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### Review 146

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#### *Modern Machiavellians Reconsidered*

In *Democratic Elitism*, Natasha Piano provides a vital reappraisal of the so-called “elite theory” of polymathic political thinkers Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, and Robert Michels.<sup>1</sup> Her reinterpretation argues that this “Italian School of Elitism” has been misappropriated in the Anglophone world. They are not in fact “elite theorists,” but “democratic theorists of elitism” (x). Piano documents the progressive distortion of their thought and the foundational influence of this “perverted” image on post-Second World War American Political Science (15). She convincingly charts the genesis of that image as the foil against which the doctrine of “democratic elitism” was defined, mediated through the work of political scientists Joseph Schumpeter, Robert Dahl, et al.<sup>2</sup> Rather than the conventional interpretations of Pareto, Mosca, and Michels as conservative and anti-democratic (even fascist) stereotypes, Piano’s “revisionist” reading of these figures seeks to recover their obscured criticisms of the plutocratic tendencies inherent in the structures of liberal parliamentary, electoral, and representative processes (11).

The “Italian School” emerged from the historical experience of the politics of “transformism” [*trasformismo*], namely the flexible strategy of co-optation and neutralization, during the process of Italian unification [*Risorgimento*], and refracted its “problems” and “promise” (11). Piano argues that like the Talking Cricket in author Carlo Collodi’s allegorical tale *Pinocchio*, these theorists were the prematurely extinguished conscience of the new Italian nation whose warnings of the “plutocratic and demagogic

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<sup>1</sup> Vilfredo Pareto, *The Mind and Society*, 4 vols. (Harcourt, Brace, 1935); Gaetano Mosca, *The Ruling Class* [*Elementi di scienza politica*] (McGraw-Hill, 1939); Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* (Collier, 1962).

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (Harper Perennial, 1949); Robert Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (University of Chicago Press, 1956); Peter Bachrach, *The Theory of Democratic Elitism: A Critique* (University Press of America, 1980).

dangers of conflating elections and democracy” went unheeded (4).<sup>3</sup> Their central concern was that “defining democracy through representative practices creates unrealistically democratic expectations of what elections, on their own, can achieve, resulting in their delegitimization” (x). Far from mobilizing this critique of representative processes for the purpose of rejecting democracy *tout court*, these thinkers sounded a prescient tocsin about narrowly equating democracy with competitive elections, a view which was later consolidated and made “natural” by the American heirs of post-Schumpeterian political thought (180).

Piano demonstrates that rather than cheerleading elite domination, as their vulgarizers contend, Pareto and Mosca were primarily concerned with the effects of (particularly geographical) economic inequality on political processes. Exposing the tendencies within representative politics towards plutocratic ascendancy was an attempt to prevent abuses of the electoral system, not to reinforce that control.<sup>4</sup> The “ghosts” of Pareto and Mosca provide the resources with which one might distinguish between representation and democracy, guiding us (albeit negatively) towards the extra-electoral role of ordinary citizens in the formation and maintenance of healthy democratic processes. Piano defines the “Italian School” not via “elitism” but by its “pessimistic” orientation (14). These thinkers deployed their (at times) acerbic invective to corrode the capacity of elites to capture political power, motivating “a kind of strategic vigilance against the plutocratic hierarchy that they diagnose as pervading liberal governments” (105). The trajectory of this pessimism was not to stifle popular participation in modern mass politics, but to clear the obstacles to it.

