In the small English town where I grew up stood a shop whose uneconstruc
ted Victorian storefront boasted the availability within of "Miscellaneous
Articles, Plain and Fancy." I often recall the phrase when confronted with a volume
of collected scholarly essays, since it is so rare to find one that is at once genuinely
coherent in theme and consistently reflective of the highest possible standards of
thinking and writing. This new collection is, however, the rare and happy excep-
tion: its publication is a notable and most welcome event in Italian studies.

Teodolinda Barolini has been widely recognized for nearly three decades as
one of the most eloquent, innovative, and intellectually courageous scholars work-
ning on medieval and early modern Italian literature in North America, and part of
the pleasure of reading this book, which gathers sixteen articles published between
1983 and 2005, lies in seeing just how well her work has stood up to the dulling
effect of time. (Fourteen of the pieces are reprinted with, at most, occasional
bibliographical updating in the footnotes; the last two are more significantly
revised, and include important new work that shows Barolini developing her
longstanding interest in gender.) Turning these pages, the reader encounters, one
after another, articles that changed the contours of North American scholarly
thinking about Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio in the 1980s and 1990s, the period
when Barolini was also producing two major books, Dante’s Poetics: Textuality
and Truth in the “Comedy” (1984) and The Undivine “Comedy”: De- theologizing
Dante (1992): all of them still as fresh, as challenging, and as worthy of attention as the
day they were published. If nothing else, the ready availability of these essays in a
single volume will be a blessing to scholars, who will no longer have to burrow
through yellowing stacks of periodicals in search of material that will continue to
demand to be read.

But there is, of course, more to it than that. Mere convenience of access —
though not to be disdained — could never suffice to make this book the indispen-
sable resource it is surely destined to be. What makes the difference is the skill
with which Barolini has grasped the opportunity to incorporate articles of differing
dates and with varied preoccupations into a framing narrative, defined both by the
grouping of the articles themselves and by her characteristically frank and spirited
introduction. The first section, “A Philosophy of Desire,” brings together pieces
connecting Dante to what the title of one of them calls his “lyric past” — the work
of the scuola siciliana, Guinizelli, Guittone d’Arezzo, and Cavalcanti — with a
subtle and original reading of the theology of Inferno as founded on a “theory of
human desire” (121). Section 2, “Christian and Pagan Intertexts,” offers a richly
detailed set of readings of the textual relationships between the Commedia
and some of its most crucially formative predecessors: Virgil’s Aeneid, Ovid’s
Metamorphoses, and the Christian “visionary tradition” from the Bible to the
visions of Thorkill and Tundal. The articles under the rubric “Ordering the
Macrotext: Time and Narrative” collectively trace the complex series of processes
by which authors, scribes, and modern editors collaborate — wittingly or other-
wise — to produce what we think of as textual unities made up of individual
artifacts more or less loosely woven into narratives: the Vita nuova, the Rerum
vulgaria fragmenta, the Decameron, and Dante’s Rime (Barolini’s new edition of
which will be more eagerly anticipated than ever after this book’s appearance).
Finally, four articles laconically labeled “Gender” provide perhaps the most stimu-
ulating and theoretically savvy pages in the book, as Barolini trains her sharp eye for
“sexual poetics” — and sexual politics — first on some canonical male-gendered
masterpieces (the Decameron, Inferno 5, the lyrics of Dante and Guittone) and then
on the whole (putatively female) body of medieval Italian literature.

Those who already know Teodolinda Barolini’s work will find it every bit as
exciting as they remember; those who do not should wait no longer to make its
acquaintance. To anyone with even the faintest interest in the Italian vernacular
literature of the Middle Ages, this volume will be self-recommending.

STEVEN BOTTERILL
University of California, Berkeley