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*From Boccaccio to Shakespeare: translation  
and transformation of an Italian novella in  
early modern England*

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## Foreword

This thesis focuses on the circulation of Italian novelle in early modern England, and on the outcome of the Italian influence on English literature. Before getting into the matters of translation and circulation of the novelle, it was necessary to examine England's historical and political context around the 16th century: this is what I have done in the very first part of my work. What emerged was in particular the perceived marginality of the English country in Europe, and its efforts to catch up with Italy and France from a cultural point of view. Throughout the century England underwent a major change, with the settlement of the Tudor dynasty and the increasing circulation of Italian literature in the country, especially thanks to cultural mediators such as John Florio and John Wolfe. The break with the Catholic Church and the circulation of the Bible in English marked a shift that allowed England to culturally emancipate. At this time English translations started to prosper. I analyse how translations were carried out in the 16th century, highlighting how modern and mediaeval theories of translation coexisted for a long time. It was during the Renaissance that a new sensitivity towards the original developed, and throughout the 16th century it became more and more difficult to deviate from it. Another crucial point that comes to light is that of the relationship between translation and culture: translations are deeply affected by the cultural context in which they are produced and can likewise influence the target culture. In the last part of the first chapter I illustrate how translation played a fundamental role in the development of the English language and literature, and functioned as an instrument to form an English cultural identity.

In the second chapter I focus on the circulation of Boccaccio's works in England, underlining how different it was from its reception in the rest of Europe. It is of interest that

the first English translation of the *Decameron* was printed in 1620, but some novelle circulated independently in the previous centuries. The Latin translation of the Griselda story (*Dec.*, X, 10) was a major success, and other novelle were translated at first in French and then in English, to provide examples of virtue. Though at first Boccaccio's popularity in England was mainly due to his Latin works, the *Decameron* novelle circulated in print and were soon included in collections of tales. Sixteen of them found a place in William Painter's *The Palace of Pleasure*, which is best known for providing the sources for many playwrights, among whom William Shakespeare. Painter wisely selected the novelle to include in his compilation, avoiding all those which could be deemed outrageous or controversial, but praised Boccaccio for his style, hoping that someone else would soon translate the whole *Decameron*. His hopes were fulfilled in 1620 by an anonymous translator, suspected by many scholars to be John Florio. Even this "complete" translation suffers the effect of censorship, as two novelle are removed and substituted. To read the non-censored *Decameron* in English one had to wait until 1886.

Still, the translated novelle provided a rich source of plots and themes which inspired English authors, and some gave life to something new. The story of Giletta di Narbona (*Dec.*, III, 9), through Painter's translation in *The Palace of Pleasure*, was adapted by Shakespeare in his comedy *All's Well That Ends Well*. In the third chapter I analyse the strategies Shakespeare used to bring this novella on stage, the difficulties of grasping the novella's deeper meaning and the challenges of making a 14th-century Italian novella fit for the Elizabethan stage. Shakespeare's task was certainly not an easy one, but his ability of refashioning plots, deepening the characters' psychology, and reworking literary material gave life to a complex play that offers interesting themes of debate and still has not managed to have scholars come to an agreement on its intriguing ending.

# Importing texts in early modern England

## 1. Different perceptions of Italy and England

Anyone even remotely interested in literature knows how influential the historical and political context is in the production of any literary work. Before getting to the business of English translations of Italian novelle, it is necessary to have a look at the historical and cultural context of early modern England, and especially at its relations with the continent, in order to understand the reasons why Italian literature circulated in the island and why it played such an important role in the development of English culture and literature.

It might be surprising to a contemporary reader to know that it was not before the late 14th century that the English language started to emancipate from its subordination to French, which remained the language of culture and of the court until the reign of Henry VI (1422-1461).<sup>1</sup> Chaucer's literary work significantly contributed to the empowering of the English language, but until the 16th century English had no prestige abroad and even English speakers lacked linguistic self-confidence and awareness about the potential greatness of their mother tongue. This was due to the perceived insignificance of England itself: a far-away, tiny, backward country which could never compete with flourishing France or prosperous Italy.<sup>2</sup>

Italy had long been playing a preeminent role in Europe, being a reference point in European cultural life; but since the end of the Middle Ages, following the development of the textile industry, it established its leadership in international trade as well, especially thanks to the Venetian Republic. Venice, Florence and Genoa dominated the European

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<sup>1</sup> Wyatt, Michael, *The Italian Encounter with Tudor England, a Cultural Politics of Translation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 157-158.

<sup>2</sup> On this point see Greenblatt, Stephen, ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature. The Sixteenth Century / The Early Seventeenth Century*, New York: Norton, 2018, pp. 3-4 and Praz, Mario, *Machiavelli in Inghilterra ed altri saggi sui rapporti anglo-italiani*, Firenze: G.C. Sansoni editore, 1962, pp. 13.

markets, imposing their currencies as the main payment method in Europe and in the Mediterranean.<sup>3</sup> Wealth allowed a general increase in the quality of life, and, alongside economic growth, literature and the arts flourished. During the 16th century Italy became the main player in the European cultural development which led Europe into the modern era.

The growth of Italy's foreign markets had a decisive influence on English culture. In fact, the mercantile presence assured a constant connection with the peninsula and not only merchants brought goods and fashions, but also they contributed to the circulation of Italian texts and culture.<sup>4</sup> Italian merchants maintained a sense of their native cultural identity abroad, causing not only demand for Italian products but interest in their culture. Moreover, they managed to bond with central figures in English political, intellectual and cultural life, as for example Antonio Bonvisi from Lucca did with Thomas More.<sup>5</sup>

During the Middle Ages Latin was at the base of a common European culture, favoured by the absence of linguistic barriers, but by their end, in the late 15th century, French and Italian were gaining more and more consideration in the European intellectual milieu. In the 16th century the Italian language – although it is not quite fair to talk about one Italian language for this period – established itself as the language of culture, being spoken in European courts.

The Italian influence marked the first three decades of the Elizabethan period: it was at this time that John Florio, an Englishman born into an Italian family, had the intuition of

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<sup>3</sup> Malato, Enrico, "Immagine e presenza dell'Italia fuori dall'Italia", in *L'Italia fuori dall'Italia, tradizione e presenza della lingua e della cultura italiana nel mondo, atti del convegno di Roma 7-10 ottobre 2002*, Roma: Salerno editrice, 2003, pp. 40-42.

<sup>4</sup> Vàrvaro, Alberto, "La diffusione della lingua e della cultura italiana tra XIII e XV secolo", in *L'Italia fuori dall'Italia, tradizione e presenza della lingua e della cultura italiana nel mondo, atti del convegno di Roma 7-10 ottobre 2002*, Roma: Salerno editrice, 2003, pp. 80-81.

<sup>5</sup> Antonio Bonvisi (died 1558) was an Italian merchant in London, known for his friendship and loyalty towards Thomas More and for his advocacy on behalf of persecuted English Catholics, which constrained him to leave England in 1548 (Wyatt, pp. 141-142).

publishing a book for English speakers to learn Italian: *First Fruites*. The first volume, published in 1578, was so successful that a second volume followed in 1591, *Second Fruites*. Florio's works weren't only useful in order to learn a foreign language, but they were also agents of cultural transmission, which deeply influenced the later English literary production.

In the latter half of the 16th century a series of Italian books were printed and issued in London. The role played by John Wolfe, an English publisher who had foreseen the potential of the market of books which were banned in Catholic territories, was significant in the transmission of Italian print culture. After being trained in the Giunta bookselling family in Florence, between 1579 and 1591 he published thirty-nine books by Italian authors – both in Latin and Italian – and five English translations from Italian in London. The publication of an anonymous italo-phobic tract by Wolfe's press in 1591 marked a radical shift in focus: the Italianate moment in England was coming to an end and the English language and its literary culture were about to assume a powerful autonomous identity of their own.<sup>6</sup>

The Italian sway in England affected all aspects of culture and fashion during the Renaissance, but the cultural influence was reversed when, at the end of the 16th century, England's role in Europe stopped being peripheral and became central.<sup>7</sup> In fact, as the Renaissance reached its apex in central Europe, Italy was already collapsing from a political and economic point of view, although it still played a crucial role on a cultural level. The phase of economic and cultural expansion was followed by a slow retreat. Italy continued to have a leading role in the progress of European culture, especially because of its historical and cultural tradition, which became an object of great interest for 16th-century European

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<sup>6</sup> On John Wolfe see Wyatt, pp. 185-198 and "Oxford Dictionary of National Biography", <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/29834> (accessed 1 July 2024).

<sup>7</sup> Praz, p. 10.

humanists.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, while some of the Northern European countries were starting to rise, Italy seemed to take a step back. Among the ascending countries was England. When the Tudor dynasty settled with the accession of Henry VII in 1484, the State strengthened and consolidated, with a well-managed centralization of powers and the increasingly important role of the court.<sup>9</sup>

The event which determined England's distinctiveness and which launched its cultural autonomy was the break with the Catholic Church. While the Council of Trent contributed to isolate Italy, by becoming protestant England gained strength and power. The possibility of reading the Bible in English significantly contributed to increasing literacy, and the translation of the Bible finally gave dignity to the much despised English language. In the 16th and 17th centuries the English language underwent a period of transformative growth, absorbing and coining thousands of new words.<sup>10</sup> English writers started to realise that English could be a fit vehicle for complex ideas, and translations of Italian works started to prosper, to give life not much later to masterpieces of English literature, which would have never been possible without the Italian encounter.

## 1.2. Early modern translation

The translations which circulated in England in the 16th century are particularly interesting because of the uncertain status of translation at the time, as throughout the century elements from the Ricardian Age still characterised the process of translation, while overlapping and coexisting with novelties and increasing accuracy towards source texts.<sup>11</sup> Translation during

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<sup>8</sup> Malato, pp. 49-50.

<sup>9</sup> Greenblatt, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> According to Jason Scott-Warren between 10 000 and 25 000 new words (Scott-Warren, Jason, *Early Modern English Literature, Cultural History of Literature*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005, p. 158).

