

Chaucer and the Common People

Introduction:

That Chaucer wrote for a coterie and not for the commonalty is essentially correct. He catered to the taste of the court and the aristocracy and not that of the common masses. He had only a selected circle of readers. Hudson observes: "He was a court poet who wrote for cultured readers and a refined society."

All this is fairly true. It is also true that to his readers—"the court and cultivated classes"—"the sufferings of the poor were a matter of the utmost indifference." But it would be extremely unfair to maintain that Chaucer himself remained indifferent to the sufferings of the poor. In fact, Chaucer's human sympathy and cordiality are all-embracing. He is responsive with the same alacrity to the Knight as to the Plowman or the Parson. The one characteristic of Chaucer which endears him so readily to every reader is the extensive nature of his understanding and fellow-feeling in which he is seldom found wanting. Therein he comes close to Shakespeare himself. Chaucer is not, admittedly, "a poet of the masses" (which means, commonly, in modern parlance, an exponent of communism or some form of radical socialism). But nor is Shakespeare "a dramatist of the masses". Each uses for his raw material life itself in all its manifestations. Chaucer is a poet of humanity though not a poet of the masses. He is not only of his age but of all ages. He is an exponent of not a narrow view of things, but of the permanent values of life. He makes a plea not for the ascendancy of one class of society over the others, but of truth and justice. He views life not in bits but as a whole, and he has abundant sympathy with all kinds and conditions of humanity.

If Chaucer wrote for the elite, so did all his contemporaries. He wrote at a time when literacy was limited to a few. Even the art of printing in England was yet decades ahead. Books were all read and circulated as manuscripts. Necessarily enough, the circle of readers was very narrow. Why should then Chaucer alone be singled out as a writer who catered to the tastes of "the court and cultivated classes"?

Contemporary Upheavals:

Nevertheless, what strikes one so forcefully about Chaucer is his aloofness from the popular movements and upheavals of his times. The Peasants' Revolt of 1381 led by Jack Straw and Wat Tyler posed substantial danger to the English feudal system and terrified a number of people. The plague epidemic of 1348-49 (commonly known as "The Black Death") wiped away almost one-third of the total population of the country. With the consequent decrease in the number of working hands, the workers started a widespread agitation for an increase in their wages. The agitation was put down with a heavy hand by the authorities, but the resentment of the labourers could not be dispelled. At the same time John Wyclif, "the morning star of the Reformation", and his followers, called the Lollards, raised a powerful voice against the corruptions of the Church officials, which incidentally implied a protest against the financial exploitation of the poor and superstitious masses by the hirelings of the Pope. It must be clear that Chaucer's age was an age of turmoil and agitation. The common people, long exploited by feudal overlords and Popish agents, had reached the end of their patience and could not but let out their unrest through a chain of movements and agitations against the ruling and influential classes. Evidently enough all was not well with the world. It would have really been astonishing if a writer could have shut his eyes so firmly on the contemporary scene. But that is what Chaucer seems to have done—at least, to some

critics. Let us quote Hudson again: "The great vital issues of the day never inspired his verse. He made his appeal to an audience composed of the favoured few, who wanted to be amused by comedy, or touched by pathos, or moved by romantic sentiment but who did not wish to be disturbed by painful reminders of plague, famines, and popular discontent. Thus, though he holds the mirror up to the life of his time, the dark underside of it is nowhere reflected by him".

Comparison with Langland and Gower:

The comparison of Chaucer with his contemporaries in this connection will be substantially rewarding. Langland and Gower were the most eminent of the poets contemporaneous with Chaucer. Both of them exhibit in their important works much wider and intenser awareness of the burning questions of the day. Hudson calls William Langland (13307-1400) "essentially a poet of the people." His most important work *The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman* (commonly known as *Piers the Plowman*) displays the poets' wide and intimate contact with the people, their miseries, privations, their exploitation and tyrannization by the ruling classes, and their seething discontent with the feudal junta and even the royalty. Rather than their splendour and glamour, the enormous poem acquaints us with the seamy sides of medieval England-its "rents, rags and uncleanness." Whereas Chaucer represents in *The Canterbury Tales* the "merry England" of the fourteenth century, Langland's scene is very melancholy, disturbed, and bedevilled by a thousand ailments. According to Kenneth Sisam, *Piers Plowman* "stands alone as a revelation of the ignorance and misery of the lower classes whose multiplied grievances came to a head in the Peasants Revolt of 1381". "It is to this Vision", points out Hudson, "that we have to turn if we would complete Chaucer's picture of fourteenth century England by putting in the dark shadows." And Legouis exclaims: "How national it is! How near the people! It must be borne in mind that Langland did not appeal to one particular class of people. He did not, for instance urge the masses to rise against the ruling class and the utterly depraved ecclesiastics. Even if he was a poet of the people, he appealed to all the classes of society alike and tried to take stock of the prevailing situation and to mend it.