Piano credibly characterizes the “sensibility” of each thinker, disentangling the various tones or moods of their pessimism, of productive anger (Pareto), of “sober cynicism” (Mosca), a quasi-fatalism (Michels), and, in transit across the Atlantic, Schumpeter’s “sardonic irony” (116). Thus, the “perversion” of Pareto and Mosca’s thought is not actually “bizarre” once Piano’s narrative has shown the progressive steps of mutation and inversion, the “telephone game” that has been played, in the process of the Italian School’s travelling theory (12). Even more valuable is Piano’s contextualization of these thinkers within the broader tradition of Italian thought. Thus, the “approach to science” of philosopher Giambattista Vico (13), his “‘systematic’ historical investigation of human affairs,” inspired a distinctive foundation for the Italian School’s ‘social science research’” (54–55).<sup>5</sup> It is in part the illegibility to Anglophone readers, in a milieu of “optimistic” Cartesian causal and positivist science, of the moral and normative aspect of this “Vichian epistemological register” (125) that enables the misappropriation of their thought.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Carlo Collodi, *Le avventure di Pinocchio, storia d'un burattino* [The adventures of Pinocchio: The story of a puppet] (Paggio, 1883).

<sup>4</sup> Compare with debates about Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Oxford University Press, 2008). *The Prince* is seen, among other interpretations, as a handbook teaching “evil” (Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (University of Chicago Press, 1978), 9), or as a “book for republicans” (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and the First and Second Discourses* (Yale University Press, 2002), 205 [Book III: Chapter VI]).

<sup>5</sup> Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico* (Cornell University Press, 1948).

<sup>6</sup> Hence, the occasion of their instrumentalization for the behaviouralist turn.

Amid a global rise of authoritarian populist and demagogic politics, and a crisis of liberal norms, the timeliness and contemporary significance of Piano's intervention is evident.<sup>7</sup> It would be welcome to see her unpack further the import of her reading for the perspectives of those contemporary scholars who are summarized in the preface (such as Nadia Urbinati, Jan-Werner Müller, Josiah Ober, and Hélène Landemore).<sup>8</sup> Piano's argument challenges and unsettles, precisely as the equation of democracy with "free and fair elections" remains deeply embedded in the "common sense" [*senso comune*] of American Political Science. From this perspective, criticism of the plutocratic capture of elections, indeed any critique of elections, is seen to stray too easily into an invitation to authoritarian or totalitarian usurpation. Yet, Piano argues that it is essential to return to an older (but, in the current context, also "fresher") realist tradition of *buon governo*, of "democracy as part and parcel of good government" (xi). The precise significance of this analysis requires careful attention as, borrowing an image from Michels, the "buried treasure" that it offers takes longer to unravel (104).<sup>9</sup>

Deftly contextualizing Pareto's life through its various phases, Piano debunks the conventional twin framings of him, as a strident *laissez-faire* "Manchester" liberal in his pre-1899 writings, and as a disillusioned misanthrope drawn towards dark authoritarian politics in his *The Mind and Society* [*Trattato di sociologia generale*] (1916) and, more starkly, in *The Transformation of Democracy* [*Trasformazione della democrazia*] (1921).<sup>10</sup> Piano's clear and succinct exposition displaces these images of Pareto's supposed early "anti-socialist" and later "anti-democratic" fixations with that of an enduringly anti-elitist critic of "the exploitation that structurally accompanies electoral forms of government and the risks of intensified economic inequality" (19). Pareto was particularly concerned with the "rampant inequality" between Northerners [*settentrionali*] and Southerners [*meridionali*] (24). His reasoning extended notably beyond Italy to an anti-war opposition to the imperial adventures of the political class in Africa (27). This "skeptical" orientation sits rather uneasily with his post-humous sacralization within a pantheon of proto-fascist thinkers. Piano substantiates her reading of Pareto with primary materials, demonstrating his concern with "democratic contestation from below" (35).

She also musters comprehensively the secondary literature, revealing both its insights and limitations. Piano's narrative achieves a clear and succinct account of Pareto's theory of elite circulation, the equilibrium model, and of "residues" (crudely, the sentiments guiding human conduct) and, perhaps too briefly, "derivations" (the legitimating justifications for that conduct). She explains the correspondence of Class I (the "instinct of combinations") and Class II ("the persistence of aggregates") residues with the Machiavellian metaphor of shrewd "foxes," with their capacity for combinations [*combinazioni*], and

<sup>7</sup> Considering recent trade wars, see her comments on Pareto's views on protectionism and the destruction of wealth (198). Pareto, *The Mind and Society*, vol. 4, §2208.

