

# Heliotropia - An online journal of research to Boccaccio scholars

---

Volume 7 *Volume 7 (2010)*  
Issue 1 *Issue 1-2*

Article 10

---

1-1-2010

Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture .  
New York: Fordham University Press, 2006. 475  
pp.

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/heliotropia>

---

## Recommended Citation

(2010) "Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture . New York: Fordham University Press, 2006. 475 pp.," *Heliotropia - An online journal of research to Boccaccio scholars*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 10.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/heliotropia/vol7/iss1/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Heliotropia - An online journal of research to Boccaccio scholars by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@library.umass.edu](mailto:scholarworks@library.umass.edu).

Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2006. 475 pp.

The work of Teodolinda Barolini is well known to scholars of medieval Italian literature. For the most part her reputation rests on two important books published by Princeton University Press: *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the Comedy* (1984) and *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (1992). These have both been translated into Italian — by Bollati Boringhieri in 1993 and Feltrinelli in 2003, respectively — a still rather unusual privilege extended to Dante scholars not from the peninsula and a mark of the importance and esteem in which her work is held. This is further evinced by the fact that the volume presently under consideration is the recipient of the Premio Flaiano 2007, an award made to a work on an Italian subject published outside of Italy. In the Spring Issue of *Italian Studies* (vol. 62, 2008), Barolini was interviewed by the *dantista* Simon A. Gilson.

This book gathers articles that have, all but one, appeared since *The Undivine Comedy*, covering the fifteen years between 1989 and 2004. They have been highly visible contributions, appearing in such canonical academic contexts as *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, *Speculum*, *Dante Studies*, *MLN* and *Studi sul Boccaccio*. Even those articles that are ostensibly a little more difficult to find, such as those in *Seminario dantesco internazionale / International Dante Seminar*, Zygmunt G. Baranski, ed. (Florence: Le Lettere, 1997) or in *La gloriosa donna della mente: A Commentary on the "Vita Nuova"*, ed. Vincent Moleta (Florence: Olschki, 1994) will nonetheless be familiar to *color che sanno* since they represent such important publications. The act of collecting these articles, then, is more interesting for the fact that it affords Barolini an opportunity to look back at her previous work, contextualizing it and providing an exegetical narrative. The volume also looks forward to the commented edition of Dante's *Rime giovanili e della Vita nova* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2009), prepared with Manuele Gagnolati.

As with any collection of essays written over a long period of time, the *paratexte* of the volume is going to be how the reader navigates the material. Here, a twenty-page introduction entitled 'Reading Against the Grain: Musings of an Italianist, from the Astral to the Artisanal' sets out in broad strokes some of the concerns of the work that may be discerned in the book. She sees her critical trajectory as guided by wanting 'to understand the cultural ground that produced not only Dante himself but also the interaction between Dante and his readers' (2). The question of literary tradition, or rather Tradition, is one to which Barolini pays particular at-

tention, especially where she sees it in a process of shifting and then stabilizing and becoming canonical. Examples are Boccaccio's 'reading' of *Inferno* 5 and the subsequent reception of Francesca, and Petrarch's *ordinatio* of the *RVF*, and its treatment by Bembo and subsequent editors. A resistance to received and preconceived ideas, then, marks her work: 'Italian culture is somewhat heavy — *pesante* — in its attention to authority and its reflexive genuflections to the past'. All of this requires an 'unlearning' as much as a learning.

Only those articles that treat of Boccaccio will be discussed in this review, but it might be opportune to briefly provide an account of its contents so that the structure and *ordinatio* of the volume can be appreciated. The first section is entitled 'A Philosophy of Desire' and comprises four essays dealing with: Dante's lyric past; Guittone's *Ora parrà* as lyric interlocutor in Dante's *Doglia mi reca* and the *Commedia*; Dante and Cavalcanti's *Donna me prega*; and the 'multiculturalism' of Dante's theology of Hell. The second section is entitled 'Christian and Pagan Intertexts' and comprises four essays dealing with Dante and the visionary tradition; the figure of Minos; Dante's hope for Virgil's salvation; Ovid's Arachne, Argus and St John, a study of 'transgressive art' in Dante and Ovid. The third section is entitled 'Ordering the Macrotext: Time and Narrative,' and comprises articles on anti-narrative in the *Vita nuova*; Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*; on the *Decameron*; and a recent article on the editorial history of Dante's *Rime*. The fourth, and final, section is entitled 'Gender' and comprises articles on selected tales in the *Decameron*; Dante and Francesca da Rimini; the lyrics of Dante and Guittone; and a final piece entitled 'Notes toward a Gendered History of Italian Literature, with a Discussion of Dante's *Beatrix Loquax*.'

The first article to deal with Boccaccio is that which originally appeared in 1983 in *Romance Philology*: 'The Wheel of the *Decameron*' and appears here as Chapter 11. It attempts to read the narrative structure of the tales as circular rather than linear and proposes that the present of plague-ridden Florence is a constant narrative 'other' as the tellers move from Florence to the various story-telling locations. The injunction that no news from the outside world be allowed to infiltrate their tales is seen as being incorporated into the stories as they become less fabulous. 'The point of the *novelle*, which are not "stories" but "news," carriers of the real, is what the ladies of the Proem knew all along — that life is the only antidote for life' (244).

