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Ruggiero, Guido. *Love and Sex in the Time of Plague: A Decameron Renaissance*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021. Pp. 306. ISBN 9780674257825 \$ 49.95 (Hardcover).

Guido Ruggiero's *Love and Sex in the Time of Plague: A Decameron Renaissance* stands as a testament to decades of reflection and crucial contributions to the study of the Italian *Rinascimento*. This move alone—the designation of the period from ca. 1250 to ca. 1575 as *Rinascimento*—offers much to scholars of premodern Italy in recasting the period divide. It also illustrates a primary goal of Ruggiero's study: to read the *Decameron* through the lens of its own historical moment, but also to argue for an interpretive key that emphasizes the values typically associated with later centuries—such as “virtù” in the Machiavellian sense of the term. This volume contains five chapters that treat major themes such as “Laughter” and “Power.” Such organization allows Ruggiero to cover a wide range in his reading of various *novelle* from Boccaccio's magnum opus. Moreover, by organizing his thinking around these broad terms, the historian makes clear his intention to write a book that serves and appeals to a wide audience, and of course his overarching focus on love and sex draws readers in without much trouble at all. Ruggiero's writing style is immersive and accessible, the clear product of decades in the classroom that allows for a presentation of these stories in a most compelling fashion. However, if there is a drawback to this large appeal, it is to be found in the lengthy retelling of the *novelle* in focus, to the point that the analytical work, and even the conclusion, feels a bit burdened by the detailed summaries they include.

Nevertheless, the strategy of immersion is a fascinating one: the first chapter opens with an exercise in readerly imagination, asking us to “Imagine...Imagine yourself as a no-longer-young Florentine painter in the fourteenth century...” (30). We are thus put in the role of the hapless Calandrino in *Decameron* 9.5 through a telling of the entire story in terms that ask us to embrace the experience of occupying a time and culture that are not quite our own. This act of minimizing the distinction between the reader and the protagonist is not without trouble; there is a discomfort in being so aligned with a figure such as Calandrino. And there is a selective process clearly in play, as we are immersed in a scene in which Calandrino's wife Tessa figures as the vindictive woman who catches her husband being unfaithful. A reader who knows the *Decameron* might expect some mention of the profoundly harrowing scene at the end of 8.3 in which Calandrino beats his wife when he is duped into thinking that she has made a magic stone lose its power. Yet, Ruggiero only effectively creates such balance with a brief mention in footnotes.

His interest—a longstanding one that is informed by much of his work—is to “look more closely at a few of the more contemporary variations on the range of passions associated with love and lust presented in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, reviewing them with an archival historian's not-so-innocent eyes” (35). This perspective admirably delves into the sociohistorical context of 14th-century Florence, but it also imposes a narrow order on the messiness of the *Decameron*. For example, in laying out what he terms the *Rinascimento*'s relating of love to *virtù*, Ruggiero writes, “Adult men, real men, controlled their emotions with reason to be *virtù*-ous, unlike women, who were dangerously passionate creatures and had great trouble controlling the feelings associated with love or sexual desire or even thinking clearly about them” (38). This book itself will defy such an easy scheme in turning to Ghismonda's *virtù* in *Decameron* 4.1, which stands in stark contrast to her father's excessively passionate attachment to her in chapter 3. Yet one wonders if the not-so-innocent eyes of the archival historian compromise some of what emerges here at times by imposing a conceptual neatness that smooths away the complications presented in the world of the *Decameron*.

Ruggiero's overall gaze remains rooted in the Florentine. This leads to wonderful insights with regard to the *popolo grosso*, social construction, and the balancing of public and private concerns, as is

especially evident in the reading of *Decameron* 4.5 and Lisabetta's tragic demise due to her isolation from the social order. We find a strong and compelling reading of the final novella of the *Decameron* in chapter 5 that aligns itself with recent work by Teodolinda Barolini and by Susanna Barsella in emphasizing Gualtieri's aberrant behavior in the political context of the recent repeal of the Ordinances of Justice and Walter (he, too, a Gualtieri, after all) of Brienne's brief stint as city tyrant in 1342-1343.

Yet, when it comes to more Mediterranean orientations, Ruggiero seems to almost evade such cross-cultural wrinkles. In his treatment of *Decameron* 5.1 and Cimone's transformation from simpleton to refined nobleman through love, for instance, he mostly disregards the setting of the novella in Cyprus and Boccaccio's play with Greek names, which might indicate another kind of appeal to a cosmopolitan Florentine audience oriented toward such cultural syncretism. This is perhaps more problematic, though, in the treatment of a novella such as that of Alibech and Rustico (*Decameron* 3.1, though bafflingly called the tale that "ends the fifth day" in this book's conclusion) (200). Ruggiero reads this tale as a turning of the theological into a celebration of sexual pleasure. However, in doing so, he goes so far as to characterize Alibech as a savior who "promised to open a new, last age of love and spiritual pleasures of the flesh: a last age where her followers would serve God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit in a new earthly paradise, putting the Devil back in Hell" (148). What is crucially missing here is an acknowledgment of Alibech's cultural and religious alterity, which she returns to by marrying Neerbale at the end of the tale. In other words, by reading Alibech only through a Christian theological lens, Ruggiero plays down the idea of Mediterranean exchange that makes putting the devil back in hell an inside joke across multiple religious contexts, and, indeed, one that crosses the sea from Tunisia to the Italian peninsula to become a proverb. Such an approach to sex across religious boundaries is one that resonates with *Decameron* 1.3 and its Mediterranean vision of religious tolerance.

This is a bold book and an eminently readable one. Ruggiero is provocative in his approach and is not afraid to try out new ideas, even as he ensures that his readers, whether scholarly or otherwise, will be immersed in the strange wonders of the *Decameron*, as we begin to emerge from our own time of plague. In the last bit of his conclusion, Ruggiero affirms that he seeks to add pleasure to tales that are dedicated to pleasure. Much as some of the particulars of that pleasure might be quibbled with, he has surely succeeded in this endeavor.

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