NEW CENTURY CHAUCER

Le Bone Florence of Rome

A Critical Edition and Facing Translation of a Middle English Romance Analogous to Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*

Edited and translated by

JONATHAN STAVSKY

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The works of Geoffrey Chaucer are the most-studied literary texts of the Middle Ages, appearing on school and university syllabuses throughout the world. From *The Canterbury Tales* through the dream visions and philosophical works to *Troilus and Criseyde*, the translations and short poems, Chaucer's writing illuminates the fourteenth century and its intellectual traditions. Taken together with the work of his contemporaries and successors in the fifteenth century, the Chaucerian corpus arguably still defines the shape of late-medieval literature.

For twentieth-century scholars and students, the study of Chaucer and the late Middle Ages largely comprised attention to linguistic history, historicism, close reading, biographical empiricism and traditional editorial practice. While all these approaches retain some validity, the new generations of twenty-first-century students and scholars are conversant with the digital humanities and with emerging critical approaches – the 'affective turn', new materialisms, the history of the book, sexuality studies, global literatures, and the 'cognitive turn'. Importantly, today's readers have been trained in new methodologies of knowledge retrieval and exchange. In the age of instant information combined with multiple sites of authority, the meaning of the texts of Chaucer and his age has to be constantly renegotiated.

The series New Century Chaucer is a direct response to new ways of reading and analysing medieval texts in the twenty-first century. Purpose-built editions and translations of individual texts, accompanied by stimulating studies introducing the latest research ideas, are directed towards contemporary scholars and students whose training and research interests have been shaped by new media and a broad-based curriculum. Our aim is to publish editions, with translations, of Chaucerian and related texts alongside focused studies which bring new theories and approaches into view, including comparative studies, manuscript production, Chaucer's post-medieval reception, Chaucer's contemporaries and successors, and the historical context of late-medieval literary production. Where relevant, online support includes images and bibliographies that can be used for teaching and further research.

The further we move into the digital world, the more important the study of medieval literature becomes as an anchor to previous ways of thinking that paved the way for modernity and are still relevant to post-modernity. As the works of Chaucer, his contemporaries and his immediate successors travel into the twenty-first century, New Century Chaucer will provide, we hope, a pathway towards new interpretations and a spur to new readers.

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In loving memory of my grandmothers
Malka Stavsky (1921–90) and Ethel Radowsky (1912–2001)
and my uncle Harry Israel Hurwitz (1935–2001)

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AND	*The Anglo-Norman Dictionary*, online edition (*http://www.anglo-norman.net/*)
EETS	Early English Text Society (o.s. = original series)
OED	*The Oxford English Dictionary*, online edition (*http://www.oed.com/*)
MED	*The Middle English Dictionary*, online edition (*http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/*)
MLT	Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*
RS	Rolls Series (Rerum Britannicarum medii aevi scriptores)

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INTRODUCTION

1. Major Themes

Le Bone Florence of Rome[1] is a fine Middle English romance in tail-rhyme stanzas, presented here in a new edition and, for the first time, a complete translation. This book aims to be of service to readers of all levels: scholars, students, teachers and beyond. In addition to providing a more accurate text of the poem and fuller account of its local connections and place in literary history than has so far been available, it delineates the cultural, social and political significance of the extraordinary story it tells. While a case is made for studying *Florence* alongside Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*,[2] the poem should be of interest to anyone intent on exploring medieval attitudes to subjects as diverse as the abuse of power, the stakes of global conflict, women's place in society, their control over their destiny and the influence of spiritual on bodily health. Its breadth of vision and at times subtle artistry call for a fresh look.

