

Ecco come Isabel Ferrari della classe 3A del Liceo Classico Ariosto ha ipotizzato il ritrovamento e il relativo contenuto di uno dei racconti mancanti della raccolta "Racconti di Canterbury" di G. Chaucer. Complimenti ad Isabel! (prof.ssa Donatella Bartoli)

The Canterbury Tales

The lost 25th story – the Parson's Tale

Prologue: the lost manuscript

Naomi almost ran through the open door of the university's library and didn't stop until she reached the last desk, in the south corner of the room. Nobody was sitting there, studying, nobody went to that section to look for books, because sitting at that desk, completely lost in a whispered conversation with a young woman, there was the university rector. Naomi suddenly stopped, and her clear eyes met the book on the desk. She bit her lips, staring at the old, yellow pages. –Collins, you're here. – said the rector, shaking his head as he was waking up from a dream. The blonde woman nodded and looked at him. –I am. Is it...is it *that book*? – the old man sighed, and looked at the woman sitting beside him, waiting for her to explain. She took off her glasses and looked at Naomi in the eyes, with a spark of curiosity on her face. –We don't know yet. Not for sure, at least. We'll have to wait for the results of the tests to know how old it is, but... – she hesitated. Naomi got around the desk and the rector stood up to let her get closer. –But? – asked again the historian. It was the rector who replied. –But we think it could be. – Naomi bit her lips again, trying to contain her excitement. –One of the oldest copies of the Canterbury Tales... – she whispered, her eyes glowing as she looked at the old pages in front of her. –The oldest, I think. – added the other woman. Naomi looked at her, this time paying really attention. They had never met each other before. –Miss Collins, this is miss Stephanie Fitch, from the University of Edinburgh. She's here to help us with the manuscript. – Naomi shook rapidly the hand the other one was offering. Stephanie was a tall, red-haired and beautiful woman, with a pair of deep green eyes that studied the blonde one for a few seconds before she smiled kindly. Naomi smiled back. –Welcome to London, miss Fitch. Thank you for your help. – Stephanie nodded and pointed the manuscript once again. –You're welcome. So, when are we going to start? –

The rector's hands were almost shaking as he opened the envelope with the results of the tests that would have revealed how old the manuscript was. The whole discovery of the book and its journey to London were still a secret for the world, as the historians who found it wanted to be sure before announcing anything. Unfortunately, they were not translators, and that was why Naomi was there. She was the best of the best, despite her young age, and the rector called her first when he got to know about the manuscript. –What does it say? – asked Naomi anxiously after he had rapidly read the papers the envelop contained. The face of the rector had turned white, he seemed very excited. –It...it says this manuscript is from the first years of 1400, probably older. Do...do you know what that means? – –Yes. – replied Stephanie with a wide smile. –It means it may have been written while Chaucer was still alive. It means it may be *his manuscript*. – Naomi put a hand on her mouth, her eyes glowing. The rector took a deep breath and looked seriously at the two women. –But we don't know for sure. Stephanie and I have already tried to read it, and it's clearly incomplete. The whole first part is missing, and so is for some of the tales in the middle. I want you two to analyze the end and try to translate it with as much care as you can. Find out what it is, and if

there are differences with the other texts we have discovered before. But don't talk to anyone about this book. – his severe words received the agreement of both the young historians. –What if we discover it is different? What if this is the real and unknown copy of the Canterbury Tales? – asked Stephanie, brushing softly the old pages. –Then you will have part of the merit, miss Fitch, in one of the greatest discoveries of our century. – she smiled. Naomi sat at the desk and the red-haired woman did the same. –Ok. Let's begin. – said the blonde as the rector was leaving.

As she typed the translation of page 150 of the manuscript on her computer, Naomi was starting to feel disappointed. After three days of fruitless research and sleepless nights and a shocking amount of caffeine doses, they still had found nothing different from the others version of the Tales. Not even a comma in the wrong place. She sighed and closed her eyes for a few seconds, trying to regain concentration. Steph looked at her with a little smile. –Don't worry, we'll find something. – she whispered. It was nine o'clock pm and the library was completely empty. The rector had a couple of desks reserved for them, and now that they were completely filled with papers the two women started putting things on the floor. –I'm starting to losing hope. I mean, maybe it isn't as old as we thought. Maybe the other versions are equally plausible. – Steph put down her pencil and turned to Naomi. –Maybe. Or maybe, this is Chaucer's manuscript. The real one. Can you even imagine that? – Naomi smiled. –Honestly, I can. – Steph smiled back. Naomi stood up. – I'll go to get some more coffee. – Steph nodded and the blonde walked away. She was almost at the door when she heard the other one calling her loudly. –Naomi! I think...I think I've found something. – the blonde almost ran back to the desks. Steph showed her a page from the introduction to the last tale. Naomi read it aloud as Steph rapidly wrote down a quick translation, that sounded more or less like this:

*And on a morning in our lovely journey,
The Host asked to the rest of the company
If anyone had a good story to tell,
And the quiet Parson replied: "Well,
My tale is not like the one you told
As it talks about facts that are very old
But true as the sun you see in the sky.
Now let me begin, before it gets to midnight..."*

Naomi looked at the manuscript's page and then at Steph's translation, again and again. –This is not the introduction to the Parson's Tale. – she whispered. Steph glanced at her and chuckled. –Not in all the other versions of the Canterbury Tales, at least. – she replied. –We've found it. We've found it! – she suddenly stood up and Naomi gave her an emotional look, smiling widely. –We have to translate it. It may be a complete another tale! – the two historians sat simultaneously back at the desks, and started working with even more dedication. The results of their hard work is also known as The Lost 25th Tale, or The Parson's Tale.

The Parson's Tale: The Lost Heir

When our beloved King's father was holding the great Kingdom of England, it happened that one of his loyal Lords and cousin married a lovely Lady from one of the central counties of the kingdom and so he became the Count of those territories. Now you, my dear pilgrims, will excuse me if I can't tell you the name and the titles of these noble people, but it hasn't been so long since these facts happened, and I

would never like someone to be offended by what I'm going to tell you or neither to damage the undefiled memory of such important people. What I can say is that I learnt this story from the pages of the diary of the Parson that looked after my town before me, and I have all the reasons to believe it is true. But, let's get back to the story now. The Count and his wife lived happily for years, in love and prosperity, and they had a son called Richard. He grew in strength and nobility of heart in his father's castle for sixteen years and became the worthy heir by birth. But peace was not meant to last. In fact, even the Lord that lived in the nearest county had tried to marry Richard's mother, but had been rejected. He hated the new Count and his son even more, as he desired his inheritance for himself. That evil man, whose name was Arthur, decided it was time to take his revenge. So he invited the Lady and her son to his castle, and planned an ambush for them. While their carriage was running through the forest, a group of men dressed in black and with their faces covered by the cloaks attacked them, appearing from the green like thunders in the sky during a storm. They quickly killed the men that were meant to protect the carriage, and then forced Richard and his mother to get out of the carriage. Richard fought like a young lion to defend his mother, struggling and screaming as the men tried to catch them. But they were too many. He fell, and the nearest mugger was about to stab him, when the lady jumped in his way shouting. Richard saw his mother fall, bleeding, reaching out a hand to touch her son for the last time, before something hit him in the head and he fainted.

Believing Richard was dead, the men stole what they could from the carriage, then went back to Lord Arthur's castle. In fact, it was him who had sent them to kill his enemy's wife and son. But their ambush didn't get unnoticed as they thought. Someone else had seen the whole scene, and had waited for the right moment to intervene. It was an outlaw, a man whose past was dark and unknown for everyone, that lived in the forest hunting the King's stags and asking for a small fee to 'protect' the noblemen that wanted to cross his path safely. His name was William, but the peasants called him the Green Sir because of the green hood he used to wear. When Richard woke up, he found William sitting quietly next to him. The young man was frightened and confused, especially because of the body of his mother still abandoned a few feet away. –Don't be afraid, kid. I won't hurt you. – said William standing up and offering him a hand. Richard hesitated, but then accepted his help to raise. –Who are you? – he asked. –They call me the Green Sir. – Richard recognized the name and opened his eyes wide. There were many stories about the forest's outlaw. But then he looked around at his mother's body and at the other dead men and sighed, feeling like someone had really stabbed him right in his heart. –Thank you for your help. I have to go now, I have to find my father and tell him... – but William immediately stopped him. –Wait, boy, wait. Where do you think you're going? Those men weren't common outlaws. They were sent for a specific purpose, which is to kill you and your mother. Do you think they will let you get out of this forest alive? – Richard shook his head. –I don't understand. Who sent them? – the Green Sir sighed. –It doesn't matter. Now, you have two choices. You can run back to your father, and end up murdered in the attempt. Or you can calm down and stay here, where you'll be safe. Trust me. – Richard hesitated, but then nodded. –Alright. I'm in your hands, Green Sir. – the outlaw gave him a look and smiled sadly. –I'm sorry, kid. Now help me. Let's give a respectable burial to these gentlemen, and to your mother. –

