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E. E. Kellett

Excerpt

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CHAUCER AND HIS INFLUENCE

FROM very early times till quite lately the custom was almost universal of beginning the history of English poetry with Chaucer. To his admirer and imitator Hoccleve he was “the *first* finder of our fair language,” before whom there had been but clumsy manipulators of a barbarous tongue. To Daniel, two centuries later, he was the writer who had

Won upon the mighty waste of days,
Unto the immortal honour of our clime,
That by his means came *first* adorned with bays.

Addison, a century later still, seems to have known as little of Chaucer as of what went before him; but he speaks to the same effect:

Long had our dull forefathers slept supine,
Nor felt the raptures of the tuneful Nine,
Till Chaucer *first*, a merry bard, arose,
And many a story told in rhyme and prose.

To Mason also—who attempted to imitate Chaucer—“Tityrus” was *first*.

The fancy persisted long. Precisely as to Milton and Hume the wars of our ancestors before the Norman Conquest seemed but like the quarrels of kites and crows, so to Dryden and Johnson, even to Coleridge and Wordsworth, the poems before Chaucer, if poems there were, were like the twitterings

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of “smale foules” trying to “maken melodye.” To these critics Caedmon was but a name; Cynewulf not even a name; *Beowulf* and *Pearl* but slowly mouldering manuscripts in the British Museum. The whole of that great literature, which it has been the work of the Early English Text Society to recover, was then a sealed book, either entirely unknown, or misinterpreted and despised. Apart from Chaucer himself, probably “Mandeville,” Langland, and Gower were the only fourteenth-century writers known even by name: and such references as are made to them are astonishing in the ignorance they reveal. All the rest, if not actually dead, were buried; and Macaulay, writing in 1837, could say with truth that “in the time of Henry the Eighth and Edward the Sixth the Italian was the only modern language that possessed anything that could be called a literature: all the valuable books then extant in all the vernacular dialects of Europe would hardly have filled a single shelf.”

But even while Macaulay was writing these words, a time was beginning which, in its lesser degree, was not unlike the Renaissance of Greek learning centuries earlier. It was found out that there had been great men before Agamemnon, and English poets before Dan Chaucer. Thorkelin had already discovered and copied *Beowulf*; in 1843 Kemble published the poetry of the Vercelli codex, and revealed to an astonished world the fact that a great poet,

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whose name he disinterred from the riddling runes that hid it, had lived in England in the very time of the “kites and crows”; Thorpe reprinted Caedmon. A little later the monumental work of Christian Grein made easily accessible the whole mass of “Anglo-Saxon” poetry. Simultaneously, later works of high rank were unearthed. For example, the edition of *Gawain and the Green Knight*, by Sir Frederick Madden, showed to all who had eyes to see that here was a fourteenth-century poet, only slightly senior to Chaucer, and fully worthy of comparison with Chaucer himself. It was thus seen that for no less than seven hundred years before the “first” poet, there had existed an English literature, well repaying hard study, and, though perhaps uncouth at first sight, gaining immeasurably on closer acquaintance. The enthusiasm of the antiquary was reinforced by patriotism; for this literature, despite its visible obligations to Latin, might be regarded as essentially independent of foreign influence, and as almost exclusively the expression of the national spirit; whereas since Chaucer’s time English poetry had been too largely a mere aspect of the great Catholic movement of Western civilisation. Doubtless there was some want of discrimination in the *furore* with which these ancient treasures were greeted. As at the Renaissance everything Greek was good, so now: every newly discovered region was an Eldorado; the poet of the *Christ* was solemnly

