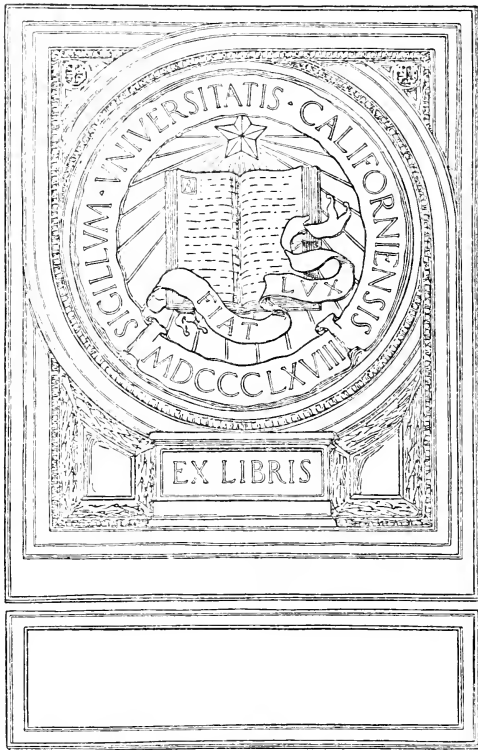


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BOCCACCIO

AND

CHAUCER

BY

PETER BORGHESI



BOLOGNA

NICHOLAS ZANICHELLI

1903

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PREFACE.

These few pages have been written not only to show our countrymen the influence Boccaccio had on the earliest period of English literature and that the English began very early to come to Italy to assimilate her treasures in literature and fine arts, but also to endeavour to encourage here the study of the English language. If England has learned and taken much from us, Italy could now in her turn learn and take very much from England.

We are willing to admit that we are going to say very little which is new: we have only gathered from what has been written here and there, and we have enlarged upon a subject which is worthy of more consideration in Italy than it has hitherto received.



INTRODUCTION.

The subject we have chosen, *Boccaccio and Chaucer*, namely the influence which the former exercised over the writings of the latter, is not an easy one, and we do not pretend to treat it here in full, as a large volume or more could be written thereon. We shall only endeavour to enumerate some of the principal thoughts and statements that have been expressed on this matter, leaving to a future time, or to others better acquainted with the subject, the task of completing our observations. The matter is one well worthy of fuller treatment, because if we can not only make it generally known, but also prove that Boccaccio had a great influence on the English literature of the XIV century, that would be of great advantage both to us and to the English: the two literatures would tend to approach more closely the one to the other: we should study English more than we have done in the past, the English people would be induced to take more

interest in the study of Italian, and from this study, from this intercourse of thought, from this communion of ideas a great result could not fail to be brought about. It is not by concentrating his work within himself that a man succeeds in doing something useful: it is chiefly by assimilating it with what others have done that such an object is attained.

Political events.

Before speaking on our leading subject, it is necessary to cast a rapid glance over the English political situation of the time, as political and literary events are generally so connected with one another, that it is impossible to trace the history of the latter without giving at least some idea of the former. Let us therefore say a few words about them.

The political conditions of England during the XIV century were by no means the most prosperous. After Edward I, who died in 1307, came the despicable Edward II who was compelled to abandon the Scottish war, who gave the regency of the kingdom to Piers Gaveston, a Gascon, perhaps a man even worse than he himself was. He brought about the war with Robert Bruce which terminated so shamefully for the English, and at last he chose new favourites in Hugh le Despenser and his son. Inasmuch as the King always chose French favourites, so the Barons were in a continual struggle against him, and they seem to have been helped by Queen Isabella, Philip the

Fair's daughter, who had formed an illicit connection with the infamous Roger Mortimer. The King was deposed by Parliament, fled to Wales, was captured, imprisoned and murdered in 1327.

Edward III, who reigned from 1327 to 1377, proved a better King than his father, and prosecuted the Scottish war with vigour.

In 1327 the hundred years' war began, and Edward claimed the French throne through his mother, in opposition to the reigning monarch, Philip VI of Valois. After fruitless campaigns from the side of Flanders in 1339 and 1340, Edward landed at La Hogue, in Normandy, in 1346, with a large army; he passed the walls of Rouen and Paris, he won a battle at Crécy, and, after a year's siege, he reduced Calais. The French war was renewed in 1355 and in 1357, and the Black Prince, after several victories over the French, entered London in triumph, with John, King of France, his prisoner. This war however was not at an end, it continued, but when in 1359 Edward sailed again to France with a large army, the war proved unsuccessful, and it ended in 1360, when, by the treaty of Brétigny, Edward renounced his claim to the French crown.

Of Richard II, who reigned from 1377 to 1399, we have but little of interest to say. It will suffice only to point out that he continued the French war, which ended in failure, that in 1386 the French were threatening his kingdom, that in 1387 there was civil war in England, and that his reign was by no means a prosperous one.

From this very short and imperfect sketch of the political events in England during the XIV

century, it clearly appears, that neither the Court (except perhaps at the beginning of the century), nor the Barons, nor the people had any sympathy with France. Even if the union between Isabella and Edward III had proved a happy one, even if the French favourites had been open and honourable men, even if the war for the French throne had not taken place, the English could not sympathize with the French, who were the true and faithful allies of Scotland.

General remarks on the English literature of the XIV century.

From the English political events of the XIV century we can infer, that England was not very prosperous. The English Court was one of the most splendid in Europe, Edward III and Richard II protected learning, but, in spite of this, literature was not in a very flourishing condition. The French language, which had been introduced into the Court of England and thence among the nobility even before 1066, spread very widely, after the conquest, among every class of people, so that during the XII and XIII centuries French poetry was not looked upon as a foreign literature, and until about the time of Edward III, children who studied Latin were also compelled to study French. Little by little however, in the course of time, it ceased not only to be spoken, but also to be written; Edward III abolished it from the Courts of Justice, and from the time of Edward III and Richard II not a single poem or song was written in French (1).

(1) Ward.

This is a decisive point in our favour, because it proves that French literature had had its day in England and that at this period, though the French school still existed there, its condition was precarious and uncertain. There was no national school nor could one be created. French having been for about two centuries the official language of England, the English tongue was still too young to acquire a very rapid development. Great periods in literature are like men of genius, who must usually imitate others before showing their own characteristics.

There had been in England a powerful Saxon literature, but after the conquest, the English spirit had weakened, and since that time English authors had written either in French or translated from French. But in the XIV century the two languages as well as the two nations became completely separated and the French tongue began to be considered as a foreign one (1). Besides there is another thing to note: the days of chivalry and the great ideals of the Middle-ages were dying out, and so the poetry of troubadours and trouvères was doomed to end.

But if a pure national school was not possible, and if the French influence was no longer felt, if the French school of the preceding centuries was dying out even in France, how could English literature improve upon the situation? Two men of genius were necessary: Boccaccio and Chaucer.

It is impossible to speak of the English literature of the XIV century without speaking of them.

(1) Craik.

They are the only two writers who dominate that century in England: Boccaccio is the master, Chaucer the disciple, the one is the mind that dictates, the other the hand that writes with intelligence, the former had a great power of invention, the latter of imitation. They are two geniuses, the latter born from the former, and although to a certain extent Chaucer is still to be classed among the best writers of the Middle-ages, he is, perhaps, more modern than his principal master, Boccaccio (1).

(1) Chiarini.

The *Roman de la Rose*.

We do not think that the old sentence which says that « a poet is born and not made » is quite true. Very few men awake to find themselves famous and the poet also is the result of great struggles and hard work. If he were only a lucky man, a man who owed everything to chance and nothing to himself, we think he could never have been surrounded by that halo which makes him so great and venerable. No! a poet is not a mere creature of chance. If we study his life and works, at the beginning of his career we see his taste unsettled, his style unformed and we see that he does not produce original matter, but that he eagerly tries his hand in imitations.

Chaucer could not escape the common fate, and his works continue to improve more and more till 1386 which marks the highest step in his literary life. He did not begin as an imitator, he began as a translator.

It is certain that the French literature of the XII and XIII centuries is great and fascinating, and Chaucer chose to translate the famous *Roman*

de la Rose which our Petrarch despised; but in France it had a great renown until the advent of Ronsard, and in England up to the time of Surrey and Wyatt.