<sup>8</sup> Nadia Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People* (Harvard University Press, 2014); Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Josiah Ober, *Demopolis: Democracy before Liberalism in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 2017); Hélène Landemore, *Open Democracy: Reinventing Popular Rule for the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton University Press, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> See Michels, *Political Parties*, 368.

<sup>10</sup> Excerpts from his pre-1899 work, such as Vilfredo Pareto, *Cours d'économie politique* (F. Rouge, 1896), can be found in Vilfredo Pareto, *Sociological Writings* (Praeger, 1966); Pareto, *The Mind and Society*; Vilfredo Pareto, *The Transformation of Democracy* (Transaction Books, 1984).

coercive “lions” (30). But Piano also indicates the expansive complexity of Pareto’s conception, which extends in fact to six classes. Far from a simple binary oscillation between vulpine and leonine elites, Piano points out that Pareto’s conception of history rejects the “perfect repetition of political structures” (34). For example, the case of modern unified Italy is neither singularly exceptional nor formulaic but intriguingly portrayed by Pareto as a “monstrous assemblage,” a bricolage of the “ugliest side of representative regimes” in other nations (28).

While departing scrupulously with the secondary literature’s tendency to elide the views of “Pareto and Mosca,” Piano exposes similar misconceptions about the conservative and anti-popular proclivities of the latter. Impressions of Mosca’s supposed anti-democratic views arise from his record of opposition to the extension of suffrage in the Italian Chamber of Deputies (60). Piano explains that this hostility was not to democracy *per se*, but resulted from his fear, which was substantiated by subsequent empirical studies (61), that, in the context of the fragile liberal parliamentary state, universal suffrage would not lead to more democracy for Southerners, but only to the solidification of Northern hegemony. Piano uses the latter term advisedly as she argues that the most “fitting successor” of the Italian School may productively be considered the socialist Antonio Gramsci rather than Michels or Schumpeter (53).<sup>11</sup> This is not to underplay Mosca’s critical appraisal of Marxism, particularly what he saw as its undue confidence in the historical progress of freedom (67),<sup>12</sup> but rather to foreground the “absurdity of our epoch,” namely the conflation of “democracy and liberal elections” (61).

For Piano, Mosca’s pessimism was characterized by its “sober” tone (51). Yet, this hardly diminishes his project to “expose the prevalence of elite rule in electoral governments in order to stem the growth of plutocracy amid *regional* economic inequality” (51). As with Pareto, Piano highlights the “global historical comparison” that was central to Mosca’s approach (55) and was elaborated in the tradition of Vico’s *New Science* and its successors, to “fortify theoretical instruments against domination” (67). Concretely, this involved advancing “a type of political affirmative action for the poor” (58). The task [*compito*] set by Mosca required the “energy of an entire people” to “realize a better form of government” (64). Piano describes the finale of Mosca’s *Theory of Governments and Parliamentary Government* [*Teorica dei governi e governo parlamentare*] (1886) as “a clarion call for future democratic action against the plutocratic domination of parliamentary government” (64).<sup>13</sup> While tracing the evolution of Mosca’s “political pessimism” through the editions of his later *Elements of Political Science* [*Elementi di scienza politica*] (1896, 1923, 1939), translated in English as *The Ruling Class*, Piano argues that “despite his moderated attitude towards liberalism in the 1920s,” Mosca remained relatively consistent in his “cynical but still popular” defensive strategies against elite control (65).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Gramsci was struck by Mosca’s grasp of the “techniques of the politics of subaltern classes.” See Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere* (Einaudi, 1975), 1607.

<sup>12</sup> An optimism arguably attributable equally to key liberal thinkers in Italy, for example, Benedetto Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty* [*La storia come pensiero e come azione*] (Allen and Unwin, 1941).

<sup>13</sup> Gaetano Mosca, *Teorica dei governi e governo parlamentare*, in Gaetano Mosca, *Scritti politici*, vol. 1 (UTET, 1982).

