

CHAUCER AS A LITERARY ARTIST

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Geoffrey Chaucer may be called the first English poet, in as much as he first created out of the dialects of Norman and Saxon a literature to be the nucleus of a national language.

Chaucer did not lead the life of a secluded poet, but assumed the duties of public service. As a page at the court of Edward III. he became associated with nobility; as a soldier he served in the French campaign; and later, on royal missions, he visited the continent, where he came under the influence of the French and Italian literatures. As scholar, courtier, soldier, and ambassador, he came in close touch with life in all its stations, and ever adjusting himself to his varying conditions, he was as much at ease with the knight as with the yeoman. With such a knowledge of human nature, which experience had taught him, he was well fitted for his subject, men.

Though a translator and a disciple of the French and Italian poets, Chaucer was original and individual, in that he drew for us with an honest pen, the world as it actually appeared to him. The freshness and vigor with which he enlivens the old legends to suit the tastes of his time are characteristic of the poet himself, and in this much is he always natural. It is distinctly the spirit of Chaucer, we feel infused into the collected ore, which he has smelted in the

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crucible of his own imagination, and the delicacy of sentiment and lightness of style to be found in Chaucer's verse, are not surpassed in any literature.

Chaucer could not be duly appreciated by contemporary critics or critics of later times because no principles had been formulated for his metrical schemes. Thus his apparent indifference to rhythm alone obscured the better qualities of his style; but now since it has been found that he was in reality a skillful meterist, an altogether different light is thrown upon his artistic powers.

There is a melody in his verse as rich as the notes of the wild-wood songster. With a spontaneity it rises into the most exquisite ecstasies, changes into the softest cadences, and is forever running in-to the most delightful harmonies.

"The bisy larke, messenger of day,
Salueth in hir song the morwe gray,
And firy Phebus riseth up so brighte
That al the orient laugheth of the lighte,
And with hise stremes dryeth in the greues
The silver dropes hangynge on the leues."

Chaucer employs the alliterative device oftentimes with great effect, as in the opening lines of the Prologue:

"Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
And palmeres for to seken strange strondes."

Here is another example from his sketch of the Shipman:

"If that he faught and hadde the hyer hond,
By water he sente hem hoom to every lond."

He frequently employs antithesis when he wishes to draw distinctions:

"Thyn is affeccioun of hoolynesse,
And myn is love as to a creature;"

and again when the spectators express their choice of the knights at the contest,

"Somme seyden thus, somme seyde it shal be so,
Some helden with hym with the blake berd,
Some with the balled, somme with the thikke herd,
Somme seyde he looked grymme, and he wolde fighte,
He hath a sparth of twenty pound of wighte."

Chaucer secures some of his best results by the use of onomatopoeia, making the sense of his verse doubly suggestive by the appropriateness of words. In his description of the Monk there is such an effect:-

"And whan he rood, men myghte his brydel heere
Gynglen in a whistlynge wynd als cleere,
And eek as loude, as dooth the chapel belle."

His most famous passage is the description of the contest in the *Knights Tale*, in which the reversal of rhythm adds to the swift moving action of the scene.

"The heraudes lefte hir prikyng up and doun;
Now ryngen trompes loude and clarioun;
Ther is namoore to seyn, but west and est
In goon the speres ful sadly in arrest;
In gooth the sharpe spore into the syde.
Ther seen men who kan just and who kan ryde;

Ther shyveren shaftes upon sheeldes thikke;
He feeleth thurgh the hertespoon the prikke.
Up spryngen speres twenty foot on highte;
Out goon the swerdes as the silver brighte;
The helmes they tohewen and toshrede,
Out brest the blood with stierne stremes rede;
With myghty maces the bones they tobreste.
He thurgh the thikkeste of the throng gan threste;
Ther stomblen steedes strong, and doun gooth al;
He rolleth under foot as dooth a ball;
He foyneth on his feet with his tronchoun,
And he hym hurtleth with his hors adoun;
He thurgh the body is hurt and sithen y-take,
Maugree his heed, and broght unto the stake;
As forward was, right ther he moste abyde.
Another lad is on that oother syde."

Chaucer was a voluminous reader, and acquired his enormous intellectual wealth from the classics. His deep appreciation enabled him to introduce the subjective element into narration in such a way that we are not displeased to learn the impression of the narrator rather than of the hero. Thus he seems to be placed in an attitude of criticism of his own work, and he is always eager to poke fun at himself. In the Franklin's Tale, after having given an elaborate description of sunset, he abruptly ends with this good-natured apology:-

"This is as mucche to say as it was night."

