

The Letters of Brunetto Latino. A Nineteenth-Century Literary Hoax

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## THE LETTERS OF BRUNETTO LATINO.

### A NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITERARY HOAX.

COMMENTING on some recent publications dealing with Roger Bacon, Mr A. J. Rahilly makes the following statement<sup>1</sup>:

‘A reliable contemporary account of Bacon’s real work at Oxford would be a valuable addition to our knowledge. Hence I venture with much diffidence to quote a passage which (so far as I know) has remained unnoticed and unknown. In the *Monthly Magazine* for 1802 there was published the translation of some letters from Brunetto Latino to Guido Cavalcanti describing his impressions of a visit to England. The letters are exceedingly interesting and deserve a careful investigation from students of Dante and of English literature. The discussion of their authenticity hardly falls within the competence of the present writer, but there is strong internal evidence of genuineness. Until proof is forthcoming there seems no reason to doubt the authenticity of the following vivid, and strangely neglected description of Bacon at Oxford as seen by a sympathetic and cultured visitor.’ Then follows a long extract from the eighth letter, and the remark that ‘This realistic sketch of Friar Bacon in his laboratory at Oxford is historically far preferable to the usually accepted account<sup>2</sup>.’

We shall have little difficulty in convincing Mr Rahilly that he was dealing with a barefaced forgery.

As the history of this forgery does not appear to have been hitherto set forth, and as—notwithstanding Mr Rahilly’s belief—several other writers besides himself have been misled, it may be well to clear up the matter once for all.

So far as I can gather these letters were first looked upon as historical

<sup>1</sup> *Studies, An Irish Quarterly Review of Letters, Philosophy and Science*, vol. III, No. 11, Dublin, Sept. 1914, pp. 252—55, and pp. 256—57.

<sup>2</sup> In *Studies*, IV, p. 128, March 1915, Mr Rahilly again repeats his belief in the genuineness of these letters.

evidence by Heinrich Julius von Klaproth<sup>1</sup>, who cited the passage dealing with Roger Bacon and the magnet. Klaproth's citation was reproduced by d'Avezac<sup>2</sup>, from whom it passed to Thomas Wright<sup>3</sup>, who in turn was the means of transmitting it to C. R. Beazley<sup>4</sup>, and to Silvanus Thompson<sup>5</sup>. Nordenskiöld<sup>6</sup> has also accepted it.

One is happy to be able to record that no Romance scholar has been misled into believing in these documents. Thor Sundby<sup>7</sup> in his valuable Danish monograph on Brunetto Latino mentions the publications of Klaproth and d'Avezac and states that he was unable to procure the *Monthly Magazine*, but adds in a foot-note that Prof. Van Mehren had informed him that d'Avezac now (1869) believed the letters to be false.

A short analysis of the nine letters follows:

I. *The Monthly Magazine or British Register*, vol. 12, London, Jan. 1802, pp. 524—25. 'Brunetto Latini to Guido Cavelcant, Diteor Greignor (a celebrated poet) at Florence.' English translation with a few phrases in the 'original' French. Brunetto wrote in French, 'en Romans selonc le Patois de France,' and not in Italian, 'porce que la parleure est plus delitable et plus comune atoz languages<sup>8</sup>.' Some remarks on the state of learning in England. A Greek copy of the Fables of Esopus had been found on a ship taken in the Mare Egeum and had been translated into English verse by a pious monk. 'I send you one of these Fables by way of specimen of English poetry.' Then follow 34 verses of which the first eight are:

Alle that will of Wysdam lere,  
Herkeneth to me and ze schal here,  
Appelagues in Greek y writ,  
Esopus, Phrygius witnesset hit;  
Esopus, he, for sothe, in Greke  
Mad Fysch, and Bestes and Fowl to speke,  
Who lyk un to grete Clerkes do preche,  
Men that bin unroyse to teche.

II. *Loc. cit.*, vol. 13, March 1802, pp. 130—31. 'An original letter,

<sup>1</sup> *Lettre à M. le Baron A. de Humboldt, sur l'invention de la Boussole*, Paris, 1834, pp. 45—6.

<sup>2</sup> *Bulletin de la Société Géographique de Paris*, 4<sup>e</sup> série, t. xv, 1858, p. 175. Later, however, as we shall see, d'Avezac realised that the document was a forgery.

<sup>3</sup> See his ed. of Neckam, *De Naturis Rerum*, Rolls Series, 1863, p. xxxvii.

<sup>4</sup> *The Dawn of Modern Geography*, III, 1906, p. 510.

<sup>5</sup> *Proc. Brit. Academy*, 1906, p. 378.

<sup>6</sup> *Periplus*, Eng. Trans., 1897, p. 49.

<sup>7</sup> *Brunetto Latinos Levnet og Skrifter*, Copenhagen, 1869, p. 14 n. 2. There is an Italian translation of this book by Rodolfo Renier with important appendixes by Del Lungo and Mussafia, Firenze, 1884.

