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Decameron by Giovanni Boccaccio (review)

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student, who is unlikely to have the patience or ability to profit from the copious quotations in Latin, French, and Italian.

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GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO, *Decameron*. The John Payne Translation Revised and Annotated by Charles S. Singleton, 3 volumes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

It is common knowledge that Charles S. Singleton's reputation rests mainly on his achievements as a Dante scholar. What is probably less known is that Singleton has devoted a substantial portion of his time and intellectual resources to "another world" of the Italian Middle Ages, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, but his labors on the *Decameron*, which are as magisterial and rigorous in analysis as his Dante Studies, have not proved to be equally rewarding.

Singleton's involvement with the *Decameron* came to the surface in 1944 when he wrote a piece "On Meaning in the *Decameron*," (*Italica*) in which he polemically argued that the esthetic experience of the *Decameron* ought to be understood as a radical contradiction of the very assumptions of the *Divine Comedy*. Whereas Dante's spirituality subordinates poetry to the claims of theology, Boccaccio's *Decameron* is directed toward the pleasures and comforts of this world. Since then Boccaccio Studies have moved a long way from Singleton's fairly simplified, schematic pattern of literary history, but the bibliographies on the subject rightly continue to list Singleton's article, the outlines of which reappear as a brief preface in the third volume, devoted to notes and commentary, of this revision of John Payne's translation. This revision is the result of Singleton's long love for the *Decameron* and the intriguing, personal story of this scholar with this text, is crisply told by Singleton himself in "A Note on the Holograph" at the end of the same third volume of this elegant set.

In 1933 Michele Barbi, one of the most prestigious names in the Italian philological tradition of textual criticism, examined the holograph copy of the *Decameron* known as Hamilton 90, which was sent to Florence on special loan for the Barbi's inspection from the Berlin's Staatsbibliothek.

As Alberto Chiari, one of Barbi's assistants, was later to report, it took only a few minutes before declaring without any hesitation that the manuscript was an autograph. But the attribution was not revealed till 1948, when Singleton himself, who was preparing a critical edition of the *Decameron* for Laterza (which was published in 1955) and was diligently collating its sundry manuscripts. Singleton had independently concluded that Hamilton 90 was the single, authoritative manuscript on which he would base his edition, but the irony is that he had failed to recognize Boccaccio's handwriting. The scholar's disappointment must still be great if one were to judge by his decision to reprint *verbatim* the account of it from the introduction to the edition of the autograph published by the Johns Hopkins Press in 1974. The disappointment is understandable, but one wonders whether Singleton's importance and role in revamping Dante and Boccaccio Studies will be gauged less by his philology and more through his work as a critic.

At any rate what matters is that one scholar's philological expertise and another's critical insight find themselves in agreement. And Singleton's claim that Hamilton 90 must become the basis of all future attempts to establish any critical edition of Boccaccio's masterpiece is fully warranted. The manuscript, in point of fact, has become the basis for the most authoritative critical edition of the *Decameron* prepared by Vittore Branca in 1976. It has also become the basis for Singleton's present revision of John Payne's translation, which had been originally printed in London by the Villon Society in 1886. Readers hardly need being reminded that Singleton has updated in the recent past other scholarly works, most notably Grandgent's edition of the *Divine Comedy* and Paget Toynbee's *Dictionary of Proper Names* in the Works of Dante. In a way such a retrieval of monumental works of the past signals Singleton's understanding of scholarship as a retouching and a preserving of the efforts of preceding generations. In the present decision to make again available Payne's classic translation Singleton has introduced remarkably few changes, such as removing some of the more obvious lexical traces of Victorian taste, archaic "thous," or, more importantly, by making use of the recent, philologically accurate text.

It is easy to agree with Singleton's retrieval of Payne's translation. It is quite true that there have been many English Translations of the *Decameron* since the Renaissance and, actually, no other work of Italian literature, not even the *Divine Comedy*, has been translated as often as Boccaccio's masterpiece. The translations, at the beginning, were generally

anonymous and were probably by clergymen, who, from the perspective of their conjugal bliss, enjoyed Boccaccio's satirical picture of the impossible continence which religious celibacy demanded, but who would still blush at the frank sexuality of the tales. John Payne's translation marks a landmark in the history of the *Decameron* in English: for the first time all the stories (including that of Alibech, III, 10) are translated.

But the translation is a landmark from the viewpoint of style. The styles deployed in the *Decameron* range from the controlled energy of the Ciceronian model to that of ordinary conversation; it is, in many ways, a mosaic of tongues, common plain speech, erudite literary allusions. Payne is effective in capturing the lofty moments and the slow rhythm of Boccaccio's prose, and when the narrative circumstances are somewhat naturalistic his rendition is still engaging though not as crisp as one could wish. The Proem, for instance—however stiff its rhetorical articulation—is simply impressive in English as it is in Italian:

Human it is to have compassion for the afflicted and albeit it well beseems everyone, yet of those is it more particularly required who have once had need of comfort and have found it in any, among whom, if ever any had need thereof or held it dear or took pleasure therein aforesaid, certainly I am one of these. For, having from my first youth to this present been beyond measure inflamed with a very high and noble passion (higher and nobler, perchance, than might appear, were I to relate it, to sort with my low estate) albeit by persons of discretion who had intelligence thereof I was commended therefor and accounted worth so much the more, nevertheless an exceedingly sore travail it was to me to bear it, certainly not by reason of the cruelty of the beloved lady, but because of an exceeding ardor begotten in my breast of an ill-ordered appetite which, because it did not suffer me to remain content within reasonable limits, cause me oftentimes to feel more chagrin than I had occasion for.

Singleton's notes are accurate and spare (the scholar ought to consult and supplement these with the notes in Branca's edition). But one wished Singleton had provided some bibliography to help those interested in reading and thinking further about the playful and elusive secrets of Boccaccio's masterpiece.

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