

Reprinted by permission from The Romanic Review. Volume LXXI, No. 1 (January).  
Copyright 1980. The Trustees of Columbia University in the City of New York.

Pp. 100-101

*Tension in Boccaccio: Boccaccio and the Fine Arts*. By Patricia M. Gathercole. University, Mississippi: Romance Monographs, Inc., No. 14, 1975. Pp. 112. The idea for this book, like much else in it, comes (without acknowledgement) from Edward Hutton, who had hoped to include in his *Giovanni Boccaccio: A Biographical Study* (New York: John Lane, 1910) "a chapter on Boccaccio and his relation to the fine arts" (p. viii), in particular to illustrations of his work from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century. Professor Gathercole provides such a chapter.

The author is a textual critic and her intimate familiarity with illuminated MSS and with book illustrations is evidenced throughout. The reader may, for example, learn (p. 43) that in the Biblioteca Mediceo-Laurenziana a MS of the *Filocolo* contains a fifteenth-century miniature in Florentine style, or (p. 45) that the Bodleian has a MS with paintings of Troilus and Criseida in the style of the MSS of René d'Anjou, or (p. 74) that a late seventeenth-century edition of the *Decameron* shows elaborate settings and costumes designed by Romeyn de Hooghe and recalling the ornateness of the Palace of Versailles.

In the brief preliminary synopses of works whose illustrations she describes, Gathercole is reprehensibly slavish in her undocumented dependence on Hutton. One example (of many) even shows her following him in a doubtful attribution of sources for Boccaccio's *Teseida*: Hutton (p. 83), "his intention was . . . to express his own sufferings. In the agonies of Palemon and Arcite he wished Fiammetta to see his own misery. . . . As for sources, . . . Boccaccio . . . knew the *Thebais* of Statius; . . . he used also . . . the *Roman de Thèbes*. . . . Nor must we altogether pass over the influence of the *Aeneid*"; Gathercole (p. 46), "Boccaccio here, taking as his sources the *Aeneid*, *Roman de Thèbes* and Statius' *Thebais* expresses his own sufferings in the agonies of Palemon and Arcite." Neither tells us what the Virgilian influence might have been.

But it is in its pretensions to literary criticism that this work most disappoints. We are told (p. 31) that both Giotto, in his Arena Chapel frescoes, and Boccaccio, in his *Ameto*, use allegorical figures, but no detailed analysis of those figures or convincing demonstration of affinities in their employment is provided. Admitting "it would be difficult to prove a direct influence" (p. 100), Gathercole resorts to a vague notion of a humanistic *Zeitgeist*: "Boccaccio was sensitive to the artistic climate of his time. . . . The tension in the art and literature of the third quarter of the fourteenth century comes then from a struggle between an old and a newer way of life and thought. . . . It is the beginning of Humanism" (pp. 32-33).

Boccaccio's descriptions of beauty in nature and in man are cited as evidence of the pictorial in his writing, but there is no recognition that, in Curtius' words, "there are essential differences between the book and the picture. . . . Literature has a different mode of existence from art." We are left with "the extremely questionable principle of 'mutual illumination of the arts'"—*European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1953; rpt. New York: Harper, 1963), pp. 11, 15. Professor Gathercole proves that its brute assertion does not make the principle less questionable. (JAMES P. HOLOKA, *Eastern Michigan University*)