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Italy, poetry and the Hundred Years War

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Bolde bredden þerinne, baret þat lofden
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, l. 21

A recent *Encyclopedia of the Hundred Years War* extends to 375 pages without finding room for 'Italy', or for any Italian location.[1] Proper accounting for such a long, sprawling war should not be reduced to the printed equivalent of metal detectorists sweeping battlefields. Modern conflicts, such as those currently punishing the peoples of Syria and Yemen, are recognised as proxy wars, part of the larger sphere of operations within which greater powers struggle. So too in the Middle Ages: locales such as Genoa and Florence, Milan and Rome were all to a greater or lesser extent caught up in the cross-Channel, cross-continental conflict known as the Hundred Years War. The poet Geoffrey Chaucer visited the first three of these places in the 1370s, and became imaginatively cathected to the fourth once England sided with Rome (and against Avignon, and hence France and Scotland) in the Papal Schism of the West, from 1378.[2] Chaucer's encounter with Italian poetry in the 1370s revolutionised his poetics, and his self-understanding *as* a vernacular author; it thus proved foundational to English literary tradition. Without the Hundred Years War, and the specific war-related experiences Chaucer accumulated as servant of the Crown, this could not have happened.

No algorithm can calibrate literary innovation with conditions of war, yet three great periods of English literary history, perhaps the greatest, coincide with pan-European conflict. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Jane Austen and William Blake bear

the impress, quite differently, of Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792–1815). Efflorescent Elizabethan poetry and drama might look to, as historical points of departure, the death of Philip Sidney in the Netherlands, the burning of Edmund Spenser's estate at Kilcolman, Ireland, and the *Grande y Felicisma Armada* (all 1586–88). And the phenomenal literary creativity of the English late Trecento, including writers as diverse as William Langland and the *Gawain* poet, John Gower and Julian of Norwich, strangely accompanies the downturn in English fortunes in the Hundred Years War. Eventually we will want to understand how such writing, much of it brilliantly original, forms part of the fabric of war itself, how war authors the poet and mystic. For now, in this chapter, we can trace how affordances of war fed Chaucer the poet as he laboured, always in an ancillary way, to further English Plantagenet interests against the Valois monarchy of France. His first documented visit to Italy, that of 1372–73 to Genoa and Florence, may have proved more amenable to the leisurely hearing, reading and acquisition of texts, especially in the city of Dante (where Giovanni Boccaccio's reputation was at its height). The second, to Milan in 1378, sees him traverse Western Europe at one of the most fraught moments of its Trecento history, with Florence succumbing to popular rebellion, the papacy splitting, the Emperor dying and the parameters of his royal mission beginning to shift. Although Chaucer was to return to England in September 1378, fallout from his second documented Italian mission does not settle until Anne of Bohemia arrives in London three years later. Even then, Chaucer has some work to do in building England's new queen, brought to distant London through exigencies of war and trans-European politics, into the fabric of his poetry.

Medieval Italians saw Britain as a strange place, far away. In *Decameron* 5.2, a desperate young woman floats in a rudderless boat, 'al vento tutta si commise' [at the mercy of the wind].[3] Named Gostanza, a distant relative to the Custance of Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*, she washes up on the Maghreb, a hundred miles or so from Tunis. This is familiar territory: the Bardi merchant banking company that employed Boccaccio's father, and Boccaccio himself for some apprentice years, had offices and a warehouse in Tunis.[4] Gostanza soon meets an Italian woman,

Carapresa, and then joins a female craft collective, working in silk, palm and leather. Before long she is speaking Arabic, and fits right in. *Decameron* 2.3 sees a group of young Florentines, wastrels back home, make a killing in London by lending money at a high rate of interest, and offering mortgages to barons on their castles and other properties [in prestare a baroni sopra castella e altro loro entrate] (2.3.13). But when civil war breaks out in England, they lose control of the castles. Happily, however, one of them sleeps with an abbot who turns out to be daughter of the King of England; they marry and he becomes Earl of Cornwall and, maybe, later King of Scotland. These two *novelle* view Britain as both more geographically distant, by a long way, and more fantastical, by far, than North Africa. Enterprising young Florentines can employ hard-boiled financial skills to get rich quick in Britain, although British natives might upset plans by doing what they do best, and are most famous for: fighting.

It is for fighting (fighting each other) that Dante memorialises 'the Scot' and 'the English': in *Paradiso*, but only as part of an acrostic anaphora that spells out LVE, 'pestilence', across nine *terzine* (19.115–41). Here one sees, Dante's eagle says,

> la superbia che s'asseta,
> che fa lo Scotto e l'Inghilese folle,
> sì che non può soffrir dentro a sua meta.[5]
>
> [the thirsty-making pride
> that drives the Scot and the Englishman crazy,
> so that neither can keep within his own bounds.]

'The Scot', if read romantically rather than generically, might be William Wallace, who defeated the English at Stirling Bridge in 1297, three years before the *Commedia*'s fictional date of departure; 'the Englishman' would be Edward I, whose military campaigns were financed by the Ricciardi of Lucca and then (when the Ricciardi failed) by Florentine companies, including the Bardi.[6] Two generations later, with English armies under Edward III redirected to continental campaigning, the king's overseas Council is informed, from Westminster, that 'he [the king] has not had anything of the issues of his land due to the great payments and

assignments which have been made to the Bardi and Peruzzi'. Edward III is seriously in hock to these Italian banking companies; and, furthermore, incomes are down because royal wool sacks have shrunk in size, and come stuffed with inferior product, 'because of fraud by the collectors and lack of supervision of them'.[7] Nonetheless, the stock of English soldiery was, following the blip of Bannockburn (1314), ascending, especially following victories at Crécy (1346) and Poitiers (1356). Petrarch closes out Book XXII of *Familiares*, his first collection of letters, with a long, deeply historical meditation on military discipline (and its decline), beginning with surprising and recent triumphs of English armies:

> They have routed the French, long crowned with martial glory, in such frequent and unexpected victories that those who had been unequal to the faint-hearted Scots not only have treated the greatest of kings wretchedly and unworthily, which I recall with deep sadness, but have destroyed the entire kingdom with fire and sword. As I recently passed through your kingdom on an official mission, I could hardly recognize it as the same one I had previously visited. Everywhere were dismal devastation, grief, and desolation, everywhere wild and uncultivated fields, everywhere ruined and deserted homes except for those spared by being within the walls of a fortress or a city, in short, everywhere remained the sad vestiges of the Angli.[8]

Here Petrarch is writing to the Benedictine (formerly Franciscan) Pierre Bersuire, whom he had known during formative years at Avignon, and then later at Paris, when attached to the university. Petrarch came on embassy to the French court in 1361; Pierre, at the instigation of Jean le Bon (John II), had translated Petrarch's reconstructed and extended text of Livy's *History of Rome* into French. Pierre was also an early reporter of the fama, or rumour, of a fairy flying above the castle at Lusignan in Poitou, later elaborated into legends (in prose and then verse) of Mélusine.[9] Lusignan, 15 miles south-west of Poitiers, controlled access to the sea and to the harbour of La Rochelle; La Rochelle, the wine-exporting port referenced by Chaucer's Pardoner (*CT* VI.571), fell under English control following French defeat at Poitiers and the Treaty of Brétigny (1360). Bersuire and Petrarch thus unite in horror at the devastation wrought by English armies on French landscapes

(especially through the slash-and-burn tactics of *chyvachie*, *CT* 1.85). And they share deep affection for Jean le Bon: Petrarch had just met Pierre again, for the last time, at Paris while on that diplomatic mission to the French court for the Visconti, in 1361. Jean le Bon, captured at Poitiers, had been released from English captivity following payment of an enormous ransom.[10]

Chaucer and Sir John Hawkwood, the mercenary captain or *condottiere* he was briefed to negotiate with at Milan in 1378, enter the documentary record of the Hundred Years War at this crucial period, between the Battle of Poitiers and the Treaty of Brétigny, which brought seven years of truce and massive transfer of French territory to English control. Chaucer, perhaps campaigning with his first master Lionel, Duke of Clarence, got himself captured close to Reims and then ransomed early in 1360.[11] Hawkwood, an experienced soldier by that date, is to be numbered among those fighting men rendered suddenly superfluous by the treaty terms of Brétigny. *Routes* (brigades) and *grand compagnies* dedicated to freelance soldering soon formed, with the attempted capture of Jean le Bon's ransom an early (failed) project.[12] Having tracked down the Rhine to Avignon, the free companies were soon bought off by Innocent IV and moved on to fresh campaigns in the Rhineland, Spain and (above all) Italy. The Compagnia Bianca in which Hawkwood served was commanded by Albert Sterz, a German who spoke English; Hawkwood succeeded him in 1364 and became proficient (as Giovanni Aguto) in Italian. He served Pisa and then, in 1368, moved to Milan, thus frustrating the further descent of the Emperor Charles IV (future father-in-law to Richard II) into Italy. This cleared the way for the marriage of teenage Violante Visconti, daughter of Bernabò, to Lionel, Duke of Clarence.[13]

The famous Visconti wedding, attended by Petrarch and bolstered by a massive English contingent, took place on 28 May 1368.[14] Chaucer, by now *valettus* to Edward III and licensed to cross the Channel on 17 July, clearly missed the main event.[15] He might have made it to Lombardy in 1368,[16] but his first securely documented trip to Italy began as he left London on 1 December 1372, accompanied by the Genovese Sir John de Mari and James de Provan (with his son Saladin), plus Genoese crossbowmen.[17] Genoa, built on a narrow strip of land backed by mountains, specialised in shipping

and protecting shipping (with crossbowmen).[18] It also shipped Tatar slaves across the Mediterranean from the Crimea, refining practices that later would facilitate enslavement of indigenous Canary Islanders, and the further Atlantic voyaging of Columbus, who was Genoese.[19] Young Tatar slaves crowded the quays where Chaucer and his royally appointed compeers were briefed to negotiate with shippers, keen to establish a seaport for the Genoese in Southampton to rival London. This initiative would end badly for Janus Imperial of Genoa, slain in front of his own London house on 26 August 1379 by the bidding of merchant monopolists and financiers, keen to preserve the privileges of the London elite.[20]

Documents prepared for Chaucer's journey in 1372–73 do not foresee an extension of the trip to Florence, but it was certainly made; Chaucer spent 174 days away from London, perhaps a hundred of them in Genoa and Florence.[21] Edward III had yet again (as recently as August 1372) been negotiating with the Bardi for a large loan to finance his wars, so Chaucer likely spent considerable time in their offices. As sometime *discipulus* of the Bardi, and son of a long-time employee, Boccaccio was well placed at Florence to feed his geographical interests (which grew to encyclopaedic proportions); an account of the 1341 discovery of the Canary Islands, shared between merchants, was reworked into Latin for his *Zibaldone Magliabechiano*, a literary compendium.[22] By 1373, Boccaccio was a senior statesman of Italian letters, associated with Petrarch as a humanist Latinist but always (and most especially at Florence) closely identified with Dante as lifelong copyist, biographer and civic champion. Trade talks, like Church councils, have a lot of downtime, but it is not likely that Chaucer travelled the 28 miles (by the best modern road) to visit the ageing *maestro* in his hill-town *patria*, Certaldo. But he inevitably heard much talk of *lecturae Dantis*, to be given by Boccaccio in Florence later that year.[23] Many of the human protagonists in the *Commedia*, if not their family names, were long forgotten by 1373. But some of the poem's most extravagant historical hopes remained alive: that, for example, an emperor might descend on Italy and make all things well. Dante's hopes for Henry VII, adumbrated as early as *Inferno* II, were dead (as was Henry) long before the *Commedia* was completed. Charles IV, his grandson, had descended on Milan in 1354,

taking the iron crown of Lombardy and reminding the Visconti of their status as imperial vicars; he then descended on (or close to) Rome. Hopes for a later return to Rome were frustrated by the English *condottiere* Hawkwood, we have noted, in 1368.