Unlike Langland, John Gower (13257-1408) did not champion the cause of the people but, even then, he expressed a keen awareness of the popular feelings and their possible repercussions on the society of his time. One of his three most important poetical works *Vox Clamantis*-a Latin poem of some ten thousand lines-was most probably written immediately after the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 of which it gives a vivid account. In general the poem deals with the evils of entire society-the clergy, knighthood, and peasantry. Gower himself was a wealthy landlord and was terrified by the rising of the workers against their masters. He lived in Kent where the rebellion broke out. He is a conservative and supports "reform within the established order." He is critical of even the Lollards' Movement. He is didactic, too (he was addressed as "moral Gower" by his friend Chaucer in his dedication of *Troilus and Cryseyde*) in his other two important poems *Mirowdel 'Omme* (French) and *Confessio Amantis* (English) though in these works there are not many direct references to contemporary events.

Chaucer's "Indifference":

In contrast to the practice of Langland and Gower, Chaucer leaves the agitating questions of the day untouched. He obviously lacks the scorching earnestness of

Langland and the didactic tendency of Gower. In spite of his awareness of the distress and grinding poverty of the masses he seems to believe complacently that:

Gods's in His Heaven— All's right with the world!

He welcomes things as they are, and almost desires them to be no better. In his works there are very few direct references to the contemporary upheavals and the deplorable plight of the commonalty. Says Moody: "The peasant rebellion and the Lollard agitation give us glimpses of an England which Chaucer, in spite of the many-sidedness of his work, does not reveal. The Canterbury Tales contains few references to the plague, only one to the peasant uprising, and only one to Lollardy, and these references are casual or jesting". Moody continues with the words which form the body of the question we are endeavouring to answer at present. Chaucer's only reference to the Peasants' Revolt is in the Nun's Priest's Tale written perhaps about ten years after the rising. Chaucer makes a less than complimentary allusion to Jack Straw, one of the leaders of the Revolt:

Certes, he Jakkes Straw and his meynee
Ne made nevere shoutes half so shrille
When that they wolden any Flemyng kille,
As thilke days was mad upon the fox.

In the Clerk's Tale Chaucer indicts the unthinking mob:

O stormy people! unsad and even untrew
As undiscreet and changing as a vave.
Elsewhere, too, Chaucer expresses his anti-mob sentiment-not only through the mouths of the pilgrims, but personally and directly.

Chaucer's Broad Human Sympathy:

But in his anti-rabble sentiments Chaucer is not being more undemocratic than Shakespeare. The fickle mob, the "unthinking Hydra", has earned the wise contempt of most English writers. In spite of his too palpable indifference to the sufferings of the poor and the downtrodden, Chaucer is never-failing in showing sympathy for all human beings irrespective of their social standing. He recognizes few barriers in this respect. He has malice towards none. Among all the pilgrims in The Canterbury Tales if some do escape his naughty irony, they are, along with the Knight, "the poor Parson" and the still poorer Plowman. In Piers the Plowman the poor Plowman is employed by Langland as a symbol of Christ himself. But then Chaucer's Plowman, too, is Christ-like in his "poverty", his honesty, and his fellow-feeling. This shepherd worries much about the sheep, and not at all about their "fleece". Evidently enough, the Parson is a Wyclifite, and through him Chaucer indirectly expresses his sympathy for the Lollards' Movement. In the Parson's Tale Chaucer gives voice to almost egalitarianistic sentiments:

"Of swich seeds as cherles spryngen of swich seed spryngen lordes. As wel may the cherl be saved as the lordl rede thee, certes, that thou, lord werke in swich wise with thy cherles that they rather love thee than drede..."

Is it not startlingly radical to have suggested the demolition of the well-recognized medieval barrier between "churls" and "lords"? Further, we may refer to the well-known passage against tyrants in the preface to the Legend of Good Women in which the king is urged to be compassionate towards his poor subjects.

Why Indifference to Contemporary Events?:

After all is said and done, it remains to be explained as to why Chaucer remained indifferent to the upheavals of his age-at least in his literary works. A critic defends

Chaucer quite trenchantly. According to him, "to be bold in one's utterance in the Middle Ages was to gamble with death, and Chaucer's temperament was not a martyr's." But we may relevantly ask: "What about Gower and Langland? Both of them were "bold" enough in their "utterances" though they championed mutually opposite sides. The reason lies else where Chaucer was not a journalist, a pamphleteer, or an occasional versifier.

He wrote not for his age, but for all ages. He was sure that the burning topics of his day would become the dead topics of the next. Had he busied himself with the topical and the ephemeral his poetry would have had little appeal for the succeeding generations. He delved deep from the topical to the universal. He gives us not the trappings but the body and soul of fourteenth-century England, superadded with universal connotations. We admire and appreciate Langland and Gower less partly because they are more concerned with the issues of their day. Muriel Bowden observes: "The most important reason for Chaucer's silence about political affairs and national events undoubtedly lies in the very nature of his genius. The poet's magnificent human comedy is the more human in that it is without the immediate, and is concerned with the universal and the timeless."