It is hard to say why Chaucer chose to translate this book in spite of the political hatred that existed between the two nations. Perhaps because, with a good sense of justice, he thought that our judgment on art must always be calm and not misled even by the most important political or social events. Perhaps again because he did not find anything that could please his countrymen so much in the Latin language which he knew almost as well as French.

✓ The advent of Italian literature had not yet supplanted the old lays and romances; furthermore it was not yet known abroad, and French was still everywhere considered the best poetical literature of the modern world. The fact is, that Chaucer did not find anything better than the *Roman de la Rose* and he began to translate it, perhaps not only to train himself in his vocation as a poet (1), but also to present his countrymen with the best production of the French poets.

As is known, the *Roman de la Rose* was commenced by William of Lorris who wrote 4,149 verses, and finished by John of Meung who wrote the other 18,588 verses. Modern criticism is inclined to think, that the translation of this work, which was, until a few years ago, attributed to Chaucer, is not his. We cannot discuss this point.

(1) Morley.

We wish only to note that in this translation the 4,149 verses by Lorris are increased to 4,432 English lines, that afterwards 8,956 French verses are cut down to 3,269, and that the work was never carried to completion.

It may be that this translation is not Chaucer's but it would appear to have been his, as he never afterwards translated a complete work, but he told the story translating here and there the most prominent passages he found in his originals. However this may be, the fact remains that he did once translate the *Roman de la Rose*.

Was this translation useful to Chaucer? Was it useful to the English literature? Some answer that Chaucer corrupted and distorted English by an immoderate mixture of French words; others on the contrary say, that Chaucer is the « well of English undefiled ». He is also called « the first poet and the true father of the English literature, the writer to whom his country's tongue owes all its beauties, the poet of the dawn, the father of English poetry, the Homer or the Ennius of his country » and that only Spencer, Shakespeare and Milton can be compared to him.

We are of the latter opinion which gained ground after Chaucer's time with men like Gower, Langland, Oecleve and Lydgate, and it is still most generally accepted. If Chaucer used French words it was not his fault, but the fault of preceding generations, and in his day English was still imbued with much that was French. At the commencement of his literary career he imitated the French school because he could not do otherwise. In his time the

English tongue was lacking in both poetic material and poetic form, and English literature dates from Chaucer. Note also that he was not singularly original, but he could easily and masterly imitate, and he had neither writers nor writings in his own tongue worthy of imitation, so that, previous to his becoming acquainted with Latin and Italian, he could only imitate French writers, in whom he found the germs of many good phrases and words.

This was of advantage to English literature which threw off its primitive roughness and crudeness, and acquired, to a certain degree, that polish and flexibility which is part and parcel of the French language.

But whilst the influence of French on Chaucer has perhaps been over estimated, the influence on him of the Italian literature has been underrated.

Chaucer abroad.

For his day Chaucer was a man who had travelled very much. In 1359 he was a soldier and followed the King, Edward III, who bore arms against France. He was made prisoner, but was ransomed soon afterwards either before or on the peace of Brétigny.

It has also been stated that he was in Italy in the year 1368 at the wedding of Violante, Galeazzo Visconti's daughter, with Lionel, Duke of Clarence, and that it was on this occasion he made the acquaintance of both Petrarch and Boccaccio.

Is there any truth in this assertion? Certainly in 1368 Chaucer was in the King's household and not in Prince Lionel's, where he had formerly been, but it may be possible that the King had allowed Chaucer to go with his son on such a joyful occasion.

During the Spring and Summer of 1370 Chaucer was abroad in the King's service, but the journey in which we are more concerned is that of 1372 when he was sent by the King to negotiate with Genoa with reference to the settlement of a Genoese

mercantile factory in one of the English ports, as from that time Genoa and England had commercial intercourse.

He left his country either in November or early in December 1372, and his business involved a residence at Genoa and Florence, which, until a few years ago, was believed to have been of about eleven months' duration, but which more recent discoveries have shown to have been of only about six months.

He remained five years in London, and in 1378 he was once more sent to Italy and this time to Milan to confer with Bernardo Visconti perhaps about the King's war when « the shores of England lay at the mercy of the French and Spaniards (1) », but he must have remained in Milan for a very short time only.

He was also sent to France and the Netherlands, and we can imagine his satisfaction at being sent on these missions, he who was so fond of books and new scenery, and so pleased when he could make new friends and visit fresh landscapes.

His travels indeed extended his acquaintance with foreign literatures and gave a general character to his education. Chiefly in Italy did he find food for his mind; it was there that he felt at home, and when he went back to England his literary tastes had been so influenced that they had quite changed.

(1) Morley.

Italian influence.

Did Chaucer during his stay in Italy, chiefly in 1372 and 1373, become known to Petrarch and Boccaccio who were still alive? It is very likely that such a genius as Chaucer would have sought the acquaintance of these two masters who were already very famous; it is possible that he went to Padua to see Petrarch, as he states in his *Clerk's Tale*, but if we take it for granted that Chaucer did not stop in Italy so long as it was at first thought, the suggestion of his meeting in Padua with Petrarch is, as a matter of fact, rendered more difficult of credence, although even in six months he may have found plenty of time to make the journey.

He was also well supplied with money. He had ninety pounds from his government, about 2,250 francs; but inasmuch as the value of money has diminished tenfold since those days, it being possible to buy with one franc in the XIV century what would to-day cost ten francs, the amount at his command during those six months would be equivalent to about 22,500 francs at the present time. It was

not a small sum then, and Chaucer could certainly have afforded to go to Padua.

It is probable that he made the acquaintance of Boccaccio, and that Boccaccio introduced him to Petrarch, as has been said, but we have no documentary proof of this. It does not concern us very much to know whether or not Chaucer was personally acquainted with Petrarch and Boccaccio: it is sufficient to prove that he knew their language and works, chiefly those of the latter, without saying that he knew also Dante's.

It has been stated by several English critics and historians that he did not know Boccaccio's works, and therefore that he took very little or nothing directly from them. Is it possible that a man of genius like Chaucer should come to Italy and remain here at least six months without acquiring some knowledge of our language, he who was so fond of learning and books?

The renown and influence of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio was already widespread almost throughout Europe; and was it likely that Chaucer should come to Italy without studying Italian, and trying to find out all he could about these three famous writers? No, it was not possible, and Chaucer made himself acquainted with Italian, and studied this language, and read and studied these three authors, chiefly the latter, as the one who pleased him most, who approached nearest to his own character. During his stay in Italy he saturated his mind with Italian poetry: there can be no disputing the fact, and it does not want any proof on our part. Yet if anyone still has any doubt on the matter, it will quite

disappear when we prove that Chaucer translated from Italian not only words and sentences, but many stanzas and made so much use of Italian as to place beyond all doubt his knowledge of the language.

And why can no work of his be ascribed with certainty to the period between 1370 and 1373? Firstly because he was occupied with his missions, secondly because he was reading and studying Italian and Italian authors. In fact he was passing « not through a period of production, but through a period of preparation and transformation ⁽¹⁾ »; he was about to abandon the French school for a higher one, the Italian. To Italy only was he indebted for his higher artistic culture, and only Italian poets enabled him to avoid imitating the French poets of the Middle-ages. We can say so without any reticence, because from the time of his first visit to Italy he saw the superiority of the younger Italian school over the older French one, and we may consider that the year 1373 marks « the turning point of his literary life ⁽¹⁾ ». It is true that the Italian literature of that time is to a large degree an offshoot of the French, but who does not know the great æsthetical difference which separates the two literatures? Who does not see that the Italian literature of the XIV century is much more modern in thoughts and feelings than the French *fabliaux*? Who does not admit that the *Roman de la Rose*, which is a psychological

(1) Ward.

romance in which personified abstractions supply characters, marks a high step above the *bestiaires* and *lapidaires*, and that Boccaccio's works and characters are far superior?

Chaucer did not fail to note this superiority, and although the fashionable taste for French Court poetry flattered his early manhood, yet it is only when he approaches the Italian literature that his genius attains full strength. Indeed the precision, the vividness with which he describes scenes and events are not the result of his own imagination, but that of his study of our own tongue. In connection with literature Chaucer belongs to two nations: above all he is English, and after that he is Italian. Certainly the French literature left indelible traces on him, but after 1372 he never looked to France, and, when he borrowed, he went to Italy, as his genius was more akin to that of our own great poets. Only after 1372, after having read and studied our best authors, did he discover that poetry was his calling, he grew more assiduous in the development of his poetic power, more hopeful and assured of his own capabilities; he felt, although he never expressed it, that he could become a poet.

