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The Auctour, the Translatoure, and the Impressoure: Translating Boccaccio’s Authorship in Early Modern England

Among the first English translations of Giovanni Boccaccio’s Decameron to appear in print are two tales: Tytus & Gesyppus ([c. 1525]; STC 3184.5) and Guystarde and Sygysmonde (1532; STC 3183.5), both translated by William Walter and printed by Wynkyn de Worde.¹ Neither text acknowledges Boccaccio as the author of the tale, and indeed both are translated not from Boccaccio’s work but from Latin translations of stories excerpted from it; but they provide a curious case study on the way authorship and the construction of an authorial persona are translated from early modern Italy by early modern English writers. This paper examines the construction of authorship and responsibility within the two English texts as well as in Boccaccio’s Decameron, seeing these as parallel activities that differ in culturally significant ways, reflecting, among other things, the shift from manuscript to print.

It may seem paradoxical to explore systems of authorial construction using two translations that mention neither the source author nor the translators of mediating versions. Yet authorship in this case should be viewed not merely as the identification of the historical person associated with the text, but also as a textual construction of responsibility and credit – the idea of authorship – and thus the presence of the actual historical figures is not a necessary condition.

¹ Hereafter Tytus and Guystarde.

In this case study, I examine how narrative structures affect the presentation of authorship and responsibility. I first examine how Boccaccio manipulates medieval ideas about how to present authors and authorship through structure. He constructs an authorial figure who is neither the historical figure who wrote the text nor the implied author that modern narratology sees embodied within the text, but rather an explicit textual representation of the author. I then examine the ways in which the two English texts construct similar authorial figures, or at least representations of parties responsible in the process of textual production. In analysing these two translated texts, I also examine the role played by the mediating Latin translations that are Walter’s immediate sources. The different frames of the source and target texts serve different functions although they are similar constructions, highlighting the significance not only of textual translation but of translation as the act of situating a text within a new set of literary and cultural parameters.

Boccaccio’s own self-construction in the Decameron is complicated, drawing not only on traditions of medieval authorship but also on the structural possibilities of the framing narrative he creates. Boccaccio’s prologue to the Decameron mirrors in many ways the structure of the Aristotelian prologue described by Alistair Minnis in Medieval Theory of Authorship (1988: 5 and chs 3 and 4). The preface, the introduction to the Fourth Day, in which Boccaccio purportedly defends himself against detractors, and the “Conclusione dell’Autore” ending the work clearly participate in the tradition Minnis outlines, presenting the reasons for writing, the form of the work, its intended purposes, and the subject matter. Boccaccio’s discussion of himself can even be seen as conforming to Dante’s statement that writing about oneself is only permissible for two reasons: in order to defend oneself against slander or infamy, or when doing so may help someone else (Convivio I.2).

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2 On the historical and implied author, see Bal (1985).
3 Boccaccio’s use of this type of prologue in a more traditional way is seen in his Trattatello in Laude di Dante, a discussion of Dante’s life and works that serves as the prologue to two manuscripts of Dante’s poetry copied by Boccaccio (Toledano 104.6 and Vatican Chigiano L.V.176; Boccaccio 1974).
Boccaccio’s paratexts begin to break from tradition in their relationship to the text. The structure that defines that relationship calls into question the explicitly presented role of the author. Here we must examine what Boccaccio is doing rather than what he claims to be doing, an exercise suggested by Teodolinda Barolini regarding Dante. In order to understand what Boccaccio is doing with the idea of the author, it is necessary to consider not only what he says about authorship, but how he says it, and what he actually does as an author.

The structure of the text, groups of ten stories recounted over ten days by the ten members of the brigata, allows for additional prologues to individual stories, but these are presented not in Boccaccio’s voice but in those of the fictional narrators. From the first story of the collection, we see that the goals of the different narrative levels in the Decameron can be contradictory. The first tale uses the events surrounding the death and perverse canonization of an unrepentant sinner to show, as the character-narrator Panfilo says, how great is the “benignità di Dio […] verso noi” (I.1.90). The contrast between this vision of the tale and Boccaccio’s statement in the preface that the tales will show “quello che sia da fuggire e che sia similmente da seguitare” (Proemio ¶14) begins to suggest that our author is not entirely reliable. This type of structural disjunction, present for many of the more licentious or anticlerical tales, protects the author from criticism. It also, however, calls into question the interpretations and comments presented by the brigata, as well as the interpretations of Boccaccio himself, whose role outside the world of the brigata mirrors the activities of the characters.

