

Fifteenth-Century English Poetry

Introduction:

The fifteenth century was a period of singular barrenness as regards literary production, particularly poetry. No poet of the century comes anywhere near Chaucer who dominated the previous century like a colossus.

We have in the fifteenth century a number of "sons of Geoffrey", or, what we call the Chaucerian who professedly followed the great master. Imitation in its broader implications is not a bad or despicable activity; but we find that the Chaucerians of the fifteenth century imitated Chaucer too slavishly and mechanically so that their imitations could capture only the trappings and not the vigorous body or the subtle soul of Chaucer's poetry. Moreover, very few of these Chaucerians thought of imitating the best work of Chaucer, namely *The Canterbury Tales*. They restricted their attention to his allegorical and dream poetry which is far below his best.

As regards "drama" and prose the age was not so unproductive, however. Sir Thomas Malory and Caxton, in particular, contributed not meanly to the development and fixation of English prose. A sense of style also came in. Caxton is an important figure in the history of English literature as it was he who initiated the art of printing in England. In his prefaces to his publications he wrote a refreshing, natural and personal style which has earned for him a secure place in the history of English prose. The introduction of the art of printing in England made books available at cheap prices to the commonalty. Literacy also increased considerably and literature, hitherto a privileged pursuit of the elite, became more "popular" in the true sense of the word. Let us discuss the salient features and trends of the poetry of the fifteenth century.

Allegorical and Dream Poetry:

As we have mentioned above, most of the imitators of Chaucer set their sights on imitating his minor work and not the ne plus ultra of his poetic art, namely, *The Canterbury Tales*. The works of Chaucer which most readily came in for imitation were the following three:

- (i) *The Parliament of Fowls*;
- (ii) *The Book of the Duchess*; and
- (iii) *The House of Fame*.

All these works are but mediocre in quality and were written by Chaucer obviously in imitation of the well-known tradition of dream and allegory so popular with the medieval English poets. None of them displays any direct, first-hand contact with life or reality as *The Canterbury Tales* so abundantly and so superbly does. The work of Chaucer's imitators is, naturally enough, remote from reality. The lesson of *The Canterbury Tales* and the "fresh woods and pastures new" opened up by Chaucer seem to have held no attraction for the Chaucerians. For the most part entrenched in the medieval tradition, they fail to capture the real-life freshness of Chaucer's poetry. The poet usually found himself dreaming and taken to a garden, and there involved in some stock incidents in which figured such stock characters as the Goddess of Love and various Virtues and Vices in personified forms. William Dunbar's *The Golden Targe* and Lydgate's *Temple of Glas* are poems of this kind. In the former the poet falls asleep on a May morning in a garden and dreams of a ship full of a hundred allegorical ladies of King Cupid's court. Reason with his golden targe (shield) tries unsuccessfully to protect the poet from the arrows of Love. Stephen Hawes in his *Example of Virtue* relates the story of a youth

who led by Reason succeeds finally in marrying Purity, the daughter of the King of Lpve. His Past time of Pleasure and Dunbar's The Thistle and the Rose provide some more examples of the allegorical dream-poetry. Some of these poems might have provided Spenser with some germinal hints. It was only Hoccleve, perhaps, who to some extent continued the tradition of English city life as it was sketched in The Canterbury Tales. His picture of London in La Male Regie is not uninteresting.

Satire and Didacticism:

Fifteenth-century poets followed Langland and "moral Gower", too, in their practice of satire and didacticism. Chaucer had nothing of the reformer or the preacher in him, and his forte was not satire but naughty irony. But Langland in Piers the Plowman and Gower in all his major works aimed at different effects. Their lead is more particularly accepted by John Skelton, the rugged satirist of the fifteenth century. He hits very crudely, indeed, though he hits very hard. He is well known for his satires on the clergy, but is best known for the boldness with which he attacked the all-powerful Wolsey. William Dunbar continued the satiric tradition in a major part of his poetic output. His satire is generally of the nature of jovial invective but sometimes takes up the colour of Rebelaisian grotesquery as, for instance, in his Dance of the Seven Deadly Sins.