<sup>11</sup> Morini, Massimiliano, *Tudor Translation in Theory and Practice*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, p. 23.



the Middle Ages was closer to exegesis and rewriting than to what we are used to indicate with the same term. Cutting or adding significant portions of the text, censorship, ideological manipulation, domestication were common practices, and one could not expect the faithfulness to the source we are now used to. Still, it is important to keep in mind that fidelity and freedom – the concepts which constitute the two poles according to which contemporary translations are judged – are historically determined categories and hence cannot be referred to early modern translations in the same way we do nowadays.<sup>12</sup>

Modern theories of translation, first developed by Italian humanists in the 15th century, only gained popularity in the other European countries with significant delay, and England was among the last ones to absorb them. Leonardo Bruni's treatise *De interpretatione recta* (1426),<sup>13</sup> which imposed on secular translation the same high standards which were reserved for the Scriptures, and which excluded the idea that it was sufficient to express the "spirit" or the general meaning of source texts, had no great impact in England. His ideas came to the island after the beginning of the 16th century, filtered by contemporary cultures and especially by Erasmus' thought.<sup>14</sup>

The influence of Italian humanists and of the newly-developed philology, which contributed to give to the original a new status, promoting the appearance of forms of proto-copyright, could not replace mediaeval translation overnight, and for a long time modern and mediaeval theories existed side-by-side and intersected. What is of interest is that as the 16th century went on, it became more and more difficult to deviate from the original, and during

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<sup>12</sup> Venuti, Lawrence, *The Translator's Invisibility, a History of Translation*, London: Routledge, 1995, p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> Leonardo Bruni (born between 1370 and 1375 in Arezzo, died in 1444 in Florence) was an Italian humanist, known for his active celebration of the city of Florence and his monumental work of translation of the Greek classics in Latin (Alfano, Giancarlo, Italia, Paola, Russo, Emilio, Tomasi, Franco, *Letteratura Italiana, dalle Origini a metà Cinquecento*, Milano: Mondadori, 2018, pp. 350-351).

<sup>14</sup> Morini, pp. 9, 14, 16.

the Tudor age translations became marked by outstanding accuracy.<sup>15</sup> The printing press again played a crucial role: famous texts circulated more easily among scholars, and the direct access to the original made it more difficult to justify variations in the translations. Although a smaller or greater degree of stylistic deviation is acceptable and inevitable, and translation should not be interpreted as a straightforward transmission of content from source text to target text, the translator is never allowed, according to contemporary translation theories, to be unfaithful to the narrated events or to the author's ideas; it was already during the Renaissance that some of these concepts established themselves.<sup>16</sup>

Besides how a text is translated, many other questions about the circumstances of the translation can be asked:

how a text is selected for translation, for example, what role the translator plays in that selection, what role an editor, publisher or patron plays, what criteria determine the strategies that will be employed by the translator, how a text might be received in the target system.<sup>17</sup>

Especially after the so-called "cultural turn" in translation studies,<sup>18</sup> it would be a mistake not to pay attention to the cultural – historical and political – context in which the translation of a certain text takes place. Translations are not neutral operations and never take place in a void. In order to understand a certain text it is essential that we also have information about the historical and cultural context in which the text was written, as the writer is him/herself a product of that particular culture and moment in time. The same, and perhaps more evidently, happens for translations.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Morini, p. 19.

<sup>16</sup> Morini, p.13, 21. On this point see also Denton, John, "Translation and Manipulation in Renaissance England", *Journal of Early Modern Studies*, supplement 1 (2016), pp. 7-33.

<sup>17</sup> Bassnett, Susan, 'The Translation Turn in Cultural Studies', in Bassnett, Susan and Lefevere, André, eds., *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation*, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1998, p. 123.

<sup>18</sup> Bassnett, 'The Translation Turn in Cultural Studies', p. 123.

<sup>19</sup> Bassnett, 'The Translation Turn in Cultural Studies', p. 136.

The topic of translation is pervaded by the political dimension, and in the early modern period the number of translations – over six thousand translations were printed in Britain between 1473 and 1640 –<sup>20</sup> constituted a patent indicator of shifts in prestige and power imbalances within European cultures.<sup>21</sup> Given this, it comes as no surprise that translations of Italian works were a safe marketing choice for a publisher in 16th-century England. It is essential to keep in mind that translations often have a strategic economic interest, and that the material conditions in which a text is produced, sold and marketed are also important. Publishers were as relevant in translation projects in early modern England as the translators themselves.<sup>22</sup> The selection mechanism which translations are subjected to is determined by the target culture and it often has nothing to do with the intrinsic qualities of the original and with its prestige in the source culture.

Translations not only reflect cultural interests and currents of influence, but also work as symbolic weapons in the cultural and political wars in Renaissance Europe. Accepting transformation as the condition for translation to be carried out,<sup>23</sup> and remembering that in the 16th century manipulation of content was still a normal practice – although the accuracy of the process had increased significantly by the Tudor Era, as said before – , it is not difficult to understand how, through translation, a text could acquire an even slightly different meaning than the one intended by its author, but which could have a significant impact in the

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<sup>20</sup> “Renaissance Cultural Crossroads”, <https://www.dhi.ac.uk/rcc/index.php?page=introduction> (accessed 23 July 2024).

<sup>21</sup> Gipper, Andreas, Greilich, Susanne, “Translation Policy and the Politics of Translation: Introductory Remarks on Dimensions and Perspectives”, in Flüchter, Antje, Gipper, Andreas, Greilich, Susanne, and Lüsebrink, Hans-Jürgen, eds., *Übersetzungspolitiken in der Frühen Neuzeit / Translation Policy and the Politics of Translation in the Early Modern Period*, Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Berlin / Heidelberg, 2024, p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> Gipper, Greilich, pp. 23-24.

<sup>23</sup> Morini, p. 11.

perception of the source culture. The theme of censorship, and of what could be translated and what could not, highlights hidden mechanisms of political power relationships.<sup>24</sup>

### 1.3. Translation beyond literature

The metaphor of nourishment is commonly used to explain the importance of translations and the influence they can have in the development of the target culture.<sup>25</sup> In fact, besides having an increasingly significant presence within English literary culture and being a powerful instrument of international politics, 16th-century translations were capable of deeply influencing the upcoming literature, the English language, and had a significant impact on the development of an English cultural identity. Literature, language and culture are deeply connected, and the reasons why they were particularly affected by translations are multiple, and have to be discussed.

Translations of Italian novelle helped the circulation of a specific narrative world all over Europe.<sup>26</sup> They introduced concepts, themes and devices unknown or, at least, unfamiliar to other cultures, which were absorbed and transformed, often to produce something new. In each cultural context the literary patrimony that had spread from Italy was altered and manipulated in order to function in each society. Plots, symbols and characters managed to enrich the literary imagination of English culture, especially because they came to the island at a time when English culture was still trying to catch up with France and Italy.<sup>27</sup> As soon as it could, the English cultural imagination established its independence. Luckily enough, the 16th and 17th centuries saw talented authors making the most of the

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<sup>24</sup> Gipper, Greilich, p. 18.

<sup>25</sup> Marfè, Luigi, *In English Clothes, La novella italiana in Inghilterra: politica e poetica della traduzione*, Torino: Accademia University Press, 2015, p. 14.

<sup>26</sup> Marfè, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Marfè, pp. 6, 7, 16, 28.

transfer of cultural energy from Italy that the 16th century had witnessed, thus producing new masterpieces, both in poetry and in prose, that proved that England was also capable of greatness.

Italian works often worked as a basis for English authors to give life to something new: works which featured both plots or themes taken from Italian works and an autochthonous sensibility. The genre limits were often surpassed, so that many novelle were rewritten in poetry or were put on stage in the form of comedies or tragedies.<sup>28</sup> Some authors managed to go far beyond the translated work and made it their own, sometimes even having it gain more popularity than the original. Shakespeare's theatre production probably constitutes one of the most patent examples of this trend, in fact, ten out of the thirty-six plays which appear in the First Folio in 1623 are adaptations of Italian novelle: *The Merchant of Venice* was adapted from Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* X, I, Giovanni Fiorentino's *Pecorone* IV, 1 and Masuccio Salernitano's *Novellino*, 14; *All's Well That Ends Well* was adapted from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, III, 9; *Cymbeline*, was adapted from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, II, 9; *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was adapted from Fiorentino's *Pecorone*, I, 2; *Romeo and Juliet* was adapted from Masuccio Salernitano's *Novellino*, 33 and Matteo Bandello's *Novelle*, II, 9; *Titus Andronicus* (subplot) was adapted from Bandello's *Novelle*, III, 21; *Much Ado About Nothing* was adapted from Bandello's *Novelle*, I, 22; *Twelfth Night* was adapted from Bandello's *Novelle*, II, 36 and Giovan Battista Giraldi Cinzio's *Ecatommiti*, III, 8; *Othello* was adapted from Giraldi Cinzio's *Ecatommiti*, III, 7; *Measure for Measure* was adapted from Giraldi Cinzio's *Ecatommiti*, VIII, 5.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Marfè, p. 63.

<sup>29</sup> Marfè, pp. 140-145.

Literature, and especially translations, constituted the battlefield where the English language had to prove its dignity. In fact, through translations England first showed that its language was capable of rendering what was expressed in more prestigious languages: somehow translations functioned as a seizure of power. But the shaping force of translations goes far beyond this.<sup>30</sup> Translations force a language to expand, as concepts and themes, newly introduced in the target culture, need new words to be expressed. Early modern English writers were open to stretching their language by relying on Latin/vernacular doublets and coining new words on foreign models.<sup>31</sup> The encounter with other idioms helped the English language to grow.

On one hand, when communication is complicated by cultural differences, the translator needs to help the reader – in this sense the translator’s experience of the author’s world is indispensable –<sup>32</sup> by bringing the text closer to the audience than the original. This domesticating approach was the one generally put in practice by 16th century translators,<sup>33</sup> who tried to reconstruct foreign texts in accordance with values, beliefs and representations that preexisted in the target culture and in the target language. On the other hand, translation cannot help but preserve, at least in part, the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text.<sup>34</sup> This turned out to be particularly fruitful in early modern England, as the encounter with the other was essential in the process of enrichment that the cultural imagination, the language and the emerging English identity experienced.

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<sup>30</sup> On the concept of translation as a shaping force see Bassnett, Susan, Lefevere, André, “Preface”, in Bassnett, Susan, Lefevere, André, eds., *Translation, History and Culture*, London: Pinter Publishers, 1990, p. ix.