It has been said that Chaucer, as a vernacular poet, is Dante's truest Trecento continuator.[24] Italian had moved on since 1321, with Dante commentary switching from Italian to Latin, *terza rima* adopted as a more popular medium, and Petrarch regretting that Dante's choice of the vernacular (rather than the Latin of his *Africa*) had put serious issues into the mouths of 'ignorant oafs in taverns and marketplaces'.[25] Chaucer, surveying his own poetics after 1373, concluded that he had a long way to go in following Dante following Virgil:

> I wol now synge, yif I kan,
> The armes, and also the man
> That first cam, thurgh his destinee,
> Fugityf of Troy contree,
> In Itayle ...[26]

'If I kan' here does not mean 'if I can', but rather 'if I possess the technical ability'.[27] Which clearly, yet, he does not: the opening of Book III of *The House of Fame*, imitating the opening of the *Commedia*'s third *cantica*, still struggling within the straitjacket of French octosyllabic couplets, expires in embarrassment. But Chaucer *will* become a poet of the *volgare illustre*, chiefly through long meditation upon and elaborating of two Boccaccian texts, the *Filostrato* and *Teseida*. It has also been said, more recently and with greater authority,[28] that Chaucer offers more intensive engagement with these two Boccaccian texts than any other Trecento poet or commentator; properly, Chaucer should take his place in Italian literary history. It was within the expanded theatre of the Hundred Years War, then, that Chaucer came to learn of Petrarch, Boccaccio and Dante, and to access their texts. Each of the poems he made from Boccaccio, perhaps his greatest work *qua poetrie*, bears an internal signature of that war: the Temple of Mars in the *Knight's Tale*, a first-hand anthology of random, violent terrors; and the city of Troy in *Troilus*, evoking the wall-ringed urban experiences that Petrarch, as we have seen, associates with English destructiveness.

Insecurities of war, encompassing physical destruction and psychic insecurity, compounded with yet deeper anxieties just before and right through Chaucer's last Italian journey. Western Christendom would split asunder in 1378: an event in collective faith life with no precedent, surpassing even the schism between Eastern and Latin churches of 1054. Someone staying on the farm or close to home in 1378, in England or in France, might have registered this as distant trouble, far up the chain of ecclesiastical command – not as the disintegration of fundamental, faith-sustaining structure. But Chaucer was bound, by the terms of his royal appointment, to pay close attention to affairs across continental Europe and then, moving across the face of the Continent, to become diplomatically engaged. It is thus worth considering how these crucial months played out, in some detail.

In 1377 Anglo-French peace negotiations, under way since 1374, broke down; Edward III died on 21 June 1377 and war began again three days later; the English parliament agreed that all French-born people living in England should be repatriated.[29] Also in 1377, Gregory XI (Pierre Roger de Beaufort from Maumont, Limoges) shifted the site of the papacy from Avignon back to Rome. Towards the end of 1377, Emperor Charles IV made advances to Westminster and began speaking of marrying his daughter Anne to Richard.[30] In March 1377 Sir John Hawkwood was royally pardoned by Richard II touching all past crimes and misdemeanours; in May 1377 he married Donnina Visconti, one of Bernabò's numerous illegitimate daughters.[31] In October 1377 the Franciscan Walter Thorpe was sent by Richard II to Sir John Hawkwood in Lombardy 'pour les affaires de la guerre' [for the affairs of war].[32] Early in January 1378 the elderly Emperor Charles IV, with his son Wenceslas, already elected King of the Romans, was received at Paris by Charles V, his nephew, confirming the Franco-Luxembourg alignment that could be traced back to the death of Charles IV's father, John the Blind, at Crécy (1346).[33] On 28 March 1378 Gregory XI died in Rome, and on 8 April 1378 the Neapolitan Bartolomeo Prignano was elected Urban VI. Walter Thorpe returned to Westminster in May 1378, carrying letters from Hawkwood and likely news (or further news) of the papal election, plus the suggestion that England should open negotiations with Bernabò Visconti. On 28 May Chaucer left

London with (and subordinate to) Sir Edward de Berkeley, travelling 'en nostre message' [with our [the king's] message] to Bernabò, 'lord of Milan', and to 'our dear and loyal Sir John Hawkwood', concerning some matters 'touchant lexploit de nostre guerre' [touching matters of our war].[34] On 26 July Urban VI confirmed by bull Wenceslas IV's election as King of the Romans. Early in August 1378 dissatisfied cardinals left Rome and, at Anagni, proclaimed Urban VI schismatic, to be renounced by all Christendom.[35] Robert de Genève, who had employed Hawkwood's troops along with Breton mercenaries to massacre thousands at Cesena in 1377,[36] became pope or anti-pope Clement VII on 20 September 1378. Chaucer, returning to London the very next day, was now to see Anglo-French hostility widening through ecclesial fracture: French, Scots and Castilians would follow one pope; Italians (but not Neapolitans), English and Germans (under the Empire) would follow another. 'What is this world?' asks Arcite in the *Knight's Tale*, 'What asketh man to have?' (I.277): basic existential questions, assigned to a dying pagan, offloaded by an English emissary living through very strange times.