After 1372 Chaucer did not produce anything without clear signs of Italian influence. Even in the *House of Fame*, which is generally thought to have been written in 1374, soon after his return to England, and which is considered as the earliest of his greater works, we find proofs of how much Chaucer loved our literature and how eager he was to assimilate our beauties; we see that he is going to forget the small minstrels of France, and to

imitate our best writers; we see that he begins to get rid of the poetry of the Middle-ages. So he begins the description of the house of fame with « a reminiscence of the invocation of the opening of Dante's *Paradise* ⁽¹⁾ », and there are other reminiscences from the ninth canto of the *Purgatory*, and still others from Petrarch.

No work of foreign origin has yet been found as the source of this poem, but there is no doubt about the existence of Italian influence: it marks the second stage of Chaucer's poetical life. Already in the *Book of the Duchess*, which he wrote in 1369 or afterwards, as it was written on the occasion of the death of the Duchess Blanche, we find that he had commenced to prove himself an original poet, but in the *House of Fame* the poet appears more and more original and in the full possession of the art of writing.

(1) Morley.

Rhyme royal.



Chaucer

Not only did Chaucer chiefly imitate Boccaccio in the spirit of the art of writing, but he borrowed from him also, we think, the outward garb of poetry: verse and stanza.

Before speaking of Chaucer's verse in the stanza called Rhyme royal and which he preferred above any other, it would be necessary for us to fix the date of *The Complaint to Pity*: but it is very difficult, in fact almost impossible, to find out the real date and the chronological order of Chaucer's works: we can only express our opinion on the question. Several critics state that it was written in 1367, namely before the Italian influence; others, among whom Ten Brink, state that it was written between 1370 and 1372, still before the Italian influence, but approaching much nearer to it, and finally others date it after 1372. The exact date at which Chaucer wrote it does not matter to us; it will be sufficient to know whether it was written before or after the Italian influence, and for our part we think that it was written after that date as we shall endeavour to prove in speaking of the verse and stanza he makes use of in this poem.

The heroic verse was never used in England before Chaucer (¹), and he used it for the first time in *The Complaint to Pity*. It is a ten syllabled measure generally formed with five iamboes, and it corresponds to our hendecasyllable except in the accents. It is true that this verse was used long before in France, and that he may have borrowed it from French writers, but it cannot be proved that he did not borrow it from Italy, and most probably it was from the latter country that he took it. In fact, although thoroughly acquainted with French literature since his early youth, why did he not use it in what he wrote before *The Complaint to Pity*? And if he wrote this poem before his journey to Italy, could he not have already studied Italian? If he did not accompany Prince Lionel to Milan, could he not have hoped and prepared himself to accompany him? For our part we feel quite sure that Chaucer knew Italian before 1372, and that our literature may have had some influence on Chaucer even before that date.

Besides, if we consider that the English heroic or decasyllabled verse may be extended to an eleventh and even to a twelfth unaccented syllable, if we consider, as Tyrwhitt affirms, that the greater number of Chaucer's verses would be found to consist of eleven syllables, if every word were pronounced according to the pronunciation of the XIV century, if we consider that, when the verse is an eleven-syllabled one, the last syllable is always unaccented, we need not hesitate much in saying

(¹) Tyrwhitt.

that most probably he borrowed this splendid and harmonious verse from Italy. Our hesitation will always become less and less if we remember that everything is not created in a moment, but little by little. So if Chaucer's heroic verse in *The Complaint to Pity* seems more allied to the French decasyllable, in his later works such as *Troilus and Creseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales* we see it more allied to the Italian hendecasyllable.

Still less doubt hangs over the source of the stanza called *rhyme royal* because it was afterwards used by James I of Scotland, and which Morley would call Chaucer's stanza, as he was the first to use it in England. Tyrwhitt and several others are inclined to think that he borrowed it from Folquet of Marseilles, who used a seven-verse stanza very similar to Chaucer's and therefore he would conclude that this stanza is of Provençal origin. But we doubt very much whether Chaucer could be led to imitate such an author when he had before him Boccaccio's octave rhyme.

Indeed Folquet has not a great name; he could not be classed among the troubadours, as many others excelled him, and he is more famous as a bishop or a warrior than a poet. Dante puts him in his *Paradise*, Petrarch and others praise him, but, as a man of letters, he always remained rather obscure. His twenty-five pieces of poetry now extant count but little, very little for a renown; his stanzas rhymed in the style of the *rhyme royal* are but few, and it is very difficult to believe that Chaucer knew them.

Besides, we must consider that during the XII,

XIII and XIV centuries the poets were looking for a fixed form of stanza, but did not succeed in discovering one. In France, the most prominent nation as regards literature before the appearance of Dante, there are stanzas of many descriptions. Let us for a moment substitute letters for rhymes and we find in Bernard de Ventadour stanzas so rhymed:

ababcedd,

and another so:

ababbe.

In Pierre Vidal we have found these two stanzas:

abbacdd,

abbedde.

Pierre d' Auvergne has stanzas rhymed in many ways and we have noted the following:

aaabbee,

abbecaa,

ababacca,

abbaace,

abacacca,

ababcca,

abcddaee.

Also Folquet of Marseilles, the creator of Chaucer's stanza, has a form of stanza for almost every composition, and we note these two:

abbacdde,

ababbce.

The last one is the beautiful Chaucer's stanza, the stanza which pleased him so much that when he once began to use it, he hardly ever departed from it. The greater and better part of Chaucer's poetical work is written in this stanza, but he used several others, and some of them are:

ababbcbc,
ababcb,
aabaabbc,
aabaabbab.

We see that Chaucer was not the first to use the Rhyme Royal, and that the first poet to use such a stanza was Folquet of Marseilles: nevertheless we consider it highly probable that Chaucer invented this stanza because it is very unlikely he could have been familiar with that used by Folquet.

How then did Chaucer manage to form his stanza from the octave rhyme? He had only to drop the fifth verse and he had *ababbcc*. So the first verse rhymes with the third, the second with the fourth and fifth which form a couplet and the last two rhyme together and form another couplet. So the most important verse is the fourth as it is the centre of the stanza: the last of a quatrain of alternate rhymes and the first of a quatrain of couplets (1).

As there is not much difference between Boccaccio's stanza and Chaucer's, it seems to us that the latter may most probably have been created

(1) Morley.

from the former. If to this we add that Chaucer, in his translation of Boccaccio's *Filostrato*, used this seven-verse stanza and that in many cases a stanza by Chaucer corresponds to a stanza by Boccaccio, we may conclude, with many excellent and impartial English critics, that Chaucer formed his stanza out of the octave rhyme.

If the rhyme royal is but an imitation of the octave rhyme, why did not Chaucer choose this stanza? Every Italian stanza has a complete meaning, it is the translation of a thought, and Chaucer wanted to do just the same; but as English words are generally shorter than ours, and many thoughts are expressed in less words than we should use, so it was necessary for him either to shorten the verse or the stanza. He chose to shorten the stanza: he dropped the fifth verse of the octave rhyme, and he found a stanza not less complete, artistic and harmonious than the Italian one; a stanza which had a great success in England and which was most generally used till towards the end of the XVI century when Spenser's nine-verse stanza dethroned it.

One may object to this assertion and say that Chaucer very rarely gave an English stanza for an Italian one, and this is true if we consider only Chaucer's extant works. But we suppose and feel almost sure that Chaucer did not invent his stanza when he wrote the works we possess, but did so when, to exercise himself in the practise of writing, he tried to translate literally Boccaccio's *Teseide*. In these first attempts to get possession of the Italian style of literature every one of Chaucer's stanza

perhaps corresponded to the meaning of an octave rhyme. Lastly we cannot conclude this paragraph without remarking that if Chaucer did not invent the famous Rhyme royal, he was certainly the first true poet who made use of it, and made it known and popular throughout England, and who placed it in the high position it held until the time of Spenser.

The Teseide.



It has been recorded by several critics and Nicolas Harris is one of these, that Chaucer did not know Italian. We think that nothing can be more absurd. The only reason they give worth considering is that he never intermingled a single Italian word in his works, whilst he used so many French and Latin words.