The structure contributes further to this feeling of literary insecurity by placing the “paratexts” in ambiguous positions, as Potter has observed (1982: 121; 135). The announcement that the “Decima Giornata” has ended comes not immediately after the return of the

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4 Barolini observes that in analyzing the relationship between the poet and his rewriting of Ulysses, critics tend towards “a reading that confuses what the poet says he is doing with what he has actually done” (Barolini 1992: 53), drawing a line between the text’s content and the act of creating it. There is an immense amount of scholarship on Dante’s authorial presence in his texts. See Ascoli (2008) for an extensive bibliography.
brigata to Florence, but after the “Conclusione dell’Autore”, suggesting that the “Conclusione” itself forms part of the tenth day and thus of the fiction of the text (Potter 1982: 135). A glance back at the “Proemio” confirms that this positioning is not an anomaly: the “Proemio” itself follows the announcement “Comincia il libro chiamato Decameron” (Potter 1982: 121), a positioning that might have been overlooked had we not, perhaps belatedly, begun to suspect the paratext of being, rather, text. A glance at the surviving autograph manuscript of the Decameron, Berlin Staatsbibliothek Hamilton 90, shows that these structural cues are not merely the product of chance or of the organizational efforts of later editors. Francesca Malagnini’s work on the rubricated capitals in the manuscript focuses on the use that these are put to in delineating between what she terms the “mondo commentato” and the “mondo narrato” (2003), but her observations confirm that the preface should be considered the beginning of the work itself, and that the “Conclusione” should not be seen as departing from the world of the tenth day.

Michelangelo Picone has suggested we can divide the Decameron into two authorial spaces: one for the implied author who speaks directly to his public and one for the narrator who speaks of the brigata from outside the brigata’s fictional world (2003: 300). The mixing of narratological terminology here creates problems, since the author Picone describes as “implied” is not a figure parallel to the narrator. Rather, let us think of the structural complexity solely in terms of narrator: the “Proemio”, part of the “Introduzione”, the introduction to the fourth day, and the “Conclusione dell’Autore” come to form their own narrative in which the figure of Boccaccio is in fact a narrator of his own writerly world. These sections form a narrative about storytelling, framing and informing the other narrative levels. This redefinition is also a logical outcome of Potter’s distinction between five different textual worlds in the Decameron; Boccaccio is the narrator of what Potter describes as the “tale told by Boccaccio about the Decameron” (1982: 121), but more importantly here, is also a character in that tale. The figure emerging from the

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5 I also have doubts about Picone’s use of “implied”, as the figure he describes is presented explicitly.
explicit description of the author’s activity is the author playing himself within a frame narrative presented as a first-person text. The author, Boccaccio, is suddenly a character in a fictionalized frame surrounding the fictional frame about the *brigata*. The security that Minnis describes medieval commentators relying on regarding the identity and motivations of the author has evaporated into fiction. We are left with the gap between fiction and reality occurring not between the text and the author, on whom we depend for guidance, but between the author and ourselves. The structural innovation of Boccaccio is this shift in authorial allegiance.

Boccaccio’s self-construction thus relies on the framing structure to complicate the role of the author. The tales are essentially placed in a double frame; they are most immediately presented by the fictional narrators of the *brigata*, but from a wider perspective, also by the fictionalized Boccaccio who is constructed using the tropes of earlier medieval traditions of prologues. The combination of these earlier traditions with the framing structure produces a new figure: a fictional author who is neither the subject of the main fiction, as Dante is in the *Divina Commedia*, nor merely the implied author, since he is explicitly described. Boccaccio’s wider framing fiction is a representation of the author within literary culture, looking both out toward the audience and inward toward the text. And it is this technique, although not this precise figure, that can be traced through to Wynkyn de Worde’s editions of William Walter’s English translations.

The history of Boccaccio in English is a long one.⁶ Although the *Decameron* as a whole was not translated into English until 1620, translations of individual tales circulated both in manuscript and print before that date. Some translators, such as Geoffrey Chaucer, whose Clerk’s Tale in the *Canterbury Tales* is a reworking of the last tale of the *Decameron*, may be unaware of the authorship of the original.⁷ Several later sixteenth-century printed translations of indi-

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⁶ See Wright (1957) and Armstrong (2007a, 2007b, and 2010) for discussions of this history. I focus here on the history of translations into English; the *Decameron* was also available in French to many English readers (Armstrong 2007a: 43).

