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### Compte rendu

H. G. Wright, *The First English Translation of the Decameron* (1620). Upsala, 1953. In-8°, 279 p. + 4 plates. – *Boccaccio in England from Chaucer to Tennyson*. London (University of London), The Athlone Press, 1957. In-8°, XXI-495 p.

THE TWO VOLUMES HERE PRESENTED to the world of English scholars have something in common in so far as they are engaged in a comparative study of English literature, with the secondary result of furnishing information about the early literary communications between England and Italy, in fact, to a great extent the period of the English drama from the end of Elizabeth's reign to the closing down of the theatres under the Puritans, in 1642. Because the two volumes actually have much to tell us as to how Italian material found its way into English literature in the period indicated, both being the work of admirable learning and intellectual penetration. They both represent the mature activity of a life devoted to a comparative study of English literature. Otherwise, we shall find plenty of differences in scope, handling of the material and structure.

The book on the translation of the *Decameron* proposes to find out who was the translator. We have no certain facts to go upon, and so the only way was to try to ascertain the personality of the anonymous translator from his work : his interests, outlook and other characteristics, as evidenced in the wording of his translation, and then in style and technique. This part of the investigation occupies the first half of the book to which are added four chapters on the texts of *Salviati* and *le Maçon*, advocated as used by the translator in the opinion of Koepel (*Salviati*) and Hutton (*le Maçon*). Consequently, these four chapters are due to the author's preoccupation with the problem of what text was actually before the translator.

The second half attacks the question whether that indefatigable interpreter of Italy to the English public, John Florio, may hide behind the anonymous translator, and so we get two extensive chapters on Florio's personality and style in his known works and in the facts of his life. The structure of the two parts of the volume in this way is exactly parallel, and every particular in the first part has its counterpart in the second part. The result is a very careful and strictly logical investigation where nothing is left to chance or oversight. It would be difficult to discover a single point where the reader could say : This or that consideration is neglected or insufficiently taken into account! It is rare to get such a treatise into your hands nowadays, when even scholarship is liable to hurried work, and where the uncalled-for objection sometimes is heard that too much time has been spent on questions to little or no purpose.

The problems here discussed are intricate, but the author has given as probable an answer as could be arrived at under the circumstances. In favour of his theory that Florio was the translator, he has collected some facts in addition to the careful analysis provided in the second part of the book. Why Florio should hide as a translator of exactly the *Decameron*, is not difficult to see. The moral atmosphere of England had prevented a translation from appearing there longer than in other countries at the time. There was also something in the life of Florio's father which contributed to the advisability for the trans-

lator to remain anonymous. We know from his activity as a lexicographer that Florio had a good knowledge of Boccaccio, and we even find something of the lexicographer's mentality in the translation. Dr. Wright has also considered the dedication and noted some curious facts in that connection which may point to Florio. The latter's references to, and quotations from the *Decameron* are also stressed in support of the thesis. As far as this careful examination and weighing of existing evidence goes, the author has undoubtedly succeeded in making out a strong case to prove that Florio was the anonymous translator. And he is right when he adds that this fact increases the importance of Florio in English letters. The English version of the *Decameron* had a long and lasting influence on English literature down to recent times. The author thinks it as important as Florio's rendering of Montaigne, and he refers to English Romanticism as indebted to the tradition at the head of which this translation of the *Decameron* stands.

The book on *Boccaccio in England* is more ambitious in scope but less exacting as to intellectual penetration. The problem involved in the translation was a very intricate one and its solution afforded a model sample of scholarly analysis. The new work asks for extensive readings and excellent sleuth work, its outlook is also wider. The author wants not only to spot the references to, and quotations from Boccaccio, as well as the poetical inspiration which Boccaccio signified to English literature, but also to show the reaction of the individual writers to the Italian poet and the change of taste which is evident in the course of time in the literature deriving more or less from Boccaccio. That the work before us has taken more than 25 years in maturing, is no wonder, though the author assigned only two to it when he began.

Two chapters are devoted to the Latin works and to the minor Italian works of Boccaccio, the remaining four to the fate of the *Decameron* beginning with Chaucer and ending with Tennyson towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The author is fully aware of the work done in his fields by previous research and he pays tribute to his predecessors but does not stop at their evaluation. In particular, we notice that he has gone over the whole area which Chaucer research has covered for a long time. We are confronted with new ideas and theories exactly here where we usually consider matters to be settled. But then, Shakespeare seems to have attracted the author much less, and we look in vain for his explicit opinion on that intricate question how we are to regard the idea behind *Troilus and Cressida* as well as the character of Cressida and several other persons in that play. There is a very short passage, p. 100 f., stating that the author – after 40 p. of detailed and clever analysis of Chaucer's version of Boccaccio's *Troilus* – thinks the further history of that subject in English literature unnecessary in his book. A certain consolation for this omission is the fact that we get some very satisfactory accounts of the interest taken in Boccaccio by Byron's two friends Hobhouse and Moore, p. 366-91, where Byron only is switched in occasionally. On the whole, there is a wealth of information valuable for the history of English literature in this volume.

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Reference: *Revue de littérature comparée*, vol. 32, n° 4, 1958, p. 589-591.