

Biggs, Frederick M. *Chaucer's Decameron and the Origin of the Canterbury Tales*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2017. Pp. 275.

Did Chaucer read the *Decameron*? The question fascinates because it seems insoluble. We know that Chaucer made extensive use of other Boccaccian works like the *Teseida* (in the *Knight's Tale*) and the *Filostrato* (in *Troilus and Criseyde*). Yet for every story in the *Canterbury Tales* that finds an analogue in the *Decameron*, such as the *Clerk's Tale* (*Decameron* 10.10) or the *Merchant's Tale* (*Decameron* 7.9), there exists also a plausible alternative origin that bypasses the *Decameron*. Despite the marked thematic and structural similarities between the *Decameron* and the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer never references the *Decameron* explicitly in any of his works. No one has found a manuscript of the *Decameron* annotated in Chaucer's hand, no scholar has yet uncovered an intertextual reference in Chaucer whose only conceivable source is the *Decameron*, and there exists no documentary evidence of a hypothesized meeting between Chaucer and Boccaccio. In the face of a question that seems impossible to answer, Frederick Biggs takes a definite stance in support of Chaucer's knowledge of the *Decameron*.

The methodology of *Chaucer's Decameron and the Origin of the Canterbury Tales* is best characterized as hermeneutic and narratological, rather than intertextual or documentary. Biggs argues that Chaucer “found in Boccaccio's work two new ways to write” (1). Two techniques offer his principal evidence that Chaucer read the *Decameron*: first, the *ars combinatoria*, the author's art of combining disparate sources into a cohesive and original tale; second, the technique of using frame interruption to drive debates about class and gender. Biggs acknowledges at the outset that “there is much speculation in the pages that follow” (6), yet by the end of the book he states with certainty that “Chaucer read the *Decameron*” (229).

Chapter 1, “Boccaccio as the Source for Chaucer's Use of Sources,” explores Boccaccio's practice of combining his narrative sources (stories that are often much less complex than their counterparts in the *Decameron*) with his own thematic concerns: sexuality, economics, religion, human foibles. Biggs takes Boccaccio seriously as a philosophical thinker, noting that the stories in the *Decameron* are not merely entertaining, but also focus on profound themes that go beyond the necessities of plot. Moving to Chaucer, Biggs writes that “Boccaccio did indeed teach Chaucer to be original — to look for ideas that could become tales not primarily in other narratives but rather in the ideas that concerned him” (12). The concept of copying ideas and practices — rather than characters, plots, or phrasing — is key to the argument that Chaucer's use of the *Decameron* is evident in broad narrative

*techniques* rather than intertextual details. The very essence of this argument, however, also makes it more difficult to prove than an intertextual reference. After all, why might Chaucer not have developed his own thematic concerns independently? And are Boccaccio's themes in the *Decameron* specific enough — and repeated closely enough in Chaucer — to prove that Chaucer could not have gotten them from another source?

The absence of a refutational section, which might have addressed reasonable objections and counterarguments, weakens the book's intertextual analyses. For instance, Biggs contends that "Chaucer both used and modified a clause from 8.10 about the necessity of money for merchants" (17). In *Decameron* 8.10, the courtesan Iancofiore makes a commentary about the nature of merchants' business: "e i mercatanti fanno co' denari tutti i fatti loro [and merchants do all their business with money]" (8.10.36, cited from Biggs, 17). Biggs argues that this remark is the source for the idea and syntax of a comment made by a merchant in the *Shipman's Tale*: "But o thyng is, ye knowe it wel ynough / Of chapmen, that hir moneie is hir plough [But one thing about merchants is, you know it well enough, that their money is their plow]" (7.287–88, cited from Biggs, 17; my translation). Biggs writes that Chaucer must have found this idea in Boccaccio because "[t]he merchant's speech, as much else in the *Shipman's Tale*, reflects more deeply on economic matters than is required by the narrative" (18). Yet the idea of merchants doing business with money does not seem sufficiently distinct that Chaucer could *only* have taken it from *Decameron* 8.10. The wording of the two citations is not an identical repetition; Chaucer's metaphor of the plow does not even appear in the Boccaccian analogue. Biggs certainly identifies shared themes across these stories, adding to an existing body of scholarly work on these tales, but he overstates the likelihood of a direct connection. The chapter concludes with a suggestion that Chaucerian tales for which no direct source has been yet discovered (e.g. the *Squire's Tale* and *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*) may have been thematically inspired by the "Licisca technique" of interweaving discussions of social issues between frame and story (41). Along similar lines, *Decameron* 10.3 is hypothesized as a source for the *Pardoner's Tale* (52).