⁷ Chaucer’s Clerk says his tale is taken from Petrarch (Clerk’s Prologue ll. 26-35).
Individual stories omit Boccaccio’s name as well as any reference to an Italian source (Boccaccio: 1562, 1591, 1597); others mention Italian as the source language but still omit Boccaccio (Boccaccio: [1565], 1569).\textsuperscript{8} William Painter’s 1566 *Palace of Pleasure* includes translations of ten stories from the *Decameron*, with attribution, and the *Second Tome of the Palace of Pleasure* (Painter 1567) has five tales from Boccaccio, although only one carries an attribution. Armstrong (2010) notes that translations of other Italian works by Boccaccio begin to appear in the second half of the sixteenth century. Boccaccio was known in English much earlier than the publication of these texts, however, as the author of Latin texts, most notably *De casibus virorum illustrium*, a compendium of stories in Latin detailing the lives of famous men, which was translated by John Lydgate in the 1430s as the *Fall of Princes*, first printed in 1494 by Richard Pynson. In addition to Lydgate’s work, two translations of *De Mulieribus Claris* also predate the translations of Boccaccio’s Italian works (Armstrong 2010).\textsuperscript{9}

The two translations by William Walter ([c. 1525], 1532) thus represent the early stages of the transmission of Boccaccio’s vernacular works to England, but they do not enter a literary culture in which Boccaccio was unknown. In both translations the tales are presented without any indication of their original authorship or even their original language; indeed, they are both described as “translated out of laten into englysshe” (1532: A\textsuperscript{r}R). Furthermore, as translations of single tales from the *Decameron*, they also omit the fictional framing of Boccaccio’s work. And yet, even though the narrative frame is missing, these works present a structure that is strangely similar to Boccaccio’s embedding techniques. Boccaccio himself is gone, as is the *brigata*, but there is no lack of authorial, narrating, and interpreting figures in this presentation of the tale. Substituting for the storytelling, narrative, and readerly worlds of

\textsuperscript{8} See Wright (1957) and Reiss (1974) for arguments that Chaucer was not familiar with the *Decameron*; Howard (1987) and Koff and Schildgen (2000) for the opposite view. Chaucer, like Walter, explicitly recognizes a Latin text as his source.

\textsuperscript{9} It is perhaps worth noting that the latter two translations are both attributed to the same translator by *STC*.

\textsuperscript{9} These translations do mention Boccaccio as the source.
Boccaccio’s structure we find instead a new system of interpretation based on a major technological advance that intervenes between Boccaccio’s writing and these translations: the printing press. Authorship in the world of print depends not only on the writer and the reader but also on a new series of figures that, like Boccaccio’s fictionalized author, find representation within text.\(^\text{10}\)

The worlds of these figures, like Boccaccio’s, can be arranged concentrically, but unlike the *Decameron*, the first world that the reader encounters, even if not immediately recognized as such, is the innermost. Each text begins with a title page including a woodcut and an incipit. In *Tytus*, the incipit functions as the title; *Guystarde* also includes a title above the incipit in larger type. Both incipits contain roughly the same information, though: the title of the story and the fact that it was translated from Latin by William Walter, “somtyme seruaunte” ([c. 1525]: A\(_1^R\)) or “seruaunte” (1532: A\(_1^R\)) of Sir Henry Marney (1457-1523), “knyght chaunceler of the duchy of Lancastre”.\(^\text{11}\)

Two worlds are established by each of these incipits. The first, introduced by the naming of the characters, is the innermost: the world of the story, corresponding to the world of the tale in the *Decameron*, and further represented on each title page by the woodcut depicting, in the case of *Tytus*, the three main characters, and in the case of *Guystarde*, the moment before Sygysmonde drinks the poison she has poured over her dead lover’s heart. The second world is established by the naming of Walter as the translator and the statement of his efforts and his affiliation. Walter is the first reader we encounter; it is his ability to interpret and retell the story that makes possible the text in our hands. For the educated reader, there

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\(^{10}\) In what follows, I am not suggesting that the paratexts or framing are in themselves novel, as work on early English printing in general and on de Worde and Copland in particular have shown that these types of texts are indeed quite common – see for example Coldiron (2009), Erler’s commentary in Copland (1993), and Hellinga (2010). Rather, I want to show how in this case the presentational strategy mirrors some of the functions of the authorial framing of Boccaccio’s text.

