

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

Teodolinda Barolini's collected essays come with an overlay of retrospective commentary; the cohesiveness of these discrete texts is thus made clear by the author's own gloss. The gloss takes two forms: an invaluable introduction locating the essays and their concerns in her intellectual itinerary, and a canny insertion of connective tissue into the essays themselves. The book offers intricate, deep readings within a compelling global vision.

Barolini has written two major books, *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the "Comedy"* and *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton UP, 1984 and 1992). Both have been translated into Italian, making her work part of a real conversation between anglophone and italoophone Italianists, rather than one that is merely virtual or unidirectional. She is so well established as a Dantist that it is important to recall her exceptionally influential essays on other authors, reprinted here, including "The Wheel of the *Decameron*," "Toward a Sexual Poetics of the *Decameron*," and, on Petrarch, "Time and the Making of the Lyric Sequence." It is a pleasure to read her brief explanations of what prompted the articles, and her intentions for them. Indeed, rereading all the essays is a pleasure in itself; not only are the interpretations powerful and the arguments rigorous, but the relevant critical background is always limned confidently and thoroughly. Had Fordham University Press merely assembled her published essays, it would have offered a real service to the profession, but again, this book is much more: it is an author's-eye guide to the individual experience and professional landscape which shaped her intellectual trajectory.

The introduction, "Reading Against the Grain: Musings of an Italianist, from the Astral to the Artisanal," articulates the principles which will play out in the chapters to come. First and foremost is a refusal to condescend: for Barolini, thinkers of the past held all the cards that we do, and then some. A corollary of this is a determination "to take the text seriously, even literally" (17). Second is a shrewd historicizing of reception history: bracketing "accretions" (4) and "encrustations" (6) in order to examine a text against its original backdrop allows us to see more sharply the innovations of a major creative intellect. For example, Dante's influence has been so strong as to diminish our recognition of his transgressiveness (e.g., the sheer audacity of his neutrals in *Inferno* III, or of limbo as a home to the virtuous pagans in *Inferno* IV); and his later appropriation by Church and State has made him seem an establishment spokesman, which he surely was not. Thirdly, Barolini advocates for and models a detailed and "massive work of social and historical contextualization" resulting in an "enriched historical context" (17). Globally, she takes "the astral and the artisanal" to illuminate the originality of the authors under examination: she posits both "a strong and austere metaphysical bent [the astral] and an elegiac desire to cherish and caress the things of earth, embodied and historical [the artisanal]" as "the abiding characteristic of the Italian cultural imaginary" (5), epitomized in "the formal *contaminatio* of lyric and narrative textuality" (14).

For readers of *Encomia* the book contains riches not only on the courtly dimensions of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, but also on the philosophical freight of courtly forms and genres in authors such as Guittone, Guinizzelli, and Cavalcanti. The centrality of the courtly matrix for Barolini is epitomized by her last chapter, which opens onto a new project: "A Gendered History of Italian Literature." Noting that American criticism has privileged biblical and classical intertextuality in the *Commedia* over its vernacular counterpart, Barolini declares that "It is precisely the vernacular tradition of courtly romance, and especially courtly lyric, that . . . provides the single greatest impetus for Dante's creation" of Beatrice (367). Dante braids the competing models of women in courtly literature and in moralizing / didactic literature into a novel hybrid; this he endows with theological value in a courtly lady and object of desire who nonetheless speaks authoritatively of the divine from a commanding subject position. Dante's engagement with the historical and subjective dimensions of women's lives finds an echo in Boccaccio, who inscribes his *Decameron* within "the moralizing, utilitarian, pragmatic strand of Italian letters" (376) which, while "frequently . . . paternalistic and obnoxious," "truly addresses issues of women in society" and is "the more open and progressive toward women" (377). Unfortunately, it was Petrarch's template that would prevail over Dante's hybrid model or Boccaccio's utilitarian one. Petrarch, whose only contribution to the utilitarian strand was the "remarkably regressive" translation into Latin of Boccaccio's Griselda tale, returned "to the courtly paradigm that Dante abandoned, thus institutionalizing a model of gender relations that endured for centuries" (377). Not surprisingly, Barolini is currently writing a book-length study of Petrarch as a metaphysical poet, as well as a commentary on Dante's lyric poems.

Even from this bald summary it should be clear that Barolini valorizes the courtly matrix not as a mere point of departure toward the theological but as an essential part of both form and content of early Italian literary culture. She does so by compiling into a single book, with a sustained if refracted thesis, the "scattered rhymes" of her own scholarly itinerary. What has always characterized Barolini's writing—clarity, confidence, crackling energy, depth, and insight—is enhanced by the critical distance of a mature, highly individual voice reflecting on her scholarly practice. This is an Italianist at the top of her game, and it's an inspiring game to watch.

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