

#### 4. York [GEOFFREY CHAUCER 1340-1400]

It is distinctive of Chaucer that he surveyed with wide, impartial and inquiring eyes not only the past but also the life of his day. He was at once familiar with foreign lands and in his own country, at home with every class of people. Beneath the changing customs the time, he makes clear the springs which move humanity in every age. His vivid pictures of his own time and country are no less true of every country and every land.

Chaucer's career is usually divided into three phases:

1. The French period
2. The Italian period
3. The English period.

#### French Period:-

Strongly influenced by French literary culture, Chaucer wrote many poems celebrating courtly love. They translated into English the lengthy French Romance "The Romance of the Rose" running to some lines and dealing with limitations of marriage and the frailties of women. "Complaint unto Pity" is remarkable for its Skizud use of seven lined stanza or 'Rime Royal' a new phenomenon in English versification. "The Book of Duchon" is another important poem of the French period. In this period, Chaucer is trying his hand, on metre, on language, on subject.

#### Italian Period:

"The house of Fame"; "The Parliament of"

"Fowls" reveal the influence of Dante's "Divine Comedy" Chaucer's humour and wit "Troilus and Cremlida". In Troilus and Cremlida Chaucer expanded brief story burning with passion and despair, in which Troilus loved Cremlida and was loved by her. Until absence from him brought about her, undoing; she turned to other lovers and was unfaithful to Troilus. Apart from his adaptations and translation of the passionate scenes of Boccaccio. Chaucer's originality is chiefly shown in Comedy in the character of Pandarus, Cremlida's uncle.

"Troilus and Cremlida" borrowed from Boccaccio indicates Chaucer's growing insight into human nature. "The Legend of good women" borrowed from Latin sources shows Chaucer's narrative skill, charm and above all his mastery over the heroic couplet.

The English Period:-

The greatest work of this period is "Canterbury Tales" the general plan is borrowed from Boccaccio's 'Decamerone'. There is a great deal of variety of character, interest, incident and finer realism. What had never been done before was to take the collection of human beings and mix them together. Make them tell stories and make these stories illustrate their own characters. Chaucer's work sparkles with life and drama. The result is not only a picture of late middle-ages but of the world itself. As Albert says, "Even in its uncomplete stage the work is a small literature itself". Dryden calls it, "God's plenty" Chaucer's literary power were at their rippest and one gets the unique picture

of contemporary England. Chaucer brings together at 'The Tabard Inn' representative of every class in England of his day. 'The prologue to the Tales' is a marvellous portrait gallery of the typical people of the age. 'The corrupt monk', 'The Dainty Prioress' and 'The Gay young Squire'. Each pilgrim going to Canterbury is at once a fully realised individual and a representative of his class or profession. Beneath the costumes and strange occupations, we have timeless human beings.

'The Canterbury Tales' consists of about 17,000 lines in verse. The verse consists of Rhymed couplets. It forms a compromise between the old and new prosody. Chaucer chooses the heroic verse with 5 accented syllables.

A merchant . . .

In motteleye and lye on horse he sat / upon  
his head a flaudryssh bevere hat.

'The Tales' themselves offer amazing variety. Some are drawn from the romances of chivalry, the Knight's Tale; some deal with scriptural stories, the Monk Tale; some are adaptations of romance from ancient France. There are no ghosts in Chaucer. His work palpitates with blood, it is as warm as living flesh.

Chaucer's Contribution: [vernacular - Mother tongue].

Reforms of language when Chaucer commenced his career, there was no English language but only a number of dialects, such as the Northern, the Southern, the East Midland, the West Midland. Chaucer chose the London dialect, "The King's English" he recast

English words, and adapted words of French origin. He made Midland Dialect a suitable vehicle for literary expression. Chaucer found English a dialect but he made it a language.

As a metrical artist :-

"Professor Skeat" has given a list of no fewer than 13 metres consisting for the most part modifications of French and Italian models. Chaucer dispensed with old English irregular lines and alliterations and adopted the French method of regular metre and end rhymes. His verse achieved union of simplicity and freedom. Chaucer employed three metres regularly. First he used eight syllabic line rhyming in couplets. Secondly he used the ten syllabic line rhyming in couplets called the heroic couplet is effectively employed in the 'Prologue' and 'Canterbury Tales'. Thirdly the ten syllabic line arranged in seven lines each, called Rime Royal - is used in 'Troilus and Criseida'.

Realism :-

Chaucer began his career with the fashionable courtly love, allegory and dream love. Soon he rejected these elements of medievalism and turned his attention to the life and people of his time. His 'Prologue' is an epitome of the 14th Century England. Each pilgrim's daily life, normal habit, prejudice and personal mannerisms come out in their conversation and behaviour. Each pilgrim is at once a fully realized individual and a representative of his class and profession.

With Chaucer English language and literature grew at a bound to full maturity. He had the European Conscience to render in English the dominant themes of European literature and at the same time an English Conscience to present the English life as it has been never presented before.

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