

Teodolinda Barolini. *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture*.

New York: Fordham University Press, 2006. viii + 416 pp. index. illus. \$80 (cl), \$28 (pbk). ISBN: 0-8232-2703-0 (cl), 0-8232-2704-9 (pbk).

In the small English town where I grew up stood a shop whose unreconstructed 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 exception: 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 working 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 Poets: Textuality and Truth in the "Comedy"* (1984) and *The Undivine "Comedy": Detheologizing 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 indispensable 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*, Guinizzelli, 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 Thurkill 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 otherwise — 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 vulgarium 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 stimulating 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.

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