Gittes, Tobias Foster. *Boccaccio's Naked Muse: Eros, Culture and the Mythopoeic Imagination*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2008. Pp. 369. ISBN 978-0-8020-9204-5. \$65

Boccaccio's Naked Muse comprises four chapters, each of which focuses on a different facet of Boccaccio as mythographer, and constitutes a discrete study in itself. Gittes' four interrelated arguments collectively portray Boccaccio as a self-stylized neo-Prometheus whose offering to humanity is a collection of myths tantamount to a "gospel of human dignity;" these myths "insist" upon the "innate innocence of humanity [...] promote cosmopolitanism and tolerance by granting a new primacy to racial and cultural mixing in the birth of nations [...] celebrate the intellectual, artistic, and cultural accomplishment of all peoples regardless of race or culture [...] and locate human beatitude not in a prehistoric past or metaphysical future, but squarely in the present" (4).

Gittes situates himself and his work in the line of critics and critical works that perceive "*sovrasensi*" in Boccaccio's writings (8). Specifically, in Gittes' eyes, the voices of Boccaccio the moralizer, Boccaccio the poet, Boccaccio the scholar, Boccaccio the mythographer and Boccaccio the pragmatist permeate his works, now sitting side by side, each in stratified isolation, now harmonizing in melodic concert. Defending Boccaccio's originality against claims that the fourteenth-century author is "more imitator than innovator" (11), Gittes challenges the stance of critics who "tak[e] Boccaccio at his word, casting him as a dilettantish scholar [...] a dabbler in rhyme [...] and a scribbler of frivolous tales" (7).

In his first chapter, Gittes surveys the history of the Golden Age motif and the question of human blessedness in classical culture, and then in Dante, so as to illuminate how Boccaccio makes use of earlier treatments of the topic to fashion his own myth (this survey approach is successfully employed by Gittes throughout the book). In this first of four studies it is made clear that Boccaccio demonstrates "a genuine commitment to [...] pan human unity and equality" (62), and to cosmopolitanism (60); the merchant is his "culture-hero" (56).

In fact, the word "miscegeny" recurs with frequency in Gittes' second chapter, which focuses on myths of local origin (Florence, Fiesole and Certaldo) and where Gittes states that Boccaccio "attribute[d] the advent of an increasingly sophisticated culture to a process of miscegenation entailing the intermarriage of autochthonic, aboriginal, and colonist populations (in various combinations)" (90), ultimately concluding that for Boccaccio "miscegenation is the biological wellspring of nations" (119). An examination of the "embedded 'autobiographies'" in Boccaccio's works leads Gittes to assert that Boccaccio considers himself to be a "social hybrid" (121) in the manner of such figures about whom he writes as Ibrida and Idalogos.

The "long-term intellectual and cultural implications" of the great plague of 1348 come into clear focus in the second half of the work, which centers more explicitly (though not exclusively) on the *Decameron* (149). In the penultimate chapter of the book, Gittes discusses the notion of a "Palingenetic Paradise," arguing that the "microsociety of the *brigata*" is "the projection of an ideal society onto the ruins of Fiesole" (154). The fourth and final micro-study ("myth of historical

forsight") focuses on the role of prudence in leading a good life and on the character Nimrod in the story of Babel. Ultimately, it addresses the question of rebuilding society and the part played by human initiative therein. The role of exemplum and counter-exemplum in edification is considered, and Gittes reveals Boccaccio to be a believer in the need to understand bad things as well as good and that we are born innocent (not guilty) – that, effectively, "we are essentially good and our unethical behaviour stems less from concerted malice than from ignorance" (238).

Each chapter presents a compelling argument supported by an impeccably thorough and rigorous scholarly presentation, the most striking features of which are Gittes' meticulously detailed notes (which comprise a third of the work) and his intricate weaving of multiple and varied literary references – drawn not only from Boccaccio's works, but also from the works of numerous classical authors. It is perhaps as redundant as it is reductive to say that Gittes' work evidences an impressive breadth as well as depth of reading. What indisputably merits comment, however, is how artfully the medium and the message of Gittes' study are fused, for, in demonstrating how Boccaccio's works are "bound by subtle reticulations of interconnected ideas," Gittes himself traces the lines of this network with no less precision and delicacy than Boccaccio himself was likely to have employed in sourcing his new myths. In this way, Gittes goes beyond unveiling Boccaccio's creative process for us to unfolding it by walking us along the very spindles of the mythographer's intellectual web (8).

What is felt to be missing from this masterful work is an explicit conclusion. The stated goal of the study was to "identify, gather, and systematize" a "selection" of the "myths" permeating Boccaccio's works in Latin and in the Vernacular, thus compiling a veritable "mythological 'handbook'" (4). This goal was laudably and thoroughly achieved. While each chapter delivers on its author's promise to "chart the evolution through Boccaccio's works of one of four interrelated myths," there is neither a subsequent nor a summative discussion on the matter of how these myths are interrelated and the implications of this for Boccaccio or for medieval literary studies or of whether Boccaccio, however exemplary, is unique in his fashioning of new myths out of the old. Nor is the question raised of what constructing such myths meant to Boccaccio—of whether his motivation in fashioning them was more penchant than program or vice versa (Gittes presents Boccaccio's mythographing as programmatic and pedagogical; while the myth-making dimension of Boccaccio's writing is both demonstrable and demonstrated, there is much to be discovered in the act of contemplating, if not debating, this interpretative framework). These are some of the questions to which Gittes' study leads but into the depths of which the work does not delve.

In no way does a phantom fifth chapter detract from the valued contribution Gittes offers with *Boccaccio's Naked Muse*. He has paved a fresh new road for scholars of Italian literature and culture alike. It falls to us to line it with trees, to populate it, and to add it to our maps.

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