David Lummus (ed.), *The Decameron Sixth Day in Perspective*. University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 2020; xii + 290 pp.: 9781487508715; $75.00 (HBK)

**Reviewed by:** Marilyn Migiel, Cornell University, USA

With *The Decameron Sixth Day in Perspective*, the American Boccaccio Association continues its project of providing readings of each novella of Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. The volume features ten essays, one on each of the ten stories told on Day 6, and an Introduction written by the volume’s editor, David Lummus.

As Lummus points out, the novellas of Day 6 are a powerful meditation on language and the use of language in intellectual and communal life. Lummus sets Day 6 in connection with classical and medieval rhetorical traditions and with the ideas about poetry that Boccaccio expressed in the *Genealogiae deorum gentilium libri*. In every story of Day 6, Lummus identifies a “double turn – the inward meditation on poetic language and the outward examination of language as a tool in society” (p. 12).

While all of the essays are learned and wide-ranging in their explorations, two of them stand out as exceptional: Guyda Armstrong’s historicized close reading of the little-studied tale of *Nonna de’ Pulci* (Dec. 6.3) and Cormac Ó Cuilleanáin’s essay on the much-studied tale of *Frate Cipolla* (Dec. 6.10). These essays sparkle with insights and are splendidly written. Armstrong, known for her masterful feminist readings, sees *Nonna de’ Pulci* not just as a “proficient wordsmith” but “as one of the iconic female characters of the *Decameron*, who stands for and beside the other female protagonist of the tale and the women of the *brigata*, becoming a resistant female reader in her own right” (p. 57). Armstrong also persuasively situates the two women of this tale within the framework of the lived experience of women in 14th-century Florence. Ó Cuilleanáin’s contribution takes the tour de force that is Dioneo’s tale of *Frate Cipolla* and matches it point for point. Adopting the structure of the typical *lectura Dantis*, which allows him to gloss portions of the novella *ad seriatim*, Ó Cuilleanáin expertly brings out his main observations: “the story’s emphasis on narration as performance; the canny sequencing of its revelations; its playful allegiance to Dante; its challenge to our ability to tell truthiness from fakery; its compulsive creativity regarding names and things” (p. 227). Ó Cuilleanáin, who interweaves exquisitely academic phrasings with ones that are riotously colloquial, has an excellent sense of how narrative moments can be organized to create comedy, both in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and in his own writing. He clearly had a lot of fun crafting this informative essay and it is a
joy to read. (Have your dictionary close at hand, however, as you are likely to come across some words you have not seen before.)

Also very fine are the theoretical reflections offered by Peter Carravetta in his analysis of Michele Scalza’s witty remark about the nobility and the ugliness of the Baronci family (Dec. 6.6) and by Aileen Feng in her reading of Emilia’s novella of Cesca (Dec. 6.8). For Carravetta, Dec. 6.6 shows how syllogistic arguments, although formally coherent, may be used to mystify. Probing further, Carravetta provides an overarching view of the other Day 6 tales about witty remarks (p. 166) and concludes that “the humour borne by the linguistic exchanges represents ultimately an amoral response to a world whose demands for a morality are in shambles” (p. 167).

Feng shows how Dec. 6.8, the tale of Cesca and her uncle, highlights how mirrors are differently gendered. For Cesca’s uncle, who offers a biting remark intended to correct Cesca’s vanity and haughtiness as she gazes in the mirror, the mirror is a mirror of truth; but Cesca fails to hear the lesson because for her the mirror remains a mirror of vanity that reaffirms her superiority. Using Dec. 6.8 as a springboard, Feng considers how Boccaccio engages with notions of female exemplarity throughout his career.

In “The Tale of Madonna Filippa (6.7),” Bernardo Piciché proposes four “keys” to read the tale: a juridical one (“Boccaccio using his background as jurist to articulate his plot” [p. 178]); an ethical one that hinges on a criticism of Dante’s condemnation of Francesca da Rimini; a political one that reveals the story as a moment in anti-Prato propaganda; and a critique of class that emerges as Boccaccio assigns Madonna Filippa not to the traditional courtly class but to the urban mercantile oligarchy. He notes also that the story “offers a prime example of how legal discourse can serve literature, and vice versa” (p. 183). While Piciché does acknowledge that Filippa, a literary character, is granted victory in a courtroom but “had she stood in front of a real judge, her fate would not have been so mild” (p. 173), he does not really grapple with the points other scholars have made about the unrealistic nature of the tale. In the previous essay in this volume, Carravetta underscores the tale’s highly unrealistic nature (p. 166), multiple aspects of which I documented in A Rhetoric of the Decameron. Nor does Piciché take account of the fact that Dec. 6.7 is told by a male narrator, Filostrato, who has a specific ideological agenda that stands in contrast to the ideological agendas of female narrators on Day 6.

