

Chaucer as the chronicler of the society of his time

Introduction:

Well does Compton-Rickett observe: "Chaucer symbolises, as no other writer does, the Middle Ages. He stands in much the same relation to the life of his time as Pope does to the earlier phases of the eighteenth century, and Tennyson to the Victorian era; and his place in English literature is even more important than theirs...."

Now what is the character of the relation which Pope and Tennyson have with their respective ages? It is a truism of literary criticism that of all writers these two are the perfect exponents and representatives of their respective ages. Their importance is twofold:

(i) Their views and "philosophy of life" are, more or less, characteristic of their respective ages.

(ii) Their works build up a picture of their contemporary life.

These two points are more tenable in the case of Chaucer than either Pope or Tennyson.

Pope:

So far as religious belief is concerned, Pope was not a representative of his age. He was a Roman Catholic whereas the majority of Englishmen were Protestants, with a fair sprinkling of Puritans among them. However, Pope never asserts his religion anywhere in his work. His compositions among themselves build up a fairly authentic picture of the social, literary, and intellectual life of the early eighteenth century which he dominated so effectively. His chief works, namely, *The Essay on Criticism*, *The Essay on Man*, *The Rape of the Lock*, and *The Dunciad* are imbued with the spirit of the age. *The Essay on Criticism* is a body of critical principles borrowed from Horace and Boileau, which were recognized as infallible in his age, set forth in memorable verse. *The Essay on Man* is, likewise, an attempt to present the philosophical and intellectual principles of the times. Much of what Pope gives is borrowed from others, which makes his work all the more representative of the age. In *The Rape of the Lock* he satirically portrays the frivolous pursuits and affected life of the upper-class ladies of his age in the person and activities of Belinda. As a critic says, "the artificial tone of the age, the frivolous aspect of femininity is nowhere more exquisitely pictured than in *The Rape of the Lock*."

Apart from Pope's indulgence in personalities, *The Dunciad*, as John Butt emphasizes, is a satire on the falling standards of literature. It pictures how the literary scene in the age of Pope was crowded with hacks who were denizens of the ill-famed Grub Street.

Tennyson:

Lord Tennyson was as representative of the early Victorian era as Pope was of the early eighteenth century. It stands to reason (Compton-Rickett perhaps assumes it does not) whether Tennyson as a poet was greater than Browning and Matthew Arnold who were his well-known contemporaries. Modern critical opinion is inclined to place Browning and even Arnold above Tennyson. But whether or not Tennyson was greater than Browning and Arnold, it is indisputable that he was much more representative of his age than they. Let us quote a critic: "It is doubtful whether any other writer of that century [the nineteenth] has reflected so clearly and broadly in his verse or prose the characteristics of that period. The dreams and aspirations, the conflicts and disappointments, the aesthetic ideals and scientific discoveries, its doubts in religion and its dogmatism in private life, its social enthusiasm and zeal for education, its curious

learning and its ethical earnestness, its enthusiasm for peace and commerce and its ardour for military conquests and imperialism-may all be found mirrored in Tennyson's poetry." Let us consider some of his major works as regards their representative value. In Locksley Hall of 1842 Tennyson effectively presents the optimistic belief of the age in the idea of progress and the potentiality of science in ushering in a brilliant future. In The Palace of Art he concerns himself with the burning question of the day whether art was for the sake of art or life. He rejected the philosophy of new aestheticism which glorified the worship of beauty at the cost of even morality. As for Maud, it gives, as a critic observes, "a dramatic rendering of the revolt of a cultured mind against the hypocrisy and corruption of a society degraded by the worship of Mammon". In his Idylls of the King, as Sir Ifor Evans observes, "Tennyson has reduced the plan of the Arthurian stories to the necessities of Victorian morality." In Memoriam, which is perhaps Tennyson's noblest work, had for its overt purpose the lamentation of the early demise of his dear friend, Arthur Hailam; but there is more of Tennyson's age than Hailam in the poem. As a poetic statement of the religious doubts of the time it exercised a powerful hold over Tennyson's generation. In The Princess he associated himself with the suffragist movement of his time and made a plea for the education and better placement of women in society. All this shows, to quote G. H. Mair that "Tennyson represents more fully than any other poet this essential spirit of the age."