In Chapter 2, "The Shipman's Trade in Three *Novelle* from the *Decameron*," Biggs elaborates on the *Shipman's Tale* and its possible origins in *Decameron* 8.1, 8.2, and 8.10. The shared kernel of these plots is the topos of "the lover's gift regained," which Biggs locates in a simplified form in the "Versus de mola piperis." In this brief Latin poem, a pepper mill is traded around between wife, lover, and husband in much the same way as Belcolore's mortar and pestle in *Decameron* 8.2 or Ambruogia's monetary loan in *Decameron* 8.1. While the section on the *versus* as a Boccaccian

source is compelling, building on earlier work (Nicholson, “The Medieval Tale of the Lover’s Gift Regained” [1980]; Spargo, *Chaucer’s Shipman’s Tale: The Lover’s Gift Regained* [1930]), the argument for Boccaccio as a Chaucerian source is somewhat less so. Biggs argues that “[f]rom Boccaccio’s retelling of the Lover’s Gift Regained in three distinct economic settings, Chaucer created a single tale, one indeed that allowed him to investigate unexpected continuities, the most important of which is the similarity between sexual and business deals” (96–97). However, these are far from the only medieval texts to deal with the intersection of sex and business, or indeed with the plot of the lover’s gift regained. Biggs asserts that the similarities prove Chaucer’s knowledge of the *Decameron*, rather than Chaucer’s own original brilliance or knowledge of an older common source.

In Chapter 3, ambitiously titled “Licisca’s Outburst: The Origin of the *Canterbury Tales*”, Biggs moves to the second narrative technique he believes Chaucer learned from Boccaccio: how to leverage interruptions in the frame structure to generate discussions of gender and class. Biggs links the *Tale of Melibee* and the *Shipman’s Tale* as a pair that deals with gender, and the *Knight’s Tale* and the *Miller’s Tale* as a pair that deals with class. Biggs acknowledges that “a conventional argument about a source relationship is not possible here” but “a pattern emerges that is complex enough to point to Licisca’s outburst as the main source for Chaucer’s thinking” (115). To sustain this argument, he proposes that Chaucer once intended to begin the *Canterbury Tales* with the Man of Law and the Wife of Bath, rather than the Knight and Miller. In this earlier (hypothetical) ordering, according to Biggs, the Man of Law would narrate the *Tale of Melibee* and the Wife of Bath would narrate what we now know as the *Shipman’s Tale* (116). Biggs argues that “the choice of *Melibee* for the Man of Law also shows Licisca’s influence since the story concerns a strong, female character, Prudence, yet one who remains completely subservient to her husband and so invites a response from a female teller” (119). It is mentioned only in a footnote (119n28) that the assignment of *Melibee* to the Man of Law is a hypothesis on the basis of the Man of Law’s comment that he will speak in prose; what we know as the *Man of Law’s Tale* is, of course, the story of Custance, told in verse. When Biggs discusses the tales of the “Man of Law” and the “Wife of Bath” in this chapter, he is in fact discussing *Melibee* and the *Shipman’s Tale*, and speculating — not without cause, but speculating nonetheless — that Chaucer had once envisioned different tellers for these stories. The argument here depends on the interplay between tale and teller. If the *Shipman’s Tale* were told by the Wife of Bath, then that story, for Biggs, “extends Licisca’s challenge to male authority by using a woman in control of her own sexuality to point to the economic basis of marriage” (121).