Before all we must observe that this is not correct, and those who assert it seem to disregard the fact that in Chaucer's works Greek names are Italianised and show that they have not seen the list of words Speght considers that Chaucer took from Italian. Even if this list were not exact, which we can partly admit, we consider that such an assertion is a very strange one, as every author does not write for himself, but for others, for those who speak or understand the language in which he writes. Chaucer wrote in English for the English. He introduced French and Latin words into his works because French and Latin were generally known in England. But can we say the same for Italian? Certainly not, because Italian was not then known

in England. What should we say if our poets introduced into their works Chinese or Japanese words which no one could understand? Chaucer was a genius of very great common sense: he would not write anything that could not be understood. As to his knowledge of the Italian language we shall give, further on, most palpable proofs as a great many passages are translated from Italian and we shall also demonstrate that Boccaccio's *Teseide* was the principal source of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*. Therefore let us briefly discuss this poem.

Not only was Chaucer able to distinguish the superiority of the Italian literature over the French, but he could also choose the very best Italian books. As regards style the *Teseide* is one of Boccaccio's best works ⁽¹⁾. In spite of its classical imitations, the narrative is always simple and bright, the verse and the octave rhyme are generally good and this work was the forerunner of Ariosto and Tasso.

Chaucer knew at once that it was a masterpiece, although the plot in itself is not very interesting: he saw that the characters were not cold, as some are inclined to think, but passionate and full of life; he knew that it was « the first long narrative heroic poem written by a man of genius ⁽²⁾ ». What a difference between the allegory of the *Roman de la Rose* and the human characters of the *Teseide*! It was a great step towards a better form of literature. Chaucer read this poem, he understood all its superiority, and he began to translate it. But

(1) Casini.

(2) Morley.

it is most probable that he did not translate it in the form which we now possess in the *Canterbury Tales* under the title of the *Knight's Tale*. This tale is most probably a recasting of an earlier translation, now lost, which he made before and which he mentions in his *Legend of good women*.

Here the usual great question arises, the question of source, as Chaucer only says that he took his work from « old stories » and from « old books », which would not be true, if, as we believe, Boccaccio's *Teseide* was his original. But was it really so?

Many eminent critics answer that it was, but a few are not of this opinion. The latter say that Boccaccio's *Teseide* and Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* have a common source. Craik is one of these and he claims to prove his assertion by saying that the *Teseide* « extends to about 12,000 octosyllabic verses » whilst Chaucer's poem extends « to not many more than 2,000 decasyllabic ones ». He adds that the English work is much less detailed than the Italian and that « the two versions differ in some of the circumstances ». In another passage he says that what is thought to be translated or imitated from Boccaccio in very little and insignificant articles leads one to suppose that they were drawn from a common source. All this is absolutely denied by Furnivall who says that the original of the *Knight's Tale* is only the Italian *Teseide*, and he adds that it is impossible to think of a French version of the fable of the *Teseide* and therefore of the *Knight's Tale*.

Happily we are not obliged to give much weight

to Craik's remarks. In the first place we must say that he had but very little acquaintance with the Italian language. Everybody knows that Boccaccio's *Teseide* is not written in octosyllabic verses, and that it has not 12,000 verses, but only 9,896, to which we must add fifteen sonnets, and we must also add that there are 2,350 in the *Knight's Tale*.

It is also necessary to state here, that we do not say that Chaucer translated Boccaccio's *Teseide* for his *Knight's Tale*, we say that Boccaccio's *Teseide* is Chaucer's original, that therefore he knew this poem: we say that much is translated and imitated from it, and we add also that Chaucer follows the Italian poem in its general features in such a way as to show his original very clearly.

In the second place, as to the shortness of the English poem as compared with the Italian one it is necessary to know that the *Knight's Tale* is at the beginning of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, which is a collection of tales told, in order to pass the time cheerfully, by at least 29 persons travelling from London to Canterbury. Now Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* is shorter than Boccaccio's *Teseide* for two reasons: first because a long tale would not amuse, secondly because the time was very limited and it was polite and necessary to leave to every member of the company sufficient time to tell two tales in going and two in returning as had been agreed upon. Therefore many secondary and even main circumstances must differ in the two versions, but it is beyond all doubt that Chaucer knew Italian, and his *Knight's Tale* has its source in the *Teseide*, as he literally translated from it about

270 verses, and either imitated or paraphrased about 500 (1).

To prove this assertion we could give here a long list of many, or all the passages in the *Teseide* with Chaucer's English translations or paraphrases, but this work has already been done by Tyrwhitt, Rossetti, Skeat and others, and therefore it is unnecessary for us to do so.

After the proofs that the most learned students of Chaucer have given us, after the comparisons which have been made between the Italian and the English poems, it is impossible not to admit that Chaucer knew Italian and that the *Teseide* is the true source of the *Knight's Tale*.

If many beautiful passages in the *Teseide* are not to be found in the *Knight's Tale*, it is, as we have already pointed out, because he wanted to shorten it very much, as he often says at the beginning of his tale, and also because many passages had already been inserted in other works of his. For example, from the description of the temple of Venus Chaucer took very little for his *Knight's Tale*, as he had already inserted a very close imitation of it in his *Assembly of Fowls* (2), namely from verse 183 to verse 287, and these lines « are translated in a way that places beyond question Chaucer's knowledge of Italian. The turn of the phrase makes it quite evident that Chaucer wrote with the Italian original before him (3) ». So in

(1) Chiarini.

(2) Tyrwhitt.

(3) Morley.

the same poem a list of birds and a shorter list of trees are taken or closely imitated from the *Teseide*, and many passages from this poem are to be found here and there in Chaucer's works. In the same way some of the reminiscences of the *Teseide* are also to be found in Chaucer's *Troilus and Cryseide*. The 260.th, 261.st and 262.nd stanzas of this poem are taken from the first three stanzas of the eleventh canto of the *Teseide*.

The poem of *Queen Anelida and False Arcite* bears a striking resemblance to the *Knight's Tale* and therefore to the *Teseide* « chiefly in the opening lines (1) » so that the 1.st, 2.nd and 3.rd stanzas of *Queen Anelida* correspond to the 3.rd, 2.nd and 1.st of the *Teseide*.

All this explains the gaps that are found here and there in the *Knight's Tale* and it explains also that even if Chaucer had had a mind to translate the *Teseide* literally for his *Canterbury Tales*, he could not have done so.

From all this we may infer also that Boccaccio's *Teseide* is the poem which most pleased Chaucer and from which he borrowed as much as he could.

Here another question arises: when Chaucer altered, did he alter for the worse or for the better? The answer is a very difficult one, but something also may be said on this point. There is no doubt that Boccaccio's *Teseide* has one great defect; this defect lies in the effort to remove, to keep at a distance the conclusion of the action, which is already foreseen from the middle of the poem (2).

(1) Koch.

(2) Casini.

Generally speaking, to curtail the story was to improve it, therefore many critics have praised him inasmuch as he avoided many tiresome descriptions, which, if useful or tolerable in a long poem, are not so in a short one. But in several cases, in his curtailings and in his alterations he was not guided by very good taste, as he does not avoid several of the above mentioned descriptions, he seems to delight in rhetorical tirades full of mythology and biblical quotations and expressions ⁽¹⁾, defects which were however very common during the Middle-ages. Perhaps it was in considering these defects that Sandras was induced to say that Chaucer did not improve the *Teseide*, in fact he says that the English poet diminished its poetic merit, omitted the finest features of the fable and spoiled the truth of the story.

But, in spite of its defects, the *Knight's Tale*, which leads the series of the *Canterbury Tales*, and which in spirit as well as in language is the translation of Boccaccio's *Teseide* had a great success in England and a great influence on English literature, as it was the basis of Fletcher's drama, of Dryden's poem, and of many other compositions.

(1) Chiarini.

The *Filostrato*.

If Chaucer took very much from the *Teseide* for his *Knight's Tale*, he certainly did not take less from the *Filostrato* for his *Troylus and Cryseide*. He did not literally translate it as he was an inventor though a disciple, an original writer though a translator ⁽¹⁾.

Chaucer's work could not be called a translation, but it is rather a recasting of Boccaccio's *Filostrato*.

