

Chaucer's Contribution to English Language and Literature

Introduction:

Father of verse! who m immortal song

First taught the Muse to speak the English tongue.

It is somewhat idle to talk of "fathers" in the history of literature, for it is questionable if a particular person can be wholly credited with in the founding of a new literary genre. Literature is generally subject to the 'law of evolutionary development. And though a man may do more than others by way of contributing to this development we should be chary of inferring upon him the medal of fatherhood. When it is said that Chaucer is the father of English poetry, and even the father of English literature we broadly mean that his contribution to the evolution of English poetry or literature is much more significant than that of his contemporaries and predecessors, and to be similarly rated is his introduction of so many novel features into it.

That Chaucer was a pioneer in many respects should be readily granted. "With him is born our real poetry," says Matthew Arnojd. He has been acclaimed as the first realist, the first humorist, the first narrative artist the first great character-painter, and the first great metrical artist in English literature. Further, he has been credited not only with the "fatherhood" of English poetry but has also been hailed as the father of English drama before the drama was bom, and the father of English novel before the novel was born. And, what is more, his importance is not due to precedence alone, but due to excellence. He is not only the first English poet, but a great poet in his own right. Justly has he been called "the fountain-source of the vast stream of English literature."

Contribution to Language:

Well does Lowell say that "Chaucer found his English a dialect and left it a language." Borrowing Saintsbury's words about the transformation which Dryden effected in English poetry, we may justly say that Chaucer found the English language brick and left it marble. When Chaucer started his literary career, the English speech, and still less, the English of writing was confusingly fluid and unsettled. The English language was divided into a number of dialects which were employed in different parts of the country. The four of them vastly more prominent than the others were:

- (i) The Southern
- (ii) The Midland
- (iii) The Northern or Northumbrian
- (iv) The Kentish

Out of these four, the Midland or the East Midland dialect, which was spoken in London and its surrounding area, was the simplest in grammar and syntax. Moreover, it was the one patronised by the aristocratic and literary circles of the country. Gower used this dialect for his poem *Confessio Amantis* and Wyclif for his translation of the Bible. But this dialect was not the vehicle of all literary work. Other dialects had their votaries too. Langland in his *Piers Plowman*, to quote an instance, used a mixture of the Southern and Midland dialects. Chaucer employed in his work the East midland dialect, and by casting the enormous weight of his genius balance decided once for all which dialect was going to be the standard literary language of the whole of the country for all times to come. None after him thought of using any dialect other than the East Midland for any literary work of consequence. It is certain that if Chaucer had adopted some other dialect the emergence of the standard language of literature would have been

considerably delayed. All the great writers of England succeeding Chaucer are, in the words of John Speirs, "masters of the language of which Chaucer is, before them, the great master."

Not only was Chaucer's selection of one dialect out of the four a happy one, but so was his selection of one of the three languages which were reigning supreme in England at that time-Latin, French, and English. In fact, Latin and French were more fashionable than the poor "vernacular" English. Latin was considered "the universal language" and was patronised at the expense of English by the Church as well as the learned. Before Wyclif translated it into the "vulgar tongue", the Bible was read in its Latin version called the Vulgate. French was the language of the court and was used for keeping the accounts of the royal household till as late as 1365. Perplexed by the variety of languages offering themselves for use, Chaucer's friend and contemporary Gower could not decide which one of them to adopt. He wrote his *Mirour del'Omme* in French, *Vox Clamantis* in Latin, and *Confessio Amantis* in English, perhaps because he was not quite sure which of the three languages was going to survive. But Chaucer had few doubts about the issue. He chose English which was a despised language, and as the legendary king did to the beggar maid, raised her from the dust, draped her in royal robes, and conducted her coronation. That queen is ruling even now.

Contribution to Versification:

Chaucer's contribution to English versification is no less striking than to the English language. Again, it is an instance of a happy choice. He sounded the death-knell of the old Saxon alliterative measure and firmly established the modern one. Even in the fourteenth century the old alliterative measure had been employed by such a considerable poet as Langland for his *Piers the Plowman*, and the writer of *Sir Gawayne and the Grene Knight*. Let us give the important features of the old measure which Chaucer so categorically disowned:

- (i) There is no regularity in the number of syllables in each line. One line may have as few as six syllables and another as many as fourteen.
- (ii) The use of alliteration as the chief ornamental device and as the lone structural principle. All the alliterative syllables are stressed.
- (iii) The absence of end-rimes; and
- (iv) Frequent repetition to express vehemence and intensity of emotion.

Chaucer had no patience with the "rum, ram, ruf" of the alliterative measure. So does he maintain in the *Parson's Tale*:

But trusteth wel, I am a southern man,
I cannot geste-rum, ram, ruf,-by lettere,
Ne, God wot, rym holde I but litel bettere.

For that old-fashioned measure he substituted the regular line with end-rime, which he borrowed from France. The new measure has the following characteristics:

- (i) All lines have the same number of syllables,
- (ii) End-rime,
- (iii) Absence of alliteration and frequent repetition.

