

SOME SPECULATIONS ABOUT CHAUCER'S SPANISH LITERARY SOURCES

It is common knowledge that Geoffrey Chaucer was widely read and his writing is packed with examples of the influences of his reading. That is why a large amount of literary criticism on Chaucer has been occupied in analysing and discussing his sources, and his references to other writers. Most critics have shown the French and Italian influence on Chaucer's work, his debt to classical and patristic literature or his acquaintance with the Bible. Yet, it is not so common to read about the importance of a Spanish influence on Chaucer. In the last few years, however, several scholars have detected and explained the existence of Spanish literary references in his writings. In this regard, some distinguished names have been mentioned: Petrus Alphonsus, St. Isidore of Seville, Seneca, Lucan, Ramón Llull, Juan Ruiz, Fray Juan García de Castrojeriz, Don Juan Manuel; and various comments have been made about Chaucer's acquaintance with Spanish literature, as well as his direct access to its texts.

The discussion of literary influences and sources is always difficult because we tend to engage in speculative questioning which is seldom illustrated with reliable evidence. This is particularly obvious, as is well known, in Medieval Literature, where the word "source" is often a deceptive term - it should not be understood as a particular text which provides the inspiration for another work, since the medieval writer indiscriminately draws from a varied literary inheritance. Therefore, this paper simply aims to put forward some reasonable conjectures regarding the Spanish sources in Chaucer, that is to say, his possible familiarity with the above-mentioned authors from Spain, his hypothetical knowledge of the Spanish language and the role that Spanish literature, on the whole, played in his work.

The starting point of this discussion might be the trip to Spain that Chaucer is supposed to have made in 1366. Some biographers, historians and

literary critics claim that Chaucer might once have visited Spain when he was in his mid-twenties and they mention a safe conduct issued by King Charles II of Navarre to a "Geffroy de Chauserre" with three unnamed companions, allowing him to travel through the kingdom from February 22 until May 24. It has been suggested that the trip to Spain might have been some sort of diplomatic mission from the Black Prince's court in Aquitaine to that of Navarre or to the court of Pedro in Castile.¹ Unfortunately, we do not know for certain the purpose of his visit, or the duration of his stay, or whether he really went at all; consequently it is not easy to presume the mark that this journey left on him or how it might have affected his future literary career.

What is an unquestionable fact is that there are some scattered references to famous Spanish men of letters in Chaucer's collection of stories *The Canterbury Tales*. All the same, we can immediately tell that these allusions to Spanish medieval scholarship are not great in number nor distinguished for their importance in the general context of Chaucer's work. Moreover, the circumstances in which they appear show that Chaucer's real and direct knowledge of the Spaniards mentioned in his tales is doubtful, to say the least.

In the first place, the name of the Spanish-Arab Averroes is included in the *General Prologue* as part of a long list of medical authorities of all times that the Doctor of Physic is familiar with (429-434). We are not surprised to spot the name of this eminent scholar from Córdoba (1126-1198), then an important cultural and political centre of Muslim Spain,² in Chaucer's book, but it is interesting to see how this influential philosopher is named among the most famous physicians of antiquity, such as Hippocrates, traditionally regarded as the father of medicine; Galen, the founder of experimental physiology, or Rhazes, one of the most celebrated physicians in the Islamic world. It is of course true that Averroes learned medicine and was the personal physician of the caliph, but he is more widely known for his series of commentaries on

¹ For accounts and explanations of this possible trip see Martin M. Crow, 63-65; John Gardner, 152-153; Derek Brewer, 86-89; Joseph Strayer (ed.), 280; George Kane, 12; S. S. Hussey, 4; Suzanne Honoré-Duvergé; Thomas Jay Garbaty; Antonio León, 122; Fernando Galván, 107-111; Bernardo Santano, forthcoming.

² It must be recalled that Averroes wrote in Arabic and, therefore, he is often included, with other Spanish Muslim writers, in a special branch of Arabic literature, rather than in the Spanish literature whose texts are written in the vernacular.