<sup>31</sup> Scott-Warren, p. 158.

<sup>32</sup> Zlateva, Palma, “Translation: Text and Pre-Text. Adequacy and Acceptability in Crosscultural Communication”, in Bassnett, Susan, Lefevere, André, eds., *Translation, History and Culture*, London: Pinter Publishers, 1990, p. 31.

<sup>33</sup> Marf , p. 5. On domesticating and foreignizing translations see also Venuti, Lawrence, *The Translator’s Invisibility, A History of Translation*, New York: Routledge, 2008.

<sup>34</sup> Venuti, p. 101.

From a post-romantic point of view, we now know how language is the basis of the nation,<sup>35</sup> and although it might be controversial to talk about nation referring to 16th-century England, linguistic consciousness and the consequent dignity acquired by literature in English were useful in building an English cultural identity. Translations can help in the evolution of a literature and a society, and they can be game changers in a society which is already undergoing a period of transformation, such as was happening in early modern England. The discovery of cultural differences favoured by translations was among the main players in the construction of identity taking place in those years. Identity is often built through negation, as it can be easier to identify what one is not before being sure of what one is, so it always contains both recognition and refusal.<sup>36</sup> In a period of revolution and radical change in the European imbalances as the 16th century was, translations constituted a way to map and appropriate the world as much as possible.<sup>37</sup> In this way they functioned as an instrument of knowledge of the alien, which therefore led to knowledge of the self.

Acknowledging the role played by translations in the enrichment and development of English culture helps us to understand that they are way more than “copies” of original texts, as they are traditionally seen. Translations are instruments for textual interpretation and means of cultural and literary influence. In Renaissance Europe they were the key in the process of transformation of literary forms and in the emergence of national vernaculars.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Venuti, p. 100.

<sup>36</sup> On the theme of building a cultural identity see Greenblatt, Stephen, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp. 7-9.

<sup>37</sup> Gipper, Greilich, p. 21.

<sup>38</sup> Bassnett, p. 127.

## The circulation of Boccaccio's novelle in England

### 2.1. A survey of early translations: the quest for exemplarity

Boccaccio's *Decameron* enjoyed immediate success after it began to circulate as a whole in 1360, and it started being copied in a huge number of manuscripts, both professionally and by private copyists, managing to penetrate within Italy's social body, as proved by the numerous works that imitate the Boccaccian model.<sup>1</sup> Even before that year some novelle had been circulating independently within the peninsula, as the direct intrusion of the author before the IV Day demonstrates.<sup>2</sup> The same happened outside Italy, where the whole work was not immediately translated – and in England they had to wait until 1620 to read an English version of the *Decameron* – but some novelle had an independent circulation since the 15th century.<sup>3</sup>

A unique textual history concerns the last novella of the book (*Dec.*, X, 10), which narrates the story of Griselda, a woman of outstanding patience, forced to endure the atrocious trials her husband has her go through to test her virtue. Francesco Petrarca, with whom Boccaccio entertained a lifelong friendship, was so delighted by the narration that he translated the novella into Latin, so that those who did not know the Tuscan vernacular could read it. The translation widened the access to the novella, which became a real *cause célèbre*. After being included in Petrarca's *Rerum Senilium Libri*, the Latin text circulated independently, often introduced by rubricated headings which emphasised Griselda's patience

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<sup>1</sup> Riva, Massimo, "Boccaccio beyond the Text", in Armstrong, Guyda, Daniels, Rhiannon, Milner, Stephen J., eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Boccaccio*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 221, and Alfano, Italia, Russo, Tomasi, p. 319.

<sup>2</sup> Stewart, Pamela, "Boccaccio", in Brand, Peter and Pertile, Lino, eds., *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 83.

<sup>3</sup> Montini, Donatella, "John Florio and the *Decameron*: Notes on Style and Voice", in Di Rocco, Emilia, Boitani, Piero, eds., *Boccaccio and the European Literary Tradition*, Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2014, p. 89.



and obedience.<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer himself used Petrarca's Latin version to write the "Clerk's Tale", having one of his pilgrims tell the story of Griselda on the way to Canterbury – still it is important to note that he might have had direct access to Boccaccio's vernacular texts during his trips to Italy.<sup>5</sup>

Two aspects of the success of Griselda's tale have to be underlined: the role of the Latin translation and the exemplary content. As far as the linguistic matter is concerned, it is important to remember that Boccaccio's production consists of works both in Latin and in the Tuscan vernacular, and that, although the *Decameron* is undoubtedly the most fortunate of his works, at first it was the Latin production to make him part of European literary culture. In fact, if we focus on his reception in England, until the 16th century his vernacular works were completely overshadowed by two of his Latin works: *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium* and *De Mulieribus Claris*.

As noted above, Boccaccio's presence in England can be traced back to Chaucer's work, as, besides the rewriting of Griselda's story, Chaucer relied on Boccaccio's *Filostrato* as the source text of his *Troilus and Criseyde*, and the stories narrated in the *Teseida* and in the *Filocolo* were rewritten respectively in the "Knight's Tale" and in the "Franklin's Tale" in the *Canterbury Tales*.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless Chaucer never indicated Boccaccio as his source.<sup>7</sup> The first English translation of Boccaccio indicated as such is John Lydgate's poem *The Fall of Princes*, whose source text is Boccaccio's encyclopaedic Latin work *De Casibus Virorum*

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<sup>4</sup> Clarke, Kenneth P., "On Copying and Not Copying *Griselda*: Petrarch and Boccaccio", in Di Rocco, Emilia, Boitani, Piero, eds., *Boccaccio and the European Literary Tradition*, Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2014, pp. 57, 58, 61, 66.

<sup>5</sup> Ó Cuilleanáin, Cormac, "Translating Boccaccio", in Armstrong, Guyda, Daniels, Rhiannon, Milner, Stephen J., eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Boccaccio*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 206-207.

<sup>6</sup> Stewart, p. 75.

<sup>7</sup> Ó Cuilleanáin, p. 207.

*Illustrium*.<sup>8</sup> Lydgate knew the text in the French translation by Laurent de Premierfait,<sup>9</sup> who would translate into French other works by the Italian author, and eventually the *Decameron* in 1414.<sup>10</sup>

It was not unusual for an Italian work to reach England through an intermediate French translation. In fact, the French connection was a fundamental part of the transmission route that allowed Boccaccio's works to get to England. French translations of Boccaccio's texts are early and numerous, and constitute proof of the alacrity with which they were assimilated into French literary culture.<sup>11</sup> Besides the international relationships of the Angevin court around which Boccaccio was active, another factor contributed to the circulation of his work in France: the Avignon Papacy. The circumstance of the papal court being temporarily relocated in Avignon allowed cultural traffic between Italy and Provence, and the encyclopaedic Latin works by Boccaccio – who personally visited Avignon twice – were particularly popular in that area.<sup>12</sup> The popularity of Boccaccio's Latin production was much higher in Europe than within the peninsula, as the use of the lingua franca made it readily comprehensible. However, translations into local vernaculars were almost immediate because of the fame gained by the texts.<sup>13</sup>

The theme of exemplarity was also crucial for the circulation of Boccaccio's work. In fact, in the 16th century there was a shift in the choice of source texts, and his Italian works

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<sup>8</sup> Armstrong, Guyda, *The English Boccaccio, A History in Books*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013, p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> Laurent de Premierfait (1380-1418) was a French translator. In the first years of the 15th century he was secretary to Cardinal Amadeo di Salluzzo, and resided at the papal court of Avignon, where he dedicated himself to the nascent humanistic studies. He produced several translations from Latin and Italian, and his popularity is testified by the large number of manuscripts of his translated works we still have today (Gathercole, Patricia M., "Fifteenth-Century Translation: the Development of Laurent de Premierfait", in *Modern Language Quarterly*, 21 (1960), p. 365).

<sup>10</sup> Montini, p. 90.

<sup>11</sup> Armstrong, p. 45.

<sup>12</sup> Armstrong, pp. 42-43.

<sup>13</sup> Armstrong, p. 21.

began to circulate in England. In particular, since Elizabeth's accession to the throne in 1558, the engagement with Italian literary culture greatly increased, and various versions of Boccaccio's novelle from the *Decameron* started to circulate in print, at first individually, then anthologized in collections of tales.<sup>14</sup> It is of interest that not all the novelle were suitable for translation – two of them were even removed and substituted in the 1620 complete translation of the *Decameron*, as we shall see later –,<sup>15</sup> and the favourites were those from the IV and the X Days, whose themes were more consistent with the ethics of the time.<sup>16</sup> The tales narrated in the IV Day concerned “coloro li quali amori ebbero infelice fine”<sup>17</sup>, those that were told in the X Day were about “chi liberamente o vero magnificamente alcuna cosa operasse intorno a' fatti d'amore o d'altra cosa”<sup>18</sup>. The most popular and appreciated, besides the story of Griselda, were those of Titus and Gisippus (*Dec.*, X, 8), and of Ghismonda (*Dec.*, IV, 1).

The accessibility of Boccaccio's works, both regarding language and content, was determining for its circulation outside Italy. The Latin production held its primacy both chronologically and in popularity, while some of the *Decameron's* novelle enjoyed independent fortune as exemplary tales, but not as emblematic works of their author.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, through his work Boccaccio managed to give literary dignity to the novella as a

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<sup>14</sup> Armstrong, p. 169.

<sup>15</sup> Armstrong, p. 221.

<sup>16</sup> Ó Cuilleanáin, p. 211, and Marfè, p. 40.

<sup>17</sup> Boccaccio, Giovanni, *Decameron*, edited by Amedeo Quondam, Maurizio Fiorilla and Giancarlo Alfano, Milano: Rizzoli, 2022, p. 685. “Those whose loves have had unhappy endings” (Boccaccio, Giovanni, *The Decameron*, translated by John Payne, London: The Villon Society, 1886, p. 189). These are the editions I use throughout.

<sup>18</sup> Boccaccio, p. 1495. “Whoso hath anywise wrought generously or magnificently in matters of love or otherwhat” (p. 462).