Before leaving London, Chaucer had seen that John Gower and a Richard Forester were appointed general attorneys for his affairs, and that a deputy was named for his position as Controller of Customs.[37] Chaucer had been appointed Controller on 8 June 1374, not long after his first Italian trip, and in overseeing wool custom and subsidy he was now regulating the source of supply judged most vital (by those answerable to Edward III, as seen above) to the continuing war effort. Chaucer spoke excellent Italian, and his first master, Prince Lionel, had briefly been Bernabò's son-in-law. But Chaucer was chosen chiefly because he was now a key figure, between city and court, in a complex, international nexus of capital, warfare and wool.[38]

Chaucer had travelled with Sir John de Burley in 1376 on a secret royal mission, possibly exploring a marital alliance between Prince Richard and Marie, daughter of Charles V of France.[39] In 1377 he was paid for two French journeys – to Paris and Montreuil and 'other places', and to 'parts of France'.[40] He could thus think himself reasonably well briefed in the European state of play as he rode to Lombardy in late May and June 1378, although events

(and entire geopolitical and religious structures) were shifting as never before: so many moving parts. Things went well in Milan, it seems, since Bernabò sent de Burley and Chaucer back to London in the company of two diplomatic messengers. The party arrived back on 21 September, and the two Visconti representatives – 'Sir Jehan de Liche, chivaler, et mestre Ingeram de Brachis, doctour es lois' – were paid for their trouble on 4 December 1378. On 20 December they were paid for further costs and expenses 'pour le temps qu'ils ont demorez en notre citée de Londres puis la Seint Michel' [for the time that they stayed in our city of London near Saint Michael's].[41] Chaucer, one might say, brought his Italian homework back to London, and his fluency made it likely that he spent more time with the Italians as they elaborated Bernabò's diplomatic project: the marriage of his daughter, Catherine, to Richard II. Such a project promised scant birth pedigree but a hefty dowry, a lifeline to the ever-needy English exchequer. At the end of March 1379, a new and upgraded English delegation left London for Milan, headed by Sir Michael de la Pole, banneret, of mercantile stock, with long military and naval experience, destined to become chancellor of England and first earl of Suffolk.[42] Sir John de Burley travelled again, but as second in rank, and what we might regard as Chaucer's spot was now taken by George Felbrigg, squire of the king's chamber. Charles IV, Holy Roman Emperor, died in Prague on 29 November 1378; news of this reached England before the party set out, and could be further digested along the way.

George Felbrigg returned to England in July 1379, job done, but the two senior English diplomats travelled on to Rome. Over the summer of 1379, Urban VI argued that relations between the French Valois monarchy and the house of Luxembourg, now headed by Wenceslaus, were falling apart. A new alliance between Luxembourg and Plantagenet houses promised English victory over France, in war, and Roman victory over Avignon, in religion. Bernabò, meanwhile, continued sending ambassadors to London, pressing his suit, and Chaucer had ample opportunity to reunite with the men with whom he had travelled back from Lombardy the previous year.[43] John Sheppey, dean of Lincoln, dispatched from Rome to tell Westminster what was going on during that summer of 1379, was in no hurry to arrive. He finally shows up in London on

29 October; the writ from king to exchequer instructs that he should not be paid the full *per diem*, since he had clearly been idling away his time in Bruges or Calais, without reasonable cause.[44] Perhaps Sheppey was thinking along *don't shoot the messenger* lines, since the original mission to espouse Richard II to Caterina Visconti was taking a strange swerve in Rome. Happily he did survive, living on to litigate his pigs' right to eat acorns from Rockingham Forest.[45] But Richard in any case did know what was happening: in early August, priors provincial of the Franciscan Order of England and Ireland had brought him letters from the pope and from Wenceslas, new King of the Romans.[46] Bernabò was wooed away from the English match by the papal dispensations facilitating the incestuous union of his daughter, Caterina, to his nephew Gian Galeazzo, whom he deeply distrusted (and who, as Chaucer later tells,[47] would eventually assassinate him). Sir Michael de la Pole and Sir John de Burley, captured and ransomed in Germany, finally returned to London after a mission of 421 days, on 20 May 1380.[48] By then the foreign figure most exciting English imaginations, the point of so many hopes in peace and war, was again the eldest daughter of Charles IV, half-sister to Wenceslas, King of the Romans, and full (elder) sister to Sigismund, future Holy Roman Emperor: Anne of Bohemia.[49]

It would be foolish to step from this morass of detail, exemplifying again the complex breadth of the Hundred Years theatre, into specific, *roman à clef* moments in Chaucerian poetry. We might rather consider more broadly a period of time that bespeaks crisis in Chaucer's life, and his art. For Paul Strohm, this is 1386;[50] the period following Chaucer's return from Lombardy on 21 September 1378 is, I would suggest, another such moment. Western Christendom is splitting, with rival popes. The Florentine Republic, with which he had negotiated in 1373, was being overthrown at the time of his Milanese visit (in a European pattern of popular rebellion that would engulf London three years later). In England, following the death of Edward III on 21 June and the quick accession of boy-king Richard, government was by 'continual councils'.[51] But to set against such uncertainties, Chaucer had *scoop*, or (to adopt his own term), *tydinges*. He had seen the future queen of England, Caterina Visconti, and was now one of two

men in the kingdom who could answer basic questions in court and city, such as *what is she like?* He could also tap his former Italian travel companions, now wintering in London, for further details. This happy state of affairs would have carried into the spring of 1379, as Sir Michael de la Pole and Sir John de Burley set off on their upgraded Lombardy mission. At a certain point after that, however, court *cognoscenti* would have known about the swerve to Rome, and Chaucer's *tydinges* would be suddenly stale. Hopefully somebody tipped him off. If not, he would have seemed like a fool from his own future fiction: 'but alday faileth thing that fooles wenden' (*T&C* I.217).