<sup>14</sup> Gaetano Mosca, *Elementi di scienza politica* (1896, 1923), in Gaetano Mosca, *Scritti politici*, vol. 2 (UTET, 1982); Mosca, *The Ruling Class*.

Former German Social-Democratic Party member Robert Michels was the only figure in the Italian School that made the transition to Benito Mussolini's fascism. Piano debunks the established narrative that Michels's political shift was catalyzed by the influence of Pareto and Mosca. It was, argues Piano, Michels's sensibility of iron rigidity, shaped by his German intellectual influences, among whom figured the sociologist Max Weber, that transmuted his earlier anti-elitist ideas into a quasi-fatalist worldview amenable to fascist conversion (107). Nevertheless, Piano's exposition of Michels's innovative early study of political organizations, *On the Sociology of the Party System in Modern Democracy: Investigations of the Oligarchic Tendencies of Group Life* (1911), examining how leaders become irremovable, is instructive for understanding the process by which Michels's evolution took place (102).<sup>15</sup> Piano demonstrates the misrepresentation of Michels's most famous text, particularly in American political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset's influential 1961 introduction, which ascribed to Michels a positive normative assessment of oligarchy, thus implying a disparaging fixation on "mass passivity" à la crowd psychologist Gustave Le Bon, rather than his actual focus on "elite corruption" (103).<sup>16</sup>

Yet, despite drawing close to Mosca and Pareto in exposing the "myths of popular representations," Piano argues that Michels "does not distinguish between democracy and representation as thoroughly as his predecessors did" (99). Piano delineates forensically Michels's continuities and breaks with his Italian colleagues, which were different than those which are habitually assumed. Michels adopted Mosca's focus on "multiplicities" of minority groups but eliminated his "democratic institutional focus on elite contestation specifically *from below*," pre-figuring in certain respects Schumpeter's notion of democracy as competitive party struggle (98). Piano documents how later thinkers dismissed Pareto and Mosca for their "fascist theoretical leanings" yet singled out Michels as a "productive resource for future democratic theory" (145). This is misleading in part because Michels, as a German émigré, was far less situated in the "fine dry air," as philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche put it, of the Italian experience of the *Risorgimento* and its lessons regarding plutocratic domination (107). Broadening his criticisms to embrace oligarchy in general, rather than its specific localized "plutocratic strain," brought Michels to the threshold of a quasi-fatalist resignation (106).

Between the World Wars, "Austro-Modernist" Joseph Schumpeter ferried "elite theory" to social scientific circles in the United States, where it was then subject to "a more pronounced perversion" (114). For Piano, Schumpeter's significance lies beyond his reputation for encouraging a "strictly 'empirical' approach" to political theory (115), but for the tone of his pessimism, a "sardonic irony" that "aims to encourage a corrupt and decaying ruling class to reform itself" (116). Quite distinct now from Pareto and Mosca, or the ambiguity of Michels, Schumpeter "challenged his readers to baldly equate electoral procedures and democratic governance" (116), the aim of which was not to attenuate "democratic expectations of liberalism," but to lower "participatory expectations of democracy" (117). Piano argues that Schumpeter's position reflected his grave fear of autocratic and totalitarian government, rather than of plutocracy (120). He rejected "classical democratic doctrine" in favor of an "alternative 'theory of competitive leadership'," which redefined democracy as "leadership selection through liberal election of governors" (129). For Piano,

<sup>15</sup> Michels, *Political Parties*. Piano's modification of the Collier translation of the original German title reflects her rejection of the prevailing interpretation (212).

<sup>16</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, "Introduction," in Robert Michels, *Political Parties* (Collier, 1962), 15–42.

Schumpeter radicalizes the Italian School's pessimism, such that "elite power seems insurmountable, and even preferable when considered against the authoritarian alternatives" (142). Yet, Schumpeter came to be seen by American Political Science scholars as a "more genuinely democratic alternative to the Italian theorists" (143).

