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A Local Habitation and a Name: Imagining Histories in the Italian Renaissance. *Albert Russell Ascoli*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2011. Pp. x + 387.

This volume is a collection of nine essays on canonical authors of the Italian Renaissance: Petrarch, Boccaccio, Machiavelli, Ariosto, and Tasso. Eight of these essays have appeared separately in print in various journals between 1990 and 2008 and are here only minimally revised; one, on Petrarch's *Familiarum Rerum*, is new. Nonetheless, they do indeed form a collection unified in at least four ways. One is simply the cross-referencing among what their author now calls "chapters": an essay on Machiavelli's *Clizia*, for example, refers to the one on Boccaccio's *Decameron* 7.9, a tale which furnished some of the meanings of character names in the play. A second is the sharing of themes across essays: issues such as the relationship to patrons and politics, or male representations of women and of gender, reappear several times, inviting these chapters to "talk to each other" (12). A third way is the similarity of method: close reading of a passage, involving a pursuit of intertextual traces and the significance of names, then broadened out to display the implications of its issues for the work more generally. In this regard we see the reading process of one very fine reader at work on a number of important texts, whose authors certainly were reading one another. The fourth is a theoretical framework, indicated in part by the title of the volume: drawn from Theseus's reference in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to the poets' giving of specific names and places to the products of their imagination, it introduces a series of discussions, strewn throughout the volume, on the interrelatedness of literature and history, fiction and reality, imagination and memory, and thus also of formalist and historicist approaches to reading. Ascoli strongly suggests that not only he but also the writers he discusses were engaged in reflecting on these interrelationships.

Most of the essays take up this interrelationship in one way or another. The opening essay, on Petrarch's "Mont Ventoux" letter, compares how Petrarch situates himself there in an unresolved middle

that fails to come to closure with how this letter has been used by modern scholars to situate Petrarch as the prime transitional figure between medieval and renaissance cultures. At the mountain's summit, gazing into the two directions of a historical past and a possible spiritual future, both offering themselves only to the imagination, Petrarch consciously confuses remembered fact and imagined fiction. Did he actually ever climb the mountain, and does that even matter? His ascent, framed at the bottom and top by Petrarch's readings of other texts, provides a splendid introduction to the theoretical heart of Ascoli's volume.

The first of two essays on Boccaccio similarly reflects on how that writer has been situated historically, in this case by Auerbach's *Mimesis*. Ascoli presents two interpretations of Auerbach's description of the *Decameron*, one of which has been rightly rejected, but the other of which recuperates a more sensible assessment. This in turn leads to a discussion of two modes of literary history: one that inquires into meanings at the time of composition, and the other that traces the meanings projected backwards by subsequent literature and its imagined history. Ascoli claims that Boccaccio was already commenting –though quite differently from Auerbach-- on the connection or, in this case, disconnection between style, genre, and content, or literary form and its offered reality; thus Boccaccio can be seen with Auerbach in a two-way conversation.

The essay on Boccaccio's story of Lidia and Pirro takes off from the suggestion that Pirro's name evokes not only the story's pear tree but also the Greek general Pyrrhus, a link that serves to explain for the first time Boccaccio's choice of the name Nicostrato. Besides the reality of these Greek generals, the "pyrrhic victory" of one reflects the Boccaccian etymology of the other, producing a theme of winning which is also losing. This theme, applied to both class and gender power conflicts, is then seen to spill over from the tale to the pair of sixth and seventh days in the *Decameron*, including significantly the singing about Arcita and Palemone at the end of the seventh day. Like Machiavelli, Boccaccio

"recuperates traditional power relations under the guise of dismantling them" while at the same time he "lays bare the mechanisms by which such recuperation is effected."

The second essay on Petrarch, and the one new essay in the book, considers the structure of *Rerum Familiarum Libri*, book nineteen, for Petrarch's "complex staging of his relationship to the world of politics" (118) as both a public and a private figure. Ascoli sees Petrarch as trying simultaneously to draw and to efface the line between public and private and argues that any historical understanding of this issue requires attention to the letters' "elaborate rhetorical *dispositio*" (121).

A chapter on Machiavelli's *Prince* lays out three goals for that text: of general wisdom, of more specifically situated advice, and of a gift by which the author hoped to create for himself some agency in Italian political history, that is, an attempt to turn knowledge into power. Machiavelli as the unarmed prophet seeks to join with the armed but visionless Medici ruler, while acknowledging the necessary failure of his project, which would require both attributes within one person.

"Ariosto's '*Fier Pastor*'" continues the problematic relationship of writer to ruler, in this case Pope Leo X, whom Ascoli finds linked by verbal echoes to the episodes of canto 17 and onward to Dante's Ugolino and Ruggieri. Setting forth several ways that scholars have approached the *Orlando furioso*. Ascoli argues that intra- and intertextual repetitions work against placing too much emphasis on narrative progression. He argues further that what most distinguishes Ariosto from Boiardo, the continual allusions to contemporary history and the self-reflective authorial insertions, make each other possible; once again the literary and the historical cannot be kept apart.

The second Ariosto essay focuses on an episode at the beginning of canto 37 and its strange comparison of three stripped women to the monstrous male Erichthonius. A long discussion of Ariosto's ambivalent presentations of women and of gender differences brings in other parts of the poem. Like Boccaccio in the Pirro essay, Ariosto both displays and by displaying critiques the patriarchal envy and enmity towards women, suggesting the monstrosity of both sexes.

The tensions between literature and history appear in Machiavelli's *Clizia* through the prologue's indication of repeated historical cases as the basis for the play, while eliding the obviously literary cases on which it demonstrably draws: not only Plautus's *Casina* but also Boccaccio's *Decameron* 7.9 and Ariosto's *I suppositi*, with reference as well to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. The issue of gender hierarchy returns together with the inextricable entanglements of history and literature.

In the final essay, Tasso, like the other writers but in his own manner, confronts the unresolved place of his own poetry between imaginatively remembered history and historically situated fiction. Tasso's puns on "voto" as both "vow" and "empty" indicate the position of language as both performative within the real world and impossibly separate from it. Tasso's particular anxieties in this regard are compared with the attitudes of Dante and Ariosto, with Tasso positioning himself uneasily between the truth claims of the one and the fiction-weaving of the other. The empty holy sepulchre at which Tasso leaves us creates a nice closure by evoking the empty Borgo San Sepolcro of the volume's first essay, as Petrarch addresses his letter to a person who is no longer there; both poets leave us hanging between the possibilities of "absence" and "redemptive Presence" (55).

These essays are rich in themselves and even richer in their interactions. The generous references to other scholarship offer additional benefits to the reader interested in any of these issues or authors. The intertextual links, analytic readings, and theoretical aims are all persuasively presented. What holds these essays together is also, however, what makes me hesitate: their tendency to make all these writers appear rather similar to each other and to Ascoli in their simultaneous weaving and unweaving of claims, defining and blurring of boundaries between the two books of *World and Word*. It would be hard to argue, of course, that these writers were not complex or not aware of the very issues dear to Ascoli: questions of how literature and history affect each other. This volume is indeed, as it promises, more than merely a collection of essays. Along with "Petrarch's Middle Age," "Boccaccio's

Auerbach, "Machiavelli's Gift of Counsel" and "Ariosto's '*Fier pastor*'," it offers us Ascoli's Italian Renaissance, a local habitation well worth the voyage.

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