

Chaucer's Italian Tradition

*Chaucer's
Italian Tradition*



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For Shira
and
for Sam

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Preface



The title of this book is peculiar enough to warrant a prefatory word of explanation. Throughout the later fourteenth century, Italian customs and conventions had neither a history nor an audience to sanction them as precedents in England; Chaucer was the only poet of his day who visited Italy and created poems that were based on works by its most renowned authors. In what sense, then, can one speak of Chaucer's Italian Tradition?

The various answers I give this question proceed from the same cardinal premise: the social, municipal, and literary forms Chaucer encountered in Genoa, Florence, and Milan all differed significantly from those he was accustomed to in London. However knowledgeable an English traveler may have been about war, capital, and wool,¹ cities that were also sovereign states were uncharted ground to him; aristocrats who gave up family name and title to become guildsmen, merchants who defined themselves by the contributions their professions made to the welfare of their commune, were not the aristocrats and merchants he knew. However conversant an English poet was with *lais* and *ballades* in the *langue d'oïl*, Dante's metamorphosis of Provençal conventions in his "new style," Boccaccio's rhetorical scrutiny of that style, and Petrarch's transformation of it were developments he was not versed in.

Unfamiliar political, cultural, and artistic traditions made Italy a "somewhere else" for Chaucer; the interpretive schemes he carried with him there, which conditioned what he would see as meaningful, could not fully elucidate what he observed. By 1373, even Florentines

1. War, wool, and capital, of course, are the three commodities that David Wallace contends mediated Chaucer's understanding of Italy. See *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

found many historical figures and aesthetic demands of a work like the *Comedy* perplexing; a foreign writer visiting Dante's *città* for the first time would especially need a guide to appraise crucial elements of his poetics, such as the "new style," that were at once peculiarly Italian and already obsolescent. The guidance Chaucer got, I will argue, came chiefly from Boccaccio, whose poems he read as a gloss to Dante's. These poems in turn posed problems of their own for an English reader; to meet them, Chaucer pondered texts like the *Filostrato* and *Teseida* with the *Comedy* in mind. Through this process of reciprocal interrogation and transposition, which prompted him to study the *trecento* authors he knew not separately but in conjunction with one another, Chaucer generated an Italian tradition.

The topography of this tradition, however, was determined as much by what Chaucer did not attend to as by what he did. Dante's artistic forebears were not his;² Petrarch's lyrics and his humanistic writings caused Boccaccio to reinvent Dante at diverse times in ways unfathomable to someone not well educated in the civic life of their city. The literary and social history of these poets' reception of one another was part of a native tradition that Chaucer knew at most only obliquely. This Italian tradition was like a path Chaucer followed when he made his own, but one he walked as a stranger, not entirely aware of where it started or where it led.

In its simplest form, my thesis is that Chaucer's Italian Tradition is the conversation that emerges when these two traditions translate each other. Because this conversation stems from and will always give voice to literary assumptions and social practices that remained unassimilated in Chaucer's appropriations of Italy, I have adopted Walter Benjamin's idea of translation to steer my inquiries. Briefly put, Benjamin maintained that the translator's task is not to duplicate a text's meaning but to re-create its mode of meaning—the way, that is, its language is oriented to the material differences of sound and letter that constitute language in its "pure" state, prior to the assignment of significance. Once a corresponding mode has been fashioned, the adaptation will simultaneously illuminate the different orientation of the source and reveal its language to be as partial and secondary as that of the retelling. For Benjamin, translation and original are equally derivative;

2. I mean, of course, Dante's vernacular heritage; had Chaucer been able to read the *De vulgari eloquentia*, he would not have known the poets Dante quotes.

each achieves its intentional integrity as the consequence of the other's disclosure that it is a fragment of language per se.

Even though I believe Benjamin's notion of *reine Sprache* unnecessarily distances itself from history, his theory does recognize the need to regard what remains untranslated in Chaucer's translation of Italy. Accordingly, the tradition I delineate will be lodged neither in Chaucer's response to the authors he used nor in their responses to each other but in the manner in which their literary and social modes of meaning echo and disarticulate one another. This tradition, Chaucer's Italian Tradition, will express itself, in other words, not in the interaction of individual talents with accredited authorities (Chaucer and Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch, etc.), but as shifts in tension that occur when the civic engagements and disengagements of Florence's poets are brought into contact with Chaucer's growing metropolitanism and his increasingly evident reluctance to make London the locus of his poetic art.³ This tradition will reveal itself as the wobble in poetic trajectories one detects by reading what I will call Chaucer's Canterbury style as a translation of the play of irony and allegory in Dante's revisions of Ovid and Boccaccio's revisions of Dante's. Like multiple suns circling one another, the gravitational pull of each writer's manner of meaning follows and modifies the orbit of the others. However odd it seems, I will insist that Chaucer's experience becomes legible as an event in English and Italian cultural history only in the wake of such a trepidation of the spheres.