<sup>19</sup> Armstrong, p. 164.

genre, establishing it in European literature, and to institutionalise vernacular literature, promoting cultural renewal.<sup>20</sup>

## 2.2. Boccaccio in Painter's *The Palace of Pleasure*

The new interest towards Italian literary culture which marked the 1560s caused a wave of Italian literary and cultural imports. It was probably due to this context of cultural openness towards Italian and French texts that William Painter had the idea to include tales by Italian and French authors in his compilation of short-stories *The Palace of Pleasure*, alongside classical authors such as Herodotus, Plutarch and Aulus Gellius.<sup>21</sup> Sixteen novelle from the *Decameron* were included in the two volumes, first published in 1566 and 1567.

Little is known about William Painter's life, and he is usually remembered in association to more familiar writers and especially playwrights, for having provided the sources for their plays.<sup>22</sup> In fact masterpieces of the Elizabethan theatre such as William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, his *All's Well That Ends Well*, or *The Duchess of Malfi* owe (at least in part) their existence to Painter's compilation. His fame as "source" has often distracted attention from the immediate popularity of the work, and from its importance as a milestone in the English reception of Boccaccio.

The fact that some novelle were used by playwrights to write their plays was among the reasons why *The Palace of Pleasure* was strongly criticised, and its title can be found in plenty of polemical works of the period, first among them Roger Ascham's *The*

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<sup>20</sup> Stewart, p. 85, and Eisner, Martin, "Boccaccio's Renaissance", in Di Rocco, Emilia, Boitani, Piero, eds., *Boccaccio and the European Literary Tradition*, Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2014, p. 50.

<sup>21</sup> Armstrong, p.171.

<sup>22</sup> On William Painter's life see Pursglove, Glyn, "Painter, William, 1540?-1594", <https://www.proquest.com/encyclopedias-reference-works/painter-william-1540-1594/docview/2137913545/se-2?accountid=13050> (accessed 1 September 2024).

*Schoolmaster*. The charge against the compilation was that of leading the young towards vice, diverting them from the study of the Scriptures, and taking them away from the school and the church to attend the plays that the novelle inspired. Most of the criticism concerned the Italian novelle included in the work.<sup>23</sup> It seems that Painter himself was aware of the risk of translating novelle from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, already perceived as a potentially scandalous text – in Italy its circulation was strongly hindered by that time –,<sup>24</sup> and he managed the risk both through an accurate selection of the novelle to include, and by the paratextual means he could use. In the preface to the reader, in fact, he declares that he is aware of the outrage that some novelle provoke and he assures that he only translated those that are not offensive:

Certaine haue I culled out of the Decamerone of Giouan Boccaccio wherein be contayned one hundred Nouelles, amongs which there be some (in my iudgement) that be worthy to be condempned to perpetuall prison, but of them suche haue I redemed to the liberty of our vulgar, as may be best liked, and better suffred.<sup>25</sup>

Then, he underlines that the aim of the novelle is both that of pleasing and that of educating the reader. Painter explains that reading *The Palace* should be “both profitable and pleasant”<sup>26</sup> and then proceeds to illustrate the examples that each novella provides:

Will Gentlemen learne how to prosecute vertue, and to profligat from their minde, disordinate Loue, and affection; I referre them to the historie of Tancredi, and to Galgano of Siena? Is not the marchaunt contented with his goodes already gotten, but will nedes goe seke some other trade. Let him note and consider the daungers wherein the aduenturer Landalfo was? Is he disposed to sende his factor beyonde the seas, aboute his affaires, let him firste bid him to peruse Andreuccio, and then comaund him to beware of Madame Floredelice.<sup>27</sup>

As we can see, in this passage Painter manages to introduce Boccaccio's novelle as exemplary. In fact, the tales which appear in the anthology are all instructive, with a strong

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<sup>23</sup> Shinn, Abigail, “Managing Copiousness for Pleasure and Profit: William Painter's *Palace of Pleasure*”, *Renaissance Studies*, 28 (2014), pp. 205, 207, 208.

<sup>24</sup> In Italy, the *Decameron* was placed in the Index of Prohibited Books issued by pope Paul IV in 1559, and a censored version edited by the philologist Leonardo Salviati was published in Venice in 1582 (Armstrong, p. 93).

<sup>25</sup> Painter, William, *The Palace of Pleasure, tome 1*, London: Henry Denham, for Richard Tottell and William Iones, 1566, p. 20. This is the edition I use throughout.

<sup>26</sup> Painter, p. 21.

<sup>27</sup> Painter, pp. 22-23.

focus on virtue, generosity and liberality; nothing controversial and transgressive found place in the selection.<sup>28</sup> Also, in translating those novelle which could be found ambiguous, as for example that of Melchisedech (*Dec.*, I, 3), Painter is somehow vague, as if he was not capable of understanding Boccaccio's complex speech,<sup>29</sup> with the result of blurring any potential controversy.

Observing the way Painter translated the Italian novelle leads us to a further matter: that of the source text. Painter was familiar with the Italian language, and it was long believed that he used the Italian text when translating the *Decameron*. However, there is evidence that he actually had an intermediary text at hand, and in particular the 1545 French translation of the *Decameron* by Antoine Le Maçon.<sup>30</sup> The Italian edition he consulted was the 1552 edition by Girolamo Ruscelli.<sup>31</sup> But while for other Italian novelists such as Matteo Bandello or Giovanni Francesco Straparola Painter relied exclusively on the French translations, in translating Boccaccio he chose to pay more attention to the original, praising it for its style and language, to which is opposed that of Bandello, not "as eloquent and gentle Boccaccio was".<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, if in translating those novelle concerning love or adventure, Painter achieved good results, in the tales containing wordplay, jokes, or witty remarks he seems to have missed the point.<sup>33</sup>

Certainly a selective translation such as Painter's could only offer an incomplete image of Boccaccio's work. Nonetheless it seems that Painter had realised its greatness,

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<sup>28</sup> Armstrong, p. 172.

<sup>29</sup> Marfé, pp. 41.

<sup>30</sup> Antoine le Maçon (1500-1559) was secretary to Queen Marguerite de Navarre, who commissioned him a new French translation of the *Decameron*, which he completed in 1545 (Ó Cuilleánáin, p. 210).

<sup>31</sup> On Painter's use of the Italian and French sources see Wright, Herbert G., "The Indebtedness of Painter's Translations from Boccaccio in the *Palace of Pleasure* to the French Version of *Le Maçon*", *The Modern Language Review*, 46 (1951), pp. 431-435.

<sup>32</sup> Painter, p. 20.

<sup>33</sup> Marfé, p. 71.

wishing that someone else joined him in making it accessible in English, “because the whole works of Boccaccio for his stile, order of writing, grauitie, and sententious discourse, is worthy of intire provulgation”.<sup>34</sup> Although Boccaccio’s novelle kept circulating for the whole 16th century in numerous anthologies, whose vogue was probably started by Painter himself,<sup>35</sup> no complete translation was available until 1620.

### 2.3. The 1620 full translation of the *Decameron*

Two centuries separate the first complete translation of the *Decameron* in a vernacular language from the first complete English translation, published anonymously in 1620. Boccaccio’s masterpiece was first translated into French by Laurent de Premierfait, through an intermediate Latin translation, now lost,<sup>36</sup> between 1411 and 1414,<sup>37</sup> then in Catalan in 1429; a Castilian translation was printed in 1494, two German translations were published in 1473 and 1490, and a Dutch translation was completed between 1564 and 1615.<sup>38</sup> In England the *Decameron* had a story of dismemberment: the English reception of Boccaccio has to be looked at in a different way from the continent.

Such a late translation is generally justified by the circulation of the French version,<sup>39</sup> but the remarkable dissemination of the English printed text shows great enthusiasm and interest towards what in a few years established itself as the most popular of Boccaccio’s works.<sup>40</sup> The *translatio princeps* surely marked a shift in Boccaccio’s reception,<sup>41</sup> but still

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<sup>34</sup> Painter, p. 20.

<sup>35</sup> Shinn, p. 206.

<sup>36</sup> Ó Cuilleanáin, p. 210.

<sup>37</sup> Gathercole, p. 365.

<sup>38</sup> Montini, p. 90.

<sup>39</sup> Montini, p. 92.

<sup>40</sup> Armstrong, pp. 214, 219.

<sup>41</sup> The term *translatio princeps* indicates the first translation of a literary work.

there are signs of continuity with the later 16th century print production. The same number of editions of Boccaccio's works was printed in the 16th and in the 17th centuries, meaning that his popularity remained constant, only interest began to be concentrated towards his *Decameron* after 1620. Also the connection with French sources did not lose its relevance.<sup>42</sup> The 1620 translation was based on two different source texts, one Italian and one French – plus a third text was used to get the woodcut illustrations which decorate the folio –.<sup>43</sup> The French source text was the 1545 translation by Antoine le Maçon, and more precisely the 1578 Paris edition, containing additional moralising rubrics to each novella. The Italian source text was not actually Boccaccio's original text, but the translator relied on Leonardo Salviati's expurgated *Decameron*, in one of the Venetian editions of 1597, 1602, or 1614.<sup>44</sup> The English reception of Boccaccio was therefore significantly influenced by the efforts made to erase profane and erotic material.<sup>45</sup>

The perceived immorality of the book may lie behind the anonymity of the translator. He is generally believed to be John Florio, as Herbert G. Wright suggested in 1953. His hypothesis has never been refuted, but there is no unanimity between the scholars about his position.<sup>46</sup> Although there is evidence that Florio was familiar with Boccaccio's original *Decameron*, and such a translation would be consistent with his previous engagement as agent of cultural transmission,<sup>47</sup> the attribution remains problematic. There could actually be a number of reasons why the text was published anonymously, and not necessarily linked to the content of the book. The printer could have obtained the manuscript after the translator,

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<sup>42</sup> Armstrong, p. 219.

<sup>43</sup> Armstrong, p. 217.

<sup>44</sup> Armstrong, p. 220.

<sup>45</sup> Ó Cuilleánáin, p. 210.

<sup>46</sup> Montini, p. 91, 94.

