PRINT, PARATEXT, AND A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY SAMMELBAND: BOCCACCIO’S NINFALE FIESOLANO IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Guyda Armstrong

Amongst Italian authors, Giovanni Boccaccio had by far the greatest presence in English translation during the period covered by this volume. Those works of his which were translated included both Latin reference works (such as his De casibus virorum illustrium and De mulieribus claris, both rendered in English verse in the first half of the fifteenth century), and his vernacular fictions, and culminated in the translation of the entire Decameron, printed in 1620. However, the greatest concentration of this dedicated activity occurred in the later part of the sixteenth century. In the thirty years between 1567 and 1597, in particular, three of his Italian vernacular works on erotic themes were translated into English and printed in London: the 1567 Pleasaunt disport of diuers noble personages translated by H. G[ranthan], printed by H. Bynneman and followed by three re-editions in 1571, 1575 and 1587 (STC 3180–3182); the 1587 Amorous Fiammetta translated by B. Young and printed by John Charlwood for T. Gubbin and T. Newman (STC 3179); and the 1597 Famous tragicall discourse of two louers, Affrican, and Mensola, translated by Jo. Goubourne [Golburne] and printed by James Roberts for W. Blackman (STC 3184.4).
These three works have several characteristics in common: all date from the first part of Boccaccio's literary career, and are thus thought to predate the Decameron (first composed c. 1351); all are examples of Boccaccio's literary experimentation in a variety of historical or imported romance genres (respectively, the 'Questions of Love' genre, derived from the French jeux partis, the Ovidian female-voiced lover's lament, and the verse pastoral romance); and all enjoyed notable popularity outside Italy in the early modern period, especially in France and Spain.

This essay will take as its subject the last of these translations to be made in the sixteenth century, the Famous tragical discourse of two lovers, Affrican and Mensola, translated by one 'Jo. Goubourne,' and published in London by 'Ia. Roberts' (customarily identified as James Roberts) for William Blackman (STC 3184.4). This little-known and little-studied translation owes its invisibility to the vagaries of the archive and the accidents of historical survival: only one copy of the translation is now extant, held in the library of Oxford University’s Worcester College. The absence of this work from any major research collection therefore constitutes an important factor in its relative obscurity: for example, the book is not currently included in the Early English Books Online in digitized form, and in fact only recently acquired its own Short-Title Catalogue number (as an extension to another text of Boccaccian derivation, A notable historye of Nastagio and Trauersari (STC 3184)). But rather than bewailing the book's absence from the best-known physical and digital repositories of early English printed material, we intend to take advantage of the one surviving copy, which offers us a unique way into early modern reading and collecting practices, and by extension, into a deeper understanding of Boccaccio's meaning and importance in the textual cultures of the time. Unusually (and uniquely, to my knowledge), the Boccaccio translation survives not as a single free-standing volume (like the other English printed translations of Boccaccio), but instead bound in a Sammelband with six other contemporary English popular romances. The Boccaccio translation is

---

4 I discuss the transmission history and features of the translation itself in more detail in Chapter 3 of my forthcoming monograph. On Roberts, see David Kathman, “James Roberts,” in the ODNB.

5 It has been edited in Two Tracts: Affrican and Mensola, an Elizabethan Prose Version (by Io Goubourne) of Il Ninfale fiesolano by Giovanni Boccaccio, and Newes and Strange Newes from St Christophers by John Taylor the Water Poet, ed. Cyril H. Wilkinson (Oxford: Roxburghe Club, 1946).

6 These are “Pheander, The Maiden Knight,” “Fragosa & his 3 Sons,” “Ornatus & Artesia”; “Titana & Theseus,” “Dorastus & Fawnia,” and “Cleocryton & Cloriana” (titles are taken from the handwritten table of contents, “Histories in this Collection” on the leaf following the last printed page of the volume).