Chaucer's language is that of every-day life. It never

smacks of artificial diction, and there are no distorted passages resulting from confusion in the choice of expression. His terms are plain, and therefore best suited to the simplicity of his subjects; but they are nevertheless invested with force and a rare poetic charm. His simplicity is all the more effective because he seems to have understated his impression. The most common-place incident is animated by the touch of his hand, and there is a surprising audacity with which he makes transitions from the gravest to the lightest topics. With a nimble fancy he leads you among flowers, through shade and sunshine, and you are committed entirely to the guidance of his imagination.

To his naturalness must we also attribute his power as a descriptive artist. He is never striving for effect, nor does he betray any signs of effort in his choice of words; but his pictures are drawn with such an ease and grace, that we admire their wonderful simplicity. The vividness of his descriptions must be attributed to the definite outlines with which the objects first took shape in the mind of the great poet. His pictures are life-like and real; and at his mere suggestion we feel the warmth of sunshine, inhale the freshness of spring, and sometimes feel the presence of an animated being whom he has chosen to place in the fore-ground of his picture. An example is had in his description of Emilye in the garden.

"Yclothed was she fresshe for to devyse:

Hir yelow heer was broyded in a tresse

Bihynde hir bak, a yerde long, I gesse.
And in the gardyn at the sonne^{up}-riste
She walketh up and doun, and as hir liste
She gadereth floures, party white and rede,
To make a subtil gerland for hir hede,
And as an aunȝel hevenyssshly she soong."

While Chaucer's style is that of a marked simplicity, he frequently will relieve your senses with a scene of gothic picturesqueness. This trait is brought out in his description of Dorigen's "castle faste by the see," in the Franklin's Tale, from which she could outline the "grisly rokkes blake" off the coast of Brittany. A breath of springtime will forever linger in the first lines of the Prologue to perpetuate its fame as as a perfect specimen of season description. Chaucer is best in his portraiture of character, for he gives not only a good idea of their appearance, but also a deep insight into the natures of his subjects. Of the Nun, so simple and coy, he says,

"Ful weel she soong the service dyvyne,
Entuned in hir nose ful semely,"

and of the Shipman so hardy and "wys to undertake,"

"If that he faught and hadde the hyer hond,
By water he sente hem hoom to eery lond."

After detailing the Monk's character, he paints him thus:

"His heed was balled that shoon as any glas,
And eek his face as he hadde been enoynt.
He was a lord ful fat and in good poynt;"

and of the Friar:

"He was an esy man to give penaunce

Ther as he wiste to have a good pitaunce."

In the sketch of the Maunciple, Chaucer makes a sly thrust at the benchers of the Inns of Court, manifestly astonished,

"That such a lewed mannes wit shal pace

The wisdom of an heep of lerned men!"

In the "poure Persoun of a Toun" he has drawn a real man.

"Benygne he was and wonder diligent,

And in adversitee ful pacient,

And swich he was ypreved ofte sithes.

Ful looth were hym to cursen for hise tithes,

But rather wolde he given out of doute,

Unto his poure parisshens aboute

Of his offryng and eek of his substaunce;

He koude in litel thyng have suffisaunce."

There are numberless cases which could be used to show how perfectly Chaucer understood the art of character sketching, but these would not suffice to give even an idea of how much more vividly he sets forth the natures of men by words and actions.

Chaucer's fame as an artist came of his genius as a story-teller, He escaped the tedious prolixity of earlier English poetry, and combined all their better qualities to which he directed his reader's interest. He possessed a fine sense of artistic propriety, and wrote his verse with an eye to unity and proportion. His scenery is picturesque but real, and though he is constantly shifting the settings of his tales,

he holds the interest of the reader so closely centered in the Canterbury Pilgrims, their caprices and eccentricities, that the change is a matter of secondary importance, and is therefore scarcely perceptible. It is in this way that his fancy leads us following the varying fortunes of Palamoun and Arcite, in the Knightes Tale.

Humor is the predominant emotional quality of Chaucer's style, but still at times this gives way to a serious philosophy; as Chaucer looked wistfully upon the serious side of life, he said,

"This world nis but a thurghfare ful wo,
And we been pilgrimes passynge to and fro;
Deeth is an ende of every worldly soore;"

but since he was not unconscious of the part that he himself was playing, for his fellow creature he had a feeling of sympathy, in which he nourished a sense of humor. Sometimes, when he feels himself to have dwelt a little too fondly upon the chords of sadness, he will, suddenly to your surprise, relieve your depression by a mere hint at the humorous. Such an abrupt turn follows upon the ^{pathetic} farewell of Arcite in the Knightes Tale.