Also here we have before us the vexed question of source. It may be, as Ward thinks, that Benoit de St. Maure was the first to write a poem on this subject, which, he says, he derived from Latin, that on it Guido de Colonna founded his Latin prose romance, which was reproduced in several languages and by many writers, that Boccaccio took his subject from Guido de Colonna, and that Chaucer's original was Boccaccio. Others on the contrary say that Boccaccio took his *Filostrato* from Benoit de St. Maure and that Chaucer's work has the same source.

This last opinion is sustained by Craik who sees

⁽¹⁾ Taine.

in the two poems only « that general resemblance which would result from their subject being the same, and their having been founded upon a common original ». Notwithstanding this the best authorities, chiefly Tyrwhitt, Warton, Ward and Morley, affirm that Boccaccio's *Filostrato* is Chaucer's original.

It must be so, because he did not write his work before 1377, namely five years after his visit to Italy, and also because not only is the story the same in both poems, but even a large number of Chaucer's passages are literally translated from Italian. Indeed, although Sandras states that Chaucer, besides having under his eyes the Italian *Filostrato*, had also, if not Benoit de St. Maure, certainly Guido de Colonna, from whom he borrowed some particulars neglected by Boccaccio, yet Skeat says that *Troilus and Cryseide* is a free version of Boccaccio's *Filostrato*, although the two poems differ in many points; and Furnivall, who published an excellent edition of three different manuscripts of Chaucer's *Troilus and Cryseide* in order to show the great difference which exists between them, as all « the manuscripts of Chaucer's works offer great and bewildering variety ⁽¹⁾ », says that Chaucer used only the Italian original. We think that Furnivall is right.

Moreover, Rossetti has found that in many instances Chaucer is a very accurate translator of the *Filostrato*, whilst « in others he has paraphrased without translating ». He compared Boccaccio's *Filostrato* with Chaucer's *Troilus and Cryseide*

(1) Ten Brink.

and he gives us the following data which go straight to the point.

Boccaccio's *Filostrato* contains 5,701 lines and Chaucer's *Troilus and Cryseide* 8,246. Chaucer adapted from the *Filostrato* 2,730 lines which he condensed into 2,583 so that only 5,663 lines belong almost exclusively to Chaucer. Therefore one third of *Troilus and Cryseide* is taken from Boccaccio and two thirds are either Chaucer's own, or taken from Boëthius, Dante and Petrarch, besides many imitations from Ovid.

It is true that many passages and episodes of Boccaccio's *Filostrato* are not to be found in the English poem, but we must always bear in mind that Chaucer was not a mere translator, and it will be easy for us to understand all the difference which exists between the two poems. We must consider that if between the two poems there are differences there are also many resemblances: so the leading incidents are the same, there are minute coincidences of expression which could not exist if Chaucer had not translated from Boccaccio, and we must not forget that Chaucer could not translate literally as he wrote poetry.

In many instances Chaucer has helped scholars to find out the sources of his works, but in the case of *Troilus and Cryseide* he rather puts them at a loss. He does not claim any merit of invention in this poem as in one passage he says that he translated it « out of Latin », but by the word Latin he might also have meant the *Latino volgare* or Italian. In other passages he incidentally refers to Homer, Dares Phrygius, Dictus Cretensis, but he

certainty did not take anything from them. He states also that the author of his original was Lollius, but no one appears to recognise this as the name of a writer from whom Chaucer may have taken anything, and no one can presume to say, as Tyrwhitt does, that Lollius may be another name for Boccaccio as our great prose-writer was never so called.

Every student of Chaucer has tried to discover the origin of this name and how the English poet came to make use of it. Some assert that he may have been a Latin writer whose renown and works did not reach us, but it is very difficult to believe that such was the case. Another version is given by Prof. Lathan who thinks that, as the *Filostrato* and therefore *Troilus and Cryseide* belong to the Trojan cycle, Chaucer misunderstood the following verse of Horace:

Troiani belli scriptorem, maxime Lolli, etc.

but we feel confident that he was mistaken in this idea. As this English poet was a very gay and jovial man, some are inclined to believe that he concealed the name of the author of his original in order to mislead his future critics, but we agree, with Lounsbury, that this is most improbable as he was a very modest man and perhaps never thought of being read or studied by any future generation.

Many other similar suggestions have been made, but they can only be looked upon as individual opinions because we cannot find proofs as to the truthfulness of any of them. So perhaps Chaucer may have thought, with Pierre Seigneur de Beauveau, that the *Filostrato* was written by Petrarch. Indeed

in several places he mentions Petrarch instead of Boccaccio, but as instead of the latter only he also mentions Statius and Corinne, so we may only come to the conclusion that he mentioned these names at random, from memory, without caring very much for precision in what he was writing.

These suppositions might be carried further. As Petrarch had two friends whom he distinguished by the names of Lælius and Socrates, Chaucer perhaps believed that by the former Petrarch meant Boccaccio, or he may have wished to imitate Petrarch by calling Lollius his Italian acquaintance and master. But, as we have already said, we can only give what are suppositions and personal opinions.

Now, why does not Chaucer mention Boccaccio in any place though he owes so much to him? ...

It was not only Chaucer's wish to be a Court poet, but he also looked to this for his means of livelihood: he was not a man of action, not a man of great courage: he was not inclined to write anything that might displease the Court. We see this in the translation of the *Roman de la Rose*, if the translation now extant is his, where he omits all passages casting reflections on Kings or other authorities. For a certain time Boccaccio was not in favour with those in authority, with the clergy and religious men in general, and this was chiefly before he expressed regret at having written the *Decameron*. Although in 1373, either just before or soon after the departure of Chaucer from Florence, Boccaccio was appointed to explain Dante to the public and his renown was reestablished, yet some rumours of his being a man of corrupt and loose

habits must have reached Chaucer, who thought that these reports might get to England: he feared the King's reproaches had he mentioned that man as his master, therefore he never mentioned Boccaccio, and perhaps translated from him less than he would otherwise have done. Besides this, although it is quite certain that Chaucer knew Boccaccio's works, yet it cannot be actually proved that he knew his name, or that he knew him personally, or indeed that he ever knew he was the author of his works, as many of the manuscripts of the Middle-ages were published anonymously.

The supposition that Chaucer purposely avoided mentioning the name of Boccaccio gains strength when we remember that Chaucer's idea of decorum was superior to Boccaccio's. In Boccaccio's *Filostrato* Cryseide is a comparatively common place person. This rich, young, beautiful and gay widow did not wish to reject the advances of a young man of distinction: she could not live the life of a nun, and if other women amused themselves with intrigue, why should she not do the same? On being assured that her reputation would not suffer, she yields at once, and makes excuses for her reluctance. In Boccaccio's work Cryseide is bad, faithless, vicious and lustful: in Chaucer's she is not « a nun to whom earthly love is a sin », but she is rather a « victim of fate ». After having read Boccaccio we despise or hate such wanton women, but Chaucer's Cryseide possesses every quality which entitles a woman to love and respect: she is won with difficulty and overcome only by surprise. The

English poet rather teaches us to pity her and he endears her to his readers.

Boccaccio's Pandarus is the most despicable of men, Chaucer's is a good natured, loquacious, rather unscrupulous man, a man who knows the world and who means to enjoy life, he is quite a new creation, a good character for a good comedy, the right man in the right place.

Boccaccio's Troylus is an ordinary man, rather destitute of refined feeling, self-indulgent and practised in the art of intrigue: Chaucer's on the contrary loves with all the ardour and freshness of youth, he is the personification of what a lover ought to be.

Boccaccio does not waste words in the first part of his poem, but he loiters in the second, chiefly after the catastrophe, when all the interest of the poem has passed away. On the contrary Chaucer dwells at length on the most moral and charming part of the poem, where Cryseide is falling in love, but he so curtails the sorrowful conclusion that the fifth or last book of his poem corresponds to four of Boccaccio's cantos.

So, in justice to Chaucer, although a translation, we look upon his *Troilus and Cryseide* as a new creation, and, although Scott thought it a rather tedious work, we think it is a very good one, and we think that Rossetti is right to judge it the finest of ancient English love poems. Certainly in this work there springs up a new life, and we should say a life more moral and purer than in the Italian poem. It could not be otherwise, as Chaucer dedicates it to « the moral Gower and

the philosophical Strode », and it shows also, to Chaucer's honour, that he did not require the aid of vulgarity or triviality to give expression to that vivacity and humour which are his chief characteristics.