Like its Chaucerian analogue, *Florence* charts the progress of a righteous heroine who experiences a series of trials and tribulations: sexual assault or harassment, treachery, displacement and false accusation, all of which are described here in horrifying detail. Besides this general theme, both narratives have a particular episode in common: the slaying of the protagonist's companion or charge by a frustrated suitor, who proceeds to frame her for murder.[3] Other shared motifs include a Near Eastern monarch who desires to be joined to the heroine (*MLT*, 2.176–89, 204–17; *Florence*, 205–25) and her miraculous escape from attempted rape at sea (*MLT*, 2.911–24; *Florence*, 1828–75). These convergences are not accidental: they stem from a vast tradition whose

first known configurations go back to classical and biblical antiquity. Stories of tried women peaked in popularity in the High and, especially, late Middle Ages, with hundreds of extant versions – some thirty in Middle English alone[4] – each differing in the order, intensity and frequency of the protagonist's troubles, their relative importance to the plot, the solutions it finds for them, and the other events with which they are linked. The early modern period saw a gradual decline in the currency of this once widespread theme, at least in the written culture. Still, it persisted in various guises: from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale* to contemporary revisions of canonical works like the 2003 BBC production of the *Man of Law's Tale*, perhaps the most innovative chapter of a miniseries that adapts six of the *Canterbury Tales*.[5]

At the same time, *Florence* diverges from most related narratives – including Chaucer's – in the nearly equal weight it gives to its male characters. Men go to war, form powerful alliances or break them on account of its titular heroine; their actions often receive more attention than do her reactions to them, which are nevertheless rendered in a pithy and memorable way (e.g. 244–9, 910–18, 1511–12). Particular focus is placed on the rise of a Hungarian prince who saves Rome and weds Florence. Like her, he must learn to cope with exile, betrayal and calumny. Though spared the ordeal of attempted rape, he is, at one point, captured, stripped of his possessions and brought before his enemy (922–66); the latter releases him following the pleas of a benevolent officer, who has found him to be 'so feyre a knyght' (792). Not until Florence is abducted from her native city, and the narrator announces that '[o]f hur haue we to sayne' ('[w]e have more to say about her'; 1590), does it become clear that she – rather than her father, husband or one of her various harassers – is the chief protagonist of this romance.

What little scholarship exists on *Le Bone Florence of Rome* has played down the importance of its composite structure, which interlaces the heroine's adventures (analogues of which are found separately elsewhere) with the masculine plotline described above. According to Marijane Osborn, the story of Florence's calumny and exile constitutes a '"tacked-on" last part'[6] detachable from the events leading up to it.

Dividing the romance into two units so as to solve the 'generic or structural confusion' that she attributes to *Florence* owing to its compositeness,[7] Osborn begins the lively verse translation prefacing her study more than halfway into the narrative (l. 1258); the analysis that follows similarly focuses on this section. The protagonist's father Otes and husband Emere, successive emperors of Rome, become in such accounts the mere starting and ending points of a laywoman's trajectory – along with the legitimate male heir, also named Otes, whom she comes full circle by producing.

Even though its plot ends up supporting a patriarchal worldview that stresses women's role as wives and mothers, *Florence* is not exclusively preoccupied with asserting such values. It concludes, instead, with a moral that applies to both genders, who are placed on the same footing as readers or members of the audience: 'Forþy schulde men and women als / Them bethynke or þey be false' ('Therefore, men and women too / Should think twice before being false'; 2176–7). This carefully stated balance should not be taken for granted. Whereas the *Man of Law's Tale* features a pair of double-dealing villainesses, *Florence* has none: of its six minor female characters, two (the governess Awdegon and the castellan's wife Eglantyne) behave rashly though not treacherously, two (the burgess's wife and the abbess) shelter the protagonist, one gives birth to her, and one (the ailing nun) is simply healed by her. Despite the lack of a female villain, the narrator of this romance insists on treating women as ethical subjects who, like men, are capable of making good and bad choices. For the sake of comparison, John Gower packages his 'Tale of Constance', among the sources of the *Man of Law's Tale*, as a cautionary example against 'bakbitinge'[8] relevant to 'every wys *man*' (2.578; italics added). No female reader is envisaged for Gower's story. Instead, its fictional male narratee courts a lady on a pedestal whom he will finally renounce in order to pursue God.