"So greet a wepyng was ther noon, certayn,
Whan Ector was y-brought al fressh y-slayn
To Troye. Allas! the pitee that was ther,
Cracchyng of ohekes, rentynge eek of heer.

'Why woldestow be deed?' thise wommen crye,
'And haddest gold ynough, and Emelye.' "

One of the most delightful qualities of his style is

his mild satire. His ridicule is keen, but it does not carry malice, and the way in which he pokes fun at the institutions and customs of his period, only give to his narration an interest more local. For instance he gives a sly thrust at the doctor.

"And certainly ther Nature wol nat wirche
Farewel, Phisik! go ber the man to chirche!"

In like vein he exposes the practices of the Miller.

"Wel coude he stelen corn and tollen thries—
And yet he hadde a thombe of gold, pardee!"

In the Monkes Tale he ridicules the long-windedness of Gower, and in Sir Thopas the romances of Chivalry.

"Sometimes he describes amply by the merest hint," says Lowell, "as where the Friar, before setting himself softly down, drives away the cat. We know without further words that he has chosen the snuggest corner.

"With his imaginative faculty," again says Lowell, "he embodies revenge in a verse that makes us glance over our shoulder as if we heard a stealthy step behind us:-

"The smiler with the knyfe under the cloke."

"One of the worlds three or four greatest story-tellers, he was also one of the best versifiers that ever made English trip and sing with a gayety that seems careless, but where every foot beats time to the tune of the thought."

No writer of our speech ever contributed more to the vast variety of metrical forms. He introduced combinations to which

the genius of the language, naturally adapted itself, that they have since become the general vehicle which poetical activity has employed. In the matter of versification, he was both a reformer and inventor.

When Chaucer first began his poetical works, there were practically only three kinds of verse to be employed. First, there was the ancient alliterative verse, the form of the Teutonic poetry, of which *Piers Plowman* is an example.

"Ther preched a Pardoner, as he a prest were,
 Broghte forth a bulle, with bishopes seles,
 And seide that hymself mighte, assoillen hem alle,
 Of falshed, of fastynge, of vowes ybroken;"

second, there was the rhyming verse of narration and tales, which though varying in the detail of lines and syllables, was composed of a class of verse similarly familiar. *Sir Thopas* is an exemplification of this verse.

"Yet listeth, lordes, to my tale
 Merier than the nightingale,
 For Now I wol yow rounce
 How sir Thopas with dydes smale,
 Priking over hil and dale,
 Is come agayn to toune;"

third, there was the octosyllabic verse, the favorite form and most widely used for narration. The scheme of the *Hous of Fame* affords an illustration here:

"So song the myghty muse, she
 That cleped is Caliopee,
 And hir eighte sustren eek

That in hir face semen meke;
And evermo eternally
They Singe of Fame."

In addition to these, Chaucer introduced a line of ten syllables, the heroic couplet, the form most suited to the lofty flights of imagination, because it could impart dignity, power and majesty of movement.

He also^{first} used the seven line stanza of five accents, having three rimes. This form was known as the rhyme royal, and was employed afterwards by many successive poets. The greater part of Chaucer's poetry was written in the octosyllabic rhyming couplet, the seven line stanza, and the heroic couplet. These are the main though not the only measures he attempted.

In order to illustrate with what unity and force Chaucer developed his tales, I shall ask you to bear with me briefly in the Pardoner's Tale, which he probably wrote, when all his powers were at their height, and in which he establishes his ability as a dramatic artist.

In this tale the character of the Pardoner has been drawn with such fine detail, that for a long while it was misunderstood.

When Harry Bailly turns to the Pardoner for a "mery tale" the "lordinges" of the company demand of him a moral tale:

"Tell us som moral thing that we may lere
Some wit, and then wol we gladly gladly here."

By force of habit the Pardoner has learned to be ready for

any emergency.

"I graunte y-wis," quod he, "but I mot thinke"

Upon som honest thing, whyl that I drinke."

The Pardoner realizing that the unsoundness of his morals is known to the company, forthwith makes a cynical exposure of his frauds, saying that, his

"Intent is only for to winne,

And nothyng for correccioun of sinne;"

and that when once he has tricked the "lewed people" he does not care if their "souls goon a-black-berried." He knows that his companions see through his hypocrisy, and instead of telling the merry tale, he intends preaching a beautiful sermon, to give them a sample of his trade. "He is impatient" says Prof. Kittredge, "of occupying the position of futile hypocrite. He is too clever a knave to wish others to take him for a fool. The Pardoner is in effect saying to the pilgrims, 'You know what kind of fellow I am, and this is my trade,'

"For though myself be a ful vicious man,

A moral tale yet I yow you tellen can,

Which I am wont to preche for to winne."

