

Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Forni, Pier Massimo, Renzo Bragantini, and Christopher Kleinhenz, eds. *The Decameron: A Critical Lexicon (Lessico Critico Decameroniano)*. Trans. Michael Papio

Francesco Marco Aresu

Volume 45, numéro 1, hiver 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094231ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i1.39126>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Aresu, F. (2022). Compte rendu de [Forni, Pier Massimo, Renzo Bragantini, and Christopher Kleinhenz, eds. *The Decameron: A Critical Lexicon (Lessico Critico Decameroniano)*. Trans. Michael Papio]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 45(1), 207–209. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i1.39126>



Forni, Pier Massimo, Renzo Bragantini, and Christopher Kleinhenz, eds.
***The Decameron: A Critical Lexicon (Lessico Critico Decameroniano)*.** Trans.
Michael Papio.

Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 540. Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval & Renaissance Studies, 2019. Pp. xiv, 454. ISBN 978-0-86698-597-0 (hardcover) US\$90.

Seventeen of the eighteen essays that together form *The Decameron: A Critical Lexicon* were first published in Italian in 1995 (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri). Bibliographically updated by the original contributors (whenever possible), further complemented with an annotated bibliography of North American criticism on the *Decameron* (by Christopher Kleinhenz), and elegantly rendered into English (by Michael Papio), these essays continue to provide—now also for an anglophone audience of non-Italianists—a wide range of critical tools and interpretive strategies for an in-depth reading of Giovanni Boccaccio's masterwork.

The essays are presented alphabetically by their title—like the *lemmata* in a lexicon—and embody a variety of critical perspectives put forth by prominent Boccaccio scholars. The alphabetical organization of the essays suggests a non-linear consultation of the volume, and it implicitly advocates for an approach to the *Decameron* that goes beyond both the traditional *lectura* of a single *novella* (or a single Day) and the narrative progression of the macrotext. On the one hand, the *lemmata* privilege a transversal reading of the *novelle* (across Days); and, on the other hand, they highlight structural, discursive, and thematic focal points that punctuate the *novelliere*.

In spite of the plurality of critical angles and the variety of the contributors' approaches, the headwords/essays can be grouped according to their predominant mode of inquiry: narratology (Franco Fido, "Architecture"; Michelangelo Picone, "Author/Narrators"; Eduardo Saccone, "Action"); rhetoric and stylistics (Francesco Bruni, "Communication"; Renzo Bragantini, "Dialogue"; Carlo Delcorno, "Irony/Parody"; Giancarlo Mazzacurati, "Representation"; Pier Massimo Forni, "Reality/Truth"; Andrea Battistini, "Rhetoric"); intertextuality and *Quellenforschung* (Costanzo Di Girolamo and Charmaine Lee, "Sources"; Giuseppe Velli, "Memory"); history of the language and textual criticism (Alfredo Stussi, "Language"; Vittore Branca, "On the History of the Text of the *Decameron*," with an update by Bragantini); and cultural-historical criticism

and anthropology (Claude Cazalé Bérard, “Philogyny/Misogyny”; Victoria Kirkham, “Morals”; Giulio Savelli, “Laughter”; Paolo Valesio, “The Sacred”).

This hasty grouping is approximate and does not do justice to the eclectic and erudite approach that characterizes each essay. It underscores, however, the eminently theoretical scope of the collection. The volume’s editors explicitly identify the methodological agenda that informs their selection of headwords: rather than an “overarching exegesis,” the contributions are intended “to provide intersecting perspectives, authentic windows through which the stratified assembly of Boccaccio’s construction may be examined” (xi). The essays, to put it differently, are intended to offer a toolkit of critical instruments for educated readers, students, and scholars to navigate Boccaccio’s work and develop their own informed reading of the text.

The editors of the volume present the essays as condensed monographs that seek to be more than mere summaries of recent work, and yet, these monographs often read like the type of literary criticism most admired by James Wood in *The Nearest Thing to Life* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2015): one that may not always be especially analytical or innovative but is rather “a kind of passionate redescription” (83). This does not detract from the effectiveness of interpretive itineraries suggested by each *lemma*. And it does not exclude the number of original points that readers will find in each essay. An exhaustive and detailed list of these innovative takes on key aspects of Boccaccio’s work would go beyond the scope and constraints of this review; a few examples, therefore, will have to suffice. Fido’s “Architecture,” for instance, gives new emphasis to the dialectics between perfect and imperfect symmetries and finds in their elegant proportions a structural feature of the *Decameron*’s harmony. Velli’s “Memory” unveils previously unacknowledged intertextual references to classical texts and details the rewriting dynamics they entail. Forni’s “Reality/Truth” institutes precious correspondences between the theological background of Boccaccio’s all-encompassing realism, Franciscan naturalism, and Thomistic philosophy’s innovative foundation of being as reality, with its relative “acknowledgement and enhancement of the value of humanity, of work, and of the world” (276). And Battistini’s “Rhetoric” sees Boccaccio’s magisterial use of rhetorical categories and tools as strategic and structural, with the aim of representing and interpreting the multifaceted, proteiform, and metaphysically unstable reality of fourteenth-century Italy.

The plurality of contributors and the heterogeneity of their backgrounds and research interests—in spite of the authors’ almost exclusively Italian academic training—generate some unavoidable terminological inconsistencies between essays: this is especially noticeable with respect to the *minutiae* of narratological jargons. And an index of citations—especially those from the *Decameron*—would have significantly facilitated the type of non-linear reading proposed by the editors in the “Foreword” (xii) as well as the volume’s “usability” for didactic purposes and further investigations. In spite of these minor quibbles, though, the volume constitutes a precious tool for those who wish to investigate the complex articulation of the *Decameron* and of medieval narrative.

FRANCESCO MARCO ARESU

Wesleyan University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i1.39126>