This is the argument that all others in this book return to; I have developed it by organizing my chapters into three sections, each of which takes as its focal point one of the authors Chaucer adapted. After an introductory chapter, in which I set forth in much greater detail the ideas just outlined, I turn to Dante and his famous definition of himself as poet in the *Purgatorio*. In order to safeguard his existence as an allegory of Love, Dante realized he had to neutralize the propensities of irony that threatened to subvert his claim to be an embodiment of God's creative breath. His strategy is twofold: he represents himself as a kind of Benjaminian translation of Amor's inspiration; and he recalls his previous silencing of Ovid, the satiric spokesman of a very different

3. As an orthographical way of distinguishing this tradition, which I designate Chaucer's Italian Tradition, from the tradition he made when he read Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch in conjunction with one another, I will mark the former by capitalizing it.

kind of love, which he had staged in the corresponding cantos of the *Inferno*. Together these strategies, I will suggest, constitute the *Comedy's modo di dire*; in the following chapter I examine what I take to be Chaucer's translation of it. In "The Prologue to the Manciple's Tale," the thieving steward incarnates the negations of irony; the Cook's fall from his horse, however, which he instigates, opens into an allegory of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. Ovid figures meaningfully in these events and in the tale the Manciple subsequently tells; rather than expunging him, however, as Dante did, Chaucer embraced his ironies, which he translated into parables of salvation. His mode of meaning, which I contend is the mode of meaning of *The Canterbury Tales*, diverges from and perturbs Dante's at the very moment when Chaucer is most Dantesque.

My purpose in this first section of *Chaucer's Italian Tradition* is to provide a broad demonstration of the dynamics I see at play in cross-cultural translation. The focus of the second section is Boccaccio, who more than anyone else is responsible for the intertextuality of Chaucer's reception of Italian literature. In each of three chapters I explore one of the various ways Boccaccio read Dante at different times in his life. In chapter 4 I give an overview of these responses by considering key works in conjunction with the political, social, and cultural institutions of Florence. These institutions changed in greater and lesser ways between 1341, when Boccaccio came to Florence from Naples, and 1374, when he left the city for the last time; I demonstrate how the coexistence of old and new forms complicated Boccaccio's view of his great predecessor. In the first part of the following chapter I take up an early work, the *Filostrato*, which I examine as, among other things, a radical revision of Dante's *stil novo*; I then turn briefly to Chaucer's extraordinary translation of its manner of meaning in the *Troilus*. Finally I look at Boccaccio's first major Latin text, the *De casibus virorum illustrium*. At two strategic points in this massive collection of catastrophes that overwhelmed famous men, Dante and Petrarch make decisive appearances; reading these passages in tandem furnishes a unique perspective from which to view how the uses Chaucer made and did not make of Boccaccio's work enable "The Monk's Tale" to challenge the *De casibus* and be challenged by it.

My goals in this section are to establish a tradition that can stand as the Italian counterpart of Chaucer's and to consider the effects of seeing it and the tradition Chaucer made as translations. Allegory and irony

will again be at the center of my discussion: Boccaccio's mode of meaning, I will show, rewrites Dante's largely through the way the relations between these figures are renegotiated in his works. By tracking the various Dantes that appear in them, the limitations and insights of Chaucer's accommodation of both authors become more readily apparent. By looking at Chaucer's Italian manner of meaning, which emerges as the interplay between Dante and Boccaccio yet is unlike anything in either, pre-suppositions and ideologies of his sources become visible as well.