We have pointed out that Chaucer's *Troylus and Cryseide* is more moral than Boccaccio's *Filostrato*, but it was not moral enough for the English of that time, and especially for many of the ladies of the Court. This justifies us in our supposition that Chaucer neither dared mention Boccaccio, nor admit that he was his principal master. Indeed, he knew that his poem was not well received at Court, and he wrote *The Legend of Good Women*, by the Queen's order, it is said, to remove the odium which *Troylus and Cryseide* had brought on him.

And here another question arises: is Chaucer's *Troylus and Cryseide* superior to Boccaccio's *Filostrato*?

If we consider separately the several points of Chaucer's work, perhaps, as we have already pointed out, in many passages in this poem Chaucer is superior to Boccaccio, and also, perhaps, if we consider the poem taken as a whole. In many instances Chaucer « has eminently shown his good sense and judgment in rejecting the superfluities and improving the general arrangement of the story. He frequently corrects and softens Boccaccio's manners and it is with singular address he has often abridged the Italian poet's ostentatious and pedantic parade of ancient history and mythology ⁽¹⁾ ».

(1) Warton.

Perhaps this is saying too much; but at least it is partly true. On the other hand Chaucer is wanting in every respect in unity; unity of composition, unity of delineation, unity of character, unity of style; whereas unity constitutes the peculiar attraction of Boccaccio. Chaucer is more monotonous, more diffuse, but he is « superior in depth of feeling and delineation of the passions (1) » and shows everywhere a closer knowledge of life. Boccaccio displays more « elegance of diction and ornament », and his work is and always will remain, an unrivalled master-piece.

(1) Skeat.

The Canterbury Tales.

Before speaking of the *Decameron* we think it necessary to say something about Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, to which we have already referred.

In Chaucer's time many persons, from all parts of England, went to Canterbury to visit the tomb of Thomas à Becket. On the sixth of May of a certain year Chaucer finds we do not know whether 29 or 30 of these pilgrims at the *Tabard*, an inn that was near London Bridge, in the South East of London, on the right bank of the Thames where in the same place, in High Street, Borough, at present stands the *Old Tabard*, a public house, but this building is very modern and there are no remains of the old one. Chaucer and the host joined the pilgrims, so that they then became either thirty-one or thirty-two and they agreed that every member of the company should tell two tales in going and two in returning from the pilgrimage. On the bright and green morning of the seventh day both journey and tales commenced.

Who does not see at once how grand is the idea, and one such as only a genius can conceive? It is not an easy task to write about 128 tales of

such length and nature, chiefly because in them every character « is distinctly marked out in itself, while at the same time it is designed as the type of a class (1) ». So his work is not only estimable from an artistic point of view, but also because it is the best extant history of English life at that time.

We do not know when the vast idea was conceived, but we feel quite sure that it was after the Italian influence had pervaded Chaucer's mind as it was only in 1374 he began to write tales for this great work which unhappily he abandoned in 1390, ten years before his death, when he had written only 24, three of which are incomplete. Notwithstanding the work has not only an artistic, a literary and an historical importance, but its final object is also religious, national, and political.

All this is certainly true, but we cannot agree with those who say that the *Canterbury Tales* is, in its aim, superior by far to Boccaccio's *Decameron*, nor with those who boast about Chaucer's superiority by saying that it is very grotesque and inhuman to tell love-stories to forget a plague. We frankly avow that we do not see the superiority of Chaucer's aim, because we do not consider the *Decameron* to be very different from the *Canterbury Tales*. In fact, if the *Canterbury Tales* contains even only in outline some of the stories of the *Decameron*, the aim of the two works cannot be very different, and certainly the *Decameron* was not written only to amuse a few persons or to forget a plague, as

(1) Ward.

the result has shown, and we think that it is very safe to conclude that both Boccaccio and Chaucer wrote with a similar object in view.

As for those who say that Boccaccio was grotesque and inhuman, they thereby show that they have not read the splendid description of the plague of 1348 which precedes the *Decameron*, and which could not have been written if Boccaccio had not felt intense sorrow on the occasion of so great a calamity. And on this point is there any difference between Chaucer and Boccaccio? If Boccaccio retires in good and merry company to a splendid villa to avoid death from plague, and to enjoy life, Chaucer, who saw four plagues, the first in 1348 and 1349, the second in 1361 and 1362, the third in 1369 and the fourth in 1375 and 1376, only twice refers to the plague in his works. Therefore we do not think there is much difference between the two authors and their works, and, if it is a merit at all to have written about the plague, we clearly see that our judgment must be in Boccaccio's favour.

It might be said, that Chaucer is more moral than Boccaccio, and certainly Chaucer's works may be read by a girl of fifteen; but we think that in discussing art we should not reason in this way. Can we say that the statue of Neptune is either ugly or immoral because it is nude? Can we condemn Dante, Shakespeare and many other geniuses because, from time to time, they introduced into their works phrases and passages which are not moral? We cannot speak against Boccaccio because he uses certain words which are rather

licentious, and puts before us scenes which many would not care to see. Shall we find fault only with him, if at that time the Italian sense of delicacy was rather blunted? Shall we condemn Boccaccio if he represented society to us under the conditions that then existed and if he spoke the truth? And if we do not condemn Boccaccio, so much the less shall we rank among those who condemn Chaucer, because if the two authors wrote much which very old men might regret to have written, certainly Boccaccio had much more to regret than Chaucer. But who has not read the history of many a great man who muses sorrowfully on his best works? Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is his master-piece, because when he wrote it he had then become possessed of more knowledge of life, his style had improved and become firmer, clearer, more flexible, more expressive and was above all things most popular. He so excels in humour and imagination that only Shakespeare can be compared with him, only Shakespeare can pretend to rival him. He is subtle, various, sprightly; he gives gorgeous descriptions and passages with a profound and exquisite delicacy and pathos. He paints what he sees, and he knows so well how to mingle wisdom with humour that he amuses his readers, he endears them to him, and everyone feels sorry that he was able to write only so few of such tales. But, though unfinished, the work « contains about 17,000 verses, besides more than a fourth of that quantity in prose ⁽¹⁾ ». His verses are

(1) Craik.

either decasyllabic or hendecasyllabic, and they are arranged either in couplets or in stanzas. Though unfinished it is the greatest of all his works and the most original, the one on which his fame stands as a rock against the ravages of time.

The Decameron.

It can be proved, as we have seen, that Chaucer knew the *Teseide* and the *Filostrato*, but it has not yet been ascertained that he knew the *Decameron*. In all probability he did, and this is also the general opinion, but till now we have not found any material proof of it. What is certain, however, is that he did not translate from the *Decameron* as he did from the *Teseide* and the *Filostrato*, but this is no surprise to us: as Chaucer was a genius, he could not remain a translator all his life, and also because the conception of translating prose into poetry seems rather strange or awkward. What we say, what we believe, what we should like to demonstrate clearly and beyond doubt is, that Chaucer knew the *Decameron* and that from this work he took at least the idea of his *Canterbury Tales*.

Certainly the task is not an easy one, chiefly because Chaucer disowns his obligations to Boccaccio, for not only never does he mention his name, but he often seems, in this particular, to try to lead his students and critics astray. And in this he

succeeds, because as both the English and the Italian poetry of that time was, generally speaking, either a translation or an imitation of that of France, so many critics were led to believe that Boccaccio and Chaucer were not much connected with each other.

It is certain that not a single one of the *Canterbury Tales* can be ascribed to Chaucer's own imagination, and although Craik says, that the fame of Italian song could hardly have reached Chaucer's ears and although Sir Harris Nicolas is almost of the same opinion, yet Ward, who is one of the best authorities on Chaucer, admits that Chaucer's indebtedness towards Italian literature and « Boccaccio in particular is considerable » and that it seems « hardly to admit of denial ». Even Craik in a passage of his history of English literature says that « it must be considered very doubtful » if any one of Chaucer's tales was really derived from Italian, and in another place he says that « this may have been the case ». Therefore we see that even those who do not admit of an Italian influence on Chaucer are nevertheless in considerable doubt in making such an assertion.

Boccaccio's *Decameron* was finished and published in 1353 and soon had a great success although many opposed it. Now, can it be possible that Chaucer who lived in Florence, if not from December of 1372 to November of 1373, as it was at first believed, at least for several months soon after the former date, can it be possible, we repeat, that he did not hear anything about the *Decameron* and did not read it?