\(^{11}\) Wright (1937: lxxvii) points out that the “somtyme” could suggest that *Tytus* was published after *Guystarde*, but also notes that since Marney was already dead when Walter referred to himself as his servant in *Guystarde*, this method of dating is unreliable. The *STC* gives [c. 1525] as a publication date.
may even be a third, implied world between these two; anyone already familiar with the Latin versions of the stories knows that they are already translations.

The text of Guystarde includes another level between these worlds and the outermost: the editorial interventions of Robert Copland. These texts begin with “R. Coplande to the translatoour” (1532: A$_2^R$) and continue with four more comments on various aspects of the story before “lenuoy of R. Coplande” (1532: D$_2^R$), presenting another mediating reader within the larger text. That this mediation is not included in Boccaccio’s Italian nor in the Latin source makes it no less a part of the new text; that it follows the same metrical form as the narrative and is printed in the same type encourages the reader to view it as integral. Five out of Copland’s six interventions begin with decorated woodcut capitals, while of the lines following the rubrics marking different parts of the story, none has anything more than a simple large capital. Copland’s world necessarily contains the world of the translator whom he addresses in the introduction and the envoy, as well as the story itself, already contained by the translator’s world. His importance to the text is highlighted by the printing choices and by his being given the first and almost the last word.

By inserting himself in this way, Copland takes a certain responsibility for the text, just as the translator takes responsibility for the translation. Foucault (1979) suggests that authorship is partly a product of a culture of literary responsibility; Copland’s role is therefore doubly authorial, as both the author of his own commentaries and the authority that guarantees the authorial labours of subordinate authors and translators. In his reactions and comments on the events of the story we have our first glimpse of the reader in action, just as we see the brigata of the Decameron reacting to the tales. And just as Boccaccio attempts in his paratexts to abdicate this particular responsibility referring both to the “reality” of the storytelling and the authority of earlier sources, Copland tries to distance himself from potential criticism, asking of the book that

what euer that they say
Of loue/foly/fortune/hastynesse/and shame
The Auctour, the Translatoure, and the Impressoure

Unto thyne auctour/and not to me the blame

(1532: D₂V)

Even as he positions himself as a textual authority, Copland, like Boccaccio, takes advantage of the multiple authorial structures of the text to protect himself from critics. The conventionality of the disclaimer does not detract from its role in constructing Copland’s literary personality; indeed, it rather reinforces the sense that it is a projection of wider cultural ideas of authorial or editorial responsibility.¹²

And yet, Copland’s authority is not the final level in Guystarde. Copland’s envoy looks both inward and outward; he directs the book both back to its “translatoure” and forward to its “impressoure” for correction of any “fautes” (1532: D₂R). Copland is the last to address the translator, but he is not, in fact, given the last word, reserved for the master printer: Wynkyn de Worde. Both Tytus and Guystarde bear typical colophons, but considered as elements of a constructed framing narrative that describes the world of the print shop, these texts take on new meanings. In the case of Guystarde the position of the colophon on the recto of the page following the final verso of Copland’s envoy connects it strongly to the story. Although we read “FINIS” at the bottom of the last page of the narrative (1532: D₂V), the colophon, marked off by the same paragraph mark that leads each stanza,¹³ still precedes the reprint of the woodcut that appears on the title page (1532: D₃R). Furthermore, the colophon does not limit itself to a statement about the printing, although this is also present. Rather, it closes the story at the same time as it acknowledges the presence of the printer as the outermost framing character: “Thus endeth the amorous hystory of Guystarde and Sygysmonde. Impynted at London in Fletestrete at the sygne of the Sonne by Wynkyn de Worde. In the yere of our lorde.M.CCCCC.XXXij” (1532: D₃R). On the following two pages

¹² On editorial responsibility in the printing house, see Hellinga (1999: 88-9). For more on Copland, including an annotated text of his interventions in Guystarde, see Erler’s edition of Copland’s poetry (Copland 1993).

¹³ The two exceptions, stanzas 211 (B₂R) and 568 (D₁V), are easily explained as printer’s errors.
(1532: D₃ optarg-D₄ optarg), possibly printed simply to fill up the gathering, we find reprints of all four woodcuts used in the text, followed by the woodcut device of Wynkyn de Worde on the final verso (1532: D₄ optarg). Thus, even graphically Wynkyn de Worde encloses the story, having both the last image and the last word.