Chaucer's Importance:

What Pope and Tennyson were to do for their respective ages, Chaucer did for his own. Chaucer hated insularism. All his life he was in the thick of men and affairs. He lived in no ivory tower of his own. He saw much of life. He was well acquainted with all classes and conditions of men. He also travelled abroad. All this trained him for "a poet of man" as he appeared eventually in The Canterbury Tales. His earlier works are too bookish being modelled upon Italian and French works; but in The Canterbury Tales he fixed up the spirit of his age for future generations to observe and appreciate. He was as truly the unofficial chronicler of England in the fourteenth century as Froissart was the official French chronicler of the military events of the same time. Other poets of the same age reveal it in a few of its many aspects. It is the singular achievement of Chaucer that he captures his age almost in its totality, more effectively than even Pope and Tennyson did theirs. Comparing him with his contemporaries Legouis remarks:

"All the writers of this time reveal some aspect of contemporary life and of prevailing feeling and thought. The author of Pearl shows us the mysticism of refined minds, Langland the anger which was threatening the abuse of governments and the vices of the clergy, Wyclif the ardour for religious reform which already might amount to Protestantism, Gower the fear aroused in the wealthier class by the Peasant Rising. Barbour the break between the literature of Scotland and of England and the advent of patriotic Scottish poetry. Each had his own plan, his dominant and, on the whole, narrow passion, a character which was local and of his time His [Chaucer's] work reflects his century not in fragments, but completely."

Two Limitations:

Chaucer's work has almost a documentary value for whoever desires to reconstruct the actual life of fourteenth-century England. But there are two major "limitations" to Chaucer's work as a delineator of the contemporary life and manners:

(I) Chaucer is almost silent about the very stirring and historic events of his age such as:

- (a) The Anglo-French conflicts commonly known collectively as the Hundred Years War, which began in 1338.
- (b) The Black Death or the terrible plague of 1348-49.
- (c) The Peasants' Revolt of 1381.
- (d) The Lollards' Movement started by John Wyclif in 1377 for the reformation of the Church.
- (e) The struggle of the House of Lancaster against Richard II ending in his deposition and succession by Henry IV in 1399.

Chaucer does of course casually refer to some of these events, but there is no full-length treatment of any of them. The Peasants' Revolt is referred to in the Nun's Priest's Tale. The battles of Crecy and Poitiers are glanced at elsewhere. The allusion to the Black Death comes in Chaucer's character-sketch of the Doctor of Physic in the Prologue to The Canterbury Tales:

He kepte that he wan in pestilence.

There is then a latent reference to Lollardism in the delineation of the "Poor Parson" who like a Lollard (one of Wyclif's disciples) believed in simple living and high thinking. But all these references are inexpressive, being almost casual. All this makes William Vaughan Moody assert: "The peasant rebellion and the Lollard agitation give us glimpses of an England which Chaucer, in spite of the many-sidedness of his work, did 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. Chaucer wrote for the court and cultivated classes to whom the sufferings of the poor were a matter of utmost indifference." It is indeed true that Chaucer like Shakespeare had a rather undemocratic distrust of the proletariat, and especially the mob. His avoidance of the treatment of the popular movements of the times has, however, another reason too. Let us quote here Muriel Bowden's words: "The most important reason for Chaucer's silence about political affairs—and national events undoubtedly lies in the very-mature of his genius : the poet's magnificent Human Comedy is the more human—it is 'drenched in life,' as John Livingstone Lowes has said—in that it is without the immediate, and is concerned with the universal and the timeless." Herein lies the crux of the matter. Before impeaching Chaucer for his neglect of the important events of his age we must understand the difference between the poet and the historian. Whereas the latter is concerned with the events and movements which can be dated, the former deals with the dateless and universal aspects of human nature which lie at the core of these events and movements. Chaucer was no topical versifier. If he were, like a chronicler, to versify the events and movements—however important—of his times he would better have been forgotten by us. What we read The Canterbury Tales for is the authentic and panoramic vision it gives us of the social life of the age of Chaucer, not for an account of the topical events which happened to befall in that age

(II) The second "limitation" of Chaucer in portraying his age is, if viewed differently, a positive asset. It is his avoidance of literalism (exact and unimaginative rendering of reality). Chaucer's is no Kodak-camera realism. What he gives us in The Canterbury Tales is, of course, very much near reality though 'it is not perfect reality. There is some exaggeration here and some extenuation there. For instance there is an obvious element of idealism in his characterization of the Knight, the Plowman, and the poor

Parson. These characters are too good to be literally possible and, naturally enough, they are exempted from those naughty strokes of irony which we find levelled against all their fellow-pilgrims. They are, according to David Daiches, "nostalgic portraits" of the people who were non-existent, but who were desired by Chaucer to exist. For the rest, however, Chaucer records as he finds, not mechanically, however, but with the additional advantage of his fresh and sly commentary of which his irony is the soul and the spice. In a word, though Chaucer is a realist yet he is not a literal transcriber of reality.

Medieval Chivalry:

Chaucer's England was predominantly medieval in spirit. And the most outstanding feature of the Middle Ages was chivalry. Chaucer's Knight is a true representative of the spirit of medieval chivalry which was a blend of love, religion, and bravery. He has been a champion of not fewer than fifteen battles in the defence of Christianity. Even the tale that he tells is, like him, imbued with the spirit of medieval chivalry-though nominally it has the ancient Greece for its setting and has for its two important characters the two Greek heroes who are said to have flourished in an unspecified " period of history. Chaucer almost completely medievalizes this story to enable us to have a taste of the chivalry of his age.