While all the so-called "elite theorists consistently expressed anti-elitist pessimism," albeit each in their distinctive tone, their reception in the US-context had a very different impact (143). Thus, Piano charts the "secret history" of American Political Science literature by examining the post-war role of "elite theory" in "constituting the epistemological foundation of the behavioral revolution of the discipline" (145). Paradoxically, the Italians became "both the genesis and the antithesis of empirical political science" (145). This arose from two intertwined "misappropriations" that viewed them, first, as anti-democratic thinkers with scorn for the masses, and second, as advancing the model of an anti-historical, positivist, empirical scientific method.

Piano delineates the use of this inheritance by pluralist political scientists, who are epitomized by Yale scholar Robert Dahl, who took up an orientation of "hopeful ambivalence." For Piano, this "nouveau elitism" represents a "qualified endorsement of the oligarchy that modern representative institutions generate" (159). She traces plausibly the detail of Pareto and Mosca's influence on the development of Dahl's polyarchy, noting Dahl's reliance on the concept of "democratic creed," and its exceptionalism from the European's corrosive demystifications. Piano insightfully analyzes the evolution of Dahl's work, arguing that, despite his post-1980s "normative reorientation" to democratic socialism, the substance of his democratic theory remained the same (156). The fortunes of "nouveau elitism" were accelerated by the "panicked response" of participatory democrats such as Peter Bachrach and Carole Pateman.<sup>17</sup> Piano argues Bachrach's defensive criticisms of Pareto, Mosca, and Schumpeter helped to formalize and reinforce a new category of "democratic elitism" to which the Italian School was reduced (165). After briefly reviewing intellectual historian Quentin Skinner's intervention as an arbitrator between pluralist and participatory democrats, Piano assesses political scientist Adam Przeworski's role in transforming the "revisionary" equation of elections and democracy into a dominant consensus that extended to socialist intellectuals (168).<sup>18</sup>

Exposing the misinterpretation of Pareto, Mosca, Michels, and Schumpeter allows Piano to correct not only the "hermeneutic injustice of the elite theory lineage," but also the "suspect genealogy of democratic elitism" which constitutes the "founding myth of [the] discipline" and "continues to shape its self-understanding as the ontological foundation of realist theories of democracy" (147). By de-mummifying the thought of the Italian School, Piano re-actualizes them for the present moment. She shows how the distortion of their thought contributed to the impasses that confront American Political Science scholars today and indicates the resources they might provide to enrich the future of democratic theory. While elections are undeniably "a crucial mechanism in modern mass popular government," Piano argues that

<sup>17</sup> Bachrach, *The Theory of Democratic Elitism*; Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1970).

<sup>18</sup> Quentin Skinner, "The Empirical Theorists of Democracy and Their Critics: A Plague on Both Their Houses," *Political Theory* 1:3 (August 1973): 287–306; Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 1985).

scholars must realize that making elections “free and fair” renders them more representative and not more democratic (180). Thus, solving the problems of representation does not necessarily lead to more democratic outcomes. It is rather the structure of elections that generates plutocratic outcomes.

So, what, according to Piano, is democracy? Primarily, she argues that it is *not* a “regime typology akin to oligarchy, monarchy, or forms of government that end with the root *arkhein* (to rule)” (183). Deriving from *-kratia*, democracy is “better understood as ‘principles’ (Mosca’s formulation), or as types of ‘power’ (Pareto’s)” (184). In other words, democracy is found in “counter-plutocratic, majoritarian institutions and procedures that fend off the most deleterious threats of the electoral process in order to level unequal political power” (180). This “fresh conception of modern democracy” (xi) is a vision of popular sovereignty and how to encourage it (104). *Pace* Dahl, we must ask not “who governs,” but “who exercises control over those who govern officially?” The members of the Italian School wanted to know whether it will be the wealthy [*ploutos*] or the many [*demos*] (184). Piano concludes that we need to generate “a more expansive vision” of democracy (182), a “radically new kind of realism,” a positive theory for (and exceeding?) the American Political Science tradition that she characterizes in terms of the Italian tradition of *buon governo* (183). Piano describes this “popular, pluralist, and anti-plutocratic platform” through its continual “contestation of elite power,” “redress of material inequality,” and “horizon-broadening” consideration of both elites *and* mass movements (8).

