



Giovanni Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, translated by Virginia Brown (I Tatti Renaissance Library 1), Harvard University Press, 2003. ISBN 0-674-01130-9, xxiii + 282.

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This book is the second edition of the fortunate and much reviewed translation of Giovanni Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* by Virginia Brown. As the editor herself declares (xxi), it was the "first volume of a series designed to bring Renaissance Latin literature to the attention of a broader public." The book hit its target for many reasons: a handy format, an extremely accurate printing job, a useful and complete analytical index, and, more importantly, a clear, fluent, and colloquial English translation.

Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* consists of a collection of 106 biographies of female characters of ancient mythology, the Bible, or ancient and modern history, arranged in roughly chronological order: from Eve, "our first mother," to a contemporary of the author, Joanna, queen of Jerusalem and Sicily (1343-1382). Dedicated to Andrea Acciaiuoli, Countess of Altavilla (the sister of Niccolò, Great Seneschal of Naples and a good friend of Boccaccio), *De mulieribus claris* was begun some time between 1361 and 1362, *i.e.*, shortly after Boccaccio's departure from Florence and his move to his peaceful birthplace, the small town of Certaldo. The author continued to rework it until his last years. So far, nine versions have been recognized among its more than one hundred manuscripts.

Like all of Boccaccio's other Latin works composed at this stage, *De mulieribus claris* also reveals a significant influence of some

aspects of Petrarch's cultural program: in particular, the rediscovery of antiquity and a closer attention to moral issues. Moreover, the reading of the first Greek texts – the Homeric poems and some tragedies - translated into Latin by Leonzio Pilato after 1362 has undoubtedly left some traces in the work. However, even within the constraint of a highly moralistic aim, Boccaccio's narrative taste, which emerges in many parts of *De mulieribus*, prevents it from becoming a mere compilation of *memorabilia*. Boccaccio, well aware of the originality of his work (cp. *Preface* 3, p. 4) in contrast with the medieval collections of saints' lives (*ibid.* 11, p. 6), offers his readers a sort of secular hagiography, based not on an absolute concept of *virtus*, but on a relative – and more human – idea of *claritas*, “fame,” which concerns Jewish and Christian as well as pagan women, virgins and whores, noble and poor women, “whose memory is still green” (*ibid.* 4, p. 4).

The style of the biographies reflects the variety of examples. Although basically following a uniform pattern (indicating the place of origin and parenthood, and describing the most significant deeds that motivate the *claritas*), the author freely adds details, colors, and elements of contrast. Thus, for example, the biographies of Empress Irene (CII) and Queen Joanna (CVI) are heavily rhetorical. The lives of Rhea Ilia (XLV) and Pompeia Paulina (XCIV) offer Boccaccio the opportunity to discuss and criticize some customs of his age: the taking of monastic vows by force and the remarrying of widows, respectively. On the other hand, the chapters devoted to Thisbe (XIII), Paulina (XCI), and Camiola (CV) resemble some of the novels of the *Decameron* for their narrative character. The result is a kaleidoscopic variety of situations and figures, which remain impressed in the mind of the reader because of their human character rather than their exceptional qualities.

Brown's exhaustive introduction—slightly modified from the first edition—gives readers essential information about the work and discusses some important issues: the place of *De mulieribus* within Boccaccio's literary production and in the broader context of the history of western literature; the making and the fate of the work, at first extremely successful and then generally disregarded, together with the other Latin literary texts of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance; the extent of Petrarch's influence; the problem of identifying the sources and Boccaccio's method of dealing with them; and, finally, Boccaccio's own attitude towards women. In analyzing this last issue, which is of particular interest to modern readers, Brown maintains a well-balanced position between an easy overestimation of Boccaccio's “feminism” and,

vice versa, an excess of emphasis on his misogyny. Instead, she tries to set *De mulieribus* within the appropriate historical and cultural contexts: like the most important of Boccaccio's works, the *Decameron*, also *De mulieribus* should be regarded as a document of a transitional period, still deeply rooted in the Middle Ages but also projected onto the new emerging culture of the Renaissance. This explains, or at least justifies, all of the contradictions and incongruities of Boccaccio's way of describing women, his misogyny and/or "philogyny."

Brown's plain spoken and clear translation is aimed expressly at satisfying the tastes of modern readers. As the editor herself points out (*Note on the Text*, p. 235, much more concise than in the first edition), her English translation is based on Zaccaria's edition of *De mulieribus claris* (Milan 1967, 1970; hereafter: Zaccaria), and is here and there indebted to the first modern English version, that of Guido A. Guarino (New Brunswick 1963; hereafter: Guarino). A close analysis of Brown's version in the light of the Latin original reveals that Brown has often sacrificed a faithful rendering of the articulated structure of Latin sentences in favor of a shorter and less elaborate syntax. In this way, Boccaccio's work becomes fully enjoyable to English readers of the twenty-first century.