Aristotle's works and on Plato's *Republic*, and as the philosopher who integrated Islamic traditions and Greek thought.¹

Then, in the *Tale of Melibee* Chaucer refers to the Spanish writer Petrus Alphonsus six times (1053, 1144, 1189, 1218, 1309, 1566). In this prose tale Chaucer tries to epitomize what the great moral, religious and philosophical treatises of all times have to say about the topic of revenge, quoting from a large selection of authorities such as St Paul, St Augustine, St Gregory, Seneca, Cicero, etc. Petrus Alphonsus is included as one of these authorities. He was a baptized Jew of Aragon, originally known as Moses Sefardi, who in the twelfth century wrote a collection of novellas entitled *Disciplina Clericalis*. This work was widely known and translated into different European languages in the late Middle Ages. Nevertheless, it is very likely that Chaucer did not know this popular Spanish writer firsthand, since, as is commonly agreed, his *Tale of Melibee* is a translation of the French *Livre de Melibée et de Dame Prudence*, generally attributed to Renaud de Louens, which is in turn an abridged translation of the thirteenth-century Albertano of Brescia's *Liber Consolationis et Consilii*. Besides, Chaucer's knowledge of Petrus Alphonsus's book was not very profound as is demonstrated by a quotation inserted in the *Tale of Melibee* which is misattributed to Pamphilus (1561), the hero of the twelfth-century Latin dramatic poem known as *Pamphilus de Amore*. According to Robinson's explanatory notes, it belongs to *Disciplina Clericalis* (744).

Furthermore, Chaucer names St. Isidore of Seville twice in *The Parson's Tale* (89 and 551). In this prose sermon on Penitence and the true nature of the Seven Deadly Sins, the Parson cites Isidore's *Sententiarum Libri Tres*, a handbook of morals and theology in the form of collected sentences, and also the famous encyclopaedia of human and divine subjects entitled *Etymologies*. Though the immediate source of *The Parson's Tale* has not been identified, it seems again that Chaucer has followed some intermediate sources, rather than the original Spanish texts. Several critics argue that the material on the Deadly Sins comes from either the *Somme des Vices et des Vertus* by Frère Lorens or an untraced version of the *Summa seu Tractatus de Viciis* of Guilielmus Peraldus, whereas the material on Penitence was taken

¹ See Miguel Cruz Hernández, *Abu-l-walid ibn rusd (Averroes): Vida, obra, pensamiento, influencia* or Oliver Leaman, *Averroes and his Philosophy*.

from some version of Raymund of Pennaforte's *Summa Casuum Poenitentiae* (Robinson 766).

Professor Patricia Shaw, in her article entitled "The Presence of Spain in Middle English Literature" also mentions another instance of Chaucer's debt to St. Isidore when she refers to the fact that the Monk's definition of tragedy is taken from the *Etymologies*. Shaw, once more, questions Chaucer's intimate knowledge of the Spanish scholar, since he could have taken this source "either directly, or through Nicholas Trevet's *Commentary on Boethius* which Chaucer certainly knew" (47). Similarly, Piero Boitani, in a lecture given at the University of León (Spain) in 1992 during the *Fifth International Conference of the Spanish Society for English Medieval Language and Literature*, suggests that it is through Boccaccio that Chaucer picks up St. Isidore's concept of fable and uses it in the *Nun's Priest Tale*.

On the other hand, Antonio León Sendra and Jesús Serrano Reyes from the University of Córdoba (Spain) have conducted a thorough study of all the Spanish references in the *Canterbury Tales*, making up a list of quotations from Chaucer's work that allude to Spanish persons and subjects. In their essay, they come to the conclusion that Chaucer's relationship with Spain was extremely important and that he "knew all the most important Spanish authorities who were basic intellectual foundations of Western civilization" (131); among these Spanish intellectuals they include Petrus Alphonsus, of whom it is said that Chaucer had a "sound knowledge" (120), St. Isidore of Seville, Averroes, Avicenna, Seneca and Lucan.