Besides soliciting the attention of both men and women, *Le Bone Florence of Rome* is profoundly concerned with exploring their relationships and mutual dependence. The perspective offered in this romance would have met with the approval of a late-medieval proto-feminist author like Christine de Pizan, whose *Epistle of Cupid* argues

that functional masculinity depends on showing respect for her gender.[9] Christine's *Book of the City of Ladies*, a compendium of narratives about virtuous heroines intended to counter the misogyny rife in much of medieval literature, adapts the popular tale of the Roman Empress, which resembles the account of Florence's exile, and, in homage to the latter story, calls her protagonist Florence of Rome.[10]

The Middle English poem upholds the respectful treatment of women by, for example, having its heroine's father and his council consult with her before taking a decision about her future (238–42, 250–2); they would rather make the ultimate sacrifice than expend her for the sake of peace, even after she voices her preference for the latter course of action (574–85). Similarly, the loyal knight Egravayne twice intervenes on her behalf: he mounts a coup (or rather countercoup) in order to save her from an unwanted marriage with Emere's treacherous brother Mylys (1132–49) and later clears her name in the presence of her rightful husband when Mylys charges her with adultery (1330–76). The significance of these details again stands out in comparison with other narratives of tried women. Early in the *Man of Law's Tale*, the protagonist is married off without her consent, under heavy though futile protest (2.232–332). The tail-rhyme romances *Syr Tryamowre*[11] and the Northern *Octavian*,[12] both of which are found in the same manuscript as *Florence*, as well as most stories belonging to the Roman Empress family, have the husband accept without question the calumny against his wife and order her banishment or execution: a verdict that none of his men dares openly contest.

A recurrent theme in *Le Florence of Rome* – and the occasion for some of its most vividly descriptive scenes – is the various physical defects exhibited or contracted by the male characters who mistreat its heroine. The centenarian emperor Garcy, who launches the plot by demanding that Otes surrender Florence to him, resembles the stock comic figure of the *senex amans*, an old man seized by a passion for a much younger woman that he fails to consummate. In keeping with this stereotype, Garcy's lustful fantasies clash with the reality of a body no longer capable of fulfilling them: he trembles (94), shivers (95–6), coughs (248), groans (248) and probably suffers from impotence (95,

104). Whereas the ageing husbands of Chaucer's *Miller's* and *Merchant's Tale* meet their personal downfall or comeuppance, Garcy also ends up being held responsible for the death of nearly all his male subjects (1204–21). He is forced, symbolically and politically, to forfeit his manhood in punishment for his outrages (1222–33).

By the same token, whereas Florence is blessed with miraculous healing powers after much suffering, four of her persecutors come to express on the surface of their bodies the moral deformities that have motivated them. One is repeatedly struck with impotence when he attempts to rape her (1444–6, 1498–500); another exhibits in due course the symptoms of acute gonorrhoea (2026–8). Only when these culprits stand before the heroine, acknowledge their guilt and confess their sins in public will she agree to make them whole again. A similar correlation between the abuse of women and ill health in the story of the Roman Empress caught the attention of Chaucer's successor Thomas Hoccleve. The fictional persona of his *Series* produces a versified translation of this narrative by request of a concerned Friend in expiation of his allegedly misogynist writings – and also to prove that he is no longer debilitated by insanity.[13]

Lacking a full-scale prequel to their heroine's trials, most analogous narratives emphasise her spiritual growth in the face of adversity, often manifested by the working of miracles. Each time she is forced to leave her domicile, her political significance diminishes, at least until she is reunited with her family. *Le Bone Florence of Rome* differs from this model: before its protagonist is abducted from Rome, the romance draws a sustained parallel between assaults on her personal sovereignty and those directed at the empire. Though she is not a ruler, Florence is a 'body politic' in a sense not unlike that of the medieval and early modern concept of a monarch who embodies the domain over which he or she reigns. Her welfare at once depends on the just government of Rome, as well as of the other communities in which she finds shelter, and indicates their chances of survival. When Florence is allowed to be mistreated, a prince loses his right to inherit his father's realm, another nobleman's lineage is brutally cut off, domestic strife breaks out, and a ship goes under along with nearly all its crew. The opening

situation of *Florence* charges these various catastrophes with a shared political significance.