The colophon of Tytus does not face any page of text, but provides closure for the tale, this time described as “frendly” rather than “amorous”, as well as adding that the printing was done “by me Wynkyn de Worde” (my italics, [c. 1525]: C₆ optarg). Although this “by me” is as conventional as the colophon, it adds a sense of personal responsibility. Whether or not de Worde was actually setting this type, the illusion, or perhaps the fiction of the printer remains: here is the printer himself, setting his own seal of approval upon the text and validating it, just as the colophon of Guystarde validates both the translation and Copland’s commentaries. Our framed experience as readers is complete; we have a vision of all of the worlds that contributed to this text, from the seemingly original Latin to the printed text in our hands.

The intervention of the Latin translations by Filippo Beroaldo and Leonardo Bruni introduces an extra element to the translational relationship between the Walter texts and Boccaccio’s tales. The STC gives Leonardo Bruni’s Latin translation as Walter’s source for Guystarde; Wright (1937) identifies a particular edition of Bruni’s translation as the most likely candidate (1499/1500, GW 5639). The two possibilities that Wright identifies as sources for Tytus are editions of a translation by Filippo Beroaldo (1491, GW 4144 and 1498, GW 4501). These Latin versions are already excerpted from the Decameron’s framing narratives and placed within frameworks of Latin paratext that contain several pieces of information. Beroaldo’s translations mention Boccaccio as the source of the story in the introduction (1491: f₂ optarg) and on the title page of the later edition of the story (1498: a₁ optarg). The former also mentions that the source text was “in lingua vernacula” and includes a brief discussion of translation strategies (1491: f₂ optarg); while the latter is described on the title page as “ex italico in latinum transuersa” (1498: a₁ optarg). Bruni’s translation does not mention Boccaccio, and describes the text as being
translated from Greek (1499/1500: a₁V). Both the Beroaldo editions and the Bruni translation include the name of the translator in their paratexts (1491: f²R; 1498: a₁R; 1499/1500: a₁V and a₅R).

Translating the Italian texts into Latin represents a movement up the ladder of literary prestige, a bid for a wider audience, and an attempt to contribute worthy pieces to a common cultural heritage.¹⁴ Translating these Latin texts back into a vernacular, in this case English, thus represents a borrowing from a prestige culture. This borrowing can contribute partly to the strengthening of the English literary system through the importation of new, invigorating models and texts.¹⁵ The statement that Bruni’s translation was from Greek lends even more weight to the potential cultural value of the text, but even the gesture towards Italy made by the two Beroaldo editions brings with it the cultural power of early modern Italian literature.

However, using the Latin intermediaries as the source texts for translation also meant that the texts had already been removed from some of the more distinguishing and culturally-specific aspects of their frames. The elements of the brigata’s tale that were specific to the growing mercantile culture of the early Italian Renaissance or to the recent outbreak of plague (1348) when Boccaccio was writing were not present in the Latin texts, and thus the stories, while certainly not void of cultural connotations, existed in a more universally European and less specific chronological frame. The Latin presentations of the texts from which Walter translated carry much more limited framing paratexts, and the longer commentary on the first edition of the Beroaldo translation focuses not on the story’s interpretation but on the translator’s activity. The versions of these tales printed by Wynkyn de Worde then, particularly the printing of Guystarde, are not transmuting the Italian frames into new English ones, but rather reframing a text that had already been removed from its culturally specific frame. The Latin intermediary presents

¹⁴ See for example Petrarch’s comments on his reasons for translating the Griselda story (Decameron X.10) into Latin (Rerum senilium XVII, 3; 1992: 655-656).
¹⁵ On the use of translation to strengthen or change literary cultures, see Even-Zohar (1978).
the opportunity to translate the text in a more physical sense of the word – to carry it over not only into a new language, but into a new frame and narrative of literary production.

Both Boccaccio’s Italian Decameron and these two English printed translations have constructed literary frameworks permitting narrative commentary and an outline of the literary culture surrounding the production of text. In Boccaccio’s text, the framing serves to destabilize medieval concepts of authorship and call into question the possibility of “correct” interpretation by constructing conflicting levels of narrative and audience response. Almost two hundred years later, de Worde’s printings of Walter’s texts highlight instead the need to restructure authorial and literary responsibility in the second generation of printing in England. The framing that in Boccaccio’s hands recreated a world of personal literary interaction through storytelling and personal relationships between the author and the reader, albeit a fictionalized author, is recreated on the other side of mediating Latin translations to satisfy the cultural and literary needs of the early English Renaissance. Boccaccio has disappeared, and in his place rises the printing house.

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