Richard lived in the forest with William for a couple of days, before he got to know that his father's castle was besieged by Lord Arthur. Once again he wanted to return, and once again William was able to convince him to stay away. The outlaw lived in a simple little cottage in the forest, so far from the most known paths that Richard was close to get lost more than once. He was a reserved, quiet and brooding man, toughened by long years spent in loneliness, but he was very kind with Richard and did his very best to help the young man. Maybe, because he reminded him of himself as a boy. He gave him one of his bows and a hood similar to the one he wore, and Richard appreciated this gesture a lot. He had always been good at archery. A few

days later, William returned from town with bad news written on his face. Richard was waiting for him outside the cottage, lying down on the fresh grass and thinking about his mother, as he used to do a lot in those days. –Hey man, why are you so dour? – William glanced at him, thinking about how surprisingly receptive that fellow was. –I have some news from your father's castle, and they're not good at all. – Richard sat up and looked seriously in his direction. –And? – William sighed. –The castle has fallen. Your dad's dead. – Richard sobbed quietly, bending down his head. –I'm really sorry, kid. – said William, gently patting his back. Richard dried the tears that were rolling down his cheeks and shook his head. –I'm not a kid, not anymore. They took all I had. My family, my titles, my inheritance. I have nothing now. – William sighed again. –You have your life. Now you just have to decide how to use it. You know your enemy is now the owner of what belongs to you, right?– the young boy nodded. –Yes. And I can't do anything right now. But I swear one day I'll take my revenge. – Richard looked up at the Green Sir, and a spark of hope lightened up his eyes.

For ten years Richard lived in the forest with the Green Sir. He became an outlaw, and people started to call him the Heir of the Green Sir, and then only the Heir. A nickname that was as unusual as ironical, but nobody could know it except the two outlaws. Richard had never forgotten his origins, and was secretly waiting for the day he would have been able to revenge his parents and get back his titles and territories. And that time seemed to have come, on a morning in Autumn, when our King had just received his crown. Richard was hunting in the forest, when he heard a woman screaming from somewhere nearby. He quickly reached the place the screams were coming from and here he found a young girl in rich clothes trying to calm down a horse, from which she had to have fallen. He immediately grabbed the horse's rein and tried to stop it. When he finally succeeded and turned around to the young lady, she was looking at him with a hand covering her mouth, clearly frightened. Richard smiled at her, trying to comfort her. –Don't be afraid, milady. I don't want to hurt you in any way. Indeed, please tell me if there's something I can do to help you. – despite the long years in the forest, Richard hadn't lost his noble manners or his charm at all. The girl seemed to be a little comforted by his words and took a step forward. –Thank you, sir. I'm afraid I got lost...my horse must have seen something and he started to run and I fell. – Richard offered her the reins of the animal. –I understand. Forgive my curiosity, milady, but why are you alone? This is not a safe place for a lady. – the girl blushed, but then smiled. –Oh, do you mean there are outlaws in these woods? – Richard laughed, looking at the lady with more attention. She was such a beautiful young woman, with long brown hair and a pair of deep doe-eyes that captured his gaze immediately. –Well, milady, outlaws are probably what you need to worry the least in this forest, especially if you want to travel alone. There are wolves, bears and men who are much worse than outlaws. – his tone was joking, but his eyes were very serious, warning her of the danger she was in. The lady nodded, thoughtful. –Then I hope I will get to my uncle's house safe. Can you please show me the way to the nearest county? – Richard hesitated, then smiled. – Well, in normal circumstances, I don't guide people through my forest, especially not for free. But, as I'm a gentleman, I could never let a lady travel alone in such a bad place. So I pray thee to let me accompany you to your destination, milady. – the girl seemed to be uncertain, as she reflected biting her lower lip. It was certainly not really wise to accept the help of an unknown guy that looked so like an outlaw in the middle of a forest. But, his green eyes seemed so honest, and his smile was so kind. And, without him, she thought she would have ended up lost or worse. So she accepted his offer and his help to mount on the horse again. Richard grabbed the reins again and guided the horse back to the path. –I still don't know your name, sir... – said softly the lady. Richard smiled at her with a mysterious air. –They call me the Heir, milady. – she seemed surprised. –So you are the famous outlaw? – Richard nodded with a little smile. –The one and only. But you don't have to be afraid. I'm quite a gentleman, for a man that's betrayed the law after it betrayed him. – The lady glanced at him, made curious by that sentence. –And you don't have any other name, sir