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compared with Milton, and *Bi Manna Craefium* was dubbed a great poem. But the fact remains not only that the discovery, as a mere matter of antiquarianism, was important, but that English literature, apart from its invaluable gains from contact with French, Italian, and the Classics, was seen to be a plant of very vigorous growth, and that much of very high merit was recovered from the bank and shoal of time. Seeing by how narrow a chance these ancient monuments had been rescued from destruction, the world wisely resolved to let them run no such risks again. Hence we are sorry to see certain scholars reverting to the ancient heresy, and in their eagerness to claim for Chaucer his just praise, arrogating to him more than really belongs to him, and tending to belittle the pre-Chaucerian poetry without the excuse of ignorance which could be pleaded by Daniel and Addison. It was perhaps natural that Professor Lounsbury, who had devoted no small part of his life to writing three huge volumes upon Chaucer, should magnify his office, and imitate less learned people by calling Chaucer the “earliest of the great English poets.” Much is to be pardoned to the writers of monographs. But when so broad-minded a student of literature as Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch falls into the same error, it is time to protest. Chaucer has merits enough in actual fact to be able to dispense with praise which is not his due; for every fresh investigation into the history of our language and our

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poetry only increases our sense of debt to him. But English poetry is too great a structure to be the work of a single man, be that man a Shakespeare himself. Such a structure demands nothing less than the silent and steady co-operation of a whole people through many ages; and—to change the metaphor—no single genius, however great, is more than an officer in that army. “All are but parts of one stupendous whole,” in which one part is often as indispensable as another. It cannot be too strongly asserted, first, that had Chaucer never been born, our literature would have taken a course very similar to the one it actually did take; and, secondly, that the influences represented by him, great and beneficent as on the whole they undoubtedly were, had yet their serious defects, which had to be supplied from other quarters. Fortunately, the English race was not so barren as to be unable to supply those other forces. Had English poetry *really* been dominated by Chaucer to the extent supposed, it would have been a vastly less vital and powerful organism than it has been. There were elements of immense value and importance in that school which Chaucer, to judge from the style of his own work, despised and tried to destroy. Nay, if comparisons are to be made—and to one like the present writer, who owes more delight to Chaucer than he can well express, these comparisons are specially odious—some of these elements were of higher value than any to be found in the school of

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which Chaucer was the leader; and all true lovers of poetry, while recognising to the full the many benefits he has conferred on his art, must ever rejoice that he did not succeed in his destructive work. In a word, he was far from “the earliest of English poets,” and English poetry, where it has been most vital, has since his time often moved on lines independent of him and *more in consonance with the lines of his predecessors*. For these predecessors, being English, worked unconsciously in accord with the English spirit; and whenever, since their time, English poetry has been most thoroughly natural, it has unconsciously recurred to the spirit of Caedmon, Cynewulf, and the author of *Gawain*. To prove this statement fully would demand at least a volume; it must be the aim of a short paper like the present merely to illustrate it by a few detached hints.

The most obvious, if not actually the greatest, achievement of Chaucer, was the final and definitive substitution of the new form of versification for the old. Already, it would seem, alliterative verse had been displaced in the south of England; but it retained more or less vitality in the north; and, allowing for anticipations here and reversions there, we may fairly say that to Chaucer, and the school of which he is the chief representative, is due the destruction of this once dominant measure, and also—to a lesser degree—of the ballad-forms parodied

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in *Sir Thopas*. In their place, he did not introduce, but improved and all but perfected the octosyllabic couplet, and then, sighing for more worlds to conquer, developed the iambic pentameter, which before his time had only appeared furtively and as it were by accident in English verse. This measure, as the basis of the *Rhyme Royal* and of the *Riding Rhyme* or heroic couplet, he handed down to future generations to imitate and manipulate, but not to better. The service he did to literature in this respect it is impossible to overestimate: the flash of genius by which he saw the extraordinary adaptability of this metre to almost all conceivable poetical uses, marks him at once as a supreme artist in verse. What English literature would be without this metre is hard indeed to imagine. And not the least significant tribute to Chaucer's greatness is the fact that modern poets have returned to his use of it, and have shunned the form of it which was developed by the Augustan writers. As "perfected" by Waller, Dryden, and Pope, the metre is now worn out and dead. As a living form, as employed by Keats in *Endymion*, by Shelley in *Epipsychidion*, by Swinburne in *Tristram*, the metre is not that of Pope but that of the *Canterbury Tales*. Thus Chaucer, like Edward the Third, is the ancestor of two rival dynasties, the legitimate and the illegitimate. It is true that he allows himself certain licenses, natural in the experiments of a pioneer, which are now not permitted, or at any