Richard II's happily companionate marriage into the House of Luxembourg would ultimately work out much better for Chaucer *poeta* than union with a Visconti bride: for although Milan had been gilded by the presence of Petrarch for eight years (1353–61), its book culture was broadly and conservatively Francophone, whereas newly reconstructed Prague, with its new university (named after an Emperor who wrote his own *Life* in Latin), boasted vibrant trans-Europeanism. Anne of Bohemia would ultimately (with the Wife of Bath) become Chaucer's muse, but initially he had much ground to make up. Both of the major works that he elaborated from Italian contrive to compliment Anne. In opening the *Knight's Tale*, Chaucer adds to the *Teseida* (and *Thebaid*) by recalling, under *occultatio*, an awkward passage to a foreign land: 'And of the feste that was at hir weddynge; / And of the tempest at hir hoom-comynge …' (I.883–4). Anne and a few attendants made a risky winter passage from Calais to Dover on 18 December 1381. Ships at Dover harbour collided, moved by heavy groundswell, and the ship from which Anne had stepped was smashed to pieces.[52]

Early on in *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer reminds us that that 'oure firste lettre is now an A' (I.171), and although the remark seems gratuitous, the *now* is striking: *now an A*. It has been suggested that Chaucer's *An ABC* was written for Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, whose death in 1368 generated *The Book of the Duchess*. It could just as likely have been written for Anne of Bohemia. Chaucer's *Treatise on the Astrolabe* refers to 'the king, that is lord of this langage' (56–7), and if Chaucer had a sense of 'the king's English', why not an equivalent language for the queen?

An immigrant queen, arriving from across the water, keen to learn the basics or *ABC*s of English, and whose name (happily) begins with *A*.

Chaucer's alphabetical poem to the Virgin Mary, *An ABC*, is still logged as an early work – despite its highly technical, poetic sophistication.[53] Such a view can be traced back to that influential Victorian, the Revd Walter Skeat. For the Anglican Skeat, excessive devotion to mother Mary belongs to an immature phase of spiritual development, so *An ABC* must represent an immature phase of poetic evolution. But consider the evidence of Chaucer's letter S. Much of its expressive urgency and sophistication is achieved through *enjambement*, an effect learned by Chaucer from long study of the *Filostrato*. 'Soth is,' says Chaucer to Mary,

> that God ne graunteth no pitee
> Withoute thee; for God of his goodnesse
> Foryiveth noon, but it like unto thee.
> He hath thee maked vicaire and maistresse
> Of al this world, and eek governouresse
> Of hevene, and he represseth his justise
> After thi wil; and therfor in witnesse
> He hath thee corowned in so rial wise. (*An ABC*, 137–44)

Mary is here is celebrated as *mediatrix*, smoothing passage between a terrifying male ruler – the Christian God – and the terrified poet-petitioner. This Mary is no mere message-carrier, however, since she's God's *vicaire* on earth,[54] and *governor* of heaven – the term *governor* deriving from *gubernator*, the rudder of a ship. 'Crowned in royal fashion', her likeness to hardworking earthly queens is emphasised here, as throughout the poem. Also striking is *An ABC*'s intensified use of legal language, as Chaucer pleads his case to Mary, hoping that Mary will defend him from God.

The most eloquent such defence of the poet Chaucer from a wrathful deity by a queenly *mediatrix* comes in the *Prologue to the Legend of Good Women*. Alceste is there characterised as 'emperice and flour of floures alle' (F 185). Anne of Bohemia, queen to Richard II, was to become *mediatrix*, pleading for those falling foul of her husband's famous temper, and would always be an emperor's daughter. Lowly Griselde, in a tale found and read by Chaucer

within a war-defined nexus of Anglo-Italian relations, is likened once to someone 'norissed in an emperoures halle' (*CT* IV.399), and earlier to 'an emperoures doghter' (IV.168). Strikingly, this latter phrase recurs nowhere else in the *Canterbury Tales* – except in the *Man of Law's Tale*, where it appears three times, at regular intervals, once with the intensifying adjective 'yonge':

> Of the Emperoures doghter, dame Custance (II.151)
> O Emperoures yonge doghter deere (II.447)
> An Emperoures doghter stant allone (II.655)

Chaucer adapts his tale of Custance from the Anglo-Norman chronicling of Nicholas Trevet, a text written for a Mary of Woodstock, sixth daughter of King Edward I. Chaucer's tale is resolutely and recursively Rome-centred. Anne of Bohemia, as we have noted and as Chaucer knew, was translated or traded to England as part of the new politics of the Papal Schism – in which England sided with Rome, home to pope Urban VI from 1378 to 1389, and home to 'good Urban the olde' in the *Second Nun's Tale* (VII.177).[55] Word of Custance's excellences as 'doghter' of 'oure Emperour of Rome' is first acclaimed by the *commons* of Rome (II.155), and the *image* of them is then carried abroad, back home, through the kind of mercantile-diplomatic networks (II.171–89) that Chaucer himself had travelled. The Roman commons acclaims Custance aspirationally: '*wolde that she were* of al Europe the queene' (II.161; emphasis added). The imperial space might, it is hoped, become pan-European, and Custance does traverse the entire Mediterranean, as well as 'our occian' (II.505). By the end of her tale, however, Custance's Europe has expanded little, with the eastern Mediterranean left a smoking ruin (II.964–5). Comparably high hopes might attach to a modern Emperor's daughter, but in Western Christendom, still schismed and defined by the Anglo-French conflict, nobody might magically achieve a sense of 'al Europe'. The west would unite only to be routed out east at Nicopolis, by an Ottoman army on the lower Danube, in 1396, two years after Anne of Bohemia's untimely death.

