Esposito Frank, Maria. *Le insidie dell'allegoria: Ermolao Barbaro il Vecchio e la lezione degli antichi. Memorie, classe di scienze morali, lettere ed arti*, 88. Venezia: Istituto veneto di scienze, lettere ed arti, 1999. Pp. viii, 133. ISBN 8-8861-6680-X.

This is a study of the two *Orationes contra Poetas* which the Venetian patrician and bishop of Verona, Ermolao Barbaro the Elder (1410–71) published in 1455 or the years immediately thereafter in reaction to a letter of the Franciscan friar Bartolomeo of Lendinara. Sometimes viewed as an obscurantist attack on poetry and pagan literature, Barbaro's orations are in fact, from my own reading of them, a far more clear headed recitation of the facts of matter, than the illusions expressed by fra Bartolomeo. A pupil of Guarino Veronese and translator from the Greek of some of Aesop's fables, Barbaro was well versed in classical literature, a friend of humanists, and the supporter of a humanist circle at Verona. Giorgio Ronconi, the editor of Barbaro's *Orationes* in 1972, did an excellent job in laying out Barbaro's humanists interests and connections. In her opening chapter, Esposito Frank builds on Ronconi's data before going on in the subsequent chapter to summarize the *Orationes* and provide a very useful scheme of the points made by fra Bartolomeo in his lost letter to Barbaro. As Ronconi had already recognized and documented, almost all of the arguments made by fra Bartolomeo (19 out of 22 in Esposito Frank's count) derive directly from Boccaccio's *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium*. The friar contended that poets were divinely inspired theologians and saints revealing celestial mysteries. Going beyond Boccaccio, fra Bartolomeo even claimed that the poets spoke of God, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In response, Barbaro viewed all this as rank nonsense. Indeed, their job was very much to provide the lewd entertainment of the ancient comic stage. These purveyors of *libido* were never held in honour in antiquity. Rightly did Plato ban them from his ideal republic. Not even did the—in many respects meritorious—Virgil and Horace receive civic distinctions. The whole point of Barbaro's *Orationes*, in other words, was to debunk the notion of the ancient poets as the bearers of divinely revealed truths and the wish of the allegorists to read into the sexual and polytheistical statements of the poets anything other than what their words actually say.

In an informative third chapter Esposito Frank puts the good bishop's orations within the context of the Quattrocento debate on the place of the ancient poets in the education of youth. She takes up this theme again in her last chapter (102–105). Esposito Frank's fourth chapter starts with Ronconi's observation that Barbaro reserved his most violent criticism for the lasciviousness of the classical stage and goes on to connect this vehemence with the often scandalous and bawdy vulgar theatre Barbaro saw about him in his own day, especially the Venetian *momarie*.

But the most ambitious parts of the book are the last two chapters, "Il ritorno di Platone" and "*Humanitas e Divinitas*." Esposito Frank convincingly argues that Barbaro was reacting not simply against fra Bartolomeo, but even more so against the attitude disseminated since the Trecento by such leading figures as Mussato, Petrarch, Salutati, and most especially Boccaccio, of the poets *theologizantes*. In this operation, according to Esposito Frank, Plato was not merely a reservoir of condemnations of the poets, as Carestia Greenfield believed, but the source of

Barbaro's understanding of the proper spheres of poetry, philosophy, and theology. But, Esposito Frank rightly notes, Barbaro got his Plato from Augustine and therefore, like Augustine, he makes it very clear that in the final analysis Plato is inferior to any Christian (79). Given the great popularity of Marsilio Ficino's and Giovanni Pico's view of Plato, as Esposito Frank also notes, Barbaro was swimming against the rising late Quattrocento tide of those who wished to find as much Christianity as possible in Plato. Esposito Frank introduces the Byzantine Platonist George Gemistus Pletho into the narrative (82–87), but to unfortunate effect. Not only is she inaccurate (John Agyropoulos did not write anything in defense of Pletho) and on shaky grounds on some assertions (a solar cult is not a characteristic of Pletho's *Laus* and the stress on Orpheus is an exaggeration since this antique authority is not even named in the surviving parts of the *Laus*), but her whole attempt to connect Barbaro's criticism of Orpheus with the supposed influence of Gemistus at the time is also a tissue of suppositions that does not seem to me to lead anywhere.

In her final chapter, Esposito Frank contrasts the "ahistorical veneration" of classical antiquity of Barbaro's contemporary and fellow Venetian, Giovanni Caldiera, and the no less ahistorical Christianizing of Pierre Bersuire's mediaeval *Ovidius Moralizatus* with the humanistically informed and more historical perspective of Barbaro, though I find her discussion here of Lorenzo Valla's supposed *theologia rhetorica* essentially gratuitous. Bartolomeo of Lendinara's allegorizing of pagan mythology fitted into this ahistorical tradition, but was all the more difficult to countenance because he was a popular preacher and authoritative doctor of theology. Esposito Frank connects fra Bartolomeo's outlook with the preaching of the Franciscans and their tendency to rely in their sermons on exempla and stories to make their points at the expense of scripture. She cites the celebrated contemporary preachers Roberto of Lecce, Bernardino of Siena, and Roberto Caracciolo as conspicuous instances of this transformation of the sermon from scriptural exegesis to the allegorical and moralizing explanation of *exempla ficta*, filled with histrionics and even stage props. For her, Barbaro's *Orationes* were a protest reflecting a critical historical attitude "of a Vallian stamp" against the misuse of pagan sources for Christian purposes by contemporary preachers (125–126). This is an alluring and innovative thesis; and there is no question that Barbaro belonged in the demythologizing humanistic camp. She may be right on a subconscious and perhaps even conscious level, but it has to be said that the *Orationes* contain no overt suggestion that Barbaro was attacking the contemporary mode of preaching. And, as I have already suggested, the stress on Valla is not needed to explain Barbaro's demythologizing attitude.

In sum, Esposito Frank has written an admirably learned and stimulating work. I think her learning sometimes led her to pull in extraneous sources, but the work as a whole is an important contribution to our understanding of the relationship of religion and humanism in the Quattrocento.

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