

etc.). It is precisely such an explicitly comparatist grounding, her ample application of readings from one tradition to elucidate texts from another, that not only makes this study accessible to the Europeanists she is trying to reach, but that also, and equally important, makes the study all the more valuable for those who have dealt with Persian literature in far different terms.

Meisami's book has much to offer the medievalist who has studied Europe's lyrical and romance genres without the benefit of even a rudimentary knowledge of the remarkably rich and sophisticated tradition, compelling in its own right, that she deals with. Her book should become an indispensable primer on Persian court poetry. Finally, we would be well advised to follow Meisami's own lead, in reverse, and see what light her readings of Persian poetry can reflect and refract on our own readings of Europe's court poetry.

– María Rosa Menocal
(Yale University)

María Rosa Menocal. Writing in Dante's Cult of Truth: From Borges to Boccaccio. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1991. 224pp. US\$ 34.95 hardcover/ \$14.95 paperback.

María Rosa Menocal's Writing in Dante's Cult of Truth addresses the need to reevaluate scholarly approaches to literature and literary history. The book examines Dante's views on poetry and literary history, particularly as exemplified in the Vita nuova and the Commedia, and identifies their impact on successive writers such as Petrarch, Boccaccio, Silvio Pellico, Borges, Pound, and Eliot. Dante's treatment of the Provençal poet Amant Daniel and the Italian Guido Cavalcanti is also discussed, as is the reconstitution of these figures in the works of Dante's epigones.

Chapter 1 contains a reading of Dante's Vita nuova. Menocal stresses a particularly neglected dimension of the text, i.e., the literary conversion by which Dante rejected the troubadour tradition and adopted "the new life" or the new poetry which is truth. In the second chapter, the author revives Le mie prigioni by the 19th-Century Italian writer, Silvio Pellico. This work is reread by Menocal as a spiritual autobiography which exhibits Pellico's determination to emulate Dante's poetic ideology. She underscores the difficulty experienced by the author in his rewriting of Dante's Francesca episode, concluding that, unlike

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Dante, he was not able to fuse truth, history, literature, and the text into one vision. Particularly interesting is her analysis of the Arnaut/Dante/Pound/Eliot relationships in Chapter 3; the intertextual and interdependent rereadings of the poetry and literary criticism by these artists serve to link the medieval mind with the modern.

Chapter 4 of this book includes an examination of Petrarch's attempt to defend the merits of lyric love or the poetics of the *trobar clus*. He establishes a counter-history and poetics to Dante's clear rejection of this kind of poetry, reviving Guido Cavalcanti, whom Dante had written out of literary history in the *Commedia*.

The final chapter or "epilogue" focuses on Boccaccio's *Decameron* or *Galeotto* (another name for the work). Menocal argues that Boccaccio draws on this alternate name or surname for subversive, intertextual purposes. It is uttered by Francesca in the famous Fifth Canto of the *Inferno*, where she informs the pilgrim Dante that after she was kissed by her lover, she and he read no further in the book by "Gallehault" or "Galeotto." Dante highlights this incident (the equation of love with poetry or the lyrical moment and nothing else) as an example of a poetic ideology which must be abandoned. Boccaccio, however, chooses the scene to stress the impossibility of absolute readings like Francesca's. For him, there are no ultimate truths, texts or interpretations.

Menocal's volume offers fresh insights not only to the scholar of Italian literature, but to the comparatist who, like the author herself, may have approached Dante in retrospect through a modern writer such as Eliot. Therefore, Dante—who initially acts as the locus or centre of critical inquiry—must occasionally sur render this spot to others. Menocal's book thus asks its readers to reconsider not only the place of "influential" writers in literary history, but the very definition of literary history itself.

— Karin E. Beeler
(University of Calgary)

Jeffrey Meyers. *The Spirit of Biography*. Studies in Modern Literature 102. Ann Arbor: UMI Research P, 1989. 305pp. US\$ 44.95.

Jeffrey Meyers is well-known as the author of 15 book-length biographical and critical studies of prominent 20th-Century British and American writers. He