Because my analysis of the *De casibus* inaugurates a discussion of early Italian humanism, it also belongs to the third section of *Chaucer's Italian Tradition*. In my final chapter I continue this investigation by considering Petrarch's translation into Latin of the tale of Griselda, the last story in the *Decameron*, and Chaucer's translation in "The Clerk's Tale." When Petrarch rescued Griselda from Dioneo's scorn by clothing her fortitude in the dignity of Latin *cola*, he brought to a close a long-standing colloquy with Boccaccio about the role of literature in forming the autonomous, moral self. By aligning Griselda's constancy, which is exemplary, with her patience, which is allegorical, Petrarch established an analogy between the historical dialectic through which he assured the independence of his public and private soul in time and his univocal faith that he will be one with God in eternity. Petrarch's dialectic, as Boccaccio well knew, involved the simultaneous excavation and burial of classical works; by imitating their style, Petrarch sought to let the yearning for greatness that drove Virgil and Cicero animate everything he wrote and did. Even though Roman virtue had to be brought into conformity with the truth of revelation, Petrarch believed the Christian became great-souled only by emulating the antique zeal for justice, prudence, fortitude, and temperance. For him, Griselda in Latin would embody these aspirations far more completely than Boccaccio's vernacular heroine ever could.

For the most part, I think Chaucer was quite unaware of the extent to which Petrarch's Griselda is early humanism's answer not only to Boccaccio's claim that the *Decameron* is ethically neutral but to Dante's insistence that the *Comedy* is the poetry of salvation. Petrarch despised logicians in general and sophisticated *Brittani* in particular; if the Clerk presented himself in Padua as an Oxford Aristotelian, he more likely would have found himself being shown the door than invited in as a disciple. Nevertheless, by organizing the various secular and ecclesiastical discourses that constitute the Clerk's character around the general

figures of allegory and irony, Chaucer brilliantly reinstated Petrarch's concerns. The Clerk who finds in Griselda a paradigm for the soul's devotion to God speaks in an elevated style that is genuinely Petrarchan. But the Clerk who formally enters into debate with Alice of Bath sings in a register Petrarch never sounded. The "Envoy" of course is French in form, but its tone is not unlike Boccaccio's. All this, I will argue, makes the Clerk, who could not be from anywhere but England, the most Italian of the Canterbury pilgrims and the first true translation of Petrarch.

These are the propositions that inform *Chaucer's Italian Tradition* and how I have organized them. Let me add that, unless otherwise noted, all translations in this book about translation are mine. I should mention as well that this volume has a companion, *Dante's Aesthetics of Being*, which the University of Michigan Press published in 1999. My original plan had been to include much that appears in that book in this one. But I discovered that what I wanted to say about Dante was self-contained and distinct enough from my arguments about what he meant to Chaucer to justify separate treatment. In the event, I have tried to write this study so that a reader who has not read the previous one will be at no disadvantage; even though I devoted considerable space to Dante's poetic manifesto there, my comments here are directed to an entirely different end and, while obviously allied with the earlier discussion, do not rely on it.

Although I had written a substantial part of this book before David Wallace's *Chaucerian Polity* appeared, many readers will already recognize that my study enters into conversation with his from the start. In a number of instances, Wallace covers the same material I do and has anticipated my lines of inquiry; in general, however, because he assumes the boundary between English and Italian customs was far more permeable than I think was the case, his representation of Italy and Chaucer's reception of it varies greatly from mine. Nevertheless, I would like to insist that I neither conceived nor wrote this book as a review of his, nor do I feel it should be read that way. From my vantage point, *Chaucer's Italian Tradition* participates with Wallace's work in a dialogue about Chaucer and Italy; if that dialogue is not quite a translation, I do think the modes of assessing meaning in each differ enough to enliven the colloquy in interesting ways.

Acknowledgments



In a sense, I have been writing this book from the time I took courses in Chaucer from Talbot Donaldson and Dante from John Freccero at Yale. But it was only in 1984, during unforgettable weekly lunch conversations with Giuseppe Mazzotta, that I began to understand why I felt any discussion of Chaucer's translations of Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch should begin by acknowledging the different literary and cultural traditions of England and Italy. Since then, in developing my ideas, I have received much advice and encouragement from many friends and colleagues. It gives me great pleasure to be able to thank Teresa Kennedy, John Fyler, Michael Hanly, and Howell Chickering, all of whom read essays that, sometimes in very different form, became part of various chapters in this book. Karla Taylor has been a constant interlocutor and good friend over the years; beyond what she has taught me in her own books and essays, she read the entire manuscript and made many crucial suggestions. I would also like to thank an anonymous reader for the Press who offered much helpful advice. Robert Hanning, Winthrop Wetherbee, and Giuseppe Mazzotta have all been counselors to this project from its inception; each of them has given me more time, encouragement, and invaluable commentary than anyone could have expected or hoped for.

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