We must, however, point out here that the spirit of true chivalry was breathing its last in the age of Chaucer. The Knight, in fact, is a representative of an order which was losing its ground. The true representative of the new order is his young son, the Squire, who has as much taste for revelry as for chivalry. He is "a lover and a lusty bachelor." He is singing and fluting all the day and love-struck as he is, he sleeps "no more than a nightingale." However, we justly wonder if he could have proved himself another Arcite or another Palamon. At any rate, he truly represents the marked change in the world of chivalry which was fast coming over the age of Chaucer.

A Cross-section of Society:

The Canterbury Tales gives us a fairly authentic and equally extensive picture of the socio-political conditions prevailing in England in the age of Chaucer. Each of the thirty pilgrims hails from a different walk of life, and among themselves they build up an epitome of their age. Each of them is a representative of a section of society as well as an individual. Even though the chief events of the age are not dealt with exhaustively by Chaucer, the thirty pilgrims provide us with the taste of life in the England of Chaucer. Chaucer was not a reformer but a delineator of reality. Legouis remarks "What he has given is a direct transcription of daily life, taken in the very act," as it were, and in its most familiar aspects. Chaucer's work is the most precious document for whoever wishes to evoke a picture of life as it then was...."

Trade, Commerce, and Craft:

For the first time in history the trading and artisan sections of society were coming to their own in the age of Chaucer. With the fast expansion in trade and commerce merchants had become prosperous and so had the craftsmen whose goods they traded in. We are told by Chaucer that the Haberdasher, the Carpenter, the Weaver, the Dyer, and the Tapicer were well clothed and equipped. Their weapons were not cheaply trimmed with brass, but all with silver. They were so respectable-looking that Well seined each of them a fair burgeus
To sitten in a yeldhalle, on a days.

They were no longer despised by the nobility. The Merchant is a typical representative of his class, and the forefather of Sir Andrew Freeport, the merchant who is a member of the Spectator Club as delineated by Addison and Steele in the eighteenth century. His character-sketch as done by Chaucer exudes prosperity. He is always talking about the increase in his income and knows well how to make money in the market place. The countrymen and merchants have always made the two most common objects of humour and satire. But Chaucer lets the Merchant go without much of satire, perhaps in recognition of the importance that his class had gained in his age.

Medicine:

Chaucer's portrait of the Doctor of Physic is fairly representative of the theory and practice of medicine in his age. The knowledge of astronomy (rather astrology) was a must for a physician as all the physical ailments were supposed to be the consequences of the peculiar configurations of stars and planets. That is why the Doctor, too, was, "grounded in astronomy." However, "his study was but little on the Bible" perhaps because he had not much time to spare from his professional studies. He had amassed a fortune in the year of the great plague and was keen to keep it with him:

He cepte that he wan in pestilence.

For gold in phisik is a cordial,

Therefore he lovede gold in special.

Gold in the form of a colloidal solution was administered as a tonic for physicians.

However, Chaucer has a sly dig at the Doctor in his reference to his gold-loving nature.

The Church:

Through the ecclesiastical characters in The Canterbury Tales Chaucer constructs a representative picture of the condition of the Church and her ministers in his age. The Church had then become a hotbed of profligacy, corruption, and rank materialism. The Monk, the Friar, the Summoner, the Pardoner, and the Prioress are all corrupt, pleasure-loving, and materialistic in outlook. They forget their primary duty of guiding and edifying the masses and shepherding them to the Promised Land. The Monk is a fat, sporting fellow averse to study and penance. The Friar is a jolly beggar who employs his tongue to carve out his living. The Prioress bothers more about modish etiquette than austerity. The Pardoner is a despicable parasite trading in letters of pardon with the sinners who could ensure a seat in heaven by paying hard cash. The Summoner is, likewise, a depraved fellow. These characters fully signify the decadence that had crept into the Church. The only exception is the "Poor Parson" apparently a follower of Wyclif who revolted against the corruption of the Church.

The New Learning:

Though Chaucer's age was essentially medieval, yet some sort of a minor Renaissance was evident. The French and Italian contemporary writers influenced considerably the course of English literature and thought. Petrarch and Boccaccio, the two Italian writers, in particular, exerted this influence. The seeds of humanistic culture of the ancient Greeks, too, can be identified in this age. The "Clerk of Oxenford" represents the "new" intellectual culture which had percolated into fourteenth-century England long before the Renaissance. He is an austere scholar who prefers twenty books of Aristotle's philosophy on his bed's head to gay clothes and musical instruments.