The sweep and coherence of Piano’s original synthesis is a landmark achievement. While the “revisionist” readings of Mosca and Pareto were in part prefigured by works by Maurice Finocchiaro (1999) and Joseph Femia (2006) respectively,<sup>19</sup> neither delivers Piano’s encompassing narrative of the dispositions of the Italian School and the impact of their misappropriation on political science. Both, like Piano, are attentive to the Gramscian resonances of the Italian School, situating their thought in the context of Italian political thought.<sup>20</sup> One might wonder about the exclusively “Italian” nature of the pessimistic orientation analyzed by Piano. Although productively contrasted against the German variant (105), something similar may appear in other global contexts. One might also ask how such figures as liberal philosopher Benedetto Croce (with his neo-idealist reading of Vico), or the revolutionary liberal Piero Gobetti, can be incorporated within this narrative, breathing the same “fine dry air,” but adding a cross-cutting complexity to an integral (albeit internally differentiated) “Italian disposition.”<sup>21</sup>

Piano’s reinterpretation of the Italian School could also productively reframe debates on democracy and dictatorship in post-Second World War Italian thought. How might these new readings of Pareto, Mosca,

<sup>19</sup> See Maurice A. Finocchiaro, *Beyond Right and Left: Democratic Elitism in Mosca and Gramsci* (Yale University Press, 1999), in which he refers to this as a “three-dimensional elitism,” 112, and Joseph V. Femia, *Pareto and Political Theory* (Routledge, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> See Robert P. Jackson, “‘Disfigurations’ of Democracy? Pareto, Mosca and the Challenge of ‘Elite Theory,’” *Topoi* 41 (2022): 45–55.

<sup>21</sup> Benedetto Croce, *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico* (Transaction, 2002); Piero Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution* (Yale University Press, 2000). Piano acknowledges this hybridity in deploying Gramsci’s use of Romain Roland’s aphorism: “Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will” (188). Compare also the Arab/Palestinian “pessoptimism” of Emile Habiby, *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist* (Arabia, 2010), or Edward W. Said, *Late Style: Music and Literature against the Grain* (Bloomsbury, 2006).

and their “successor,” Gramsci, speak disruptively to, for example, social liberal Norberto Bobbio’s mediation between the intellectuals of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), the Christian Democrats (DC), and beyond?<sup>22</sup> Can Piano deploy her analysis to account for the constitution of a coherent majoritarian personality that might produce *buon governo* without reducing the remedy of the defects of representation to a single principal, or reducing democracy itself to that remedy?<sup>23</sup> Would a more substantive treatment of Pareto’s “derivations” and Mosca’s “political formula” (with its politics of alliance-building) be a helpful counterpoint to Piano’s discussion of the theory of residues? To what extent did the Italian School confront the challenges of critical myth-construction addressed by Gramsci in the semantic field of “common sense” [*senso comune*]? Such discussions might speak productively to the metabolism between elites and masses that Piano allusively handles in her concluding discussion of Renaissance poets Francesco Petrarch and Giovanni Boccaccio and the former’s translation of the last story of Boccaccio’s *Decameron* from the vernacular into Latin (190).<sup>24</sup> Revealing the Italian School to be bellwether critics of tendencies now thrust into the political spotlight, *Democratic Elitism* is a crucial read for future theorists of democracy.

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<sup>22</sup> Norberto Bobbio, *Politica e cultura* (Einaudi, 1955). The PCI provides a concrete referent against which one could evaluate the evolution of the “Marxist fairy tale” (29, 55, 118, 200).

<sup>23</sup> Potentially offering something absent from contemporary analyses of economic inequality (12, 176) is, for example, Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Harvard University Press, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> Francesco Petrarch, *Letters on Familiar Matters*, vol. 2 (Italica Press, 2005); Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron* (W.W. Norton, 2015).