It was in and through Italy that Chaucer grasped the full, one might say imperial measure of what vernacular poetry might aspire to. Simultaneously he saw that the most grandiose hopes

collapse if particular persons die. Such reflections themselves feed poetry, especially Italian poetry, soaked as it is in the long heritage and impossible precedent of Rome. Inspiration through Italian poetry likely first struck Chaucer in a simple way, at an epiphanic moment: hearing Dantean *terzine*, Boccaccian *ottave*, or a Petrarchan sonnet, or perhaps perusing a manuscript. But much as Dante's tercets unfold a complex filigree of period politics, and Boccaccio and Petrarch were deeply and differently engaged in civic and ambassadorial duties, so Chaucer's experience of Italy in the 1370s was expansively complex, viewed as he moved diplomatically across the Continent.[56] Yet in traversing this greater European theatre, Chaucer, like the *tre corone*, could but painfully see its warring *nationes* violate the spirit of *pax Romana*, the *regnum* of Jesus and Mary so earnestly interpellated by Custance, his emperor's daughter, 'of al Europe the queene'.[57]

This crucial decade of the 1370s further exposed Chaucer to both sides of an acute and very particular ideological conflict, whose historical importance would long outlive the Hundred Years War. In Florence he found one of the most widely inclusive polities of medieval times, based on guild structures and rapid rotation of leadership. In Lombardy he witnessed, helped negotiate with, one-man rule, a regime keen to promote the bloody-minded unpredictability of its *dominus,* his use of torture, his sexual prowess. A key legal principle for such a polity, one later coveted by Henry VIII, was *quod principi placuit legis habet vigorem*: what is pleasing to the prince has the force of law.[58] Chaucer was not to know that, through the fifteenth century, one-man rule (despotism) would win out and, in the nineteenth century, government through collective structures would be dismissed as *medieval*.[59] And perhaps *quod principi placuit* has even longer legs: democratically elected western leaders seem now increasingly inclined to *follow their own feelings*, play their hunches or associate with despots, than to work with other democratic leaders (or consult epidemiologists). But Chaucer did envision, within his own lifetime, alternative possibilities for England. His *Canterbury Tales* explores the parameters of associational form, guildlike collectivism, *bonum commune*. He also delineates (in part within the *Canterbury Tales* itself) one-man dictatorship, distractedly godlike behaviours, *Lumbardye*. And he

dreams that when the courtly protocols of an irascible king-god are breached by a guileless courtier-poet, an 'emperice and flour of floures alle' will save him.[60] Once the historical surrogate of this *emperice*, Anne of Bohemia, had died, the irascible Richard II could not long save himself. Richard II was deposed and then murdered in February 1400; Chaucer died eight months later.

Richard II long hoped, delusionally, that his loyal subject Sir John Hawkwood, veteran of French campaigns and commanding large forces in Italy, would intervene decisively on the English side.[61] Hawkwood himself had divided loyalties, buying up London property and seeking Richard's pardon for youthful crimes and disobediences in war-torn France while yet marrying Donnina Visconti. Hawkwood died in August 1393, and early in 1395 the Florentine Signoria commissioned Taddeo Gaddhi and Giuliano d'Arrigho to memorialise him in fresco on the north wall of Santa Maria del Fiore. Later that year, however, Richard II requested that Hawkwood's remains be repatriated, and a cenotaph was built at his parish church of St Peter, Sible Hedingham (Essex).[62] So as the Hundred Years War raged on into the new century one might contemplate the same key figure in two locales, set far apart, testimony to strange, cross-European alliances. Especially strange is the fact that both Hawkwood and Lionel Duke of Clarence, Chaucer's first master, were both sons-in-law to Bernabò, greatest despot of the age. Chaucer held open the pages of his *Canterbury Tales* to receive news, in 1385, of Bernabò's assassination.[63] Great men will continue to fall, *The Monk's Tale* can expand, and this war will not end in Chaucer's lifetime.

On 25 October 1415, St. Crispin's Day, Europe was astonished yet again by an English army defeating the French. Bishop Henry Beaufort proclaimed Henry V's triumph from the pulpit at St Paul's four days later. Some of his clerical confrères and fellow bishops picked up the news at the lakeside town of Constance, between the Danube and the Rhine: here a great Church Council was attempting to heal the Papal Schism that had split Western Christendom since 1378, the year of Chaucer's meeting with Hawkwood and Bernabò. Sigismund, King of the Romans, later Holy Roman Emperor, and a driving force of the Council's early years, had left Constance on 18 July 1415, travelling to Perpignan, to Paris early

in the new year (finding Charles VI absent through insanity), and then London. Son of Charles IV and his fourth wife, Elizabeth of Pomerania, Sigismund was full brother to Anne of Bohemia, hence brother-in-law to Richard II (deposed by Henry V's father). On 15 March 1416, Sigismund elected to side with Henry V and signed the Treaty of Canterbury; he tossed Latin verses to the crowd, and John Capgrave made Middle English verses from them.[64] On 27 January 1417 Sigismund made his long-awaited return to Constance, sporting his newly bestowed collar of the Order of the Garter.

Two days after Sigismund's return to the Council the English delegation treated him to a banquet with music and *tableaux vivants*: our Lady holding her son; the Magi led by a star on a fine gold wire; and Herod (an English speciality) killing the innocents.[65] Through recourse to music and drama, the English tacitly conceded that their *language* was no asset: not even Oswald von Wolkenstein, the Tyrolean poet-musician who spoke ten tongues, and who travelled to England and Scotland during the Council, claimed to speak English.[66] Literarily speaking, the Italian delegation was by far the most distinguished at Constance, offering varieties of Italian, Latin (humanist and otherwise) and even Greek.[67] Two English bishops joined a Dante study circle.[68] Jean Gerson, who as Chancellor of the University of Paris had quarrelled with Christine de Pizan over the *Roman de la Rose*, made up for lost time: the Hundred Years War had depressed manuscript production in France, as in England, and so Gerson embarked on a self-publishing frenzy. Yet he had long nursed a sense of French inferiority in the face of Italian literary achievements; his first surviving sermon makes extensive use of Petrarch, *De remediis utriusque fortunae*, and his hexametric *Josephina* invites and resists comparisons to *Africa*.[69] Many highly talented Italian literary men were on hand at Constance to accommodate any kind of literary interest, offering instruction in Italian, humanist Latin or even Greek. Many were desperate, since their pope, John XXIII, had fled on 21 March 1415, leaving them seriously underemployed. Leonardo Bruni returned to Florence to write his *Historia Florentini populi*. Pier Paolo Vergerio joined the service of King Sigismund, the new Garter knight, and died in Hungary, in 1444. Poggio Bracciolini, the most famous and celebrated of all,[70] also accepted the patronage of a Garter member: not Sigismund, but Bishop Henry Beaufort.