Here it is worth noting that just at that time

Boccaccio was very much esteemed, honoured and renowned, that just in 1373 he was chosen to explain Dante in St. Stephen's Church and that Florence and its literary people especially must have, spoken very much about this fact. Now, is it possible that Chaucer who was so fond of learning, whose love for books is so clear and manifest in all his works, is it possible that he did not hear anything about this fact, the principal one which happened in that town in that year, he who read and studied Dante and translated passages from him? he who was one of Boccaccio's greatest admirers?

Again, new books were not published then by hundreds as they are now; it was very difficult then for a good new book to get lost among the crowd of its worthless companions, so also for this reason we may say that most likely Chaucer knew the *Decameron*.

It may be that several of Chaucer's Florentine acquaintances neither liked the *Decameron* nor cared to hear it mentioned. Certainly the clergy strongly opposed it, but Chaucer was then in the very prime of life, of good character, religious but not a bigot, cheerful, merry and gay, and he must certainly have spoken about Boccaccio from whom he has taken so much.

Therefore if Chaucer knew the *Teseide* and translated it, if he knew the *Filostrato* and translated a great portion of it, if he knew Boccaccio's Latin works, as we shall presently see he did, is it likely that he did not know the *Decameron*, Boccaccio's principal work? And if he did know

it, is it possible that it did not influence him? Is it possible that he did not take the idea of his *Canterbury Tales* from it? For our part, it is very difficult to believe the contrary. Although we may allow that Chaucer knew other works from which he may have taken the idea of the framework of his book, and although it is difficult to believe that these works, such as the *Disciplina Clericalis*, the *Romance of the seven wise men*, the *Vision of Piers Plowman* had no influence on him, it is still more difficult to believe the contrary as regards the *Decameron*.

Let us look a little closer into the two works, and we shall find that the *Canterbury Tales* is a work of much the same kind as the *Decameron*. The *Decameron* is a species of comedy not intended for the stage and so is the *Canterbury Tales*. The subjects of the *Decameron* are of about the same kind as those of the *Canterbury Tales*, and although the framework is somewhat different, yet it has many striking resemblances.

And this resemblance is not only in the general idea, but moreover several of Chaucer's tales have some resemblance to those in the *Decameron*. In fact, the pardoner in the *Canterbury Tales* is an itinerant ecclesiastic of much the same stamp as Frate Cipolla in the *Decameron*, although Chaucer may have taken the outline of the very beautiful *Pardoner's Tale* from the *Cento novelle antiche*.

The *Reeve's Tale* forms the basis of the sixth novel of the ninth day in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. The only difference is that Boccaccio's story is much more licentious than Chaucer's.

As to the *Shipman's Tale* Speght supposes that its original is the first novel of the eighth day of the *Decameron*. Although Morley frankly avows that it was taken from the *Decameron*, yet at the same time we must also record the fact that Tyrwhitt and Warton think it more probable that both Chaucer and Boccaccio derived the outline from a French *fabliau*. But, as we have said, if we believe that Chaucer had abandoned the idea of taking anything from France, it will not be difficult for us to take the side of Morley.

Chaucer asserts that he derived the *Franklin's Tale* from a Breton lay, but this lay is not known. Skeat says that « the subject seems to have survived in a popular *fabliau*, which Boccaccio has drawn upon in the *Decameron* and also introduced into the *Philocopo* », therefore also in this tale, if Chaucer did not take it from the *Decameron*, there is at least some connection with this work, namely with the fifth novel of the tenth day.

Several resemblances are also found between the *Merchant's Tale* and that of *Lidia and Nicostrato*, the seventh ~~novel~~ of the ninth ~~day~~, and between the *Miller's Tale* and that of *Frate Puccio*, the third novel of the fourth day.

Although these resemblances are very striking, yet nothing definite can be proved, and if, for example, both Boccaccio and Chaucer find fault with the monks in similar matters, it does not of necessity follow that Chaucer borrowed from Boccaccio, but it may rather tend to show that the defects of the monks were as notorious in Italy as in England, as may be inferred from a letter

written by Boniface IX in 1390, and it may be that both Boccaccio and Chaucer felt it was necessary to satirise and condemn these defects in order to put an end to them.

Furnivall says that, if Chaucer had known the *Decameron*, he would have translated and inserted some or at least one of its « racy *novelle* » in his *Canterbury Tales*. It seems to us that Furnivall and several others are inclined to wish Chaucer had translated more than he did. To some extent we have already answered this assumption when we spoke of the evolution of every author, namely when we said that almost every genius begins as a translator or as an imitator, and that it is only little by little that his own personality springs forth, but we have now another observation to make on this point. The *Canterbury Tales* is an unfinished work: there ought to be at least 120 tales, and we have only 24. Can we not suggest what Chaucer would have done if he had been allowed to finish his work? Could he not have thought of introducing some of the « racy *novelle* » into that portion of his book which he was not able to give us?

In conclusion if we look for material proofs that Chaucer knew the *Decameron*, we fail to find any as in all Chaucer's works there is no allusion to this book or to its author; neither a phrase nor a single word can be proved to have been taken from it, and the coincidences which the *Canterbury Tales* has with it are common to other books which were previously published and which Chaucer may have known. But when we consider the above

coincidences, when we take into consideration Chaucer's love and enthusiasm for the Italian literature, and when we remember, as we have already pointed out, that he knew the *Teseide*, the *Filostrato* and Boccaccio's Latin works from which he took so much, we may conclude with some certainty that he knew also the *Decameron* or at least some of its tales. We can only conjecture this, but we feel that there is some ground for supposing that Morley, Mammoth and many others are right when they conclude that Chaucer owes to Boccaccio the framework of his *Canterbury Tales*.

The question has also arisen as to whether Chaucer's work is superior to Boccaccio's, and several English men of Letters have given judgment in favour of their own poet. We should like to say the contrary, but we cannot pass judgment on a question like this, because we do not feel called upon to pronounce too closely between the merits of these two geniuses, and also because it seems to us that it is very difficult to compare an unfinished work with a complete one. It has been said that in the *Canterbury Tales* there is more unity of idea, more unity of composition than in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, that the prologue is in strict accord with the following tales which are closely connected to one another. We certainly accept the suggestion that the prologue in the *Canterbury Tales* is in strict accord with the subsequent tales, and that the preface in the *Decameron* is not; but we do not see in the other portion of Chaucer's work more unity of composition than in Boccaccio's. It is so true, that Chaucer's tales are not much connected to one

another that their order even is not the same in several old manuscripts. Notwithstanding this, let us grant that Chaucer's tales are a little more connected to one another than those in the *Decameron*, ✓ let us grant that Boccaccio's work is much less moral than Chaucer's, yet we do not think that this is enough to determine Chaucer's superiority.

The Clerk's tale.

The *Clerk's Tale*, which is one of the best in the *Canterbury Tales* deserves special mention. It is the matchless story of patient *Griselda and Dioneo*, the last tale in the *Decameron* about which Petrarch said that no one could read it without shedding tears. It pleased him so much that he translated it into Latin and it is from Petrarch's Latin prose that Chaucer took it. But how did Chaucer obtain this translation? He himself says that he went to Padua to see Petrarch whom he calls his master, and he makes his Clerk say:

« I woll you tell a tale which that I
Learned at Padowe of a worthy clerk,
As preved by his wordes and his werk:
He is now dead and nailed in his chest;
I pray to God so yeve his soule rest.
Francis Petrarch, the laureat poet
Highte this clerk, whose rhethoricke sweet
Enlumined all Itaille of poetrie. »

Perhaps this time Chaucer, whose statements are often doubtful or unauthorised has spoken the

truth, because if it is true that Petrarch latinised this tale in 1373, it is rather difficult for Chaucer to have got hold of the translation in Florence before his departure from the town. Perhaps he really got it in Padua from Petrarch himself.

We have said that Chaucer's statement this time is true, but still it is not quite true, as his *Clerk's Tale* cannot be a version of only what he heard from Petrarch: he follows so closely Petrarch's Latin translation that he must have had it before him when he wrote.

The fact of not having taken it from Boccaccio is considered a great argument in favour of those who affirm that Chaucer knew neither the *Decameron* nor Italian. Indeed there is not in it a single phrase which leads us to suppose that Chaucer had already read it in the *Decameron* ⁽¹⁾; but, if it is true that Chaucer heard this tale from Petrarch himself, can it be that Petrarch did not speak to Chaucer of the original in the *Decameron*? It may be so, but we do not believe it.