The conclusions of this interesting essay seem, however, a bit generous and far-fetched. As stated above, references to the work of Petrus Alphonsus and St. Isidore are confined to six quotations in *The Tale of Melibee* and two in *The Parson's Tale*, respectively, and Chaucer quotes them indirectly, following intermediate sources rather than the original texts. We have also seen how Averroes is quoted once among other outstanding physicians and never as a philosopher. In addition, we should not include Avicenna in the list of *Spanish* authorities since, as the authors of the research work admit, he is not from Spain; in fact, Avicenna is a Persian physician who is generally considered to be one of the most famous and influential philosopher-scientists of Islam. Similarly, references to such classical figures as Seneca and his nephew Lucan should not be taken into account here; although they were born in

Spain they are usually considered part of the Latin culture - both were educated and lived most of the time in Rome during the emperor Nero's reign, and their Latin writings follow the Roman literary traditions. It is forcing the argument to claim these two writers as Spanish; rather, they are part of the ancient Roman civilization, and in that sense, they are present in Chaucer's writings as many other classical authors

Continuing with the conjectures of other critics on the Spanish literary sources in Chaucer, I should mention Robert P. Miller's study entitled *Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds*, where a connection is established between Chaucer and the Majorcan mystic and missionary Ramón Lull, author of the chivalric manual *Le libre del orde de cauayleria* (c. 1276). About this book, Robert Miller's remarks that: "Perhaps no other contemporary work expresses so clearly the feelings associated with the code to which Chaucer dedicated his Knight" (180). But, once more, Chaucer was not really familiar with the Spanish text or the author because, according to Miller, the theories of chivalry embodied in his Knight seem to be taken from a popular fourteenth-century French manual translated from a Latin version of Ramón Lull's book (180).

A similar line of thinking leads Professor Santiago González to an analogous conclusion in his article "A Marian Miracle in England and Spain: Alfonso X's *Cantigas de Santa María* N° 6 and Chaucer's *The Prioress's Tale*". It presents a comparison between these two narrative poems found in the Medieval Spanish and English cultures which deal with the same episode of a child-singer murdered by a Jew, but the author claims that it is "most unlikely that Chaucer might ever have had access to the poems of the Castilian king" (152); he suggests, on the contrary, that both Chaucer and Alfonso X shared a common Latin source and each writer adapted this Marian legend to his own vernacular tradition.

Another academic from the University of Michigan, Thomas Jay Garbáty, in his article entitled "The *Pamphilus* tradition in Ruiz and Chaucer", discusses the sources of *Troilus and Criseyde* and proposes that before going to Italy and reading Boccaccio's *Filostrato*, Chaucer was influenced by two other similar courtly love stories: the twelfth-century Latin dramatic poem

Pamphilus de Amore and the Endrina episode in the *Libro de buen amor*¹ by the Spanish poet Juan Ruiz, archpriest of Hita (c. 1283-1350). After offering several specific parallels between the Spanish story and *Troilus*, Garbáty mentions Chaucer's trip to Spain and suggests the "strong" possibility that Chaucer had "heard the recitation of the Endrina episode from the *Libro de Buen Amor* of Juan Ruiz" (463). He adds that, though Chaucer might not have understood Castilian, he should not have had trouble following the narrative with some help in translation, because he already knew the direct source for the Endrina episode, the *Pamphilus* (463, note 14).

I should not neglect the possibility that Chaucer might have known of the existence of Ruiz's *Libro de buen amor* and that, if he came to Spain at all, he might have heard a minstrel reciting these popular stories. What is more difficult to accept is that he might have understood the recitation in Spanish so well as to keep particular details in store and use them afterwards in the composition of his *Troilus and Criseyde*, even if he already knew what the plot of the story was and had some simultaneous translation done for him. Anyone who has been in a foreign country with a different language is aware of the difficulties one faces trying to follow an everyday conversation in an ordinary situation. Now, imagine Chaucer trying to grasp the meaning of this poem with all the subtlety, intricacy and refinement typical of the poetic language. In addition, Juan Ruiz's language is especially rich, colourful and spontaneous, full of colloquial expressions, idioms and old sayings, making it impossible to be understood by a foreigner who comes to Spain for just a few weeks.²

Martha S. Waller presents another interesting proposition, arguing that some passages from *The Physician's Tale* are drawn from a Spanish source, a

¹ The oldest extant manuscript of this fine collection of light verse has been dated at 1330. It contains the famous episode of the love affair between don Melón and doña Endrina, in which a bawdy Convent Trotter has to intervene.

