REVIEWS

absorbs from Boccaccio, each text favouring plurality of interpretation. The book closes with a discussion of Chaucer and Petrarch as sites of periodization struggles, discussing attempts to construe each of them as variously ‘medieval’ or ‘Renaissance’ figures. Rossiter’s book is not only a careful consideration of the relationship between Chaucer and Petrarch, but its reach beyond that narrow focus also makes it a valuable addition to the wider field of work on Chaucer and the tre corone.

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No medieval authors make readers laugh more than Boccaccio and Chaucer. Yet, as Carol Falvo Heffernan says, few studies have directly addressed the comic in their works. She therefore examines tales that bear some relation to fabliaux in the Decameron and The Canterbury Tales. Instead of a philosophically inflected, sociologically nuanced comparison of their humour, however, Comedy in Chaucer and Boccaccio is fundamentally a slim, debatable examination of sources and influence. Like many others, Heffernan believes Chaucer knew the Decameron; more than most, she lets speculation pass as evidence. In her first two chapters, Heffernan wants to establish the comic literary tradition Boccaccio and Chaucer shared. She begins, though, by tracing Chaucer’s fortuna in Italy. This history is interesting, but the only way Heffernan can connect it to her real subject, Chaucer’s reception of Italy and its writers, is to imagine that he brought his poems on his journeys. In Milan, Chaucer left them to the Visconti libraries; in Florence, he gave them to Boccaccio. Complete lack of evidence hardly deters these flights of fancy; neither do facts or geography. The Apennines notwithstanding, we read, for instance, that Chaucer could have met Petrarch at Padua on his way from Genoa to Florence (p. 10); Dante comes onstage as a Ghibelline exile (p. 18)! Heffernan goes on to gather ancient and medieval ideas about comedy, which she uses to situate her readings of parallel tales. After preliminary remarks about the fabliaux, Chaucer’s use of them, and an unnecessarily circuitous argument that Boccaccio knew them (something few doubt), Heffernan turns to Canterbury tales that have analogues in the Decameron. Unlike Peggy Knapp, Heffernan does not analyse the aesthetic, ethical, and social effects of laughter in these tales; she tries instead to show that Chaucer incorporated details from the novella of Pinuccio (IX.6) in the Reeve’s Tale, Dom Felice (III.4) in the Miller’s, Lidia (VII.9), via Vendome’s Comedia Lydie, in the Merchant’s, and Gufardo (VIII.1) and Monna Belcolore (VIII.2) in the Shipman’s. I found none of Heffernan’s arguments convincing, chiefly because none accounts for the absence of any verbal correspondence between Italian and English texts. So sure is Heffernan of Chaucer’s borrowings, she doesn’t
even rely on ‘memorial reconstruction’ to explain them; Chaucer must have had a manuscript of the Decameron. Heffernan next treats Boccaccio’s and Chaucer’s anti-fraternal tales. The comedy of Thomas’s fart differs qualitatively from that of Nicholas’s; she says nothing about the difference. The Friar’s captious, malicious humour is something else again; it, like Jankyn’s ‘ars-metrike’, inheres in anti-fraternal satire in ways that, as Heffernan notes, do not operate in Boccaccio, where we laugh at the wit of an Alberto (IV.2) rather than at the parodying of friarly ideals. Cipolla’s inventiveness hilariously undermines one’s confidence in relics; the Pardoner’s corrupts them from within. Is anything about the Pardoner, including his Eucharist joke and his ‘gaude’ (both undiscussed), actually comic? The Pardoner, moreover, is not a friar; what he has to do with anti-fraternalism is never explained.

Heffernan’s most nuanced chapter is her last. She discusses the humour Chaucer added to the Filostrato, chiefly through Pandarus. His manipulations, she suggests, secret doors and such, invoke the fabliaux; that they make us uncomfortable even as they make us laugh is a key element in Chaucer’s transformation of Boccaccio. Heffernan also discusses Troilus’ final laugh; its comedy resides in the removed perspective that permits him to see the folly of human endeavours. That this realization will bring pagan Troilus no comfort when judged by a Christian God qualifies, one imagines, its comedic tenor; Heffernan does not address the issue.

I wish I could report that Comedy in Chaucer and Boccaccio does its topic justice. Heffernan’s book is under-researched—she cites virtually no Italian scholarship on the novelle and leaves aside pertinent studies on parody and satire in English; she overlooks important Chaucerian criticism as well. Too many passages too frequently repeated also brought frowns where one had hoped to smile.

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Samantha J. Rayner’s monograph explores ideas of kingship in the work of Chaucer, Gower, Langland, and the Gawain-poet: the four poets dubbed ‘Ricardian’ by John Burrow on account of certain values and narrative characteristics he thought they shared, and whom Rayner views as similarly united on the subject of kingship. The images she examines are really restricted to those of kingly governance; Rayner is not interested in the trappings and pageantry of monarchy, but in the ethical principles influencing a king’s rule of himself and his people. Gower’s poetry is given the most selective coverage of the four, which may seem a counterintuitive strategy as, as Rayner points out, ‘the most heavily explored theme in all three [of Gower’s major] poems is wise rule’ (p. 5). The other Ricardian poets rarely engage with the theme of kingship explicitly, so her method in their respective chapters relies more on finding out