In Chapter 4, “Friar Puccio’s Penance: Upending the Knight’s Order”, Biggs focuses on the *Miller’s Tale* and its possible sources or intertexts in *Decameron* 3.4, *Decameron* 7.2, and the Middle Dutch tale *Heile van Beersele*. This last tale’s plot aligns with the *Miller’s Tale* (also featuring a flood, a misdirected kiss, and a retributory branding), and the tale is potentially old enough for Chaucer to have known it. In *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, it is identified as a likely source or “hard analogue” for the *Miller’s Tale*, as Biggs himself admits (127). Biggs proposes instead that the arrow of influence points the other way, from Chaucer to the anonymous Dutch tale: *Heile van Beersele* is likelier to be inspired by the *Miller’s Tale* than the other way around, because it is a clumsier narrative than Chaucer’s. Focusing on the introduction of tubs as plot devices in the respective stories, Biggs contrasts the abrupt and awkward physical economy of *Heile van Beersele* with the way that “Chaucer’s narrative moves these objects with apparent ease” (133). Biggs’ analysis of the movement of objects through domestic spaces in *Heile van Beersele* and the *Miller’s Tale* offers an intriguing perspective on the role of material space in textual description (136–46). Yet it is not convincingly established as a hermeneutic principle that the finer, more fluidly plotted story is likely to be the *origin* of the rougher, less well-planned tale. In fact, the opposite seems equally if not more probable. Turning to the tale’s reception history, Biggs proposes that Masuccio Salernitano’s tale of Viola and her lovers (*Novellino* 29) may indicate a previously unsuspected knowledge of Chaucer on Masuccio’s part. The final pages of the chapter propose the tale of Friar Puccio, *Decameron* 3.4, as an intertext for the *Miller’s Tale* because “both introduce schemes that control the action through long speeches in which the lovers, Dom Felice and Nicholas, hoodwink the husbands, Puccio di Rinieri [...] and John, by seeming to take them into their confidence, pretending to reveal secrets to them, and swearing them to secrecy” (161).

Chapter 5, “The *Wife of Bath’s Tale* and the *Tale of Florent*,” turns to Chaucer and Gower. Here Biggs proposes another rearrangement of conventionally accepted source relationships, contending that the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* inspired Gower’s *Tale of Florent*. Continuing the argument developed in Chapter 3, that “Licisca’s outburst inspired much of [Chaucer’s] early work on the collection” (180), Biggs analyzes the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* as a treatment of gender and agency made possible by Chaucer’s reading of the *Decameron*. Basing his claims on a textual analysis of female speech as a way to claim agency (182–85), Biggs suggests that the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* is Chaucer’s direct response to Licisca, that Gower’s *Tale of Florent* was directly inspired by the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, that *The Tale of Florent* is a “re-

writing” which de-emphasizes female agency, and that Gower’s rewriting caused the notorious falling-out between Chaucer and Gower.

The central claim of *Chaucer’s Decameron and the Origin of the Canterbury Tales* — that Chaucer knew not just Boccaccio’s works and concerns generally, but the *Decameron* specifically — is frequently repeated. To give just a few examples: “Chaucer relied heavily on three *novelle* from the Eighth Day of the *Decameron* in writing the *Shipman’s Tale*” (106); “Licisca showed Chaucer how to write” (107); “Licisca’s outburst inspired much of [Chaucer’s] early work on the collection” (180); “Because *Decameron* 8.1, 8.2, and 8.10 all contributed to the *Shipman’s Tale*, there can be no doubt that he [Chaucer] had read Boccaccio’s work attentively” (228). In large part due to the generalized nature of Biggs’ argument — that Chaucer adapted ideas and narrative techniques, rather than intertextual elements — readers will likely be left with reasonable doubts. Is it not possible that Chaucer in the *Canterbury Tales* and Boccaccio in the *Decameron* each chose to address pressing concerns in their respective societies — the place of women, the flourishing of trade, the corruption of the Church — without one necessarily having read the other? If it was necessary for Chaucer to read the *Decameron* to arrive at these themes, then whence did Boccaccio derive his material? If Boccaccio did not need prior inspiration to write about class and gender, while Chaucer did, does that imply Boccaccio is a superior author? These questions are left un-posed and un-answered, and Biggs’ argument would have been strengthened by some pages devoted to addressing them. The book’s primary merits are in gathering together constellations of linked tales; among the material dedicated to the *Decameron*, the clustering of 8.1, 8.2, and 8.10 stands out as an especially rich reading. Biggs’ volume offers evocative interpretations of individual stories and provocative trajectories for future scholarship, which may one day decide the question of “Chaucer’s *Decameron*” once and for all.

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