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Book Review

JORDAN, CONSTANCE, *Pulci's Morgante: Poetry and History in Fifteenth Century Florence*, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1986, pp. 216.

In claiming that Luigi Pulci's *Morgante* is a propagandistic assertion of Medicean supremacy and "divine right to rule," Constance Jordan dances to a trendy Marxist tune. Unfortunately in *Pulci's Morgante: Poetry and History in Fifteenth Century Florence*, Ms. Jordan does not have the fancy footwork, nor the historical grounding, to substantiate her claim. The title of this recent study, as well as its introduction, are enticing; both promise an interdisciplinary look at Quattrocento Florence, at one of the Medici circle intimates, and at a less-studied epic poem. Ms. Jordan stumbles into the same trap as many art historians: she claims too much premeditated intention on the part of poet and patron without evidencing her hypotheses with documentation. Apart from the introduction, little use is made in the text of letters, chronicles or other historical evidence to complement the literary textual points. This is the allure of interdisciplinary studies and the dilemma of scholars who attempt them: the possibility to explore delicate and complex interrelationships is great, the catch is not to lose sight of one or the other perspective. Ms. Jordan errs on the side of the literary critic, to the point that one seriously questions her choice of subtitle. It is strikingly misleading, as this review shall reveal.

In her introduction, Ms. Jordan provides historical background: a brief biography of Luigi Pulci, his relationship to the Medici, and some

discussion of Medici power. Her explanation of the sociopolitical milieu is superficial, based on Rubinstein's *The Government of Florence* (1966), ignoring studies much more recent, extensive and germane to the topic of Medicean ascendancy and control (Dale Kent, John Majemy, et. al.). Her use of Pulci's correspondence with Medici family members, and references from important chronicles such as Villani and Dati suggest that she will be incorporating these into the body of her work. Instead, these are a gloss found only in the introduction.

The body of the book, as a glance at the table of contents reveals, is primarily devoted to a traditional literary analysis. The first chapter, "The Form of the Narrative," is a straightforward structural analysis, replete with diagrams and models. Forcing Pulci's narrative into schematic frameworks and patterns which depict plot progression is not as enlightened an approach to the work as one expects after the introduction. The entire chapter's validity is called into question by the author herself at the end of the chapter: "The partial or subjective nature of my analysis justified my unwillingness to elevate it to the status of a demonstration of structure. Critiques of structuralist interpretations . . . render theoretically indefensible both structuralist methodology and critical programs designed to produce objective analysis." (57) The author then admits that the methodology used to analyze part 1 of the poem is useless in analyzing the second part, whose structure is "not patterned." (58)

The second chapter, "Models of Chivalry," deals with literary precedents in the French tradition and Arthurian legends. Once again, the analysis is conventional, limited strictly to an interpretation of the plot. At times, Ms. Jordan suggests a historical link, but leaves it disappointingly unresolved. For example, the provocative statement "The politicization of the figure of Rinaldo continues to be a feature of the *Morgante*," (79) promises more historical explanation. Ms. Jordan dismisses us with a few pat references to well-known civic icons: the lion, Hercules. Nowhere does she mention the *Marzocco* by name, nor does she supply rudimentary art historical examples of how and why and where these symbols stand for Florence, or how an audience or indeed the patron Medici would react to such imagery. Thus she only briefly suggests a use of political symbolism. This aspect deserves much more attention if one considers that the Medici, who commissioned the work,

were a family with an enormous repertoire of its own personal, significant emblems and symbols. If Pulci is truly trying to write a history of the Medici and their manifest destiny to rule, as Ms. Jordan claims in her introduction and throughout the book, would he not also adorn his work with Medici imagery? Again, one is reminded of the art historical parallel, where artistic commissions and architectural monuments commissioned by the Medici are replete with their various personal insignia.

Ms. Jordan gets bogged down in discussion of "time models" which she says Pulci uses, and which are an important factor of his "perspectivism"—a term she coins but does not define until the end of chapter 3. It is this, "the constitution of a subject by repeated representations, each registering a different aspect of it," (124) which Ms. Jordan believes to be Pulci's theory of history. She discusses at length other theories of history from Boethius to Villani, yet we are unconvinced of Pulci's participation. Nowhere does Ms. Jordan demonstrate that Pulci actually read or contemplated theories of history in his supposed attempt to formulate his own.

In the third chapter, "Typical Adventures," Ms. Jordan is back to a formalist analysis in classifying plot events. She bases much of her argument on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Latin poetry and mythology. Pulci's humanistic training was limited, as Ms. Jordan points out early in the book. Yet she only admits in a footnote to Pulci's dubious familiarity with these works: "It is impossible to know the extent of Pulci's knowledge of medieval and Renaissance mythography. I have assumed he had a general knowledge of the most common interpretations of popular myths . . . I find it hard to imagine he did not know Boccaccio's *Genealogie*, although there is no direct evidence that he did" (199). The most glaring error is when Ms. Jordan misidentifies Luigi Pulci as the author of the *Ciriffo Calvaneo*, when in fact it is Luigi's brother Luca. Unfortunately, Ms. Jordan also bases some discussion of Luigi's poetical development on his authorship. This kind of sloppiness makes it difficult to give credence to her arguments.

The final chapter, "Poetry and History," is as disappointing as it is misleading. Perhaps "Poetry and Historiography" would be a better title, yet one questions Ms. Jordan's criteria in judging a historian. She states that Pulci's most important contribution to the *Morgante* was

“the judicious discrimination that would convincingly establish it as a *factual* rather than a fantastic *fiction*” (125) (emphasis mine). Why Ms. Jordan insists on Pulci’s role as willing and conscious Medicean historian in the face of such scanty, strictly literary evidence, is obscure. She states herself in the preface: “When Pulci began writing his poem, he did not realize, I think, that he was in possession of all the elements with which to articulate the central concerns of historiography.” Why Ms. Jordan imposes that task upon him is unclear. To base an argument upon Pulci’s claim to be Carlo Magno’s best historian is to base an argument on a literary *topos*: all epic poets claim to sing as no other previous bard. The attempt to historically quantify and legitimize this hyperbolic and conventional claim is unsuccessful. I think Ms. Jordan’s main problem lies in the fact that there is no historical evidence to demonstrate that Pulci was anything other than a poet, and not the historian concerned with the development of historiography she would like him to be. He was a poet of the vernacular, and contrary to what Ms. Jordan states, this was unremarkable: “The fact that Pulci was virtually alone among the poets and historians of the Medici circle in writing in a popular vein was probably in his favor” (26). Lorenzo himself was the author of poetry “in the popular vein,” with “La Nencia da Barberino” and the *canti carnascialeschi*. Such claims force one to question Ms. Jordan’s understanding and familiarity with Quattrocento Florence, its milieu and literature.

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