

Chaucer and Italian Culture.

Helen Fulton, ed.

New Century Chaucer. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2021. XLVIII + 288 pp. £70.

Chaucer and Italian Culture sets itself the task to prove “those who think there cannot be anything new to say about Chaucer and the Italian tradition” wrong (1), and the eight essays contained in this volume do so by drawing on the resources of textual criticism, history, cultural theory, and art history. They demonstrate that a transnational approach to Chaucer allows to challenge prevalent narratives about historical periodisation, diplomatic relations in the fourteenth century, and the influence of classical literary genres on medieval English literature.

The Introduction provides an overview of previous works on Chaucer’s Italian contexts by Piero Boitani, David Wallace, Warren Ginsberg, and K. P. Clarke (1-4). It also summarises Chaucer’s historical connections with Italy, such as his Italian missions of 1372/3 and 1378 as an esquire in the King’s household and possible interactions with Italian bankers when working as a controller of customs in London.

Having provided this summary, however, the book suggests that we should take a wider view of these relatively limited and sparsely documented interactions with Italian texts and persons to truly understand Chaucer’s European identity. As the editor Helen Fulton explains in her Introduction (1-16), the volume makes a deliberate choice to move beyond the traditional “sources and analogues” approach to Chaucer’s Italian contexts, given that the relationship between a Chaucerian motif and its “origin” in some other text (or, more likely, multiple texts) is at times not at all clear. In fact, Fulton suggests, Chaucer “distributes the borrowed material throughout his work, smelting it, combining it with other elements,” and frequently refashioning its genre and tone, as when he turns a Latin *exemplum* into a source of both comedy and tragedy in the *Monk’s Tale*. To account for this unorthodox approach, *Chaucer and Italian Culture* proposes, likely Chaucerian borrowings should be considered in the context of pan-European politics, literary genres, and theories of perception.

The geographical space of Italy, both real and imagined, and its influence on Chaucer’s life and works are considered in the first three chapters of the book. Chapter 1, “Chaucerian Diplomacy,” by William T. Rossiter (17-44), investigates both standard and non-standard diplomatic roles that Chaucer takes on during his missions to Italy. Rossiter proposes that Chaucer built on his Italian experiences, as well as on Petrarch and Boccaccio, in representing ambassadorial figures in the *Clerk’s Tale* and book IV of *Troilus and Criseyde*. Intellectual and cultural exchanges depicted in Chaucer’s works and surviving historical documents challenge the narrative of modern diplomacy emerging in the fifteenth century, as well as the traditional binary between “medieval” and “Renaissance” political practices. In

Chapter 2 (“The Haunting of Geoffrey Chaucer: Dante, Boccaccio, and the Ghostly Poetics of the Trecento,” 45-90), James Robinson considers how the poetics of “present absence” and “textual haunting” (50) can account for the kind of intertextuality that links Chaucer with Dante and Boccaccio. Taking Dante’s *Inferno* 10 as a case study, Robinson analyses how the episode is evoked in *Decameron* 6.9, thanks to its focus on Guido Cavalcanti, a “great non-presence” in Dante’s canto (Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante’s Poets: Textuality and Truth in the Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 126). Finally, Helen Fulton’s “Chorography and Topography: Italian Models and Chaucerian Strategies” (Chapter 3, 91-120) demonstrates that Chaucer’s preface to the *Clerk’s Tale*, indebted to the classical genre of chorography, or regional description, draws attention to international and economic contexts that lie behind the marriage of Walter and Griselda. Fulton argues that Chaucer’s choice to use the opening present in Petrarch’s version of the Griselda story, but not in Boccaccio, is unconventional and innovative, since in English literature, chorography is rarely found outside the historiographical tradition before the early modern period.