<sup>8</sup> These French phrases are taken *verbatim* from Brunetto Latino's *Li Tresors*, I, i, 1 (éd. Chabaille, 1863, p. 3).

freely translated from the Romans selonc le Patois de France, written about the middle of the 13th century by Brunetto Latini, at the Court of Henry the Third, in London, to Guido Cavalcanti.' In a footnote, 'This is translated from a MS. copy of this Romance, as old as the 13th or 14th century, now in the possession of Mr W. Dupré, the translator, who believes the original work was never printed.' The letter begins: 'You are so well pleased with the English poetry which I sent you, that you desire to have a specimen of English prose. I now send you some extracts from a beautiful composition of a monk of great piety and learning. It contains the history of the Fall of Man and of his Redemption through Christ, under the form of a well-contrived allegory. It begins thus: Here is the Book that speketh of a place that is called the Abbey of the Holy Gost the whiche schulde ben founded in clene concience,' etc., etc.

III. *Loc. cit.*, 13, April 1802, pp. 237—40. In this letter 'Brunetto Latini gives a short description of England, Scotland, and Ireland, with some account of the City of London, its citizens, and the Court of Henry the 3rd,—his relation of an Elephant kept in the Tower, and his History of that Animal.' Extracts in French accompany this letter. Here is an example: 'Et sachiez que en la plus grant partie de toutes les ylles, et especiaument en Irlande, na nul serpent, et porce dient li paissant que la ou len portast des pierres ou de la terre dirlande nul sarpent ni poroit demorer<sup>1</sup>.' The elephant<sup>2</sup> was presented to King Henry by the Emperor Frederick the Second, who had received it as a present from the Emperor Prester John, of India.

IV, V, VI, VII. *Loc. cit.*, 13, May 1802, pp. 355—59. French text given. In IV 'Brunetto Latini gives an account of the diversions of the English Nation—English Dogs—their Excellence—History of the Dog—wonderful Instances of the Sagacity and Fidelity of that Animal<sup>3</sup>.' Letters V, VI, and VII deal with the rights of man and government. They are addressed to Charles Count of Anjou and Provence.

VIII. *Loc. cit.*, 13, June 1802, pp. 447—50. Brunetto visits Oxford and meets Roger Bacon, who tells him of his discovery of gunpowder and shows him a magnet<sup>4</sup>, numerous optical instruments, and a Brazen

<sup>1</sup> *Verbatim* from *Li Tresors*, i, iv, 124 (éd. Chabaille, p. 168).

<sup>2</sup> The account of the elephant is also copied out of *Li Tresors*, i, v, 189 (éd. Chabaille, p. 242), with the invented detail of its presentation to King Henry.

<sup>3</sup> The account of the dog may also be read in *Li Tresors*, i, v, 186, pp. 234—37.

<sup>4</sup> Brunetto does mention the magnet (*Li Tresors*, i, iii, 120, p. 147), but our impostor's account is taken almost word for word from the *Bible* of Guyot de Provins (verses 622 to 653). These verses had previously been printed several times.

Head, which emits sounds. They carried on conversations 'en romans selonc le patois de France.'

IX. *Loc. cit.*, 13, July 1802, pp. 549—54. This letter, like the preceding, is addressed to Guido Cavalcanti at Florence, and contains the continuation of the English poem in Letter I. Brunetto had since discovered that its author was a Cistercian monk named William of Skene. After 490 verses comes the remark, 'Here the MS. is imperfect, and the remainder irretrievably lost.' A note at the beginning of the letter states that it is 'translated from an ancient MS. in the Romance tongue of nearly Brunetto Latini's time, in the possession of Mr William Dupré, of Poland-street.' On p. 553 this latter gentleman laments the difficulty he finds in gaining access to the so-called Public Libraries of London, and tells us that he is 'an obscure man, who happens to be fond of letters (perhaps, too, engaged in literary pursuits, and it may be, moreover, in circumstances that are narrow and confined).'

Nothing more was heard from Poland Street on the subject of Brunetto Latino and his letters<sup>1</sup>, but in the *Monthly Magazine* for December 1802 (vol. 14, p. 391) appeared the following announcement signed by the Editor: 'Mr Dupré, the gentleman from whom we received the communications respecting Brunetto Latini, which have appeared in several numbers of our Magazine, has thought proper, though not *till after detection*, to confess that he has been imposing upon us, and that, in the supposed letters of that person, he only meant to give a picture of English literature and manners, as they existed at that period, in imitation of the French Anacharsis. We so little approve of impositions of any kind, that we think it necessary to ask pardon of our readers for having led them into a temporary error; and we imagine we cannot better atone for our inadvertence, than by subjoining a genuine account of Brunetto Latini from the accurate Tiraboschi,' etc.

The main source of Mr William Dupré's forgery was evidently the *Tresors* of Brunetto Latino, of which he had either procured a MS., or seen one in some library (probably the British Museum). In addition he used the already published extract from the *Bible* of Guyot de Provins, and other works, the tracing of which is not worth the time. Even without his own confession these letters would certainly have

<sup>1</sup> Some observations on and emendations of these letters by a Manchester writer named Delisle, who had no suspicions concerning their authenticity, appeared in the May, June, and August numbers of the same Magazine (vol. 13, pp. 315, 445; vol. 14, pp. 4—5).

been pronounced false by any trained philologist. Concerning the personal history of this disciple of Macpherson and Ireland I have not succeeded in finding any information<sup>1</sup>. He was clearly not imposing on the public when he described himself as 'an obscure man.'

MARIO ESPOSITO.

DUBLIN.

<sup>1</sup> No doubt he is to be identified with William Dupré, author of *Lexicographia-neologica Gallica. The Neological French Dictionary; containing words of new creation, not to be found in any French and English vocabulary hitherto published*, etc. London, 1801, 8vo.