<sup>47</sup> Wyatt, p. 165.



be he Florio or not, had completed it without indicating its authorship; or it could be hypothesised that the manuscript used by the printer had something to do with the mysterious 1587 *Decameron* John Wolfe had entered on the Stationers' Register and of which there is no trace.<sup>48</sup>

Not only does the name of the translator not appear in the 1620 edition, but neither is Boccaccio's authorship indicated. These are not the only omitted elements. The Italian source text used by the English translator was a censored version of Boccaccio's work, meaning that long portions of the novelle were cut, some were changed and Salviati added glosses meant to suggest the right interpretation to the reader.<sup>49</sup> In its content, the English translation follows the Italian source for the most part. The authorial conclusion, present both in the Italian and in the French version was not included in the translation, and after the first and second editions the "Author's prologue" disappears too.<sup>50</sup>

But it is more interesting to observe that besides these paratextual elements, some novelle are censored, with the offending material erased or rewritten by the translator, and two novelle even substituted in their entirety. One is the novella of Alibech and Rustico (*Dec.*, III, 10), probably the most outrageous one, which is substituted by the story of the chaste princess Serichta, taken from François de Belleforest's *Histories tragiques*. The other novella is the one concerning the Baronci family (*Dec.*, VI, 6), a bourgeois family living in Florence in the 14th century. In this case the reason why it was expunged is not as evident, as it does not contain any obscene material. The hypotheses explaining this choice regard either

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<sup>48</sup> The information that an edition of the *Decameron* was meant to be published in 1587 by the printer John Wolfe figures in the Stationer's Register, but the book was presumably never published, as there is no further evidence it ever existed. Armstrong clarifies that the suggestion about the possible link between Wolfe's lost edition and the 1620 translation was made to her by Warren Boutcher (Armstrong, p. 220).

<sup>49</sup> Montini, p. 93.

<sup>50</sup> Armstrong, p. 221.

the novella's scarce relatability for 17th-century English readers or a blasphemous punchline that it contained.<sup>51</sup>

The access to the non-censored *Decameron* was prevented for centuries, until the first truly complete translation of Boccaccio's original text was completed by John Payne in 1886. Still, the magniloquent style of his translation and the high price he charged for his limited edition, made it not as popular as other translations, and the unexpurgated *Decameron* remained out of circulation.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Armstrong, pp. 221, 222.

<sup>52</sup> Ó Cuilleánáin, p. 210.

# From Boccaccio's Giletta di Narbona to Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*

## 3.1. Boccaccio's simplicity, Shakespeare's complexity

The most fruitful way to understand how Italian novelle were absorbed and transformed within English literature is probably to focus on one of them exclusively, in this case *Decameron* III, 9: the story of Giletta di Narbona, which is generally acknowledged as the source text for Shakespeare's comedy *All's Well That Ends Well*.<sup>1</sup>

The plot is quite simple, as Boccaccio himself sums it up:

Giletta di Nerbona guerisce il re di Francia d'una fistola; domanda per marito Beltramo di Rossiglione, il quale, contra sua voglia sposatala, a Firenze se ne va per isdegno; dove, vagheggiando una giovane, in persona di lei Giletta giacque con lui e ebene due figliuoli; per che egli poi, avutala cara, per moglie la tenne.<sup>2</sup>

Almost fairy-tale-like, the novella has often been an object of oversimplification, especially from the point of view of those who approached it through Shakespeare's complex play;<sup>3</sup> but trying to interpret it while taking it out of its context inevitably leads to not grasping its complexities.<sup>4</sup> Each novella from the *Decameron* makes sense on its own – otherwise the circulation of single novelle in early modern England would probably not have been so conspicuous –, but it often acquires a deeper meaning when it is read within the context Boccaccio provided. Giletta's novella is told at the end of the Third Day by the Queen Neifile, and is the only tale which fulfils both alternative requirements of the set theme: stories which concern “chi alcuna cosa molto da lui disiderata con industria acquistasse o la

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<sup>1</sup> Snyder, Susan, “Introduction”, in *All's Well That Ends Well*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Boccaccio, p. 628. “Gillette de Narbonne recovereth the King of France of a fistula and demandeth for her husband Bertrand de Roussillon, who marrieth her against his will and betaketh him for despite to Florence, where, he paying court to a young lady, Gillette, in the person of the latter, lieth with him and hath by him two sons; wherefore after, holding her dear, he entertaineth her for his wife” (Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, translated by John Payne, p. 176).

<sup>3</sup> Cole, Howard C., *The All's Well Story from Boccaccio to Shakespeare*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Cole, pp. 13-14.

perduta ricoverasse”.<sup>5</sup> But the previous stories, and especially the following one, twist the original theme and suggest that the whole Day should actually be interpreted taking the erotic theme into account. In most of the Third Day’s stories the “much desired thing” is sexual, so the erotic theme soon becomes central and offers a key to read Giletta’s story on a deeper level of interpretation. Moreover, Boccaccio ironically emphasises the role of God as the one who allows the achieving of the sexual goal, creating a subtle satire that proves wrong those who debase Giletta’s story to a conventional virtue story.<sup>6</sup> Shakespeare appears not to elude the centrality of both subjects, which are of great importance in his play; this leads us to the problem of his sources.

Almost certainly Shakespeare knew the story through William Painter’s translation in *The Palace of Pleasure*.<sup>7</sup> The novella in itself is, in fact, quite innocent, and was selected among those that Painter judged acceptable and fit for translation. It is interesting to note that this is the only novella from the Third Day that found a place in *The Palace*, while three from the First Day and five from the Second Day were translated.<sup>8</sup> The apparent extraneity to the Third Day’s motif of Giletta’s novella saved it from expurgation – only one minor intervention was operated by Salviati in his edition –,<sup>9</sup> in fact, Painter’s translation is extremely close to Boccaccio’s original. But no other meaning than the one originally intended by Neifile could be inferred from the translation of the single novella, and thus Shakespeare could not have been aware of the Third Day’s thematic interplay, unless we suppose Painter’s translation not to have been his only source.

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<sup>5</sup> Boccaccio, p. 523. “Such as have by dint of diligence acquired some much desired thing or recovered some lost good” (p. 127).

<sup>6</sup> Cole, pp. 20, 24.

<sup>7</sup> Snyder, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Cole, p. 76.

<sup>9</sup> Cole, p. 80.

This is likely, given the centrality Shakespeare manages to give back to the erotic theme in his play, and the playwright's habit of consulting several sources simultaneously and in more than one language.<sup>10</sup> However, no other version of the novella was available in English at the time in which Shakespeare wrote – *All's Well* is dated to the first decade of the 17th century –,<sup>11</sup> so Shakespeare must have grasped the *Decameron's* real spirit through an Italian or French version.<sup>12</sup> Shakespeare probably had access to one of the 16th century editions of le Maçon: one of the most accurate and sensitive treatments of the *Decameron*. This hypothesis is grounded on evidence, as French names and terms can be found in *All's Well That Ends Well*, as in other plays of his:<sup>13</sup> Bertram's name, for example, is closer to the French version Bertrand than to Beltramo, as found in Painter's text. Allowing Shakespeare some French and the reading of le Maçon's translation, of course does not imply that he was fully aware of Boccaccio's strategy to enrich the novella's meaning through the surrounding stories, but it makes it plausible for him to have managed to understand Boccaccio's ironic treatment of the novella. It is especially significant that it is correlated to the following novella through Dioneo's words "senza partirmi guari dall'effetto che voi tutto questo di ragionato avete",<sup>14</sup> alluding to the pertinence of Neifile's story to the erotic motif.<sup>15</sup>

But, if the most complex meaning of the novella did not lie within its plot, how did Shakespeare manage to restore it in his play, without changing the storyline a bit? Both authors made the most of the genre they were dealing with. Shakespeare had an

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<sup>10</sup> Marrapodi, Michele, "Introduction: Intertextualising Shakespeare's Text", in Marrapodi, Michele, ed., *Shakespeare, Italy and Intertextuality*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Snyder, p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> Most scholars allow Shakespeare some French and Italian (Cole, p. 85).

<sup>13</sup> Cole, p. 86.

<sup>14</sup> Boccaccio, p. 462. "without much departing from the tenor of that whereof you have discoursed all this day" (Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, translated by John Payne, p. 182).

<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that the novella that follows Giletta's is the most outrageous and censored of the whole work: that of Alibech and Rustico, excluded from the 1620 translation, in which the themes of sexuality and religion coexist (Armstrong, p. 221).

extraordinary ability in rewriting, remaking and refashioning literary material,<sup>16</sup> and in this case as in many others he recycled the plot while exploiting all the possibilities the theatre offered, which of course differ from those of the novella. Shakespeare's play has more characters than those that first appeared in Boccaccio's novella, each one fulfilling essential tasks for the success of the comic mechanism and for conveying the story's irony. Particularly interesting is the role of the Countess' servant, the Clown, who through his courtship to Isbel and his explicit sexual desire highlights Helen's real goal.

Countess: Tell me the reason why thou wilt marry.

Clown: My poor body, madam, requires it: I am driven on by the flesh, and he must needs go that the devil drives. (I.iii.27-30)<sup>17</sup>

Other scenes show Helen in an even more ambiguous light, such as the one staging a dialogue between her and Parolles – another side-character that Shakespeare invented – about virginity. In this circumstance she appears mature and confident, talking about losing her virginity “to her own liking” (I.i.152-153), letting the audience understand that her love for Bertram is all but platonic, merely physical.

The relationship between God's will and the erotic theme, which characterises the whole Third Day of the *Decameron*, is not left out of Shakespeare's comedy either. Besides the element of the pilgrimage in itself, already present in the *Decameron*, Shakespeare adds a detail that refers to Boccaccio's parody of the sacred. Neither in the original novella, nor in Painter's translation, was the destination of Giletta's pilgrimage mentioned; instead, in *All's Well That Ends Well* Helena declares that she is headed to Saint Jacques le Grand, which is undoubtedly Santiago de Compostela, in Spain. This might seem irrelevant, but in the 16th and 17th centuries Saint James pilgrims were regarded as hypocritical and lacking religious

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<sup>16</sup> Marrapodi, Michele, “Shakespeare's Romantic Italy: Novelistic, Theatrical, and Cultural Transactions in the Comedies”, in Marrapodi, Michele, ed., *Italian Culture in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries: Rewriting, Remaking, Refashioning*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007, p. 67.

