Issue No 2
July 2007

ONEWORLD CLASSICS E-NEWSLETTER

Dear Reader,

Many thanks for the warm reception given to the first Oneworld Classics newsletter: it was great to read your reactions to it. This month's issue includes an article by Tim Parks on Boccaccio in addition to our regular features.

Any feedback on our newsletter will be gratefully received as we constantly try to improve it, and if you'd like to recommend us to your friends and acquaintances, that wouldn't go astray either!

Best wishes, as ever,
The Oneworld Classics Team

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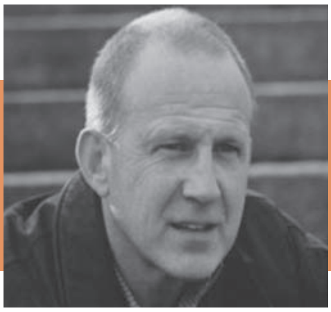
BOCCACCIO'S WOMEN

Tim Parks



"One of the most charming enigmas of the ancient world," wrote Roberto Calasso in *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, "is the life of Nonnus." An Egyptian poet of the fifth century, Nonnus wrote two works: the *Dionysiaca*, a lavish and loving account in forty-eight books of the life of the god Dionysus, and a *Paraphrase of St John's Gospel*. Since the *Paraphrase* presupposes a Christian author, critics have been eager to demonstrate that it was written after the *Dionysiaca*, fruit of a conversion that leads us naturally from the pagan to the Christian traditions. "Later in life Nonnus converted to Christianity," the Encyclopaedia Britannica assures us. Such chronology makes sense. "Yet there is nothing," Calasso rebuts, "that would allow us to claim that the *Paraphrase* was written after the *Dionysiaca*." Instead we are forced to consider the possibility that the Christian poet was overwhelmed by the vision of a god whose cult was on the brink of extinction. Or even, as Calasso mischievously proposes, that Nonnus wrote both works at the same time and saw no discrepancy between them.

Something of the same embarrassment, if not the enigma, pervades critical reflection on Giovanni Boccaccio. Born in 1313, illegitimate son of a Tuscan merchant, Boccaccio spent his adolescence and early twenties in Naples, training first in banking and then in the law, before finally persuading his father that his real vocation lay in writing. The early works, in halting verse, followed established genres and drew on traditional themes of chivalry and courtly love. But the *Decameron*, written in flowing Florentine prose when Boccaccio was in his late thirties, marks a huge shift of vision, presenting a world that the modern reader now finds entirely recognizable. The hundred tales of the book seethe with apparently amoral comedy, where the astuteness of a hard-headed bourgeoisie seems to have brushed aside the tedious codes of feudal practice and medieval clericalism. When the wonderful Madonna Filippa, on trial for her life, nevertheless proudly confirms her crime of adultery and, having got her husband to confess that she never denied him sex, declares:

> "If he always got as much as he wanted of me… what was I supposed to do with what's left over? Chuck it to the dogs?"

there are few who will not cheer. Where were the women when this ridiculous law about burning adulterous wives was drawn up, Madonna Filippa demands? To everybody's relief the magistrate agrees that it's time to rewrite the statute book. The pretty lady escapes the pyre and goes triumphantly back home where we feel sure that her flare for domestic economy will leave nothing unconsumed. Oh for such a sane outcome, you think to yourself, in contemporary Teheran or Riyadh.

But this, of course, is why we know of Boccaccio at all, this extraordinary tour de force whose ebullience and narrative richness would inspire so many others from Chaucer to Shakespeare and beyond, and whose handling of the vernacular, at once vigorous and elegant, is immediately felt to be at the well-spring of the best Italian prose. The modern reader is at home with the *Decameron*. The old world has been laid to rest, our own ethos seductively established. Hence the growing perplexity as we turn to Boccaccio's later works. Why has the man become so poisonously misogynist? Why does he moralize so tediously? Why did he feel it necessary to put together an encyclopaedia of place names? Why, above all, has he chosen to write in Latin? "Its heavy-handed moralizing," writes Virginia Brown, the English translator of *De mulieribus claris* ("Concerning Famous Women", *Famous Women*, 2001), "is as foreign to modern taste as it is possible to be." "Its vehement antifeminist tirades," writes the translator of the most recent English edition of *Il Corbaccio*, "its bewildering inconsistencies in moral outlook, and its unevenness of tone and style defy the critic to treat it as an organic unity."

It is not just, as with Nonnus, that we are uneasy about the proper direction of time's arrow, the failure of our new world to impose itself as convincingly as it should. There is also a deeper anxiety about the nature and consistency of character, and, together with that, about the exclusiveness or otherwise of what appear to us entirely alien mind frames: the exuberant vindication of natural wit and appetite in the *Decameron*; the stern prescriptions of repression and orthodoxy in *Famous Women*.

* * *

Explaining Boccaccio's change in direction, critics point to two events, or conversions. In 1350, while still working on the *Decameron*, Boccaccio met Petrarch, the most influential literary figure of the time and the great idealist of early humanism. Over a number of meetings through the coming years Petrarch encouraged Boccaccio to pursue the humanist project of recovering the literature and learning of the pre-Christian classical world. So Boccaccio completes a *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods*, something he was already working on, and later undertakes similarly encyclopaedic compilations such as *Concerning the Fortunes of Illustrious Men*; *Concerning the Mountains, Woods, Springs, Lakes, Rivers, Swamps or Marshes, and concerning the Names of the Sea*; and finally *Concerning Famous Women.* In so far as these projects were an attempt to record human achievements and establish the importance of individual human dignity outside of, though never explicitly opposed to, the Christian framework, they are very much part of those forces of renewal that will lead to the Renaissance, the decision to write in Latin being a gesture of universalism, of making scholarship available to the international community, not a backward-looking monasticism. The burden of the critics' explanation is thus that such projects needn't seem in contradiction to the *Decameron*, even if the modern reader may have little desire to read them.

But the second influence is in uneasy relation to the first. Following a warning, or so the story goes, in 1362, from a dying and saintly monk, Boccaccio, now pushing fifty, begins to fear that he has been spending too much time on profane writings and perhaps not enough on his eternal soul. He engages in correspondence on the matter with Petrarch: of course profane writing is okay, they eventually decide, so long as it is instructive, educates the young to serve the *polis*, turns the soul to beauty and truth.

But is this what the *Decameron* had done? Some critics, notably the American Robert Hollander, have worked hard to convince us it had. The task is beyond them. The whole of Boccaccio's work, Hollander insists, is the work of a great and systematic Christian moralist. Common sense rebels. The writer himself feared it wasn't true. Father of five illegitimate children, Boccaccio, in his fifties, began to hector readers about the values of chastity. "Passion must be restrained with continual effort," he urges (*FW*, 95). Having accepted holy orders some years before, he now sought a licence that would allow him to undertake the care of souls in church.

Yet at the same time, in 1370, now in the last years of his life, Boccaccio also copied out a definitive manuscript of the *Decameron*. This meant rediscovering such delightful stories as that of the ageing pederast who, on catching his wife in bed with a charming boy, resolves the problem of wounded pride by arranging that they all spend the night together. Compounding the unease that this apparent inconsistency generates in critics, is the reflection that the whole of Boccaccio's work, both as narrator and scholar, is intent on presenting the human being as a historical individual largely responsible for his own destiny. Boccaccio is one of the fathers, that is, of the modern Western vision of character that leads us to set so much store by a quality like consistency. Always expressing themselves through some decisive narrative action, the people Boccaccio writes about, fictional and historical, possess a clarity entirely lacking in their ambiguous creator.

Women are at least part of the key to understanding what is going on here. Lots of women. Boccaccio's first work, *Diana's Hunt*, contained a list of all the women of the more well-to-do Neapolitan families. Having returned to Florence in 1340, the *Amorous Vision* extended the list to include those he had met in the Tuscan city. The *Filostrato*, written in the 1330s, is the story of Troilus and the faithless Criseyde. The *Filocolo*, the source for Chaucer's

Knight's Tale, features a Court of Love where questions of the heart can be debated. For example: a young woman is listening to one suitor while she plays footsie with a second and squeezes the hand of a third. Which does she like best?

The *Elegy of Madonna Fiammetta*, written shortly after Boccaccio's return to Florence gives us the touching lament of a Neapolitan woman whose Florentine lover is leaving her to return to his father and his city. The *Decameron* is dedicated to all women suffering from love, the writer claiming to have himself recently been released from such pains. The stories are told over ten days by seven women and three men. At the beginning of the fourth day, the writer remarks that his soul has been "pledged to you [women] since childhood." Those who don't love women and desire their love, he tells us, are unworthy of our attention.

The *Life of Dante*, written in the early 1350s has a great deal to say about the beauty and purity of Beatrice, but then even more about the horrors of living with a vulgar wife, to wit Mrs Alighieri. After which comes the *Corbaccio*, a book of unparalleled misogyny, comprising a hundred and fifty pages of venom and outrage directed at those very women the author has spent his life describing and, as he frequently boasts, entertaining. The *Corbaccio* is "the most enigmatic and least attractive of Boccaccio's works," remarks the eminent scholar and translator of the *Decameron*, G.H. McWilliam (Penguin Classics). Many readers, on the contrary, will find the book not only intensely enjoyable, but crucial for getting a sense of the relationship between the various parts of Boccaccio's work, the distance travelled, in particular, between the *Decameron* and *Concerning Famous Women*.

Critics seem relieved not to be sure quite when the *Corbaccio* was written and pretend to have difficulty understanding the title. A lot of space is taken up discussing such matters, while the content may be largely passed over as essentially a literary topos, a stylised *reprobatio* of the position assumed in the *Decameron*. In general, Boccaccio is praised for breathing new life into old literary models where the results accord with modern tastes, and forgiven for having only been involved in a literary exercise when they do not.

Corbaccio – the word means "an ugly or evil crow" – is "almost an anagram of the author's name," remarks McWilliam, but then decides that "the title can hardly refer to Boccaccio himself." In fact a host of internal references make it clear that the *corbaccio* is the woman who is the subject of the book and source of all the narrator's woes: a widow, with a black hood over her head and a gown that she "opens and closes" like wings. The crow of course has frequently been associated with evil and, in medieval times, with things demonic. Yet one can't help feeling that Boccaccio must be aware of that near anagram: the *corbaccio* is a bird of ill omen from which he finds it difficult to separate himself. So it is in this work.

A scholar returns to his home town from Paris. Discussing women, their beauty and virtues, with a friend (what else do men do?), he hears of a certain widow who surpasses all others. Determined to see her, he falls in love and writes letters. She sends enigmatic replies and makes fun of him with her present lover and gossiping entourage. Humiliated, the scholar considers suicide, but is dissuaded by his friends. Falling asleep, he has a decidedly Dantesque vision. Alone in a dark valley – "the labyrinth of love" or "pigsty of Venus" – he is met by the widow's recently dead husband, sent from purgatory to show our narrator the error of his ways. Why on earth is he wasting his time on women when: "No other creature is less clean than woman: the pig, even when he is most wallowed in mud, is not as foul as they." Only someone out of his mind, the dead husband tells us, could behave as the scholar has, especially at his age, and with his studies.

The essential gist of the ghost's message is soon delivered, but he doesn't stop. He offers us an exhaustive account of the wiles women use for trapping men. "About this I need say no more," he tells us. And then does. And just when we feel the tirade is at last over, he switches from the general to the particular. He tells the story of his marriage, his wealth plundered to pay for his wife's lovers, her physical awfulness beneath a cosmetic veneer. "About this I need say no more," he declares. And then does. She is garrulous, gluttonous, credulous, bossy, phobic, insatiable, lascivious.

The list is interminable, the excess obsessive. A note of grotesque comedy creeps in. "If she says she's seen a donkey fly… you'd do well in the end to agree with her." Irritated by a mosquito, she wakes the whole household chasing the insect round the house with a broom. There are pages and pages on how she dresses, how she does her hair, how she studies herself in the mirror, how she makes eyes at men in church. Until at last it is clear to us that whatever the dead husband, or the narrator, or Boccaccio himself, may really think of women, the idea of a man ever tearing himself away from them, is unimaginable. Even in purgatory the dead husband gets all his energy from thinking about women. Perhaps paradise will be the release from this slavery.

– *Tim Parks*

POEM OF THE MONTH
in association with ANON,
the anonymous-submission magazine

Bye-Bye by Guy Kettelhack (from ANON 5)

Remarkably little will
happen today.

I've decided that stasis
will be the sole basis

for wending my lone
and particular way.

Oh, it's not that I'll cease
autonomically breathing

or actively block
hole or pore.

I will simply subsist on
existence as is,

and I will not
petition for more.

Guy Kettelhack is a US writer widely published in US and UK literary magazines

Buy ANON, the anonymous-submission magazine, from the Calder Bookshop at £4.50 For more information about ANON, please visit http://www.blanko.org.uk/anon/

MY FAVOURITE CLASSIC

MARK THWAITE

cherishes the challenge of a Very Big Book,
Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*

There are a handful of Very Big Books that bibliophiles often feel duty-bound to read. *Ulysses*, *Middlemarch*, *In Search of Lost Time*, *The Man without Qualities*. A different list for every reader, but a list nonetheless, lurking somewhere in their minds, of books they feel they really should conquer. Personally, I am just about to start reading *War and Peace* and I hope – ten pages every day! – to finish it some time in October. I'm going to read it because I think I should. Happily, once you jump on board a Very Big Book they often pay you back in spades. I remember that once I had finished reading *Don Quixote* (idyllically, on holiday in Spain, very near to the source of the action) for weeks and months after nothing else – quite literally – measured up. Everything seemed disappointingly slight. I felt this even more sharply after reading *Moby Dick*. Melville's Very Big Book is about a Very Big White Whale pursued by the monomaniacal Captain Ahab and his awe-struck crew. That, at least, everyone knows. If you wish you can, with this precis in mind, decide what you want the whole thing to mean. Books as big and rich and iconic as *Moby Dick*, or *Don Quixote*, seem to bring out in readers a drive for reduction and simplicity. "What this novel is really about is ..." But *Moby Dick* can't be reduced to plot or thinned down to its metaphor. It means what it is over the course of its hundreds of pages; pages that we journey through as the whaling ship *Pequod* precariously voyages on. A ship of fools on an unsettling sea; a pointless adventure; an essential quest. Melville's biblical rhythms, and his encyclopedic intrusions into the narrative, certainly shape something quixotic, but they make something much darker too. Don Quixote tilts at windmills, struggling with his sanity; Ahab's rawer battle is, mid-seas, utterly perspectiveless. We hate to think so, but Ahab is Everyman. To really know we are alive, we all have to conquer *Moby Dick*.

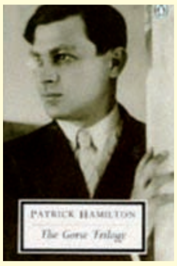
Mark Thwaite is the managing editor of ReadySteadyBook.com and the The Book Depository website (www.bookdepository.co.uk)

OUR BOOKSELLER RECOMMENDS

Mark Jackson invites you to rediscover the unjustly neglected genius of Patrick Hamilton

This month the Old Vic are staging an adaptation of *Gaslight*, by Patrick Hamilton, and it's heartening to see a revival of interest in this author, who is acclaimed as both dramatist and novelist. His best-known play is *Rope*, famously filmed by Alfred Hitchcock, and the National Film Theatre recently showed a season of films based on his work.

Patrick Hamilton was born in the village of Hassocks near Brighton in 1904 and the centenary of his birth has marked the publishing revival of many of the novels on which he built his reputation. *Hangover Square* (1941) is his most famous novel, a very convincing portrait of the life of an alcoholic set in Earls Court in the 1930s, containing a realistic account of the rise of Fascism. The book was much admired by Graham Greene and J.B. Priestley. His most memorable potrayal of London is probably contained in *Slaves of Solitude* (1947), a rather bleak and depressing study of loneliness but also containing within the writing great sincerity and intensity. In 2005, BBC 2 filmed another of his London novels, *20,000 Streets under the Sky* (1935), his semi-autobiographical account of growing up in London, portraying the intertwining lives of a group of Londoners. In June 2007 Black Spring Press are reprinting his *Gorse Trilogy*, the story of a ruthless seducer and conman and one of his best works. There is a very good biography written by Sean French.



So why read Patrick Hamilton? Simply because he is one of the greatest novelists of the twentieth century and one of the best portrayers of London in fiction. His work touches on loneliness, despair and unrequited love, but he has compassion for his characters who are portrayed realistically and vividly. The books are highly readable and fast-paced, containing engaging dialogue and at times veering off to waspish social comedy. If you are new to this novelist, he is a real find, a keen observer of human nature and a compelling witness to a changing London before and after the Second World War.

Mark Jackson is the Manager of Calder Bookshop at 51 The Cut, London SE1 8LF. Previously he worked for Waterstone's in Putney.

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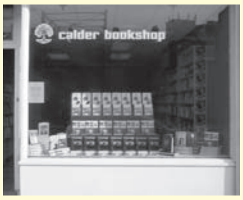

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OUT OF THE DUST

Marcel Aymé

Marcel Aymé, virtually unknown in the English-speaking world these days, is also to some extent not appreciated at his just value in France where, although some of his short stories and children's writing are considered undisputed classics, the rest of his considerable body of fiction and drama is now essentially ignored.

He was born in rural Burgundy in 1902, spending his childhood there before moving to Paris to become a journalist. His first novel *Brûlebois* was published in 1927 to critical acclaim and his follow-up, *La Table aux crevés*, won the prestigious Prix Renaudot two years later, but it was with 1933's *La Jument verte* that his fame became widespread. Aymé wrote and published regularly until his death in 1967, focusing mostly on his novels and short stories at first – his farmyard tales *Les Contes du chat perché* (1934–46) have now become a staple in French curricula – but shifting more towards plays from the late 1940s onwards.

All of his writings are characterized by their irony, humour and realism, and are concerned with unearthing and examining – both in the context of rural France and bustling Paris – the workings of society and ordinary people's darker motives. His fiction became increasingly satirical and political – such as the 1948 novel *Uranus*, which criticizes the Left's abuse of its post-Liberation power and was superbly adapted to the screen by Claude Berri, featuring a memorable performance by Gérard Depardieu as an alcoholic barkeeper who develops a passion for Racine. Although Aymé's reputation was stained by his decision to continue publishing his works during the Occupation and his friendship with politically dubious writers such as Brasillach, he staunchly refused to join any party and poured scorn on the Left and Right alike.

Another recurring feature in his works is the Kafkaesque incursion of the supernatural into a realist setting. A famous example of this is his short story *Le Passe-muraille*, in which a modest and downtrodden civil servant suddenly discovers that he has the ability to walk through walls, and uses this new-found power to avenge the humiliations inflicted on him throughout his life. Aymé's 1941 novel *La Belle Image* (which will be published for the first time in English, as *Beautiful Image*, by Pushkin Press in February 2008) uses a similar technique: its protagonist, a successful married businessman, suddenly finds out that his appearance has been transformed into that of darkly handsome stranger. This leads him to observe his friends and family as an outsider and, among other things, to seduce his own wife – revelatory experiences which lead him to question his former life of comfort and elevated social standing.

FOUND IN TRANSLATION

Beppe Fenoglio, *A Private Affair*
Hesperus Press, December 2006, £8.99

Robert Löhr, *The Secrets of the Chess Machine*
Fig Tree, May 2007, £16.99

Jean-Euphèle Milcé, *Alphabet of the Night*
Pushkin Press, April 2007, £7.99

The first recently translated work we would like to highlight this month is Beppe Fenoglio's *A Private Affair*, an Italian modern classic first published posthumously in 1963. Set in the Piedmontese mountains in 1943, it portrays the experiences of a young idealistic anti-German resistance fighter, Milton, whose love for a woman who has betrayed him causes his faith in his political cause to waver, leading him to question the importance of public affairs in the face of private concerns. The novel also provides a fascinatingly realistic account of the Italian Resistance movement and its hardships.

As for contemporary foreign fiction, Robert Löhr's debut novel, *The Secrets of the Chess Machine*, translated from the German by the ever-prolific Anthea Bell, is a magnificent piece of historical fiction, chronicling the events surrounding the famous eighteenth-century inventor Wolfgang von Kempelen and his chess automaton – a tale which inspired one of Poe's short stories. Von Kempelen's machine, in the guise of an Ottoman Turk, is undefeatable at chess, drawing crowds and becoming a favourite society talking point in the process. The fact that the invention is a hoax, operated by an Italian dwarf, is a secret that must be kept by all means.

Finally, Pushkin Press have recently published Christopher Moncrieff's excellent translation of Haitian writer Jean-Euphèle Milcé's novel *Alphabet of the Night*, which recounts the fortunes of a Jewish immigrant shopkeeper who is forced to flee his everyday routine in Port-au-Prince when his friend and security guard is killed by a policeman, and decides to find a long-lost lover. The atmospheric narrative serves as a pretext for a compelling examination of the notions of identity, nation and history and a critique of an island still coming to terms with its past.

THE LAMBASTER

Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen

A broadly acknowledged masterpiece hung, drawn and quartered by The Lambaster

It's almost certainly to blame for *Love Actually*. And also for *Four Weddings*, *Bridget Jones* and all those other dire insubstantial frothy nauseating bits of fluff that bill themselves as a comedy of manners/rom-com. Much is made of Austen's delightfully satirical comedy, but the characters we are invited to laugh at are easy targets due to grossly superficial character portrayal, which becomes more and more wearying as the book progresses, and our interest in these cardboard cut-outs shrinks from idle curiosity to abject indifference. The one point in the novel which offers the greatest opportunity for drama and interest – Lydia running off to Brighton – is glossed over to minimize any impact it might have on the narrative and characters, so that Austen can return to her safe world of "oh my goodness, Reverend Pinckton was wearing slightly outlandish trousers today! And the look he gave me, really!"

I'd like to close today with the words of Mark Twain, who once remarked of Jane Austen, "Every time I read *Pride and Prejudice* I want to dig her up and hit her on the skull with her own shinbone… It seems a great pity to me that they allowed her to die a natural death."

Goodnight.

(NB: The views expressed in this article are not necessarily shared by the OWC Team)

JULY EVENTS AT THE CALDER BOOKSHOP

5th July, 7:00 p.m.
Wyndham Lewis as Artist, Writer and Soldier
Readings and talk

9th July, 7:00 p.m.
Do You Want to Get Published?
Alison Baverstock gives practical tips to aspiring writers

11th July, 7:00 p.m.
Cravan vs Cravan
David Lalé talks about Cravan and the Dadaist movement
(plus 20-minute film showing of *Cravan vs Cravan*)

12th July, 7:00 p.m.
Mrs Pankhurst and the Suffragette Movement
Readings and talk

18th July 7:00 p.m.
Sacred Rites and Transformations
Film showing

19th July 7:00 p.m.
James Joyce's Nighttown (from *Ulysses*)
Readings and talk

24th July 7:00 p.m.
Acoustic Evening: Music and Poetry

26th July 7:00
A Dramatized Reading of W.B. Yeats's Poems

31st July 7:00 p.m.
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