Some of us would have liked to see the volume include two more essays, one on the Introduction to Day 6, which features the famous eruption of the servants Liscisa and Tindaro into the frame tale, and one on the Conclusion to Day 6, in which Dioneo, crowned King of Day 7, proposes and defends his controversial topic (wives who trick their husbands) and the women storytellers visit to the Valley of the Ladies, a place to which the entire group will then move for the storytelling on Day 7. Still, this lacuna is partially remedied as Lummus’s Introduction treats the frame-tale portions of Day 6 (pp. 10–14) and Teresa Kennedy, in “The Tale of Madonna Oretta (VI.1),” shows how it falls to Liscisa’s mistress Filomena, the narrator of this first tale of Day 6, to “regain control over the narrative” and restore “rhetorical and aesthetic order” following Liscisa’s transgression (p. 27).

Occasional oversights mar the text. For the most part, these are misspellings (e.g. Silenze e cavalli [19n], Genealogy [21n], Boccaccio’s [p. 253]). Curiously, however, in analyzing Dec. 6.8, the author says that “Cesca’s novella does not
follow Pampinea’s theme” (186n) when in fact the theme for Day 6 is set by Elissa, not Pampinea.

On the whole, this volume stands as an important contribution to Boccaccio studies.

William Robins (ed), The Decameron Eight Day in Perspective. University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 2020; 284 pp.: ISBN: 9781487506902, $79.00

Reviewed by: Matteo Pace, Connecticut College, USA

Published under the auspices of the American Boccaccio Association, The Decameron Eight Day in Perspective, edited by William Robins, brings the collection of lecturae Boccaccii halfway through its completion. The volume is opened by a thorough introduction from the editor that accounts for the day’s thematic focus on beffa, the geographical and urban landscape of the stories, and their intratextual connections. Ten individual essays offer original interpretations of the novelle, while taking into account the Decameron as a whole in its cultural and historical milieu.

While reading VIII.1, KP Clarke addresses its “problems of tone” (p. 21), and connects them to the novella’s uneasiness with the transactional nature of human interactions. The inconclusiveness of the story is identified in the moral undertone of the whole brigata, which is not comfortable with the intermingling of economics with virtue and female chastity. Clarke furthers his reading by analyzing four 14th-century responses/adaptations to the novella, that veer from its original sense, and that interpret sexual transactions through a more positive outlook.

Through the lens of the Aristotelian theory of the commensurability of goods, and the principles of fair exchange among personal relationships, Maggie Fritz-Morkin argues that in VIII.2 Boccaccio translates Nicomachean Ethics into a reading that stresses the value of “currency as useful for the good of social cohesion” (p. 43). Moreover, by focusing on the “grinding euphemisms” (p. 45), the author posits that Boccaccio’s “poetics of obscenity” (p. 40) marks his creative verbal economy and problematizes the nature of unseemly language as being at once metalinguistic and typological, both in the novella and in the author’s conclusion.

In his legal and economic reading of Calandrino’s beffa of VIII.3, Justin Steinberg moves between the metalinguistic component of the novella’s question of artistic representation and the juridical undertones of the pranksters’ retaliation. According to Steinberg, the beffa immortalizes Calandrino’s figure through a social understanding of art, while the search for the magic heliotrope puts into question Calandrino’s private ownership vis-à-vis the needs of Florence—a city-state that by the time of the Decameron heavily relied on tax contributions and fiscal policing for its own survival.

Katherine A Brown’s interpretation of VIII.4 focuses on the interplay between absence, morality, and aesthetic pleasure and characterizes the novella as a response to the first two tales of Day Eight. By exercising a “corrective rewriting of VIII.2” (p. 93), the novella valorizes sexual intercourse consummated for personal gain. Although hardly intertexts in themselves, a series of references to Dante’s Pg. 17–19