Having cheered Agincourt from the pulpit of St Paul's, in 1417 Beaufort found himself representing Henry V's interests at Constance. Considered *papabile* himself, Beaufort helped secure the election of Odo Colonna as Martin V, crowned on 21 November. The new, schism-ending pontiff rewarded Beaufort by creating him cardinal on 18 December: a move that aroused angry suspicions in Henry V.[71] Not until August 1419 did Beaufort dare return to England. Poggio was already in place, struggling to develop his humanist interests on stony ground, missing his Italian friends and considering a turn to patristics. Chaucer was on hand: not Geoffrey, the fluent Italianist and translator of Petrarch, but his son Thomas, the career politician. In his *Clerk's Tale*, set in Lombardy, Chaucer *père* adds a long speech with no counterpart in Boccaccio or Petrarch. This, the first speech of his *Tale* goes on for a remarkable seven stanzas of rhyme royal, beginning with 'O noble markys, your humanitee' (IV.92). *Humanity* was a new word for late medieval England, an Italian import connoting dedication to a new course of study. Poggio considered himself a *humanist*, dedicated to 'studium ... humanitatis' since boyhood, but unable to find like minds (so he tells an Italian correspondent) in England.[72] The *Clerk's Tale* speech appealing to Walter's 'humanitee' (and it takes some nerve to keep a despot quiet for forty-nine lines) is delivered by the speaker of the Commons, a perilous position rather new to English politics. An individual is chosen to be speaker, Chaucer says, because he is the most learned; or because he is the person the ruler can best tolerate listening to; or because he has the most refined presentational skills (IV.87–91). Perhaps combining all these qualities, Thomas Chaucer was to serve five terms as speaker of the Commons (a record not surpassed for over three hundred years). There is no evidence that Thomas Chaucer tried to learn *studium humanitatis* from Poggio Bracciolini, who stayed on in England until early 1423. But there is evidence that Thomas Chaucer was briefed to spy on Poggio's master, Cardinal Henry Beaufort, by Henry V, the hero of Agincourt.[73]

The Hundred Years War, through many strange twists across wide European spaces, created unforeseeable cultural opportunities, some taken and some not. Had Henry V not defeated the French at Agincourt, Poggio Bracciolini would not have come to London. Had Geoffrey Chaucer, fluent in Italian and familiar

with Florence, lived longer he might have talked *humanitas* with Poggio; Thomas Chaucer, a kingpin of the state apparatus, was not so inclined. The greatest Italian humanist of the age was thus left stranded in England for years, lamenting a culture not ready for him: opportunity lost.

The affairs of war that forced Geoffrey Chaucer to develop wide understanding of European politics, and that brought him to Italy, wrought huge, long-lasting effects. Some, unique to Chaucer, pertain to poetics. From Boccaccio he learned, through intensive reading and imitation, how sinewy syntax might achieve plasticity of expression, wrapping around line-endings and hence escaping the leaden beat of couplets. From Dante he learned the potentialities of a verse form much more like English than French: a longer line with marked caesura, generally with two stresses per hemistich. More thematically, and to choose just one example, Boccaccio's *Teseida* provided snapshots of war in a temple of Mars, although Chaucer's images are by turns more claustrophobic and, suggesting actual fields of battle, expansive: 'A thousand slain, and noght of qualm ystorve' (*CT* I.2014). From 'Fraunceys Petrak, the lauriat poete' (*CT* IV.31), and from 'the wise poete of Florence, / That highte Dant' (*CT* III.1125–6), Chaucer learned how *poetrie* could articulate a space of empire, but also how such dreams might swiftly fade, as Emperors (Henry VII, Charles IV) and their children (Queen Anne) died. In bringing him to Italy, the Hundred Years War prompted Chaucer to Europeanise his verse, and to declare himself subject to, and master of, *poesie* (*T&C* V.1789–92). *Poesie* and *poetrie* are rare words in Chaucer, associated with Latin making, often of an imperial cast. Circumstances of war thus usher Chaucer down a path that will lead, generations later, to the weaponisation of English as instrument of war, at the service of 'the king, that is lord of this langage'.

Notes

1 Wagner, *Encyclopedia of the Hundred Years War*.
2 For the relationship between the Schism and the Hundred Years War, see Brown's chapter in this volume. Citations of Chaucer's work will

come from *The Riverside Chaucer*, and will be cited parenthetically by abbreviated work (when needed) and line number.

3 Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ed. McWilliam, 380; *Decameron*, ed. Branca, 5.2.11.

4 Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity,* 206–7.

5 Alighieri, *Paradiso* 19.121–3 (my translation).

6 See Economou, 'England', 342b–343b.

7 PRO C49/File 7/7 and PRO 31 [Transcripts] 7/157, in *Wars of Edward III*, ed. Rogers, 68.

8 Petrarca, *Letters*, trans. Bernardo, 242, 22.14.

9 See Mühlethaler, 'Lusignan'.

10 He became a prisoner again, dying at the Savoy in 1364, once his son Louis, Duke of Anjou, had abandoned his role as hostage and surety to the English.

11 See Turner, *Chaucer*, 72–119.

12 See Fowler, 'Sir John Hawkwood'.

13 See Fowler, 'Sir John Hawkwood'; Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 34–5.

14 See Spěváček, *Karl IV*, 109.

15 See Crow and Olson (eds), *Chaucer Life-Records*, 28–9.

16 There is no further record of Chaucer in England until 31 October 1368: See Crow and Olson (eds), *Chaucer Life-Records*, 30.