The first part of this romance may also help to account for a perplexing event that occurs just before its end: after Florence confesses and cures her persecutors, her enraged husband burns them to death, much to her displeasure (2117–21). From a religious point of view, this act is gratuitous if not heretical: Emere denies the efficacy of penance despite its having been miraculously demonstrated in the healing of the four villains. However, from the perspective of secular politics, their crimes against Florence amount to acts of *lèse-majesté*, which the emperor punishes in order to secure his rule, just as King Alla in the *Man of Law's Tale* executes his treasonous mother (2.890–96). Emere will not forget that his wife's previous attempts to pardon two of these offenders have backfired (1276–90, 1721–5). Unlike Alla, he does not seek absolution for his brutality towards them.

Though dismayed by this outcome, Florence does not openly condemn it. Once a vocal protester against the injustices that others have inflicted upon her, she briefly pleads with Emere to reward her few benefactors and then withdraws into silence, outwardly resigned to her loss of authority. The boisterous wedding celebrations that follow barely cover up the question whether she at all wishes to be removed from the convent of Beverfayre, in which she has found shelter and where she has been practising her gift for healing. On the one hand, in addition to praising God for bringing her there (1903–5, 1912–17), Florence had prayed to be reunited with Emere (1810–12). On the other, she had also expressed her desire to become a nun (1099–107) and, upon her arrival at Beverfayre, sworn that she had no 'fere … Leueyng vndur the sonne' ('companion … Living under the sun'; 1906–8).

These loose ends suggest that Emere's burning of the villains and recovery of Florence are but one possible dénouement enabled by the plot of the romance; its conclusion is neither inevitable nor representative of late-medieval standards of conduct. A more detailed examination of the literary relationships of *Le Bone Florence of Rome* will allow us to reconstruct the alternatives that were available to its audience. The very layout of Cambridge, University Library, MS Ff.2.38,

the unique manuscript in which this poem survives alongside copies of three other romances that feature a tried heroine, calls for such a comparative analysis.

2. Literary Relationships and Critical Approaches

Before delving into the extant versions of the Florence story, let us take a broader look at the history of its principal theme and the ways in which scholars have approached it. A survey of this kind is necessary to identify the sources of critical impasses that stand in the way of appreciating the romance and to move beyond them. The first documented appearances of tried heroines occur in two narratives from antiquity: Susanna and the Elders, whose Old Greek recension has been dated to the early first century BCE, and the Hellenistic novel *Callirhoe*, probably written towards the end of that century or the beginning of the next.[14] The latter is preserved in a thirteenth-century Byzantine manuscript, an early-medieval palimpsest and several papyrus fragments; there is no evidence to suggest that it was known in England before the latter half of the sixteenth century. By contrast, the former circulated widely, in a somewhat later version, as chapter 13 of the Vulgate Book of Daniel. It is cited or subtly evoked by quite a few of its medieval relatives such as the alliterative *Pistel of Swete Susan*,[15] Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* (2.639), the likely Old French source of *Le Bone Florence of Rome* known as the *Chanson de Florence de Rome*[16] and the tail-rhyme romance *The Erle of Tolous*,[17] whose best version is bound together with the Middle English *Florence* in Ff.2.38.[18]