The next essay on the *Decameron* is entitled '*Le parole son femmine e i fatti sono maschi*: Toward a Sexual Poetics of the *Decameron* (*Decameron* 2.9, 2.10, 5.10)' and first appeared in 1993 in *Studi sul Boccaccio*. It takes

the proverbial equation of word with women and deeds as masculine as the point of departure 'for conceptualizing a pervasive Decameronian thematic regarding the relation of words to deeds and both to gender' (281). Tracing this dichotomy of words and deeds as belonging to two separate gendered spheres, she reads Dioneo's navigation of these spheres in his stories told at the end of the second and fifth days. The result is an assertion that the *Decameron* 'depicts *parole/femmine* as conduits to *fatti/maschi* and *fatti/maschi* resulting in *parole/femmine* in a mighty interwoven skein of word and deed, male and female, interconnected and ununderable,' concluding pithily *le parole fanno fatti*.

The article immediately following this, the book's Chapter 14, is entitled 'Dante and Francesca da Rimini: Realpolitik, Romance, Gender' and it originally appeared in *Speculum* 75 (2000). It was a bold article then and remains a probing and challenging exploration of literary tradition and the necessity of 'unlearning' before reading can be fully meaningful. Here she explores how Francesca is presented with minimal detail in *Inferno* 5 and how subsequent commentators, and especially Boccaccio, reinscribed her as romance. Boccaccio's *esposizione* on *Inferno* 5 is, for Barolini 'a canny and aggressive move' and has him 'emerge as the shaper of the canonical and definitive — and definitively romanticized — Francesca' (321).<sup>1</sup> Barolini then proceeds to re-historicize Francesca in political and social terms which drives a repristinated reading of *Inferno* 5.

Perhaps the most obviously and self-consciously polemical article in the collection is that which appeared originally in *Lettere Italiane* 56 (2004), here as Chapter 12, entitled: 'Editing Dante's *Rime* and Italian Cultural History: Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarca ... Barbi, Contini, Foster-Boyde, De Robertis.' This work emerged out of Barolini's commented edition of the *Rime* for the *Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli* and sought to enter into a difficult dialogue with the editorial decisions made by Domenico De Robertis in his monumental five-volume *Rime* for the *Edizione nazionale delle opere di Dante Alighieri*. The polemic is not based on philology, for which Barolini claims no expertise, but rather in the cultural history that is embedded in this editorial history. De Robertis's edition, she asserts, chooses to forego questions of chronology in favour of following the traces of the editorial history via the manuscripts: 'he substitutes the history of

---

<sup>1</sup> Boccaccio's *Esposizioni* are now available in English, for the first time, in *Boccaccio's Expositions on Dante's Comedy*, trans., with introduction and notes by Michael Papio, The Lorenzo da Ponte Italian Library (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); in a symmetry worthy of Dante himself, Barolini is the Lorenzo da Ponte Professor of Italian at Columbia University.

the transmission of the poems for the history of Dante's development as a poet.' Occupying a central position in this problematic is Boccaccio. For Barolini, De Robertis's ordering of the *rime* 'is a bizarre grafting of Boccaccio onto the Giuntina' (253).<sup>2</sup> Boccaccio is a brilliant reader of Dante but is anything *but* neutral and extending him the reverence evident in De Robertis's philological approach merely hampers rather than enlightens.

The polemic is also with the *exclusivity* of philology and she notes just how difficult it is to use De Robertis's edition, to get a clear idea of what he is doing. She cites Guglielmo Gorni's review of De Robertis's edition, published two years previous in the same journal, in which he worried that the difficulties of using the edition might risk its poor reception 'specie all'estero e presso chi guarda alla filologia come un mondo a sé'.<sup>3</sup> Us and them, those for whom this is easy, second nature, and those *all'estero*, the *extra-comunitari* of Dante philology.

The article is a culmination of many of the strands that run through Barolini's work, and which were picked out for attention in Gilson's *Italian Studies* interview with her. Resist authority, unlearn tradition, suspect conventionalization. It is indebted too to radical trends in medieval studies in the 1980s and 1990s in North America, such as the New Medievalism and the New Philology, drawing on philology, manuscript studies, and theory.<sup>4</sup> The volume is also in some ways, then, a scholarly autobiography. Indeed, it is interesting that for a scholar who has done so much to pick apart the strategies of establishing authority in Dante, such strategies are often in evidence in her own work: she assiduously cites her own work and has a very light touch in updating the bibliography of older articles. The Gilson interview reveals a scholar whose ear has been as finely tuned to her own reception as it has to Dante's and who is fearless in her acknowledgment of such.

The central importance of both philology and hermeneutics (in their very varying guises) is fully and eloquently attested to in this stimulating and perhaps epochal collection of essays. The only problem is that Teodolinda Barolini is in grave danger of herself becoming an institution and so perhaps it is only to do her justice to say that *Dante and the Origins of*

---

<sup>2</sup> *Sonetti e canzoni di diversi antichi autori toscani* (Florence: Giunti, 1527; and repr. in facsimile with an introduction by Domenico De Robertis, 2 vols [Florence: Le Lettere, 1977]), an important early witness to Dante's *Rime*.

<sup>3</sup> 'Sulla nuova edizione delle *Rime* di Dante,' *Lettere Italiane* 54 (2002): 571–598 (597).

<sup>4</sup> An approach exemplified with great acumen and skill by her former doctoral student Martin G. Eisner in his excellent Columbia PhD thesis 'Boccaccio Between Dante and Petrarch: The Chigiano Codex, Terza Rima Trilogy, and the Shaping of Italian Literary History.'

*Italian Literary Culture* must be read critically and interrogated with the ferocity she herself so often brings to her reading.

K. P. CLARKE

PEMBROKE COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY