
The writings of Giovanni Boccaccio and Francesco Petrarca easily rank among the most heavily scrutinized of the Italian Renaissance. It is a testament to their literary legacy that scholars continue to plumb the depths of their works and emerge with new and important discoveries. Timothy Kircher is one such scholar. His book presents the results of his extensive mining expedition into Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and Petrarch’s *Familiares*, *Secretum* and *Canzoniere*. Kircher charts a new route into these texts through the writings of fourteenth-century Tuscan mendicants and especially Dominicans. His multi-layered comparative analysis of these humanist and ecclesiastical works helps bring to light the considerable contribution Boccaccio and Petrarch made to early Renaissance moral philosophy and, more broadly, to the history of ideas.

In his introductory chapter, Kircher sets the scene for his investigation. He paints the fourteenth century as a period of profound spiritual crisis triggered in part by the papacy’s corrupting sojourn in Avignon and, at mid-century, by the ravages of the Black Death. These conditions spurred people to resolve with new urgency fundamental questions of ethics and to identify a reliable moral pathway to salvation. Within the Church, Kircher notes, it was the mendicants who took the lead in shaping systematic responses to these concerns. Among others, Dominicans Domenico Cavalca (d. 1342), Rainerio da Pisa (d. 1348) and Jacopo Passavanti (d. 1357) wrote moral guides for clergy and laity alike. Kircher distills the principal tenets of this mendicant moral philosophy and in so doing sets up the central claim of his book. Boccaccio and Petrarch represented the secular counterparts to this ecclesiastical response, but counterparts with a radically different set of ideas. Reacting as much to the mendicants’ efforts in moral education as to the broader spiritual crisis itself, these humanists launched attacks on some of the principles underpinning the Christian ethical tradition. In their place, they shaped a moral philosophy that, while embracing Christianity’s universal standards of right and wrong, radically revised its ethical pedagogy. It is in the context of outlining these central arguments that Kircher explains the title of his book: *The Poet’s Wisdom*. “For Petrarch and Boccaccio,” he writes, “the poetic realm was intimately associated with the philosophical” (8). Whether in tearing down the mendicant philosophy or in constructing a new one of their own, these humanists depended first and foremost on “the poetic features of persona, tone and voice” (11).
In each of the five chapters that follow, Kircher focuses his attention on a particular theme, concept, or image inherent in the humanists’ moral philosophy. In Chapter Two he explores how, in the context of their historical writings on the Black Death, Boccaccio and Petrarch articulated new ideas on authority and the limits of human knowledge. The bulk of the chapter is devoted to comparing Matteo Villani’s chronicle of the plague to the famous opening pages of Boccaccio’s Decameron. Kircher notes how Villani seeks to find meaning for this human catastrophe within the moralizing framework of salvation history. Boccaccio, in contrast, emphasizes the mystery and inexplicability of the plague’s devastating force; and rather than passing judgment on the victims and survivors, he simply documents the range of human reactions to this unprecedented horror. Kircher’s textual analysis reveals how, through language, syntax and range of narrative perspectives, Boccaccio effectively transforms medieval traditions of writing history. But while acknowledging the Black Death as a catalyst for rethinking historiographical principles, Kircher focuses on the broader philosophical implications of Boccaccio’s approach. These poetic features also illustrate an attitude of skepticism toward the certainty of human knowledge that breaks radically with Christian tradition. Through a briefer series of comparisons with the Familiares, Kircher goes on to show how Petrarch’s more introspective writings on the Black Death shared in the Decameron’s views.

Chapter Three explores how Boccaccio’s Decameron—and especially the lessons embedded in the first day of storytelling—shatters the keystone of mendicant moral instruction, the exemplum, while at the same time offering an alternative pedagogy. In contrast to the traditional view of the exemplum as an objective model of behavior, Kircher argues, Boccaccio believed that all moral truths necessarily pass through the subjective filters of those who deliver (the clergy) and those who receive them (the laity). Nor could an exemplum boast a “universal value”: such a claim was meaningless in a world that he perceived in a constant state of flux, teeming with an infinite variety of individuals and unique circumstances. Given that these forces of subjectivity and temporality are inevitable parts of human existence, moral authority cannot reside in a single person, institution or set of rarefied exempla. Such authority devolves instead to individuals who must evaluate moral behavior first and foremost by testing it against their own experience. Kircher details how Boccaccio communicates these radical ideas through his use of narrators (multiple in number, mostly female, and all laity with varying personalities), through the ten-day timeframe of their storytelling, and most of all, in the tone, language and substance of the stories themselves. For example, in the tale of the Jewish