word the narrator ascribes to Emilia's tale and not applied to any other tales in Day Eight.

Several essays examine questions of social status and gender, accompanied by interrogations of the Aristotelian ethics of moderation, a major theme in the *Decameron*. Teodolinda Barolini's original reading of VIII.7, "The Scholar and the Widow: Corrupt Appetite and Moral Failure in Society's Elite" and Maggie Fritz-Morkin's contribution, "Obscene Exchanges" (VIII.2) address these issues. Maggie Fritz-Morkin examines the "mortar" and "pestle" puns as the "structural hinge" (39) that control both the plot and meaning of the tale VIII.2. She cleverly teases a lot more nuance from these obvious sexual puns, *double entendre*

for sexual-economic transactions. The class and gender imbalance between the protagonists, she argues, suggest the insufficiency of Aristotle's theory of a "justice of structural reciprocity" (40). Barolini, in another complex and scintillating contribution to the volume on the longest novella in the *Decameron*, in analyzing another case of imbalance between protagonists shown in the immoderate vendetta of a scholar against a widow, demonstrates that "learning is not enough" (189). For Boccaccio, a learned man must possess *umanità* and *compassione*. In "Doing Unto Others, or Sieneese Polyamory" (VIII.8), Olivia Holmes expands on this theme of retaliation, which she connects to Dante's Aristotelian system of "corrective justice" (193), here turned "burlesque" (194).

In a volume offered as "in perspective," it would be easy for the authors to have proffered a review of the literature and a summary of the arguments. This collection of essays is outstanding precisely because it moves beyond such a prosaic front to offer provocative new readings that will enhance understanding of the *beffa* genre, of the role of Day Eight in the *Decameron*, and of Boccaccio's brilliant artistry.

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