After Chaucer, no important poet ever thought of reverting to the old measure. Thus, Chaucer may be designated "the father of modern English versification." Chaucer employs three principal metres in his works. In *The Canterbury Tales* he mostly uses

lines of ten syllables each (with generally five accents); and the lines run into couplets; that is, each couple of lines has its end-syllables rhyming with each other. For example:

His eyes twinkled in his heed aright
As doon the sterres in the frosty night.

In Troilus and Cryseyde he -uses the seven-line stanza of decasyllabic lines with five accents each having the rhyme-scheme a b abb c c. This measure was borrowed by him from the French and is called the rhyme-royal or Chaucerian stanza. The third principal metre employed by him is the octosyllabic couplet with four accents and end-rime. In The Book of the Duchesse this measure is used. The measures thus adopted by Chaucer were seized upon by his successors. The decasyllabic couplet known as the heroic couplet, was to be chiselled and invigorated to perfection three centuries later by Dryden and Pope. Apart from those three principal measures Chaucer also employed for the first time a number of other stanzaic forms in his shorter poems.

Not only this, Chaucer seems to be the first Englishman who realised and brought out the latent music of his language. "To read Chaucer's verse," observes a critic, "is like listening to a clear stream, in a meadow full of sunshine, rippling over its bed of pebbles." The following is the tribute of a worthy successor of his:

The morning star of song, who made
His music heard below,
Don Chaucer, the first -warbler, whose sweet breath
Preluded those melodious bursts thatfiU",
The spacious times of great Elizabeth
With sounds that echo still

He made English a pliant and vigorous medium of poetic utterance. His astonishingly easy mastery of the language is indeed remarkable. With one step the writings of Chaucer carry us into a new era in which the language appears endowed with ease, dignity, and copiousness of expression and clothed in the hues of the imagination.

The Content of Poetry:

Chaucer was a pioneer not only in the linguistic and prosodic fields, but was one in the strictly poetic field also. Not only the form of poetry, but its content, too, is highly indebted to him. Not only did he give English poetry a new dress, but a new body and a new soul. His major contribution towards the content of poetry is in his advocacy of and strict adherence to realism. His Canterbury Tales embodies a new effort in the history of literature, as it strictly deals with real men, manners, and life. In the beginning of his literary career Chaucer followed his contemporaries and immediate predecessors, and wrote allegorical and dream poetry which in its content was as remote from life as a dream is from reality. But at the age of about fifty he realised that literature should deal first-hand with life and not look at it through the spectacles of books or the hazy hues of dreams and cumbersome allegory. He realised, to adopt Pope's famous couplet (with a little change) :

Know then thyself: presume not dreams to scan,
The proper study of mankind is man.

And the product of this realisation was The Canterbury Tales. This poem, as it were, holds a mirror to the life of Chaucer's age and shows its manners and morals completely, "not in fragments." Chaucer replaces effectively the shadowy delineations of

the old romantic and allegorical school with the vivid and pulsating pictures of contemporary life.

And Chaucer does not forget the universal beneath the particular, the dateless beneath the dated. The portraits of the pilgrims in the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* constitute not only an epitome of the society of fourteenth-century England, but the epitome of human nature in all climes and all ages. Grierson and Smith observe about Chaucer's pilgrims: "They are all with us today, though some of them have changed their names. The knight now commands a line regiment, the squire is in the guards, the shipman was a rum-runner while prohibition lasted and is active now in the black market, the friar is a jolly sporting publican, the pardoner vends quack medicines or holds seances, and the prioress is the headmistress of a fashionable girls' school. Some of them have reappeared in a later literature. The poor parson was reincarnated in the Vicar of Wakefield, the knight in Colonel Newcome and the Monk in *Archdeacon Grantly*."

His Geniality, Tolerance, Humour, and Freshness:

Chaucer's tone as a poet is wonderfully instinct with geniality, tolerance, humour, and freshness which are absent from that of his contemporaries and predecessors who are too dreamy or too serious to be interesting. In spite of his awareness of the corruption and unrest in the society of his age Chaucer is never upset or upsetting. He experiences what the French call *joie de vivre*, and communicates it to his readers. No one can read Chaucer without feeling that it is good to be alive in this world however imperfect may it be in numerous respects. He is a chronic optimist. He is never harsh, rancorous, bitter, or indignant, and never falls out with his fellow men for their failings. He leaves didacticism to Langland and "moral Gower" and himself peacefully coexists with all human imperfections. It does not mean that he is not sarcastic or satirical, but his satire and sarcasm are always seasoned with lively humour. In fact his forte is irony rather than satire. Aldous Huxley observes: "Where Langland cries aloud in anger threatening the world with hell fire, Chaucer looks on and smiles." The great English humorists like Shakespeare and Fielding share with Chaucer the same broad human sympathy which he first introduced into literature and which has bestowed upon his *Canterbury Tales* that character of perennial, vernal freshness which appears so abundantly on its every page,

Contribution to the Novel:

