

The Decameron Fourth Day in Perspective. Ed. Michael Sherberg

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Volume 43, Number 1, 2022

Quel che resta del giorno. La notte nella letteratura italiana dal Settecento ai giorni nostri

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1097791ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/q.i.v43i1.40196>

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Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0226-8043 (print)

2293-7382 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Migiel, M. (2022). Review of [The Decameron Fourth Day in Perspective. Ed. Michael Sherberg]. *Quaderni d'Italianistica*, 43(1), 232–234.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/q.i.v43i1.40196>

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***The Decameron Fourth Day in Perspective*. Ed. Michael Sherberg. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. Pp. ix + 222. ISBN 9781487507473.**

The Decameron Fourth Day in Perspective, part of the American Boccaccio Association's ongoing effort to provide readings of each novella of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, offers twelve essays: an Introduction written by the volume's editor; an analysis of the Introduction to Day 4; and critical readings of each of the ten stories told on this day.

In addition to using his Introduction to provide an overview of the arguments of each subsequent essay, Michael Sherberg draws attention to the way that Day 4, when the storytelling topic is love that ends badly, allows Boccaccio "not only to plumb new formal angles of the novella but also to demonstrate his virtuosity with regard to tone and linguistic register" (4). Especially nice is Sherberg's attention to language and metanarrativity. Noting that many stories on Day 4 "contrast a loquacious character with a taciturn one, calling into question the role and power of the word in a moment of crisis" (6), Sherberg describes how the storytellers use language to respond to the challenges of male leadership, after Filostrato demands that his companions tell stories to document the kind of unhappiness he himself feels in love. In a novel move that distinguishes his Introduction from those in companion volumes dedicated to Days 1, 3, 6, and 8, Sherberg artfully comments on what Day 4 reveals about the fictional character of Filostrato, and especially about the limits of Filostrato's capacity for love.

Especially well done are the essays dedicated to *Decameron* 4.3 and 4.4, novellas that previously have been roundly ignored. In "The Tale of the Three Ill-Starred Sisters (IV.3)," Michael Papio rethinks the value of a story that Giovanni Getto considered perhaps the weakest in the *Decameron*. Noting that the story's narrator (Lauretta) tells the vicissitudes of Ninetta, Magdalena, and Bertella almost entirely in her own voice, Papio links this narrative technique to medieval exempla and proposes to "recalibrate the novella as an illustration of (...) the perils of anger" (64). Following a review of classical and Christian views about anger with which Boccaccio and his medieval readers would have been familiar, Papio succeeds in showing how "[w]hat may have initially seemed a hodgepodge of plot elements can now be reorganized into a convincingly coherent whole" (71). Acknowledging that destructive desire is central also to the tale of Gerbino (*Dec.* 4.4), Gur Zak probes further, arguing that this story "explores the nature of heroism and masculinity as they pertain to love" (74). Zak places Gerbino's heroics in a genealogy that runs from Florio in the *Filocolo* to Cimone in *Dec.* 5.1, to show

how Boccaccio “tend[s] to introduce an ethical dilemma and then return to it over and over again from various angles, perspectives, and literary genres, without ever offering a definitive answer to the issue at hand” (74).

F. Regina Psaki’s masterful close reading of *Decameron* 4.6, the story of Andreuola and Gabriotto, reveals how this novella engages in dialogue with other Day 4 stories. Reading the rubric of *Dec.* 4.6 against the rubrics of *Dec.* 4.1, 4.5, and 4.9, Psaki attends not only to how the women interact with their lovers but also to how verbs and grammatical subjects function in the rubrics. She analyzes Panfilo’s “philosophically nuanced and rhetorically polished” discussion of dreams, and draws attention to its “elegant alliterations and parallel constructions” (111); she reads Andreuola and Gabriotto’s secret marriage and their eerie dreams in light of the secret liaisons in *Dec.* 4.1 and 4.5 and Lisabetta’s dream in *Dec.* 4.5; she shows how Andreuola’s maidservant differs in crucial ways from Lisabetta’s maidservant in *Dec.* 4.5; turning to the judge in *Dec.* 4.6 as the embodiment of patriarchal power, Psaki reveals how Andreuola marshals her inner Ghismonda as she responds to him; and bringing her analysis to a close, Psaki shows how it is with the figure of Andreuola’s father that *Dec.* 4.6 departs most clearly from *Dec.* 4.1, 4.5, and 4.9.

The essays by Tobias Foster Gittes and Suzanne Magnanini offer illuminating insights by altering our perspective. In his analysis of *Dec.* 4.1, Gittes focuses on Ghismonda’s father, Tancredi, and argues that rather than thinking about Tancredi’s perverse attachment to his daughter as incestuous, as many critics have since the 1960s, we should instead place Tancredi in a lineage that includes such figures as Dante’s Ulysses and King Felice in the *Filocolo* and think of his irrational behavior as the result of his extreme old age. In reading *Dec.* 4.7, the tale of Simona and Pasquino, Magnanini shifts the focus away from the sage and toad at the end of the novella and places it on Simona, a wool spinner, who, unlike other loquacious lower-class women in the *Decameron*, is surprisingly inarticulate. Magnanini views this story as a pointed criticism of other Day 4 novellas in which female victims are portrayed as heroines.

It appears—unfortunately for those of us who are always on the lookout for excellent scholarly essays that we can assign to students reading the *Decameron* in our courses—that some of the authors assume familiarity with Italian. Completely opaque to readers who do not know Italian is a sentence such as “it is a story ‘*che raccontano i provenzali*,’ not one that they *raccontarono*” (171). Moreover, one wonders why English equivalents are not used in phrases such as “it is futile to seek a *vita interiore* let alone a *coerenza psicologica* in such figures” (39), “[t]he

fortuna of this tale” (86), “Day 4 *novelle*” (107), “Andreuola has a trusted *fante*” (116), and “the culmination of the *aspra giornata*” (157).

Overall, this volume is a welcome addition to scholarship, as it offers many thought-provoking insights into Day 4 of the *Decameron*.

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