Clearly, the aim of "popularizing" a work usually reserved to scholars and specialists imposes some editorial choices. First of all, the fact that the Latin original text is not given alongside the translation encourages a most informal approach to Boccaccio's work, and makes readers perceive it as a modern work rather than as a venerable relic of the past. Secondly, the bibliography wisely leaves out studies devoted to textual and exegetical problems, which are of little interest for non-specialists; it concentrates on the many translations of the work into modern languages and, under the title *Varia*, mentions the most important and recent critical studies. Thirdly, and more importantly, Brown limits the explanatory notes and the indication of the sources – placed at the end of the whole translation – to some strictly necessary remarks, mostly taken from Zaccaria's lavish endnotes. On the one hand, such great conciseness has the advantage of sparing the reader a continuous to-and-fro, which can be extremely distracting. On the other hand, as my remarks below will show, many elements of the text inaccessible to non-specialists – in particular, references to ancient mythology and history – remain unexplained.

What follows is a list of brief observations, based on my analysis of Brown's text both as a translation from Latin and as a book for average modern readers.

P. 1, *Dedication*, 1. Boccaccio begins his *libellum* ("booklet," better than Brown's "slim volume") saying that he wrote it *pridie ... paululum ab inerti vulgo semotus et ceteris fere solutus curis*, which Brown translates: "a short time ago, ... at a moment when I was able to isolate myself from the idle mob and was nearly care-free." This sentence is fundamental in establishing a *terminus post quem* for Boccaccio's work. On July 2, 1361, Boccaccio had handed over his house in Santa Felicita to his half-brother and had retired at Certaldo. For a long time, however, he continued to look at Florence and the Florentines with anger and suspicion. Brown's translation, which omits *ceteris*, "the other concerns" (Guarino), and refers *paululum*, "for a little while," to *pridie*, misses some important points. When Boccaccio wrote this dedication, his move to Certaldo was still very recent (*paululum*, to be connected with *semotus*). He had managed to solve some practical problems (*ceterae curae*), which certainly included the controversy with his half-brother. However, his spirit was still restless and tormented by moral and religious concerns. As for the *iners vulgus*, Boccaccio's negative opinion about the Florentines, frequently expressed in his letters of that period, makes Brown's "idle" seem inappropriate in comparison with the other possible meaning of the word: "ignorant", "unskilled" (cp. Guarino's "crude multitudes").

P. 68, Clytemnestra (XXXVI, 1) and 70, Helen (XXXVII, 1). *Ebalia*, the kingdom of their father Tyndareus, is rendered first with "Sparta" and then with "Oebalia." Usually Brown tacitly corrects Boccaccio's inaccuracies; thus, for example, *Epydna* becomes "Pydna" (p. 127, Olympias, LXI, 8) and *Messana* "Emesa" (p. 207, Symiamira, XCIX, 1). In the same way, Brown often correctly adopts the readings of Boccaccio's autograph manuscript, Laurentianus 90 sup. 98; for example, at p. 219 (Irene, CII, 8), Brown considers *Sycopeus* instead of *Synopeus* of Zaccaria's text.

P. 80, Penelope (XL, 12). A note should explain to the readers who know their Homer that one of Ulysses' companions, Philetios (gr. *Philoitios*), becomes *Philitias* in Boccaccio's text, and thus "Philitias" in Brown's translation.

P. 191, Agrippina, mother of Emperor Nero (XCII, 10). The emperor Claudius is killed by his wife through the intervention of his doctor, Xenophon, who *illitis veneno pennis ad vomitum continuandum*

porrexit: “to maintain constant vomiting, tendered the emperor feathers, first smearing them with poison.” Only through the corresponding passage of Tacitus’ *Annals* (12. 67) is it possible to understand at what the “feathers” were aimed: Xenophon thrust a poisoned feather into Claudius’ throat (*pinnam rapido veneno inlitam faucibus ... demisisse*) on the pretext of provoking vomiting (*tamquam nisus evomentis adiuvalet*).

P. 255, note on Joanna, queen of Jerusalem (CVI). The source of the biography cannot be Servius’ commentary on Virgil’s *Aeneid*, 1. 235 (!). Zaccaria, in fact, quotes Servius’ passage in reference to the fatherhood of the Trojan Dardanus, Joanna’s supposed ancestor (CVI, 3), *not* to the whole chapter.

Indeed, neither do such few imperfections undermine the high value of Brown’s work, nor are my remarks aimed at obscuring its merits. First of all, Brown has recovered and made accessible to scholars and students of ancient and modern literature “the fountainhead of the European tradition of female biography,” which “deserves an honored place in the history of Western literature” (p. xxi). Secondly, her plain spoken and clear English translation allows modern readers to enjoy, after seven centuries, the biographies and the stories that they contain just as many women of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance appreciated them.