

Subject: ENGLISH

Class: B.A. Part 1 English Hons., Paper-1, Group D

Topic: Chaucer's Contribution as a Poet

Lecture No: 68

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CHAUCER'S CONTRIBUTION AS A POET

Introduction

- Lowell rightly remarked 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 , 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.

Chaucer *employed* in his work the East midland dialect, and 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. 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."

Contribution to Versification:

- Chaucer's contribution to English versification is no less striking than to the English language. He sounded the death-knell of the old Saxon alliterative measure and firmly established the modern one.
- Let us give the important features of the old measure which Chaucer so categorically disowned:
 1. 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.
 2. The use of alliteration as the chief ornamental device and as the lone structural principle. All the alliterative syllables are stressed.
 3. Frequent repetition to express vehemence and intensity of emotion.

Chaucer had no patience with the "rum, ram, ruf" of the alliterative measure. 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:

1. All lines have the same number of syllables
 2. End-rime
 3. 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 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 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."
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

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 *l'art 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."

Conclusion

- 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, perennial freshness which appears so abundantly on its every page.

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