<sup>17</sup> Shakespeare, William, *All's Well that Ends Well*, edited by Susan Snyder, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 95. This is the edition I use throughout.

faith, so heading to Santiago allegorically meant heading towards one's own desires.<sup>18</sup> It is also ironic that Helena justifies her quest for Bertram, whom she desires physically, with a religious pursuit.

The choice of Saint Jacques le Grand as Helena's destination has its roots in Shakespeare's own time and culture, and it would not have had the same effect on the reader if Boccaccio gave that same information in his novella. Another challenge that Shakespeare had to face was that of bringing a 14th century Italian novella to his own world.

### 3.2. Boccaccio in Shakespeare's time

The material Shakespeare borrowed from Italian novelle for his plays was, of course, not ready for use, and what appeared on the English stage was the result of adaptation, refashioning of plots, transformation and transcoding of previous material, authorial selection, overcoming of linguistic and cultural obstacles.<sup>19</sup> So, although the influence of Italy is clearly reflected in the Shakespearian text, the playwright inevitably had to deal with the perception of his audience, reworking the text according to a specific reference point. This is essential not only for the play to be understood, but, as far as the genre of comedy is concerned, it is also crucial to make the comic mechanism work and to generate laughter. Choosing a well known story – an average Elizabethan would have recognized the story-line within the first scene of the play –<sup>20</sup> allowed Shakespeare to take advantage of the spectators' expectations, either fulfilling or disappointing them. But, given the wit and the irony which

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<sup>18</sup> Cole, pp. 109-110.

<sup>19</sup> Marrapodi, "Introduction: Intertextualising Shakespeare's Text", p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Cole, p. 116.

had shaped the tradition of the *All's Well* story to work, the comedy had to be relatable for the audience.

What Shakespeare did was to recycle an established narrative, and to exploit the foreign setting of the play to discuss contemporary domestic issues,<sup>21</sup> at his own risk. The themes of sexuality, virginity, reproduction and forced marriage, which have a central role in the play as well in the *All's Well* story tradition, had a strong political connotation for any 17th century English person, who had been governed for four decades by a childless and unmarried Queen.<sup>22</sup> Queen Elizabeth I had probably just died when the play was first performed, so lines such as

Parolles: [...] It is not politic in the commonwealth of nature to preserve virginity [...]

Helen: I will stand for it a little, though therefore I die a virgin.

Parolles: There's little can be said in't, 'tis against the rule of nature. To speak on the part of virginity is to accuse our mothers, which is most infallible disobedience [...] virginity murders itself, and should be buried in highways, out of all sanctified limit, as a desperate offendress against nature. (I.i.128, 129, 135-147)

would sound daring to the audience. Nonetheless such a risky dialogue might also have contributed to the commercial success of the play in those years.<sup>23</sup>

The character of Parolles and the subplot that concerns him offer another harsh theme of note for the Elizabethan audience: that of soldier desertion. This character is a parody of some vain officers that filled the streets in London, and surely Shakespeare could only put it on stage as an issue regarding French soldiers,<sup>24</sup> though there is no doubt that it calls on English officers. We cannot be sure of whether the audience felt uncomfortable towards this military parody, but at the same time, because it was such a familiar situation, the Parolles

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<sup>21</sup> Marrapodi, "Introduction: Intertextualising Shakespeare's Text", p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> Muñoz Simonds, Peggy, "Sacred and Sexual Motifs in *All's Well That Ends Well*", *Renaissance Quarterly*, 1 (1989), p. 34.

<sup>23</sup> Muñoz Simonds, p. 34.

<sup>24</sup> Cole, p. 107.



subplot was also a rich source of comedy, much more when the play was first performed than it is for us now.<sup>25</sup>

Shakespeare's ability did not only consist of inventing new details, characters or situations that could bring the original story closer to contemporary sensitivity, but he also managed to select narratives which already contained topics of interest for his contemporaries. For example, Bertram's forced marriage calls attention to the system of wardship,<sup>26</sup> which was still in use in 17th century England, and perceived as an odious and anachronistic practice. The wardship system originated during Norman feudalism: at first, the guardian responsible for the ward could only consent to the choice of a husband for female wards, but by the second half of the 13th century the guardian's power of choosing a partner was extended to wards of both sexes, and in the following centuries it became a matter of mere profit. Shakespeare's audience would hence have found the matter interesting and the King's imposition unjust. In particular, despite the King's effort to underline Helen's virtue as true nobility and his determination to provide a title for her, it was clear that the guardian's right to enforce marriage had to be exercised without disparagement.<sup>27</sup> So, although he may sound proud and obnoxious, when Bertram says "A poor physician's daughter my wife! Disdain rather corrupt me ever" (II.iii.116, 117), he is actually playing his best card to underline the King's abuse.

Another element already present in Boccaccio's novella that in Shakespeare's times acquires a new meaning is the matter of Helen managing to cure the King after the efforts of others had proved vain. The king's healing appears almost miraculous, and in Boccaccio's

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<sup>25</sup> Cole, pp. 107, 108.

<sup>26</sup> The right of wardship allowed the lord to take control of a fief and of a minor heir until the heir came of age ("Wardship and marriage", <https://www.britannica.com/topic/wardship>, accessed 13th September 2024).

<sup>27</sup> Cole, p. 97.

novella God is in fact called on by the king when accepting to try Giletta's cure: "Il re allora disse seco: «Forse m'è costei mandata da Dio; perché non pruovo io ciò che ella sa fare [...]?»"<sup>28</sup> and no further explanation is given about the circumstance of Giletta's medical treatment. In Shakespeare's text the matter is not explored much further than in the novella, but Helena's success in spite of all the most learned doctors' failure, might be traced back to the issue, popular in those years, of two different schools of physicians.<sup>29</sup> The royal physicians who had failed to heal the king can be identified with those who still followed Galen's traditional doctrine,<sup>30</sup> while Gerard de Narbonne – and hence Helen herself – most likely represent those who followed the modern theory inaugurated by Paracelsus.<sup>31</sup> Galen's medical theories had hardly been challenged until the 16th century, but in 1527 Paracelsus burnt his books in front of the University of Basel, where he was lecturer in medicine. He was considered a divisive figure and was very well-known in Europe. It is possible that in choosing his source material, Shakespeare thought of this matter as one of interest for his contemporaries. Again Shakespeare took one of his source's minor issues and emphasised its controversial aspects to make an impression on his spectators.<sup>32</sup>

### 3.3. Beltramo, Bertram: a comparative analysis

It is not only the new side-characters that Shakespeare worked upon when adapting Boccaccio's novella for the stage; he also had the possibility to deepen the psychological

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<sup>28</sup> Boccaccio, p. 631. "The king, hearing this, said in himself, 'It may be this woman is sent me of God; why should I not make proof of her knowledge [...] ?'" (p. 177).

<sup>29</sup> Cole, pp. 101, 102.

<sup>30</sup> Galen (129-216) was a Greek physician whose doctrine exercised a dominant influence on medical theory and practise in Europe from the Middle Ages to the mid-17th century (Nutton, Vivian, "Galen", <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Galen>, accessed 13th September 2024).

<sup>31</sup> Paracelsus (1493-1541) was a German-Swiss physician who inaugurated a new study of pharmacy allied with chemistry (Hargrave, John G., "Paracelsus", <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Paracelsus>, accessed 13th September).

<sup>32</sup> Cole, p. 105.

representation of the existing characters. Though Cavalchini points out that both Boccaccio and Shakespeare were most focused on the character of Giletta/Helen,<sup>33</sup> I believe that the one who benefited the most from the stage was Beltramo/Bertram. In fact, while the character of Giletta already had well-defined contours in the novella, and appears pretty much the same on the stage as Helen, Boccaccio's Beltramo only existed as a function of Giletta's love and desire for him, and as the one who first refused and then accepted her. Shakespeare, on the other hand, gave him some personality and even had him change and grow throughout the play. This also makes him much more interesting than Helen, who is a round character since the beginning of the play, and does not allow the audience to discover her characteristics little by little. From the beginning she appears clever and determined, bringing the whole audience on her side, aided by the side-characters Shakespeare creates to dispose the audience in her favour.<sup>34</sup> Although she might appear a positive character, she is somewhat rigid, unable to surprise. The Bertram we see in the final scene, instead, is much different from the one who first got to the court of France.<sup>35</sup>

At the beginning of the play Bertram is basically a foolish adolescent, and it is easy for the audience to acknowledge his immaturity. When in the second act he is given Helena as his wife he admits: "Prepared I was not for such a business, therefore I am found so much unsettled" (II.v.63-65), showing his insecurity, which might also be due to his sexual inexperience.<sup>36</sup> A few lines later he proves himself even more childish, not understanding Helen's request for a farewell kiss

Bertram: Well, what would you say?

Helen: I am not worthy of the wealth I owe,

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<sup>33</sup> Cavalchini, Mariella, "Giletta, Helena: Uno Studio Comparativo", *Italica*, 4 (1963), p. 320.

<sup>34</sup> Snyder, p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> Babula, p. 98.

<sup>36</sup> Babula, p. 94.

Nor dare I say 'tis mine, and yet it is;  
But, like a timorous thief, most fain would steal  
What law does vouch mine own.  
Bertram: What would you have?  
Helen: Something, and scarce so much. Nothing, indeed.  
I would not tell you what I would, my lord.  
Faith, yes:  
Strangers and foes do sunder and not kiss. (II.v.80-88)

By this point of the play, Helena has already given proof of her value, even accepting to risk death to obtain Bertram's hand:

If I break time, or flinch in property  
Of what I spoke, unpitied let me die,  
And well deserved. Not helping, death's my fee. (II.i.185-187)

So when Helen has already achieved her goal, Bertram still has achieved nothing. In this sense, his choice to go off to war is not only a way of escaping a marriage he did not agree to, but can also be seen as an attempt to assume his – traditionally – masculine role and to prove his maturity, and to be worthy of Helen.

The tasks Bertram leaves for Helen to complete are necessary to the dramatic development, but he also has much work to do, in order to mature and make the match with Helen proper. A few scenes after his flee from the court of France, after the experience of the war, which probably contributed to shaping a man out of the boy he was, he appears already changed, much more confident, when trying to seduce Diana. He expresses his feelings towards her and even accepts to lend her his ring, unaware of Helen's trick, thus proving that what before he avoided, now he longs for.

