

INITIAL HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Introduction.-The fabric of our literature is shot with the varying tints of racial characteristics; the sombre imagination of the Celt, the flaming passion of the Saxon, the golden gaiety of France, and the prismatic fancy of the South. Many have been the influences brought to bear upon our speech; yet in this composite texture the Anglo-Saxon element dominates. That is the outstanding fact. We have only to take some passage of modern poetry, say a few lines from Tennyson's *Passing of Arthur*.

KEYWORDS – humour , texture , allegory , literature , sympathy , scientific , mordant.

INTRODUCTION

If Geoffrey of Monmouth is the popular historian of the age, William of Malmesbury is the scholarly one. His account of the kings of England is marked by scrupulous care in dealing with ascertained facts, eschewing fantastic legends. Glanville and Bracton contribute to the making of constitutional law; the former from the practical, the latter from the theoretical standpoint. Roger Bacon, a Franciscan friar, is one of the earliest scientists, and in a frankly unscientific and credulous age is noted for the insistence he laid upon the supreme value of experiment.

Gower and Chaucer. Contemporary literary judgments are seldom of value. Ben Jonson was rated by his age above Shakespeare, and his own generation failed to appreciate Milton. So we need not be surprised to find Chaucer's friend, John Gower, placed on a higher pedestal than the author of *The Canterbury Tales*. Later judgments perhaps have unduly depreciated Gower. He was a writer of much talent, and his important poem, the *Confessio Amantis* (c. 1393), by its sweeping and varied collection of medieval tales, certainly prepared the way for Chaucer. It is very useful pioneer work. His inferiority to Chaucer is shown in the uncertain way in which he uses the vernacular, still preferring on the whole the "polite" tongue of the day-French.

Chaucer. *The Man and His Career*.-Geoffrey Chaucer, born of the merchant class, spent his early life in London, by the Walbrook stream; and at seventeen he was appointed page to the wife of Lionel, son of Edward III. In this way he gained acquaintance with Court life and manners. After a military expedition to France in 1359, which led to his capture by the French and subsequent ransom for sixteen pounds by Edward, he became first a personal attendant of the King; later on a squire. He saturated himself in the French Romances-notably the *Roman de la Rose*-and promptly and naturally imitated them. In 1370 Chaucer travelled abroad in the king's service, to Flanders, France, and Italy-to the Italy of Giotto, Petrarch, and Boccaccio; in short, to the world of the early Renaissance. Need we be surprised that the sojourn in Italy profoundly impressed the imagination of the English poet. Hitherto he had been ignorant of Italian literature; now he reads the great writers, and the glamour of the *Roman de la Rose* fades away.

Not one but many are the visits paid to Italy, and in the meantime we find Chaucer fulfilling the prosaic duties of Comptroller of Customs at Aldgate; living much as Hawthorne lived his consular life at Liverpool, a business and practical man on one side, and a dreamer of dreams on the other. It was at this time that he wrote *The Parlement of Foules* (1382), the translation of Boethius, *Troilus and Criseyde* (1382), *The House of Fame* (1384), and *The Legend of Good Women* (1385). And over them all is the magic of the South. But the Italian, like the French inspiration, begins to die away. The rich concrete qualities of the man begin to clamour for a more temperamental utterance, and during the closing years of the fourteenth century he gives us *The Canterbury Tales*. It is possible that Boccaccio's *Decameron* may have suggested the framework of the poem—the succession of story-tellers. But for the subject-matter the poet has gone directly to the life of his own day.

The Form of the Canterbury Tales. Of this work about 17,000 lines are in verse, while two stories—the tale of Melibeus and *The Parson's Tale*—are in prose. The verse consists of rhymed couplets. It forms a compromise between the old and new prosody. Chaucer does not care for alliteration or doggerel rhyme, and chooses the form of "heroic" verse, with rhymed couplets and five accented syllables.

The tales themselves are of astonishing variety. Some are drawn from the romances of chivalry—e.g. *The Knight's Tale*. Others deal with moralizing scriptural stories—e.g. *The Monk's Tale*. Some are fine adaptations of romantic stories of ancient France. There are, between the stories, prologues, in which Chaucer's gift of sharp and vivid characterization is best seen—e.g. *the Discourse of the Wife of Bath*.

The Characterization. When the prevailing tendency of the age to deal in allegory and abstractions is taken into consideration, it is astounding how alive these Chaucerian types are. For in the course of his life he had come into contact with them all. The Knight, the Squire, the Merchant, the Sailor, Scholar, Doctor, Monk, Labourers, Saints, and Knaves—he knew them intimately and drew them from personal observation. He knew the Court folk; he knew the People; and he draws them for us with all their little tricks and mannerisms and external peculiarities. We recognize one by the raucous tone of the voice, another by his rubicund face, another for her sensitiveness: she was so "pitous" she wept to see a mouse caught. We see the parchment face of the Knave, the jolly rubicund countenance of mine Host, we become acquainted, in a word, with the medieval Englishman as he moved and lived, depicted with a breadth of vision and a rich tolerant humour unsurpassed in our literature. The poignant note that we find in Langland is absent, for Chaucer takes rather the comedy view of life; but this must not be held to imply any lack of sympathy with the poor and suffering. There is a large-hearted charity in his treatment of the labouring class, as his picture of the Ploughman will testify.

And there is an open-air atmosphere about it all. His people are always vital. Never do they become shadowy or lifeless. They shout and swear, and laugh and weep, interrupt the story-teller, pass compliments, and in general behave themselves as we might expect them in the dramatic circumstances of the narrative. And it is never possible to confuse the story-teller; each is distinct and inimitable, whether it be the sermonizing Pardoner, the hot-tempered Miller, or the exuberantly vivacious Wife of Bath, who has had five husbands but, experience teaching her that husbands are transient blessings, has fixed her mind on a sixth!

There are tragedies as well as comedies in the Tales; some are grave and subdued, others ablaze with colour and merriment. But the thread of honest and kindly laughter runs through them all, serious and gay alike.

There is nothing of the dreamer about Chaucer—nothing of the stern moralist and social reformer. Like Shakespeare, he makes it his business in *The Canterbury Tales* to paint life as he sees it, and leaves others to draw the moral.

Langland's mordant pictures of contemporary life gave an actuality to poetical literature which removed it far from the old heroic stories with which the name of poet had hitherto been connected. Chaucer realized what those who followed him for many years to come were too blind to see—that the genius of the English people did not lie in high-flown tales of sentiment, but in homely stories of everyday life, illumined by shrewd observation, tolerant humour, and occasional moralizing.

And the crowning glory of *The Canterbury Tales* lies in the fact that in this masterpiece he uses "naked words in English." He has made the new language throb with life, and put the corner-stone on the edifice of English Mediæval Literature.

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