The Eclogue:

The fifteenth century is known for the appearance of the Virgilian eclogue as a new genre in English literature. An eclogue is, generally, a short poem, especially a pastoral dialogue (generally between shepherds and shepherdesses), written in the manner of Virgil and Theocritus. The man who introduced the eclogue in England was Alexander Barclay, the translator of the famous work of the German poet Sebastian Brant, entitled by him The Ship of Fools. His eclogues 'were mainly modelled upon those of the Italian poet Mantuanus and have elements of satire which we find absent from those of Virgil. Barclay's forte is his mastery of detail and his very effective handling of the dialogue between his shepherds. Further his work contains plentiful references to current English affairs.

Ballads:

The ballad is another gift of the fifteenth century to English literature. Ballads constituted a considerable part of English folk literature. They were transmitted orally from one generation to the next. Most of the ballads in England remain anonymous, and according to the older critical opinion as represented by F. B. Gummere in The Beginnings of Poetry (1901) they had a communal origin: that is, they were authored not by individuals but by the community as a whole. Modern critical opinion, however, is inclined against the communal theory of the origin of the ballad.'

The ballad originally existed as some song accompanying a folk dance. But later it came to signify a short narrative poem told impersonally with some dramatic interest in more or less a traditional metrical form. Most-commonly, the stanza employed by it consists of four lines, the second and fourth rhyming together. The first and the third lines contain four stresses, and the other two, three each. See for instance, the opening verse of Sir Patric Spens.[1]

" The king sits in Dumferling toune,
Drinking the blude-red wine:
"O whar will I get a guid sailor,
To sail this ship of mine? "

The themes of most of the ballads are love, domestic tragedy, war, history, and the supernatural. The popular ballads (some thirty in number) concerning Robin Hood and his "merry men" are a class by themselves. Robin Hood is, in Albert C. Baugh's words, "the people's counterpart of aristocratic heroes like Sir Gawain". He is honest and God-fearing but bosses over and robs the cruel rich to mitigate the penury of the poor. The most popular ballads dating from the fifteenth century are The Nutbrown Maid and Chevy Chase. The former is of the nature of a "true love" poem and the latter concerns itself with the heroic fight between the English Sir Percy and the Scottish Sir Douglas. Even in the "cultured" eighteenth century these ballads were acclaimed as wonderful literature. Prior based his Henry and Emma upon The Nut-brown Maid, and Addison in his Spectator brought out the beauties of Chevy Chase. Chevy Chase is couched in the traditional ballad metre referred to above, but The Nut-brown Maid is written in stanzas of twelve lines each. Along with the ballads in the fifteenth century there was a great outpouring of lyric verse dealing with both religious and secular themes.

Versification:

As regards versification, all the poets of the fifteenth century looked back to Chaucer for guidance. Very few new prosodic forms were adopted by them. In fact, instead of advancement, the prosodic part of English poetry showed signs of retrogression, if not outright decadence. Very few poets seem to have had an ear for music. Chaucer was perhaps the first English poet who instinctively grasped the hidden music of English words, but fifteenth-century Chaucerians did not benefit from the shining example before them. Much confusion and disharmony were created when the finale was dropped in the fifteenth century. That put before the poets a garbled version of Chaucer's poetry, which, inaccurately read, started jarring upon the ear. His followers misread and mis-copied Chaucer. Their own poetry shows a lamentable neglect, if not ignorance, of all the basic laws of prosody. Lydgate was the most egregious offender in this respect, and was frank enough to admit: "I took none heed neither of short nor long." Skelton and Hawes were other notable offenders. The former, indeed, admitted that his "rime" was "ragged" and "jagged". In his contempt of all verbal music he might have given a cue to Donne and his fellow-metaphysicals. All the three principal metres employed by Chaucer, namely, the heroic couplet, the octosyllabic couplet with four stresses in each line, and the Chaucerian stanza were widely employed by the poets of the fifteenth century but none of them exhibited in his handling of these measures the easy facility and unforced mastery of Chaucer.

Let us now discuss briefly the work of the more important English and Scottish Chaucerians of the fifteenth century.

ENGLISH CHAUCERIANS

(1) Thomas Occleve or Hoccleve (1370-1450):

A consistent follower of Chaucer, he represented himself as "the stupid scholar of an excellent master."