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rate frequently used. Such are the truncated first foot,

Twenty bokes clad in black and red,
Twenty thousand freres in a route,

and the like; or the extra syllable so commonly found at the “caesura”—a freedom regular in the Elizabethans. But in his ease and lightness of scansion, and in his general treatment of the rhyming scheme, Chaucer has set the standard for to-day.

There is no need to mention here the many other metres which he tried, with great skill and ingenuity, at various times—the eight-line stanza of the *Monk's Tale*, for example, which was to give birth in the process of years to Spenser's immortal verse; or the many experiments like those in *Anelida and Arcite*, which, interesting as they are in themselves, are too elaborate to have given rise to more than a few imitations. Amid all these varieties, he preserved the beauty of his line; and it is undeniable that the iambic pentameter, in various combinations and in many forms, is to all intents and purposes the creation of Chaucer, who, moreover, not only created it, but brought it to perfection.

And yet, in those old metres which he despised, there was much which even his decasyllabic, at least in its rhyming form, could scarcely give. It is perfectly true that the *rum ram ruf* of the alliterative line, as Chaucer knew it and could not help knowing it, was loose and even licentious. In the fourteenth

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century, as used in *Piers the Plowman*, in *Gawain and the Green Knight*, in *William of Palerne* and a score of other poems, it bears every mark of having been a deliberate and somewhat ignorant *revival* of an old form; of having been a reaction against the tendencies of the day, and a purposed recurrence to what had been the tendencies of former times; and it had many of the defects of such revivals. For instance, whereas the metre of *Beowulf*, though easy and varied, had its precise and definite rules, and its limits beyond which it rarely or never strayed, the metre of *Piers the Plowman* apparently had none; it is an unweeded garden that too often runs to seed. Old English metres, as is well known, reduce themselves to five or six more or less rigidly defined types; and it is rarely indeed that a line, not obviously corrupt, fails to conform to one or other of these types. But he would be a bold man who would declare that he can see any type, or any number of types, to which the alliterative writers of the fourteenth century conformed or tried to conform. Hence Chaucer, as the apostle of law, may well have been right in revolting against this anarchy, nor can we be surprised that he did not recognise the true powers of the metre at its best; for the poems in which it was used at its best were not accessible to him. But in scholars of our time, to whom such poems *are* accessible, such a one-sided view is unpardonable; for we can see, as Chaucer could not,

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its capacities: and we can rejoice that even he, with all his influence, did not destroy it altogether, but that it lingered on, at least in the north, for a hundred years after his death. For we do not need to be told that, when used by a master who knows how to curb its laxities and restrain its exuberances, it has often a roll and a majesty which we seek in vain in the “ten-syllabled” couplet, and which indeed not even the Rhyme Royal always attains. The almost entire absence of rhyme, again, lends it some small degree of the dignity which we find in the blank verse of Milton; and even the alliteration, which occasionally palls, has at times for us to-day the full forceful value which, as far as we can guess, it had for its original hearers. Alliteration, indeed, seems to be an almost inevitable element in English poetry. Even when banished, it has a tendency to return. Spenser, while imitating Chaucer in so much else, imitated the balladists in his constant alliterations, and Swinburne, while restoring to us much of the ease of medieval metres, restored alliteration with it. There was, in fact, as Sir Israel Gollancz says, *a grandeur, a flexibility, and a vigour* in the metre of a Cynewulf which is ill compensated by the greater regularity and smoothness of the metres introduced by Chaucer. And all this, being *demande*d by the English nature, had to be recovered somehow; but it was not found in its old fullness till blank verse was invented—a measure of greater capacity than any of those used