Heir? – she asked in the end with a smile. Richard smiled back. –I used to. – he passed a hand through his short hair, and added –But you can call me Richard, milady. – the young woman nodded, putting a lock of hair back beyond her ear. –I’m happy that I met you, Richard. My name’s Laura. – they looked at each others’ eyes and got lost for a few seconds. –Let me say that you’re very beautiful, Laura. – whispered Richard.

Richard accompanied Laura up to the nearest town limits, which was not distant from her uncle’s house. When it was time for them to separate, Laura tried to give him her silver necklace, but he refused. –I don’t want any payment for what I’ve done, milady. – Laura smiled at him. –If you don’t want to take it now, I will give it to you when we’ll meet again. I’m sure you’ll find the way to my uncle’s house. – Richard smiled, feeling his heart become suddenly very light in his chest. –I will. – he simply replied, and with that promise Laura rode away. Richard looked at her going away for a while, then went back to the forest.

Almost a week later, Laura was watching the stars from the window of her room when she suddenly saw a shadow approaching through the garden. The shadow got closer and closer, and a well-known voice whispered. –I think I found you, milady. – since that night, the two young lovers had been meeting almost every night at the lady’s window. She told him about the death of her parents and the uncle she had to live with now. He told her his story, sharing it with someone for the first time in ten years. And, slowly, he began to long for a different destiny. If he could have his titles and inheritance back, he might marry Laura, and live with her in the castle that was of his parents. To the desire of revenge, a desire for a new future had been added. But Lord Arthur still held the power in Richard’s father castle and there was apparently no way to get his possessions back. However, the young outlaw was determined to do all he could to succeed. One night, he went to his mother’s tomb. He used to bring her flowers every week, and sometimes sat beside the gravestone and told her about his life. It was simply a way to feel less lonely. That night, Richard told his mother about Laura. About her beautiful eyes, her melodious laugh, her sensitivity. He narrated the way they met and their first kiss. He confessed he loved and wanted to marry her. Richard promised he would have taken back what was due to him, that night, on his mother’s gravestone.

The Heir and the Green Sir were sitting one in front of the other outside the cottage. William’s face was really serious. He sighed, and opened his mouth as if he was about to speak. Then he closed it and waited for a few more seconds. Richard stayed silent, waiting for him to say something. –Alright. So you basically want to fight a Lord almost alone and demonstrate you’re the legitimate heir of the county. Oh, and then marry a girl whose family doesn’t even know of your existence. – Richard nodded. –Look, I understand if you don’t want to get involved, but I have to do this. It’s my only chance to have my life back. – the Green Sir looked at him right in the eyes, right in the soul. And smiled. –Don’t be silly, kid. I said you are *almost* alone. Of course I will help you. And I think I know a couple of friends who may want to do so. – Richard almost jumped up and hugged him. –Thank you, Will. For everything. – the other man smiled kindly. – You’re welcome kid. Now come on, let’s try not to get killed... –

For ten years, Richard had kept the ring his father had given him before sending him to the trip which had led his wife to death. Now Richard could use it as a proof of his birth. He and William had gathered a big number of outlaws from the near towns and were planning to attack Lord Arthur in his castle. So a couple of days before the date established, Richard went to Laura’s house to tell her what he was up to. She was very worried about him, but didn’t try to make him change his mind. She knew he was never going to give up. –Just be careful, please. – she said before letting him go. So the young man went back to the forest. But while he was on his way back, some guards of the Count recognized him as the Heir and tried to catch him.

Richard ran away towards the forest, but the men chased him and caught him. He was brought to the castle and imprisoned as an outlaw. In two days he would have been executed.

All Richard's possessions were brought to Lord Arthur. His bow, his sword, and the ring. The lord immediately recognized the symbol on it and understood who his prisoner was. –I want you to kill him now! – he shouted to his men, suddenly haunted by the ghost of his past crimes. The guards ran back to the prison where he was kept, but found the cell was empty. Someone had helped Richard escape and killed a guard in the meantime. They immediately got their horses and started the hunt.