My' dere maister—God his soule quyte— And fader Chaucer, fayne wold have me taught,
But I was dulle, and lerned lyte or naught.

Occleve was a satirist and moralist, but his most refreshing contribution to English poetry is the addition of the autobiographical touch. A. C. Ward calls him "one of England's earliest biographers". His main autobiographical work is La Male Regie de T. Occleve which is of the nature of a confession. The poet describes how debauched he

was as a young man when he used to visit the taverns in Westminster. He gives some vivid pictures of the London of those times. His chief work as a poet, however, is his verse translation (in Chaucer's rhyme-royal) of Aegidius's *De Regimine Principum* (Regimen of Princes) written for the guidance of Prince Henry who later became King Henry V. In his tone of earnest didacticism Occleve is nearer "moral Gower" than his acknowledged master, Chaucer.

(2) John Lydgate (1370-1449):

He is the dullest and the most voluminous of English Chaucerians. Compton-Rickett suggests that Occleve's confessional -A-ords, "But I was dulle" could have been uttered by Lydgate also and, we may suggest, with greater appropriateness. He follows mostly the tradition of allegorical and dream poetry we have already referred to. His poetic work extant runs to more than 30,000 lines! We wonder why he was not included by Pope among his dullards in *The Dunciad*! He has no ear for music and violates egregiously even the basic principles of prosody. Nor does he have the spirit or the magic touch which Chaucer brought to bear upon his work. However, in their heyday, his principal works, *The Troy Book*, *The Story of Thebes*, *The Fall of Princes* and *The Pilgrimage of the Life of Man* (something like *The Pilgrim's Progress*) pleased numerous readers. His *Complaint of the Black Knight* was once ascribed to Chaucer. His most lively and the least dull work is his *London Lackpenny* which describes the woes of a poor man in the streets of London. Modern investigators have, however, come to the conclusion that this work was in fact written by some one else. Lydgate was a Benedictine monk of no mean learning; but learning is no substitute for real poetry. Legouis pertinently questions "whether this Benedictine ever had time to lift his eyes from his books and papers and look at nature."

(3) Stephen Hawes (1475-1525):

He belongs to a later generation than Lydgate and Occleve. A. C. Ward observes about him: "He looked upon himself as a follower of Chaucer, though he was in fact a belated medievalist using verse as a medium for sermonical allegories uneasily wedded to chivalrous romance." He had a wonderful memory and could recite the works of many poets. He admired Lydgate, too, and referred to him as "my master". His most important work was *The Passtyme of Pleasure, or The History of Graunde Amoure and La Belle Pucel* which appeared at the end of the fifteenth, or the beginning of the sixteenth, century. It is Chaucerian more in prosody than in spirit or content. Hawes uses, no doubt, rhyme royal and decasyllabic couplets, but his avowed intention is the training of a perfect knight and lover with the help of the narration of his allegorical struggles with giants and monsters. Spenser, as Ward avers, was definitely indebted to Stephen Hawes, "for it is evident that *The Faerie Queene* does perfectly what Hawes had tried but ponderously failed to do; on the other hand it is no longer seriously held that Hawes' *Passtyme of Pleasure* was vitally influential in the making of Spenser's masterpiece."

(4) Alexander Barclay/ (1474-1552):

He is best known for his translation of the work of the German poet Sebastian Brant, which he entitled *The Ship of Fools*. The translation was not direct, but through the medium of a Latin and a French translation. He describes the various personified vices which make voyage in a ship. He satirises the vices of the clergy and the layman alike, but his keenest satire is reserved for the vice of usury. Barclay's name is also notable in

the history of English literature for his introduction of a new genre-the eclogue. He wrote some five eclogues, but he followed not Virgil but Mantuanus. As Legouis observes, his eclogues "have nothing of the idyll, but are moral satires."

(5) John Skelton (14607-1529):

He is best known for his coarse and pungent satires which put one in mind more of Langland than Chaucer. His verses are rough, unchiselled, and unmusical. He himself wrote:

Though my rime be ragged,
Tatter'd and jagged,
Rudely rain-beaten,
Rusty and moth-eaten,
If ye taken wel therewith,
It hath in it some pith.

