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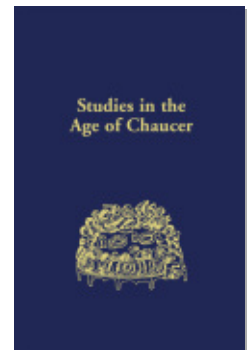
Chaucer, Boccaccio, and the Debate of Love: A Comparative Study of The Decameron and The Canterbury Tales by N. S. Thompson (review)

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Arthur Lovejoy and Emil Wolff—the *catena aurea* as the dominating dramatic principle in Chaucer's spiritual and textual world on the basis of highly nuanced semantic and solid philological observations, to concentrate on an "exposition of Chaucer's play with ideas" (p. 16) and not on a history of ideas or mentalité, is only weakened by this curiously apologetic *captatio*. Although the volume could have gained through a final round of editorial fine-tuning (see, e.g., the book's back flap, which inverts the content of chapters 5 and 6, and a number of unfortunate typos) as well as through the inclusion of Katherine Tachau's *Vision and Certitude in the Age of Ockham* (Leiden: Brill, 1988) and Linda Holley's *Chaucer's Measuring Eye* (Houston: Rice University Press, 1990) on the topic of "sight," Taylor's investigation, in its learnedness and accuracy, is a welcome contribution to the ideologized realm of Chaucer studies in the nineties. Once one has accepted its basic (moral?) premise, the book's impressive array of detailed philosophic and linguistic analysis and its depth of interpretive insight (esp. on the connectedness or mediation of sight and word, time and narrative form, memory and design) rival Jerome Mandel's recent *Geoffrey Chaucer: Building the Fragments of the Canterbury Tales* (1992), which attracted, not surprisingly, the same publisher.

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N. S. THOMPSON. *Chaucer, Boccaccio, and the Debate of Love: A Comparative Study of The Decameron and The Canterbury Tales*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. Pp. x, 364. \$72.00.

The author of this engaging and learned work insists that he is out to prove only that it takes more than the search for verbal parallels to investigate the possible connections between *The Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales*. He also acknowledges that the kind of evidence for influence that he explores is not likely to change the minds of those who will admit nothing less than positive evidence in such matters. Yet he is himself convinced that his comparative readings of the two works yield results that show, at least, stronger connections between them than have been hitherto shown, if not conclusive reasons for believing

Chaucer knew and used Boccaccio's *Decameron* when he wrote *The Canterbury Tales*. And this is exactly as it should be if one is to revive this old question from the affirmative point of view.

Some readers, however, may find Thompson's approach as old-fashioned as the question it addresses, for his account of what happens when we look beyond what the textual eye sees is based on critical resources that are largely traditional in their interpretive orientation. The book's carefully argued thesis depends almost exclusively upon close and complex readings of the framing structures of *The Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales* and of specific parallel narratives within those structures. The cultural context of the study has been defined predominantly by the conventions of literary and intellectual history. Recent theoretical paradigms and systems are scantily present in Thompson's method, though he does use the term *reader-response* (without reference to Kenneth Burke) to name one of the intended effects of Boccaccio's and Chaucer's narrative strategies upon their audiences. Though this will please some members of our common Chaucerian enterprise more than it will others, it should not prevent anyone interested in the book's subject from giving it an open-minded reading.

Thompson's organization of his argument follows a similar pattern throughout most of the book. First, a concept such as diversity (in chapter 1) is introduced with some commentary on its medieval cultural particularities. This is followed by subsections in which the concept as it functions in Boccaccio and Chaucer is analyzed. These are, in turn, followed by a comparative summary and conclusion. The topical concepts with which Thompson titles the remaining six chapters—Reading the Signs, The Literary Debate, The Autonomy of Fiction, The Comic Tales: Fabliaux or Novelle?, The Romances: Noble and Ignoble Love, and The Three Griseldas—give some idea of the shape of the work. In every chapter, Thompson writes with extraordinary attention to the details in the texts he has selected as the bases for his argument that *The Canterbury Tales* resembles *The Decameron* both in the ways their authors represent their understanding of the nature and aims of writing as well as in the ways they handled analogous story materials. One of the most important of the correspondences investigated in the first half of the book is that between the *brigata's* concerns with "utile" and "diletto" in *The Decameron* and the pilgrims' oppositions of "sentence" and "solas" and "earnest" and "game" in Chaucer. These lead to the creation in each work of a moral laboratory in which the reader is provoked into making