17 See Crow and Olson (eds), *Chaucer Life-Records*, 32–40.

18 Thirty Genoese crossbowmen were hired to man a new galley for Edward III in December 1372, the month of Chaucer's voyage. See Crow and Olson (eds), *Chaucer Life-Records*, 38 n. 1.

19 See Wallace, *Premodern Places*, 181–202.

20 See Strohm, 'Trade, Treason'.

21 See Crow and Olson (eds), *Chaucer Life-Records*, 40.

22 Wallace, *Premodern Places*, 208.

23 See Boccaccio, *Esposizioni sopra la Commedia di Dante*, ed. Padoan.

24 Wallace, 'Chaucer's Italian Inheritance', 53.

25 *Familiares* 21.15, as translated by Foster, *Petrarch*, 29. See now for finer-grained, textualised understanding Gaston, *Reading Chaucer*; K. P. Clarke, *Chaucer and Italian Textuality*.

26 *House of Fame*, 143–7.

27 From *kunne*. The whelp who meets the dreaming Chaucer in *BD* 'koude no good' (389) is lost, perhaps untrained, hence detached from the hounds (who know what they are doing) in the pack.

28 By Kenneth P. Clarke, following his presentation 'Medieval humanism and vernacular poetics'.

29 See Lambert and Ormrod, 'A Matter of Trust', 225–6; Tuck, 'Richard II and the House of Luxembourg', 205.
30 Perroy, *L'Angleterre*, 136; Saul, *Richard* II, 83; Tuck, 'Richard II and the House of Luxembourg', 207.
31 See Fowler, 'Sir John Hawkwood'; Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 34.
32 Perroy, *L'Angleterre*, 137.
33 See Šmahel, *Parisian Summit*, 239; Tuck, 'Richard II and the House of Luxembourg', 207.
34 Crow and Olson (eds), *Chaucer Life-Records*, 54.
35 See Šmahel, *Parisian Summit,* 247.
36 See Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 34.
37 Crow and Olson (eds), *Chaucer Life-Records*, 54, 60.
38 For a superb, granular account of Chaucer's controllership of Customs, see Strohm, *Poet's Tale*, 121–36; on capital, warfare and wool see Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 11–13.
39 Crow and Olson (eds), *Chaucer Life-Records*, 43–4.
40 Crow and Olson (eds), *Chaucer Life-Records*, 47–8. A marriage offer from Charles V for his daughter Marie was made early in 1378: see Saul, *Richard II*, 83.
41 Cited in Perroy, *L'Angleterre*, 138.
42 See Tuck, 'Pole, Michael de la, first earl of Suffolk'.
43 In September 1379 a safe conduct is issued for 'Ingelram de Brakys' as Bernabò's messenger, and on 10 December 1379 a gift is recorded as presented 'Johanni Lisle militi et Rogero Cane armigero' (Perroy, *L'Angleterre*, 139 n. 2).
44 See Perroy, *L'Angleterre,* 141 n. 1.
45 PRO SC 8/215/10733: https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C9334289.
46 Perroy, *L'Angleterre*, 140. See further on this complex period Tuck, 'Richard II and the House of Luxembourg', 216–17.
47 See *Monk's Tale*, VII.2399–2406 ('*De Barnabo de Lumbardia*').
48 Tuck, 'Pole, Michael de la, first earl of Suffolk'; Perroy, *L'Angleterre*, 142.
49 A council meeting was held two weeks after the return of Pole and Burley, and envoys were dispatched to Bohemia to pursue the marriage, on 18 June (Saul, *Richard II*, 87).
50 See Strohm, *Poet's Tale*.
51 From 1377 to January 1380: see Saul, *Richard II*, 31, 46–7; Fletcher, *Richard II*, 76–84.
52 Recounted by Thomas Walsingham, *Chronica Majora*, ed. and trans. Taylor et al., 1.572.

53 See Brown (ed.), *Companion to Chaucer*.
54 The French term *vicaire* is here added to the English.
55 One Westminster monk straightforwardly asserted that Richard II had bought his new queen: see *Westminster Chronicle*, ed. Hector and Harvey, 24.
56 On the importance of *mediation* (a term new to English in the fourteenth century) in diplomatic contexts of war, see Davies, 'Forms of Writing, Forms of War'.
57 *CT* II.161; and for Custance's ferocious, *ballade*-length Marian prayer, which turns the tide of her tale, see II.841–61.
58 See Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, ed. Pratt, vol. 6, 45–6.
59 See Burckhardt, *Die Cultur* [sic] *der Renaissance in Italian*.
60 See *Legend of Good Women* F 185, and Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, *passim*.
61 For an example from 1388 see Perroy, *L'Angleterre*, 295 n. 2.
62 See Fowler, 'Sir John Hawkwood'.
63 See n. 47 above.
64 See Gillespie, 'Chichele's Church', 3–4.
65 For a fuller account of this and what follows see Wallace, 'Constance', in *Europe*, ed. Wallace, 2.655–82.
66 See Wallace, 'Oswald von Wolkenstein'.
67 Manuel Chrysoloras, the renowned teacher of Greek, travelled to Constance with the Italian *nation* but died on 15 April 1415: see Wallace, 'Constance', 2.659.
68 See Wallace, *Premodern Places*, 143–45; Havely, *Dante's British Public*, 15–17.
69 See Hobbins, *Authorship and Publicity Before Print*, 1–11, 152–3, 194.
70 See Greenblatt, *The Swerve*.
71 The chief suspicion being that the new pope would seek to revive papal powers of taxation and appointment in England: see Harriss, 'Beaufort, Henry'.
72 See Bigi, 'Bracciolini, Poggio'.
73 See Rawcliffe, 'Chaucer, Thomas'; Harriss, 'Beaufort, Henry'.