These antecedents call into question a prevalent theory about the source of tried-heroines narratives, first articulated in a 1927 dissertation and still cited with astonishing regularity.[19] Its author Margaret Schlauch distinguishes between two stages in the development of what she terms 'accused queen' stories: the first kind has the protagonist threatened by an incestuous father or jealous mother-in-law, whose attempts to dominate or, respectively, dispose of her are vestiges of a prehistoric matriarchal (or rather matrilineal) society; the second type substitutes a frustrated suitor as the heroine's nemesis, who manifests

the patriarchal (or patrilineal) social order of the Middle Ages. In due course, this anthropological hypothesis was translated into literary history. Osborn, for instance, maintains that '[f]olklorists have named what they perceive as the controlling motif "The Calumniated Wife". But the calumny itself … appears to be a medieval variant of an earlier plot in which the incest-threatened woman of royal blood is cast adrift on the sea', which survives in the fourth-century life of St Clement known as the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions*.[20] Susanna and the Elders and *Callirhoe* suggest that Osborn's 'earlier plot' is a different if related theme, which intersected at various junctures with the one in question here. Consequently, one should be wary of assuming that stories of tried heroines with no incest motif are, in fact, repressed-incest tales.

The attempt to uncover the incest motif works best when there is sufficient evidence to betray its occlusion. A case in point is the *Man of Law's Tale*, which features both types of accusation defined by Schlauch. Not only do its closest romance analogues, the Middle English tail-rhyme *Emaré*[21] and the Old French *La Manekine*, begin with unconsummated incest, but its narrator also prefaces his story by saying 'fy' (2.80) on 'swiche unkynde abhomynacions' ('such unnatural abominations'; 2.88).[22] Another scholar applies this approach to John Gower, whose poetry is notoriously obsessed with incestuous relationships and is probably the implied target of the Man of Law's rebuke.[23] However, the relevance of incest to *Le Bone Florence of Rome* is less certain. Though readers of Ff.2.38 would have been familiar with this motif from the tail-rhyme romance *Sir Eglamour of Artois*,[24] which is found there as well, the two narratives differ starkly in their handling of the relationship between father and daughter.

To be sure, Florence enjoys a special bond with Otes. Nevertheless, as opposed to the incestuous emperor in *Eglamour*, he does not object to her being married to another. On the contrary, he does his utmost to keep his daughter from being coupled with the wrong partner even as he encourages her relationship with Emere. He is likewise more respectful of his daughter than is his counterpart in the *Man of Law's Tale*, who sacrifices the protagonist's well-being for the sake of misguided political calculations. Consequently, while *Florence* includes

two heiresses – its heroine and the young girl Betres (Beatrice), whom she is accused of killing – it lacks the intergenerational power struggle between parents and children that motivates *Eglamour* and its analogues, which Schlauch identifies with matrilineal societies. Instead, its forbidden desires give rise to a series of mostly intragenerational conflicts between men who vie for political dominance: Emperor Garcy versus Emperor Otes, Mylys versus his brother Emere, and, finally, Emere versus the men who have kept his wife away from him. The sexual harassments that she faces and successfully thwarts all fit into this scheme.

Another inheritance of earlier scholarship that underlies contemporary ideological readings is a decades-long controversy about the geographical source of the Florence story, that of the Roman Empress and other related narratives, also known as the Crescentia type. One camp, represented by the editor of the *Chanson de Florence*, traced it to a lost Sanskrit tale preserved in later Near Eastern collections. Having presumably reached Europe by the end of the eleventh century, the archetype underwent a number of changes that distinguish its Western from its Oriental versions before splitting into various subgroups. A second group of scholars posited a Germanic, possibly Anglo-Saxon provenance, favoured by what they claimed was the greater antiquity of its surviving traces.[25] Since no conclusive evidence was put forward to solve this disagreement, it was abandoned in the late 1930s. In a recent contribution, however, Ulrich Marzolph has managed to push back the chronology of the extant Near Eastern versions to the early tenth century, thereby refuting the European derivation of this plot. Furthermore, he raises the possibility that it had stemmed from a Jewish oral tradition whose origin is none other than Susanna and the Elders and was later transmitted by Jewish storytellers to both Christian Europe and the Muslim Near East.[26]

Other studies reposition the debate in a different way: they maintain that *Florence* and its analogues not only hail from the Orient but also express an Orientalist fixation with this region.[27] As with enquiries into the 'repressed' incest motif, such arguments seem designed to give a context for Chaucer's works; in so doing, they marginalise