But yet, if he appears physically mature, he demonstrates not to have grown mentally: he is so unwary to choose Parolles, about whom everybody else is suspicious, as his wingman, and when he discovers that he has been betrayed his reaction is exaggerated and

makes him look foolish again.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, what Parolles writes to Diana about him is quite unfair at this point:

Men are to mell with, boys are not to kiss.  
For count of this: the Count's a fool, I know it. (IV.iii.231-232)

This description might have suited Bertram at the beginning of the play, but now he has changed and he is no longer a boy, as Helen's words about their night together prove:

O my good lord, when I was like this maid,  
I found you wondrous kind. (V.iii.309-310)

It is at this point of the play that Bertram's change appears evident. When he sees Helen, he is no longer unsettled and unprepared. Though he thought her dead, and so might have felt free from the imposition he had suffered, he finally accepts her and recognises her worth.

It is interesting to note that in the play little importance is given to the fulfilling of the tasks: the child Helen has to carry is not even born when she and Bertram meet again. In Boccaccio's novella *Beltramo* seems to change his mind about Giletta just because she had managed to complete the tasks he had assigned her:

La contessa [...] ordinatamente ciò che stato era e come raccontò; per la qual cosa il conte, conoscendo lei dire il vero e veggendo la sua perseveranza e il suo senno e appresso due così be' figlioletti, e per servar quel che promesso avea [...] pose giù la sua obstinata gravezza e in piè fece levar la contessa e lei abbracciò e basciò e per sua legittima moglie riconobbe, e quegli per suoi figlioli.<sup>38</sup>

In *All's Well* Bertram's conversion and reconciliation with Helen appear mostly the result of what he accomplished in between. By the end of the play Bertram is no longer a boy, he is mature enough to appreciate Helen and ready to assume his role as husband. If in Boccaccio's novella *Giletta* was the only one who had to make an effort to obtain what she wanted, in Shakespeare's play Bertram had some work to do as well. For the audience there is no doubt

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<sup>37</sup> Babula, p. 97.

<sup>38</sup> Boccaccio, pp. 640, 641. "The countess, then, [...] orderly recounted that which had passed and how it had happened; whereupon the count, feeling that she spoke sooth and seeing her constancy and wit and moreover two such goodly children, as well for the observance of his promise [...], put off his obstinate despite and raising the countess to her feet, embraced her and kissing her, acknowledged her for his lawful wife and those for his children." (p. 181).

on whether Helen deserves Bertram's love, but Bertram must prove himself worthy of Helen's before the spectators.

Shakespeare exploited all the possibilities the theatre offered to have a character grow on stage, in the span of the couple of hours the play lasts. What did not fit in the novella found a place in Shakespeare's work, proving the extraordinary ability of the playwright to create complex characters even out of those which at first sight might seem insignificant.

#### 3.4. Does it actually "all end well"?

The title *All's Well That Ends Well* is extremely misleading. The expectation of a happy ending which it inevitably suggests is disappointed by the last scene, full of tension which is never let off. Different opinions have been offered regarding the ending of this problem play,<sup>39</sup> but what is certain is that there is no unanimous interpretation of it.

Helen dares to say "All's well that ends well" (V.i.25) at the beginning of the last act, when nothing has ended yet, and the only way we can agree with her is by sharing her naivety. She has completed the tasks Bertram had imposed, but she is – as Cole has suggested – a "self-deceived deceiver",<sup>40</sup> who seems unable to grasp all the complexities of her own story. In the last lines of the play the King offers a more truthful interpretation, by saying "All yet seems well" (V.iii.333),<sup>41</sup> thus suggesting that nothing has actually ended and that what appears well, might not be so. In fact, the ending is only potentially happy, and the spectator can only trust that the reconciliation between Helen and Bertram will generate true love in a

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<sup>39</sup> The label "problem play" was proposed by Frederick Samuel Boas in 1896 for those plays that seemed to him not to fit neither the tragic nor the comic genre: *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Measure for Measure* and *Hamlet* (Snyder, p. 16).

<sup>40</sup> Cole, p. 131.

<sup>41</sup> Shakespeare, p. 214.

future that will not appear on stage. Moreover, the King's concession to Diana to choose a husband for herself makes the plot circular, thus highlighting again that nothing has ended.

If thou be'st yet a fresh uncroppèd flower,  
Choose thou thy husband and I'll pay thy dower. (V.iii.327, 328)

The epilogue suggest another interesting interpretation, which presumably let Shakespeare's own expectations down:

The King's a beggar, now the play is done.  
All is well ended if this suit be won,  
That you express content; which we will pay  
With strife to please you, day exceeding day.  
Ours be your patience, then, and yours our parts:  
Your gentle hands lend us, and take our hearts. (Epilogue 1-6)

Regardless of how the play ends, the criterion to establish if all ended well is whether the audience is pleased and enjoyed the play or not. Unfortunately, neither by this parameter can we say that the play ended well, as it seems never to have been popular, and it is certainly not a favourite of Shakespeare's audiences and readers.<sup>42</sup> Some have even labelled this play a failure.<sup>43</sup> It is not difficult to hypothesise what might have generated the audience's uneasiness, as the final resolution fails to satisfy, and rather than clarify, generates questions.

Though today we should not afford to be unsettled by the patriarchal anxieties about the roles of Helen and Bertram being gender-reversed, which distressed critics in the past centuries,<sup>44</sup> still the two heroes fail to be likeable. Helen tricks Bertram into loving her, and the spectator has to assume that his change of heart is authentic, but there is not enough evidence to be sure of that. Bertram, on the other hand, even after the growth he experiences throughout the play, remains culpable in many ways, and Helen's obstinacy in obtaining his love is quite inexplicable. The most problematic point concerns Helen completing the tasks

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<sup>42</sup> Cole, pp. 133, 134.

<sup>43</sup> See Snyder, p. 25.

<sup>44</sup> Snyder, p. 32.

Bertram had assigned her through his letter, but failing to understand – or ignoring – the spirit in which such letter was written: his conditions were not to be met, but to be dismissed.<sup>45</sup>

When thou canst get the ring upon my finger, which never shall come off, and show me a child begotten of thy body that I am father to, then call me husband. But in such a “then”, I write a “never”. (III.ii.57-60)

It is not unusual for Shakespeare’s characters and plays not to be univocal and unproblematic,<sup>46</sup> nor should this be a reason for us to walk away from them and not to question them. This play’s complexity might have contributed to its lack of success but at the same time it promotes debate and exchange, and, as this whole dissertation aims to demonstrate, it is through these practices that new – sometimes great – things come alive.

Although this play might not end as well as its title promised, it is a crucial witness of how the decisive process of transfer of cultural energy from Italy to England contributed to lay the foundations of English literary excellence. *All’s Well That Ends Well* is proof of what intercultural exchange can generate: it is much more than a matter of translation and adaptation, it is about experimenting, discovering other points of view, finding meeting points, meditating through different perspectives, identifying in someone else’s story and giving it new meanings. Shakespeare managed to read under the surface of Boccaccio’s novella, and he found breeding ground for his creativity. The playwright managed to dialogue with Italian and French authors, crossing borders by overcoming cultural, linguistic, physical and chronological distance: tasks that required subtle and clever strategies to be completed, as the *All’s Well* example proves.

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<sup>45</sup> Snyder, p. 18.

<sup>46</sup> Marrapodi, “Shakespeare’s Romantic Italy: Novelistic, Theatrical, and Cultural Transactions in the Comedies”, p. 67.



## Riassunto in italiano

Il XVI secolo rappresenta un momento chiave per lo sviluppo della lingua e della letteratura inglese. La posizione marginale dell'Inghilterra in Europa aveva fortemente condizionato la percezione della lingua e della cultura inglese, che sembravano non poter competere con quella italiana e con quella francese. L'Italia da tempo aveva un ruolo di preminenza nella vita culturale europea, e lo sviluppo del commercio internazionale aveva garantito la circolazione non solo di beni, ma anche di testi che contribuivano ad accrescere la curiosità verso la sua cultura. L'età elisabettiana fu caratterizzata da un grande interesse verso la letteratura e la lingua italiana (si tenga presente, tuttavia, che non si parla certo di una lingua italiana unitaria nella penisola), e persone come John Florio e John Wolfe seppero agire come mediatori culturali intuendo il potenziale di mercato che l'ammirazione per la cultura italiana offriva. Il collasso politico ed economico dell'Italia fu controbilanciato dall'ascesa di Stati del Nord Europa, tra cui la stessa Inghilterra, che dopo lo scisma protestante e l'insediamento dei Tudor si era rafforzata da un punto di vista politico e culturale. La possibilità di leggere la Bibbia in inglese favorì l'alfabetizzazione e dimostrò finalmente che anche la lingua inglese era in grado di esprimere concetti complessi.

Fu in questo contesto che cominciarono a proliferare traduzioni inglesi di opere che circolavano in Europa. L'Inghilterra del XVI secolo rappresenta un contesto particolarmente interessante per gli studi di traduzione: si tratta di un secolo di transizione, in cui alle modalità di traduzione adottate durante il medioevo iniziano ad affiancarsi nuove teorie avanzate dagli umanisti italiani nel secolo precedente, e influenzate dalla nascente filologia. Fino a questo momento manipolare il testo, aggiungere e omettere pericopi, modificare le parole e i contenuti erano pratiche comunemente messe in atto da copisti e traduttori, per

giudicare l'operato dei quali non possiamo fare riferimento ai parametri che utilizziamo oggi. Tuttavia, è proprio durante il rinascimento che alcune delle moderne teorie della traduzione si svilupparono e consolidarono, e infatti nel corso del XVI secolo deviare dall'originale diventò sempre più problematico, per la crescente importanza del suo statuto.