² Although I have references of other unpublished works which examine parallelisms between Chaucer and Juan Ruiz, I have not been able to read them and, therefore, I ignore the argument they advance. These works are an M. A. Dissertation written by M. Luisa Díez Arroyo entitled *Tratamiento del amor en el Libro de Buen Amor del Arcipreste de Hita y Troilus and Criseyde de Chaucer* (University of Oviedo, 1989), and a forthcoming article by Dionisia Tejera Llano, "La dimensión social de la religión durante la Edad Media retratada en dos escritores importantes: Chaucer y Juan Ruiz, Arcipreste de Hita," *Actas del V Congreso de Selim* (University of León).

glossed Castilian version of Aegidius Romanus's *De regimine principum*¹ written for the instruction of the Infante Pedro at the court of Alfonso XI of Castile by Fray Juan García de Castrojeriz and entitled *Regimiento de príncipes*. Waller illustrates her argument with some narrative and verbal parallels between the English and the Spanish text that imply Chaucer had an actual knowledge of the Spanish language. This critic offers two possible explanations for Chaucer's access to a copy of Castrojeriz's work: either Chaucer discovered the book during his hypothetical journey to Spain, or he borrowed it from the Spanish princess Constance of Padilla - the daughter of Peter I of Castile and second wife of John of Gaunt - who lived at the English court. As to Chaucer's knowledge of Spanish, Waller maintains that Chaucer might have learned it before he was sent to Spain or he could have picked it up during his sojourn in this country:

The man who could learn enough Italian on his two brief official visits to Italy (six and twelve years later) to read Boccaccio and Dante ought, on the basis of his knowledge of French and Latin, to have been able to acquire some command of Spanish relatively rapidly, especially since he would still have been in his early or middle twenties in 1366.

Glending Olson, from Cleveland State University, refutes this theory and states the passages from Castrojeriz's *Regimiento* that Chaucer might have used in his *Physician's Tale* are in fact derived from John of Wales's thirteenth-century preachers' aid, the *Communiloquium*. It is indeed more likely that Chaucer should have used the Latin text by John of Wales and not the Castilian book by Castrojeriz. It is tempting, but in view of our limited knowledge, too risky to speculate that Chaucer knew Spanish before coming to Spain; and it is highly unlikely that he could have learned enough Spanish in just a few weeks so that he could then translate several passages from the Spanish original. If he ever came to Spain, the safe conduct would have allowed him to stay for no more than three months, and much of that time he would have been travelling through the kingdom of Navarre and Castile on slow rough roads with his three unnamed companions. That means that he would have had little time to learn and practice the language and little hope of

¹ This text was written about 1285 and meant to be a guide for the future King Philip the Fair of France.

reaching the advanced level that would allow him to translate from Spanish. Besides, he did not need to learn Spanish to conduct diplomatic negotiations in Castile, since French was the language used by Spaniards and Englishmen to communicate orally.¹

Finally, the programme of the *Ninth International Congress of the New Chaucer Society* held in Dublin two years ago included a paper by Jesús Serrano Reyes entitled "Spanish Modesty in the *Canterbury Tales*: Chaucer and Don Juan Manuel". The author of this paper, who at that time was writing his doctoral thesis on the same topic, argued that Chaucer had been influenced by one of the most important prose writers of fourteenth-century Spain, Don Juan Manuel. To support his hypothesis he drew an analogy between the first lines from Chaucer's *Retractions* and a few lines from Don Juan Manuel's prologue to *Libro de los enxiemplos del conde Lucanor et de Patronio* (1328-35), a treatise of morals in the form of 50 short tales. Both texts offer a similar expression of false modesty in which the authors attribute the virtues of their works to God and their defects to their own incompetence.