The central chapters of the book focus on the representation of perception and multisensory engagement in Chaucer and his Italian near-contemporaries. Chapter 4, “Vision and Touch in Dante and Chaucer,” by Robert S. Sturges (121-44), examines the depiction of vision and touch in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* and Dante’s *Convivio* and *Vita nova*. While I was not convinced that Chaucer’s merging of Platonic and Aristotelian theories of vision is necessarily attributable to the influence of Dante, there are clear affinities in the representation of the sensory aspects of love in the two authors. Sturges’s idea that Chaucer’s knowledge of the *Convivio* might extend beyond Book IV also deserves further examination. In Chapter 5, “The Aesthetics of ‘Wawes Grene’: Planets, Painting and Politics in Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*” (145-68), Andrew James Johnston proposes that Chaucer’s depiction of the paintings in Theseus’ Theatre in the *Knight’s Tale* could have been influenced not only by Boccaccio’s *Teseida*, but also by astrological wall paintings in Italian urban spaces. While Chaucer clearly understood the effectiveness of appropriating public-facing visual art for political purposes, in the *Knight’s Tale*, the ekphrastic description presents his readers with a critical rather than a celebratory portrayal of power.

The volume closes with an analysis of pan-European circulation of genres and motifs. Chapter 6, “The Prophetic Eagle in Italy, England and Wales: Dante, Chaucer and Insular Political Prophecy” (169-92), by Victoria Flood, considers the surprising absence of political prophecy in Chaucer’s work, given its popularity elsewhere in Europe, including in Dante’s works. Flood’s work on the parodic interpretation of Dante’s Eagle in Chaucer’s *House of Fame* resonates well with Teresa A. Kennedy’s argument (Chapter 8, “From Imitation to Invention: Chaucer’s Journey from *The House of Fame* to the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*,” 217-40), which similarly suggests that Chaucer demystifies the Eagle to emphasise the unreliability of language as a conduit to absolute truths. Leah Schwebel instead focuses on “trophee,” a textual crux in Chaucer’s writing (Chapter 7, “‘Trophee’ and Triumph in the *Monk’s Tale*,” 193-216), proposing that it should be understood in the context of the genre of poetic triumph, used by Ovid and Virgil and revived during the *trecento*. By appropriating this Latin and Italian form of expression in the

Monk's Tale, Chaucer highlights the crucial role of the poet in memorialising famous people and events.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of this volume is that it convincingly shows the value of reading Chaucer in the context of European-wide circulation of people and ideas. By reading and repurposing Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio critically and selectively, Chaucer was able to capture phenomena as central to medieval scholarship as prophetic writing or political uses of public art on the cusp of change. Implicitly, this volume issues an important correction to the prevailing narrative about Chaucer's inability to imitate the Italian poets structurally: perhaps Chaucer has been able to absorb his Italian influences so successfully not despite the fact that his Dante is a "Dante of fragments" (Warren Ginsberg, *Chaucer's Italian Tradition* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), p. 30), but because of it.

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Building the Canon Through the Classics: Imitation and Variation in Renaissance Italy (1350-1580).

Eloisa Morra, ed.

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It is no longer possible to talk of the "translation" of classical literature in Renaissance Italy without acknowledging the diverse and complex processes the term encapsulates. The essays of this volume explore the various ways that the classics were imitated, adapted, domesticated and revived by authors who were, at the same time, working to build and position themselves within a canon of their own. This dynamic between old and new, authority and personal authorial identity involved an evolution – traced by the chronologically-ordered essays – in attitudes towards the traditional humanist view of *imitatio* and a shift in status of the *auctoritates* from timeless authorities to historical sources. In the process, the Italian humanists succeeded in developing a classical literary canon that spread throughout Europe, and in carving out space for their own literary creations within it.

A key contention of the volume is that, throughout the long-fifteenth century (1350-1580), the earlier humanistic model of close study, imitation and memorization of the classics gave way to a more creative mode of readership in which the inner mechanisms of the classics were still adopted, but did not supplant the individual style and authorial identity of the modern Renaissance writer. Recently, scholars studying the vernacular tradition in particular have theorized a broad definition for "translation" with regard to the reception of classical works in this period; in his *Vernacular Aristotle*, for example, Eugenio Refini defines translation as "forms of adaptation, abridgment and rewriting" (3) in which the translator interprets and revivifies the original for the contemporary audience. This volume takes this broad definition of translation and offers a series of vignettes that masterfully