Ogni traduzione riflette non solo il contesto storico e culturale del testo di partenza, ma è anche fortemente influenzata da quello in cui la traduzione stessa è realizzata. Le traduzioni riflettono equilibri politici e interessi economici, per questo non risulta affatto stupefacente che le traduzioni di testi italiani dell'Inghilterra del XVI secolo fossero particolarmente numerose, a dimostrazione dell'interesse verso la cultura e la letteratura italiana. L'impatto delle traduzioni nella cultura inglese del XVI secolo necessita di uno sguardo in grado di andare oltre i dati che testimoniano la circolazione di certi testi al di fuori dell'ambiente in cui sono stati prodotti inizialmente. Le traduzioni del '500 furono uno strumento potente, in grado di influenzare profondamente non solo la letteratura, ma anche la lingua inglese, ed ebbero un ruolo di rilievo nello sviluppo di un'identità culturale unitaria. La novella italiana fu il mezzo di diffusione di un preciso immaginario narrativo, da cui furono assorbiti in diversi contesti culturali nuovi concetti, temi, e strategie narrative, che in Inghilterra sono stati in grado di arricchire l'immaginario narrativo preesistente, dando l'opportunità agli autori dei secoli successivi di dar vita a capolavori in cui temi e trame provenienti dall'Italia si legano a una sensibilità autoctona. Le traduzioni rappresentano anche il campo in cui la lingua inglese dovette dimostrare la sua dignità, provando di essere in grado di esprimere concetti che erano stati formulati in lingue ritenute più prestigiose. Gli autori inglesi erano inclini ad ampliare la lingua, facendo uso di nuove parole, necessarie per esprimere nuovi concetti. In ultimo, il contatto con un mondo altro favorì la creazione di un'identità nazionale, poiché il riconoscimento dell'altro è fondamentale per la conoscenza di

sé. Alla luce di questo è evidente che le traduzioni sono molto più che “copie” di un testo originale, ma costituiscono strumenti di interpretazione testuale e mezzi di influenza culturale e letteraria.

Di particolare interesse sono le vicende riguardanti le traduzioni dell'opera di Giovanni Boccaccio. Il successo del *Decameron* ebbe inizio ancor prima che l'opera iniziasse a circolare integralmente: alcune novelle furono copiate e trasmesse in maniera indipendente, non solo all'interno della penisola ma in tutto il continente. La novella di Griselda (*Dec.*, X, 10), in particolare, godette di un'ampia fortuna in tutta Europa, specialmente grazie alla traduzione in latino che ne fece Francesco Petrarca. Due elementi essenziali per la circolazione dell'opera boccacciana sono proprio quelli racchiusi nel caso della novella di Griselda: l'esemplarità e l'accessibilità linguistica. La produzione latina di Boccaccio, infatti, lo rese celebre in Europa, e in Inghilterra in un primo momento fu molto più popolare della sua produzione vernacolare. Il tema dell'esemplarità fu un filtro fondamentale per la selezione delle novelle da tradurre. Le novelle del *Decameron* che ebbero maggiore successo europeo furono quelle meno scabrose e offensive, più in linea con la sensibilità delle culture di arrivo. Va tenuta a mente la rilevanza della Francia come luogo chiave per la diffusione dell'opera di Boccaccio in Europa. Gran parte della produzione boccacciana, infatti, giunse in Inghilterra attraverso intermediari francesi, poiché l'assimilazione dell'opera nella cultura letteraria francese fu particolarmente rapida e consistente.

Oltre a circolare in maniera indipendente, alcune novelle del *Decameron* furono antologizzate, entrando a far parte di raccolte più ampie. Ben sedici furono incluse nella raccolta *The Palace of Pleasure*, di William Painter, uscita in due volumi nel 1566 e 1567. Essa è nota prevalentemente per essere stata la fonte a cui diversi drammaturghi, tra cui Shakespeare stesso, hanno attinto per ricavare le trame delle loro opere. Questo spesso

distoglie l'attenzione dal ruolo fondamentale che *The Palace of Pleasure* svolse nella ricezione di Boccaccio in Inghilterra. Painter era consapevole del rischio comportato dalla traduzione di un'opera percepita come scandalosa come il *Decameron*, e gestì la complessità dell'operazione attraverso un'attenta selezione delle novelle da includere nella raccolta e attraverso gli strumenti paratestuali che aveva a disposizione. Nessuna novella controversa fu antologizzata: anche Painter seguì il criterio dell'esemplarità. Anche in questo caso le traduzioni delle novelle italiane furono eseguite attraverso un intermediario francese, tuttavia nel caso specifico di Boccaccio Painter si servì anche di un'edizione italiana, ed elogiò lo stile dell'autore augurandosi che qualcuno si unisse presto a lui completando la traduzione dell'opera.

Tuttavia, per poter leggere il *Decameron* in inglese si dovette aspettare il 1620, quando ne fu pubblicata una traduzione anonima. Una traduzione così tarda è solitamente giustificata dalla circolazione di una versione francese, ma ciò che è certo è che dopo la pubblicazione della sua traduzione il *Decameron* mise in ombra le altre opere dell'autore. La *translatio princeps* si basava su due diversi testi, uno francese e uno italiano. Si noti che il testo dell'edizione italiana era quello censurato ad opera di Leonardo Salviati, pertanto la ricezione del testo in Inghilterra fu pesantemente condizionata dal tentativo di eliminare dal *Decameron* ogni traccia di materiale erotico e profano. Si ipotizza che il traduttore possa aver desiderato rimanere anonimo proprio a causa dei contenuti scabrosi del testo, ma naturalmente non c'è alcuna certezza riguardo le ragioni di questa circostanza. Herbert G. Wright nel 1953 ha avanzato l'ipotesi che dietro il traduttore possa celarsi la figura di John Florio, tuttavia tra gli studiosi non c'è unanimità in merito. Oltre al nome del traduttore, anche quello dello stesso Boccaccio non figura nel testo, e tra gli elementi omessi va notata

specialmente l'assenza di due novelle, sostituite per intero l'una poiché eccessivamente oltraggiosa, l'altra presumibilmente perché troppo lontana dalla sensibilità dell'epoca.

Un esempio interessante di come la novella boccacciana sia stata trasformata e assorbita nella letteratura inglese è costituito dal caso della novella di Giletta di Narbona (*Dec.*, III, 9), riconosciuta come la fonte da cui Shakespeare prese la trama di *All's Well That Ends Well*, per mezzo della traduzione di Painter in *The Palace of Pleasure*. La trama della novella ricalca la struttura della fiaba e spesso, specialmente quando accostata alla commedia shakespeariana, è stata sminuita attraverso un'eccessiva semplificazione. La verità è che giudicare la novella estrapolandola dal contesto originario fornito dal Boccaccio inevitabilmente impedisce di coglierne le complessità. Ogni novella del *Decameron* acquista un valore diverso se letta alla luce di quelle che la precedono e la seguono. In particolare la novella di Giletta di Narbona rientra perfettamente nel tema proposto dalla regina Neifile per la terza giornata, ma a esso occorre accostare il motivo erotico, sotteso a tutte le novelle della giornata, e a questo una satira sottile che implica l'intervento divino come favoreggiatore del desiderio erotico. Shakespeare fu in grado di cogliere questi aspetti e di riportarli nella sua commedia, per questo è necessario ipotizzare che oltre che dalla fonte di *The Palace of Pleasure*, in cui la novella è tradotta al di fuori del suo contesto, egli abbia attinto anche a una traduzione completa del *Decameron*, presumibilmente quella francese di Antoine le Maçon del 1545. L'abilità del drammaturgo fu quella di sfruttare al massimo le possibilità che il teatro offriva per trasmettere anche i significati meno espliciti della novella boccacciana, creando nuovi personaggi e inserendo dettagli funzionali al meccanismo comico.

Una sfida stimolante fu senz'altro quella di riportare una novella italiana del XIV secolo all'interno di un orizzonte di riferimento familiare al suo pubblico. Riciclare una trama già nota implicava necessariamente un'operazione di adattamento e trasformazione.

Shakespeare approfittò dell'ambientazione estera per portare in scena tematiche scottanti per lo spettatore elisabettiano, come quella della verginità, che nel contesto in cui la commedia veniva messa in scena aveva una precisa connotazione politica in riferimento alla regina Elisabetta I, che, quando la commedia fu messa in scena, doveva essere morta da poco senza lasciare eredi e senza essersi sposata. Per riavvicinare la storia al pubblico inglese, tuttavia, non era indispensabile inserire elementi nuovi – come il personaggio di Parolles, che chiamava in causa soldati codardi e disertori –, ma tematiche già presenti nella novella assunsero significati nuovi nell'Inghilterra del XVII secolo. In particolare risultavano familiari le tematiche della custodia dei feudatari, ancora in uso in quegli anni, e quella della guarigione del re attraverso metodi non tradizionali, che rimandava alla diatriba tra medici di scuola galenica e quelli che invece seguivano le teorie di Paracelso.

Anche i personaggi subirono una trasformazione evidente dalla novella alla scena, e in particolare Shakespeare riuscì a dare un aspetto nuovo al personaggio di Bertram, scarsamente caratterizzato nella novella. Il Bertram che Shakespeare mette sul palco è oggetto di un notevole approfondimento psicologico, e addirittura è un personaggio in divenire, che cambia nel corso della commedia. Dall'essere un adolescente insicuro e puerile che rifiuta un matrimonio che reputa ingiusto, passando attraverso l'esperienza della guerra, il Bertram della scena finale si dimostra molto più maturo e la riconciliazione con Helen appare più come il frutto del cambiamento di lui che come risultato del superamento delle prove da parte di lei.

Tuttavia, a dispetto del titolo, *All's Well That Ends Well* non mette in scena un vero e proprio lieto fine. La conclusione della storia lascia l'amaro in bocca e la riconciliazione finale tra i due protagonisti genera più dubbi che certezze. Non solo la commedia non sembra finire bene: sembra non finire affatto. Nemmeno l'auspicio espresso nell'epilogo, in cui viene

espressa l'idea che il lieto fine della commedia dipenda dal suo apprezzamento da parte del pubblico, si realizza: la commedia non è mai stata un grande successo e non è certo annoverata tra le migliori opere dell'autore. Ciò che è interessante, però, è che essa testimonia il risultato di un processo di scambio culturale che ha contribuito a porre le fondamenta dell'eccellenza letteraria inglese. Inoltre, se la complessità della commedia ha contribuito al suo insuccesso, al contempo ha generato un vivo dibattito tra gli studiosi, e questo non può che essere positivo, poiché è attraverso lo scambio e il confronto che si possono superare le differenze e dar vita a nuove e grandi cose.

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