Then he begins his sermon, which after a few lines, is interrupted by a long episodic discussion on the sins of wine, gluttony, gambling and swearing, with touches of humor here and there.

In the background Chaucer has set a dark mysterious gloom, attendant to the plague which swept the land four times during the reign of Edward III. The plot is laid in a Flemish town where the pestilence has already claimed a thousand victims.

Careless of their own salvation, in the face of calamity,

the "three riotoures" hold their drunken revels. Amid their turbulence comes the tinkle of the funeral bell before the corpse of a comrade, who was stricken by the plague while drunk at the table. The drunken revellers in a rage swear to seek and slay "This false traytour Death." Here we feel a mighty conflict of divine with human law. One other character comes upon the scene—a character who contributes gradations of light and mystery, in a contrast deeply impressive.

Upon the road they meet with an aged man, "al forwrapped save his face," of whom they tauntingly enquire concerning death. Chaucer does not give the slightest hint as to who this feeble wayfarer is, whom he has shrouded in mystery, but he would perhaps be best interpreted as Death himself.

From this point the narration has an unhalting movement, with each successive step of which, we become more keenly interested to learn how the great conflict will end, and ⁱⁿ the glittering heap of florins, we somehow feel the weight of doom.

The Pardoner is so preoccupied with the recital of his sermon, that he continues with the accustomed exhortation at the end,

"I yow assoile, by myn heigh power,
Yow that wol offre, as clene and eek as clere
As ye were born."

Suddenly realizing its inappropriateness, he adds this explanation:-

"And lo, sirs, thus I preche."

The Pardoner is not so callous but that he sees the contrast

between his ~~hypocrisy~~ and the impressive beauty of his tale, so with a kind of remorse he says,

"And Jesu Crist, that is our soules leche,
So graunt yow his pardon to receyve;
For that is best. I wol yow nat deceyve."

Naturally he must relapse into his former mood. Knowing that his profession is thoroughly understood, he hastens to escape from his confusion through jocularly.

Having traced the varying moods of the Pardoner and his audience, we may now reflect with what accurate dramatic propriety Chaucer has developed this plot. The Pardoner's is a beautiful story, skillfully told so as to bring out its dramatic irony, and in its entirety is considered one of the best short stories in the English language.

The defects in Chaucer's work are so slight, that only a brief review is necessary to make the just estimation of his literary productions. Perhaps the greatest fault that can be found in Chaucer's verse is his intrusion of learning. But even here, we find the poet confessing a weakness which we must attribute to the times rather than the man, and valiantly struggling to overcome the defects in his works. An instance may be cited in the House of Fame, in which he expresses profanely his regret at being compelled to brevity in his account of the death of the Carthaginian Queen.

"And nere it were too long to endite
By God I would it here write."

His carelessness is less noticeable, because we are less

apt to see a fault of this nature in a work so pure and simple. Chaucer wrote so hurriedly, that he did not pay strict attention to conformity of all his statements, and for this reason we often are confronted with the most bare-faced inconsistencies; and it is well that we are always willing to overlook an honest incongruity. It is still a question among critics, as to whether his carelessness or rather disregard for logical succession of detail really adds or detracts.

As to the obligations in which he stands to earlier and contemporary writers, no assertion may be safely made. While there are no qualities in his verse which can be traced definitely to any certain writers, still we know that Chaucer was influenced largely by Ovid, Bocaccio and Dante.

It is a great mistake that some have made in attributing Chaucer's greatness to his ability to create out of a language inadequate for his purpose a lasting work. It is true that the Saxon-Norman tongue was not so elegant and urbane as the Romance languages, but it was unequalled in its adequacy for portraying deep and strong emotional feelings.

Chaucer's life was marked by a steady growth, in which he rose at last above the tastes of his time. This applies to the technical part of his work as well as to the purely poetical.

With an infinite knowledge of men and their ways; with an unbounded love for Nature and her beauties, both balanced by his happy temperaments, he directed the course of his creation with such a masterly hand, that we adjust ourselves unconsciously to the succeeding mutations of this fanciful world.

Chaucer builded the fabric of his work on the absurdities and follies of men, but the mildness of his nature never gave way to the invective, whenever he saw fit to cast reproach; nor did he stand in the attitude of teacher or reformer, but of comradely sympathizer, who alongside of his fellow strove manfully against the current of an immoral age. As a bard he made their pilgrimages light with song and story, and as a guide, he pointed out in all the embellishments of his imagination each work of art which he snatched from the losses and ruins of time.

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