As we have already pointed out, it may be possible that although Chaucer knew several of Boccaccio's tales he may not have known this particular one. It may be that when he wrote his *Clerk's Tale*, he had not yet finished reading the *Decameron*, but it is most likely that Chaucer was more familiar with Latin than with Italian, and that therefore he preferred to take this tale from Petrarch. To this add that at that time the *Decameron* was not very much esteemed by many

(1) Chiarini.

people, that Boccaccio had already repented of having written it, and it will not be difficult to understand why he chose Petrarch's translation, and also why he never mentioned Boccaccio in his works.

It does not matter to us whether Boccaccio was the true originator of the story, or whether the story is very old, as Petrarch himself states, or whether it was taken from life and that Griselda really existed. For us it is enough to state with certainty, that Boccaccio originated this masterpiece which gave birth to many imitations and different compositions throughout Europe, chiefly in Italy, France, Germany and England, and that, after all, Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*, in spite of being a translation from Petrarch, is nothing else than Boccaccio's *Decameron* which he translated. It is therefore the art of Boccaccio that he brought to England, and besides the fact of having certainly heard the *Decameron* and its author spoken about is another argument in our favour to prove that Chaucer knew this work.

Yet Chaucer did not translate this splendid tale without curtailing much of what was of no use for his purpose and without adding something of his own. This was usual in Chaucer who never was a « mere slavish translator ⁽¹⁾ ». Sometimes he altered for the worse and sometimes for the better. In this tale the changes he introduces really improve it: he omits a proem in which are many valuable, but, in this case, useless geographical

(1) Ward.

notions, and he adds a passage on the fidelity of women, which gives so much pathos to the tale that many a critic has very much praised the English poet, and judged that the English version is perhaps superior to the Italian original.

Boccaccio's Latin works.

Several times we have had the opportunity of saying that Chaucer knew Boccaccio's Latin works, and we wish now to show that they must have exercised a great influence on him.

Boccaccio's *De Claris Mulieribus* suggested him his *Legend of good women* which we have already mentioned. But did Chaucer write this book voluntarily? It would not appear so. On the contrary it seems that some ladies of the Court had taken offence at his *Troylus and Cryseide* and perhaps at some other poems of his where he speaks against the infidelity of wives, and that in consequence the Queen enjoined him to write a book in praise of those wives who had proved faithful to faithless husbands.

However that may be, the fact remains that he wrote this book, which does him credit, because, after Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, he was the first, and in England the very first, to appreciate the many good qualities of woman, and to raise her from the state of servitude and servility in which she was kept during the old and middle

ages. According to him woman is a daisy in her modesty and has in her beautiful candour and sincerity the magic power of curing the wounds of the heart. If in many instances Chaucer has exposed women to derision, perhaps to correct their ridiculous habits, in this book he gives a solid proof of knowing how much a virtuous woman is deserving of praise and how superior she is to every eulogy.

As we have said, Chaucer owes this invaluable book to Boccaccio. To prove the truth of this assertion it is sufficient to mention, that almost all the women described by Boccaccio have been given a place in Chaucer's work, and to give another proof that the English poet knew Boccaccio's Latin works we shall mention here that his *Monk's Tale* is taken from Boccaccio's *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium*.

Dramatic power.

Our Carducci has stated that the *Decameron* is the human comedy just as Dante's work is the *Divine Comedy*. Even in this Chaucer resembles Boccaccio: if Chaucer had been born three centuries later, he would have been the English Molière just as Boccaccio would have been another Goldoni if he had lived in the XVI or XVII century.

Unhappily for us, and for the English, at that time the modern drama was not yet born, and the miracle-plays of the XIV century could not be attractive either to Boccaccio or to Chaucer. Nay, there was not yet even the embryo of the modern drama, but the vividness of the imagination of these two writers, their humour, their scorn of hypocrisy, their cleverness in seeing deeply into the heart of man, caused them to be considered as true dramatists before drama existed.

It is so true that there is dramatic power in their compositions that afterwards some subjects which are common to both Boccaccio and Chaucer were successfully brought on the stage.

Chaucer's influence.

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Studying, working and under the heavy weight of misfortunes which generally accompany this worldly life Chaucer approached gradually towards

« The undiscovered country from whose bourn
No traveller returns. »

In his last years he was very unhappy and poor. Had he been happier and better provided for, perhaps he might have completed his *Canterbury Tales*; but dejected and without any hope he abandoned it ten years before his death which took place on the 25.th of October 1400, twenty-five years after his great master, Boccaccio. He was buried in Westminster Abbey, in the Poets' Corner, and perhaps he is the greatest poet whose bones have their resting place there.

He died, but his works did not. Not only is it not the place here, but it is also beyond our purpose to describe the influence which they had and are still having on English literature. Up to the beginning of the Elizabethan era nothing could compare with

the *Canterbury Tales* which has till now borne fruit in a long succession of prose writers, and poets and painters. In this respect we may say that Chaucer's influence in England was superior to Boccaccio's in Italy: Chaucer had no rival in his country, whilst in Italy Dante and Petrarch were at least as famous as Boccaccio.

A Comparison.

We do not know of any two other writers more simular, or more equal in their general characteristics than Boccaccio and Chaucer: they approach to one another closer than friends, than master and disciple, than father and son, than two brothers. Nature had given them both qualities which no one can acquire by one's self: healthy, gay, sincere and high-minded, they seem to belong to a time in which mankind had fewer cares than at present. What can we say of Boccaccio that we cannot say also of Chaucer? Either little or nothing. They are two of the most learned men of their time. As to Boccaccio, his commentary on the first sixteen cantos of the *Divine Comedy* would suffice to prove this assertion. As to Chaucer his *Astrolabe* shows that he was something of an astronomer, his *Tale of the Chanon's Yeoman* shows that he was a philosopher, his *Parson's Tale* shows his knowledge of Divinity. There was no gloom in them, therefore they could easily penetrate to the heart of every man, and judge with certainty, and, as we have already pointed out, they are the

true historians of their time. In their works there are pictures of public and domestic life: the clergyman is there represented in his good and his bad qualities, and so is the landlord and the poor workman, the great lady, the poor servant maid and the country-woman. On the scene of the world painted by these two authors we see in turn men and women of every social rank; now shameless vice and now modest virtue, now wickedness and deceit, now goodness, truthfulness, sincerity: all the different characters of mankind pass before our eyes as in life. And all this is brightly narrated with a freedom and vividness of imagination which our present novelists would be very proud to possess.

They were religious, but their religion, except perhaps in their later years, never approached bigotry or superstition. In any case they were always more moral than many other famous writers: indeed the only reproach which has been made to them is that in their youth¹ they were rather unscrupulous in their love affairs. Severe critics and fearless accusers of the vices of the clergy, they were in their turn accused of having brought religion into contempt. It was not so: they reproached the vicious clergyman, but never religion itself, and if Chaucer ever espoused the cause of Wickliffe, it was certainly not for want of religion.

They both loved learning and books, but their love of nature was stronger and more absorbing, so that their works remain fresh and green, and can still be not only read, but studied with enthusiasm.

They are both the pioneers of a new language,

of a new literature, we could say also of a new civilisation, and therefore they are full of natural inspirations. They copied directly from nature and put themselves between nature and the literary geniuses following them.

They were both good writers in prose and poetry, but Boccaccio wrote better prose and Chaucer better poetry. They both had great power of satire and great influence not only on literature, but also on morality and they deserve fully the monument of immortality erected to them by the generations that followed them.

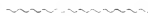
Conclusion.

Since the time of Chaucer the English have always come to Italy to study and admire our antiquities, our literature, architecture, music, sculpture and painting: they have always had great admiration for us. Also a few months ago an English paper, a supplement of *The Times*, said that to be an artist it is necessary also to be a little Italian, and Lord Kitchener in Rome only last year said that an Englishman has always two countries: « Old England and Young Italy ». But while the English have introduced something Italian into their artistic works, they have also their peculiar qualities which we ourselves should know. Therefore we think we could reverse the sentence in *The Times* and say, that we cannot be true artists without being also a little English. Progress results from such intercourse of ideas, and we feel sure that in studying English literature we shall improve our own.

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