Richard and William had fled to the forest after stealing a couple of horses. –William, you have to go. Gather the men and wait for me near the castle. This evening we will attack. – said Richard with decision. The Green Sir gazed at him. –And you? Where are you going? – he asked. –They're chasing me, they want me. I'll make them get lost in the forest and then meet you. Now go, quick! – William nodded, and turned his horse. –Be careful, kid. And good luck. – then he rode away. Richard spurred his horse and ran into the forest, already hearing the sound of his pursuers.

He was almost sure he was safe, when he heard another horse approaching. He was ready to fight when the animal got closer, but on it there wasn't a guard. There was Laura. Richard got off his horse and ran to her, who had done the same. They hugged tightly. –What are you doing here, Laura? It's not safe, they're chasing me. They know who I am. – whispered Richard, his lips pressed on her hair. Laura held him tighter. –I heard you escaped and went looking for you. I was so worried! I thought they had killed you. – Richard sighed. –They will, if they find me. You have to run, right now! If they see us together they will kill you. – he hesitated, then kissed her with all the emotion his heart was able to feel. And Laura understood it may have been their last kiss. His goodbye kiss. –I love you. Now go. – Richard whispered. Laura nodded and mounted back on her horse. Richard waited for her to leave before going away. He wanted to be sure she was safe. But, only a few seconds after she had disappeared from his sight, he heard the horse neigh and his lover scream. He ran to her, as fast as he could.

Laura saw the arrow hitting the horse's leg and a few seconds later she fell to the ground with the injured animal. She screamed as the guards reached for her. Then, she saw a familiar green hood and Richard's voice shouting at the men. Richard jumped between her and the guards and started fighting with the men, who had immediately recognized her. He was good and seemed to be able to win. But then another guard came out of the green, drawing his bow. It all happened in a few moments. The guard released his breath, and the arrow. Richard killed a man. The arrow penetrated Richard's chest. Laura screamed. Richard turned to her, his blood slowly spilling from his chest. A man took a step towards him, his blade directed to his head. –No! – Laura screamed, trying to get in the man's way. The sword hit her strongly, and she fell on her knees, beside her lover. She was crying. Richard reached out a hand to touch her cheek softly, then took his last breath. Laura bent on his body, with her head on his chest. Then she closed her eyes.

The Green Sir found the abandoned bodies of the two lovers a couple of hours later. He cried bitterly, seeing the young man he had grown up like a son and his beloved lady, together even in death. He buried them, helped by the other outlaws that spent many days singing in the forest, remembering their brave friend known as the Heir. Many ballades were composed about him and the lovely Laura, so that their love will live forever, despite destiny and death. And William, after that night, abandoned the forest and became a monk. He was sent in a small town in a different county, where he became an honest and quiet parson. Lord Arthur fell ill a couple of days after. He seemed to have visions, as they tell, about a lady he used to love in youth and a young man haunting his dreams, reminding him of all the terrible things he had done. When he died, a month later, his feud returned to the King, as he had no heir...

I don't know if this story is really true, my dear pilgrims, but I hope you liked it and that it will always remind you of the strength of true love and...

Epilogue: Can you trust History?

Naomi and Steph stared at the last lines of the manuscript for almost a minute. The narration was sudden interrupted, and there were no more pages of the old book. –Oh come on, it can't end like this! – said Steph. Naomi shook her head. –I don't understand. This isn't an allegoric tale, a comic or magic one and it doesn't even have a moral! Why did Chaucer write it? And why wasn't it in the other copies? – they looked at each other, and got an idea in the same moment. –Maybe he wanted to publish it, but he couldn't. I mean, the Parson talks about the characters giving only their names because he's afraid someone may recognize the people involved. – said Steph slowly. Naomi nodded. –Because the story is true. So...maybe Chaucer really heard this story from someone, and decided to write it down. But it was really true and someone didn't want it to come out. – Steph looked at the manuscript, surprised and curious at the same time. –So they forced Chaucer to write another tale for the Parson, and then he died before finishing the Tales. Maybe he was killed because of this tale! – she exclaimed. But Naomi shook her head again. –Maybe. But we have no proofs at all. Probably Chaucer died naturally and he we didn't know this tale just because he decided to replace it with the other one. Maybe it has not even been written by him. – Steph looked at her and smiled. –Maybe we will never know. But I think sometimes you just need to believe, and run the risk. In the end, can we really trust what the fog of centuries has brought to us? Or should we change our point of view, to find the truth? –

The End