discriminations between virtue and vice and finds himself working his way through a labyrinth of appearances and reality that ultimately acts as an instrument of self-knowledge. This and other narrative aspects of the two fictions that are discussed early in the book then inform the treatment of their analogue tales in the second half of the study. These are divided into a “comic” group—*The Miller’s Tale* and *Decameron* 3.4; *The Reeve’s Tale* and 9.6; *The Shipman’s Tale* and 8.1—and a “serious” group—*The Merchant’s Tale* and 7.9; *The Franklin’s Tale* and 10.5; and *The Clerk’s Tale* and 10.10. The heart of Thompson’s work, the analyses of these groups emphasize their common concern with the subject of marriage, generating a debate that examines the sources of order and stability for society and individual.

Just as it is impossible for a review to convey fully an argument like the one Thompson makes, it is also difficult to indicate disappointments with much thoroughness. Still, a responsible accounting must at least state the major issues that elicited some degree of reservation. Since the book’s argument depends upon the notion that Chaucer took some very important cues from Boccaccio in his conception and execution of *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole, it is surprising to find that Thompson does not devote more time to the tales of pilgrims who have not been traditionally associated with *The Decameron*. For example, his comparisons—teasingly brief themselves—of Dioneo as paradoxical and teasing narrator to the Pardoner and Wife of Bath may have been missed opportunities to strengthen his case, especially since the discussions of Dioneo’s role in *The Decameron* are so interesting. So, too, the decision not to extend the context of his inquiry to include an ample consideration of other Chaucerian appropriations of works by Boccaccio limits Thompson’s claims to have explored the relationship between the two writers thoroughly. *Troilus and Crisyede* is mentioned several times without any sustained discussion of its Boccaccian provenance, and even the four pages given to *The Knight’s Tale* barely acknowledge, much less address, the extent and manner of Chaucer’s adaptation of the *Teseida*. It is difficult, for me at least, to think about what Chaucer might have done with *The Decameron* without qualifying that proposition with what he actually did with the *Filostrato* and the *Teseida*, including somewhere in the consideration the recognition that prose and verse sources may constitute a meaningful difference in the ways in which one writer may draw on the works of another.

Three other details of a minor nature are, perhaps, worth pointing out. First, Thompson's extensive bibliography omits the singular study by Stavros Deligiorgis, *Narrative Intellection in the Decameron* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1975) in which Boccaccio's work is subjected to intense thematic scrutiny and analysis. Second, I must disagree with the statement on page 72 that Chaucer's characterization of the pilgrims "anticipates Cubism by some five hundred years. . . . As with Cubist works, it is left to the observer to disambiguate the lines which both depict and obfuscate meaning." I seriously doubt that anybody who knows how to look at modern art would regard Cubist works in this way. Like the attempts to explain the allegorical space of *Piers Plowman* as "surrealistic," this analogy does intellectual justice to neither of its terms. Last, and on a lighter note, on page 211, the Miller's daughter Malyne in *The Reeve's Tale* is further "disparaged" by being renamed Malkyn, whose maidenhead, according to Holy Church, no man wants (*Piers Plowman*, C 1.180).

Finally, it must be said that *Chaucer, Boccaccio, and the Debate of Love* first entered this world as an Oxford doctoral thesis. The thesis, according to the author's acknowledgement note, became this book. Yet to one who turned to it after a term of reading theses and dissertations in eager anticipation of a change in reading program karma, it seems to have retained too much of its former incarnation for comfort. This excellent and intelligent study could have been an elegant book had it been revised to omit the relentless repetitions, recapitulations, summaries, the "as we have just seen" and "I shall now argue," and other rhetorical signposts of the thesis level of existence. This personal complaint notwithstanding, N. S. Thompson has made an impressive and valuable debut with this work.

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