This *Libro del Conde Lucanor*, which antedates the *Decameron*, greatly influenced the development of Spanish prose fiction, yet we do not know to what extent it may have influenced other English writers who followed, including Chaucer. Firstly, we can say that some critics have denied the authenticity of the *Retractions* (Robinson 16); but even if Chaucer certainly wrote the passage, he might be using one of the widespread formulas to express false modesty that many other writers had been using for centuries. Ernst Robert Curtius offers an excellent catalogue of rhetoric formulas in *Literatura europea y Edad Media Latina*; here he states that those formulas associated to false modesty used in the Middle Ages date back to Cicero and are usually combined with other formulas of devotion to God, especially in diplomatic writings (129). Chaucer could simply be using two standard ways of expressing humility and devotion in his *Retractions*, as Boccaccio does at the end of his *Decameron* when he addresses his audience and says that his work has been possible thanks to "la divina grazia", and not because of his own merits: "non già per li miei meriti" (Vol II, 735).

¹ Fernando Galvan refers to this idea in "Medieval English Literature: A Spanish Approach", and gives some evidence (106).

In view of all these arguments and propositions, I am led to believe that it is highly improbable that Chaucer knew the work of any outstanding medieval Spanish writer directly. In the two tales he quotes Spanish writers - Petrus Alphonsus in *The Tale of Melibee* and St. Isidore of Seville in *The Parson's Tale* - Chaucer benefits from French or Latin translations, rather than from the Spanish original text. Although some works by Ramón Lull, Juan Ruiz, Fray Juan García de Castrojeriz, Alfonso X, Don Juan Manuel, and even the religious narrative poetry of Gonzalo de Berceo, show some thematic and formal features that bring Chaucer's work to mind, there is no convincing evidence that these Spanish writers exerted a direct influence on Chaucer. The similarities between them might be explained simply by the homogeneity and continuity of the medieval Western literary tradition.

A long stay in Spain might have brought Chaucer into direct contact with the Spanish literary world, but, unfortunately, his short trip to Spain still remains a subject for conjecture. And even if this journey were not a pure fiction, he would not have stayed there long enough to gain any kind of knowledge of the Spanish literature or the Spanish language. Anyone needs more than a few weeks in the country to learn its language, and, of course, much more effort and time to make head or tail of its poetic language. There is no real possibility that Chaucer read Spanish in any meaningful way.

Therefore, we should not exaggerate the influence of Spanish literature on Chaucer. The Spanish element is scarce in his work because he showed little insight into contemporary Spanish culture and its literary world. We only have to count the number of times different scholars are quoted in the two tales in which Spanish authors are cited to see the ensuing proportion; then, if we do the same calculation, taking now into account Chaucer's whole output, we have a clear view of the rather secondary role that Spanish literature plays in his work.

Chaucer's lack of knowledge and/or interest in Spanish literature might be attributed to the cultural situation of the time. Although Castile was fully integrated into fourteenth-century western European life and culture, Spanish civilization in general was still rather marginal in a country like England, where the literary background was dominated by French and Italian authors. The strained diplomatic relations between England and Spain during Chaucer's ti-

me¹ did not favour cultural exchange either. And although some Spanish names rank among the greatest philosophers, theologians, historians, translators, and poets of the Middle Ages, Chaucer sought the influence of the canonical masters of his time, that is to say, the great classical writers, the Italian poets of the trecento and the always influential French authors. Spanish writers were not regarded as “canonical masters” in fourteenth-century England.

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¹ From 1369 to 1389 the Castilian king Enrique II was deeply involved in the Hundred Years' War against England, while John of Gaunt, through marriage to Princess Contance, claimed the crown of Castile and tried to invade Spain.

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