The novel is one of the latest courses in the banquet of English literature. But in his narrative skill, his gift of vivid characterization, his aptitude for plot-construction, and his inventive skill Chaucer appears as a worthy precursor of the race of novelists who come centuries afterwards. If Chaucer is the father of English poetry he is certainly, to use G. K. Chesterton's phrase, "the grandfather of the English novel." His *Tales* are replete with intense human interest, and though he borrows his materials from numerous sundry sources, his narrative skill is all his own. That could not have been borrowed. His narration is lively and direct, if we make exception for the numerous digressions and philosophical and pseudo-philosophical animadversions having little to do with the tales proper, introduced after the contemporary fashion. It is difficult to find him flagging or growing dull and monotonous. It is perhaps only Burns who in *Tom O' Shanter* excels Chaucer in the telling of "merry tales."

Chaucer's Prologue to The Canterbury Tales has been rightly called "the prologue to modern fiction." It has characters if not plot, and vivid characterization is one of the primary jobs of a novelist. A novel, according to Meredith, should be "a summary of actual life." So is, indeed, the Prologue. Several of the tales, too, are novels in miniature and hold the attention of the reader from the beginning to the end, which, alas! very few novels of today do.

As regards Chaucer's Troilus and Cryseyde, it has been well called "a novel in verse." And it has all the salient features of a novel. It has plot, character, unravelling action, conflict, rising action, and denouement-every thing. Though the background of the action is the legendary Trojan war, and though some elements have been borrowed from the Italian writer Boccaccio, yet it is all very modern and close to life. It is not devoid even of psychological interest which is a major characteristic of the modern novel. "Its heroine," as a critic observes, "is the subtlest piece of psychological analysis in medieval fiction: and the shrewd and practical Pandarus is a character whose presence of itself brings the story down from the heights of romance to the plains of real life." S. D. Neill opines that "had Chaucer written in prose, it is possible that his Troilus and Cryseyde and not Richardson's Pamela would have been celebrated as the first English novel." A. W. Pollard facetiously~observes that Chaucer was a compound of "thirty per cent of Goldsmith, fifty of Fielding, and twenty of Walter Scott." This means, in other words, that as a story-teller Chaucer had some of the sweetness of Goldsmith, the genial ironic attitude and realism of Fielding, and the high chivalrous tone of Sir Walter Scott. But, after all is said and done. Chaucer is Chaucer himself and himself alone.

Contribution to the Drama:

Chaucer wrote at a time when, like the novel, secular drama had not been born, and yet his works have some dramatic elements which are altogether missing in the poetry before him. His mode of characterisation in the Prologue to The Canterbury Tales is, no doubt, static or descriptive, but in the tales proper it is dynamic or dramatic. There the characters reveal themselves, without the intervention of the author, through what they say and what they do. Even the tales they narrate, in most cases, are in keeping with their respective characters, avocations, temperaments, etc. In this way Chaucer is clearly ahead of his "model" Boccaccio, who in his Decameron allots various tales to his ladies and gentlemen indiscriminately, irrespective of their conformity or otherwise to their respective characters. The stories in The Decameron could without violence be re-distributed-among the characters. But not in The Canterbury Tales where they-serve as a dramatic device of characterisation: and in the drama, pace Aristotle, character is all-important. In their disputations and discussions and comments upon each other's tales and their general behaviour, too, the pilgrims are made by Chaucer to reveal themselves and to provide finishing touches to the character-portraits already statically (or non-dramatically) set forth in the Prologue. Chaucer is abundantly showing here the essential gift of a dramatist. A critic goes so far as to assert that Chaucer is "a dramatist in all but the fact", and again : "If the drama had been known in Chaucer's time as a branch of living literature, he might have attained as high an excellence in comedy as any English or Continental writer."

Chaucer's Limitations:

Let us round off our discussion by briefly referring to some of Chaucer's limitations or what as "the father of English poetry" he could not give to it. Matthew Arnold feels in

Chaucer's work the absence of "high seriousness" which is the characteristic of all great poetry. Then, Chaucer has, unlike Dante, no burning message to give. Again as Hudson avers, he is not the poet of the people. Moody and Loyett maintain that "Chaucer wrote for the court and cultivated classes to whom the sufferings of the poor were a matter of the utmost indifference." Still another critic finds missing from Chaucer's poetry those "mysterious significances" which are characteristics of all great poetry. All this is, in a measure, true. But those who charge Chaucer with the absence of pathos may well read the following passage from The-Knight's Tale in which 'Arcite laments his separation, consequent upon his death, from his lady-love:

Alas the woe! alas the paines strong
That I for you have suffered, and so long!
Alas the death: alas, mine Emilie!
Alas, departing of our company!
Alas, mine hertes queen! alas my wife!
Mine hertes lady, ender of my life.
WJiat is this world? What asken men to have?
Now with his love; now in his colde grave,
Alone, withouten any company!
Farewell my sweet! farewell mine Emilie!
And softe take me in your armes rwey,
Fore love of God and heakeneth what I say.