This "pith" is generally very lively and mordant satire which has for its target, very often, the clergy. He is perhaps the only Chaucerian who experimented with new prosodic measures. He was a great scholar but had, like Samuel Butler, a keen taste for grotesqueries. In Colin Clout he lashed the vices of the clergy. In Why come ye not to Court he displayed grit enough to attack the all-powerful Wolsey. The Bouge of Court is an allegorical satire of the kind of The Ship of Fools. It is couched in rhyme royal of Chaucer's invention.

SCOTTISH CHAUCERIANS

It is a pleasure passing from the English to the Scottish poetry of the fifteenth century. In fact, the fifteenth century is the most glorious period of old Scottish poetry. Scottish Chaucerians captured more effectively the spirit of Chaucer's poetry than their English counterparts and what is still more creditable, they exhibited a keener sense of originality in their works. Their poetry is not retrogressive but progressive. Let us consider briefly the work of the most eminent Scottish Chaucerians.

(1) James I of Scotland (1394-1437):

He is known for his Kings Quair ("King's Book") which he wrote while in the captivity of the English. It commemorates a romantic incident of his own life. It was at the age of eleven that the king was captured by the English to remain a prisoner in England for more than eighteen years. During his captivity he once happened to have through his window a glimpse of the stunning beauty of Joan Beaufort, daughter of the Earl of Somerset. On his release in 1424 he was married to her. In his poem he narrates the story of his love sincerely no doubt, but not with the dramatic realism of Chaucer. He mixes much allegory with reality. And then there is the dream (after Chaucer's Hous of Fame) in which he is wafted to the palace of Venus and counselled by Minerva. James uses the pentameter stanza of seven lines with the rhyme-scheme a b abbe c which Chaucer first employed in his Troilus and Cryseyde. As James I (a king) had also used it, it came to be known as "rhyme-royal".

(2) Robert Henryson (1425-1500):

He is best known for his Testament of Cresseid in which he recast the conclusion of Chaucer's Troilus and Ciyseyde. In Chaucer's poem Cresseid betrays Troilus for Diomedes, and Troilus dies heartbroken. Henryson keeps Troilus alive and makes Diomedes betray the inconstant Cresseid who is struck by leprosy and goes about begging. Troilus accidentally comes across her and without recognising her gives her

alms. But Cresseid knows who he is, and after he is gone, falls to the ground, but before dying writes her will bequeathing a ring to Troilus who later erects a "tomb of marble grey" above her grave. Henryson's poem is written in the same measure (rhyme-royal) as Chaucer's and shows the same correctness and musical quality as Chaucer's poem. His other important work comprises some thirteen Aesopean fables and a version of the Greek legend of Orpheus and Eurydice.

(3) William Dunbar (1465-1530):

He is a more arresting figure than even Henryson. He is sometimes called "the Chaucer of Scotland", and not unjustly. He is the greatest British poet between Chaucer and Spenser. His poems are usually short. Many of them, as Legouis observes, are cast in medieval frames. He lacks the observation of Chaucer and Henryson. "But he has to a rare degree-one never reached before him and seldom since- virtuosity of style and versification...He dazzles the eyes and ravishes the ears." Dunbar's work falls into three categories as follows.

(i) formal allegory;

(ii) comic and satirical verse; and

(iii) religious poetry.

The Golden Targe is the best work of the first category and has been already referred to. Other such works are The Thrisse and the Rois celebrating the marriage of James IV and Margaret Tudor, sister of Henry VII of England; and Bewty and the Prisoner. Among the poems of the second category the most prominent and most characteristic of Dunbar is The Drifnce of the Seven Deidly Synns. The poem is more full of grotesquery and macabre buffoonery than religious edification. It is indeed a weird extravaganza. Thirdly, there are many hymns written by him,

(4) Gavin Douglas (1475?-1522?):

He is well known for his two allegorical poems The Palace of Honour and King Hart and his verse translation of Virgil. The former is written in intricate nine-line stanzas and too obviously imitates Chaucer's House of Fame. The latter uses the eight-line stanza of The Monk's Tale. The only novelty of Douglas is his mixing of humour and pathos in his allegory. His translation of Virgil's Aeneid is in heroic couplets, but he is little worried about correctness or music. His verses jar upon the ear very rudely. His translation seems to be more of the nature of a parody than a translation.