THE CANTERBURY TALES OF CHAUCER, IN THREE VOLUMES, VOL. III

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The Canterbury Tales of Chaucer, in Three Volumes, Vol. III by Geoffrey Chaucer & Thomas Tyrwhitt & Charles Cowden Clarke

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GEOFFREY CHAUCER & THOMAS
TYRWHITT & CHARLES COWDEN CLARKE

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Trieste

CHAUCER'S

CANTERBURY TALES.

THE

CANTERBURY TALES

OF

CHAUCER.

TO WHICH ARE ADDED

AN ESSAY ON HIS LANGUAGE AND VERSIFICATION,
AND AN INTRODUCTORY DISCOURSE,
TOGETHER WITH NOTES AND A GLOSSARY.

BY

THOMAS TYRWHITT, F.R.S.

With Memoir and Critical Dissertation.

THE TEXT EDITED BY CHARLES COWDEN CLARKE.

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THE GENIUS AND POETRY OF CHAUCER.

We approach with a mixture of enthusiasm and of awe to the consideration of the genius and the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer, and are almost disposed to adapt and employ the well-known words of Keats addressed to Apollo—

> "Lo! 'tis for the Father of *our* verse—
> Flush everything that has a vermeil hue,
> Let the rose smile intense," &c.

A peculiarly rich chaplet, surely, should be woven for the brow of one to whose verse, as to a fountain, we may, in a great degree, trace all the splendours, graces, and powers of English poetry: the infinite variety of Shakspeare—the linked sweetness and ethereal air of Spenser—the intricate ingenuity and involved strength of Donne, Cowley, and the rest of the metaphysical poets—the solemn grandeur of Milton—the graceful spirit of Denham and Waller—the inflamed common sense and masculine energy of Dryden—the terseness and glittering point of Pope—the rich description of Thomson—the tenderness and classical polish of Goldsmith and of Rogers—the forest-like vastness and gloom of Young—the brilliant philosophical rhetoric of Akenside—the fine frenzy of Collins—the condensed elaboration of Gray—the direct vigour and earnest spirit of Cowper—the passionate outpourings, which came, like molten lava, from the hearts of Burns and Byron—the tremulous elegance and husbanded strength of Campbell—the *Excelsior* path ever pursued by the lonely and daring genius of Shelley—the inner and inverted eye of poetry which was the differentia of Wordsworth—

the broad-winged and all-embracing sweep of Coleridge—the simple, yet fiery inspiration of Scott—the narrow, Teneriffe-like elevation of Southey—the musical and muffled song of that flower-embosomed bee, Keats—and the exquisite blending of art and nature to be found in the better poems of Tennyson, where the union of the two is so complete that you cannot distinguish between them, any more than you can determine where one colour of the rainbow melts into another;—all these, and all the rest of the efforts of our British genius, would never have existed but for the impulse given, and the example set, by Chaucer. We equal him not to one or two of his followers, such as Shakspeare and Milton—we say not that he combined the qualities of after poets in himself—we assert not that many, or any, of these succeeding writers were his slavish imitators, or his imitators at all; but, even as the oak reposes in the acorn, and as in a "cradled Hercules" we trace

"The lines of empire in his infant face"—

so in the rhymes of Chaucer, rude as many of them are, we have the germ of the whole gigantic development of poetic growth which has since astonished the world, and to which, taking it all in all, there is nothing equal or second in the compass of literature.

Here, in reference to the poetry as well as to the life of the poet, it is no easy matter to

"Call up him who left half told
The story of Cambuscan bold."

Much obscurity springing from antique language and allusions rests upon many parts of Chaucer's writings. We must deduct, too, from him a good deal of the matter which he wittingly or unwittingly absorbed from the great contemporary writers of his time, and must also mark with a stern *cum nota* the offences against delicacy which unfortunately have found far too many parallels in all early literature. Early writers are, in general, great borrowers from the few sources that are open to them. They think no more of deriving thoughts and images from others than of taking stones from a mountain side, or faggots from a forest. In Scripture itself there are coincidences between

different writers which can hardly be accounted for except on the supposition of appropriation, such as those between the 2d chapter of Isaiah and the 4th of Micah—not to speak of passages in which the imitations of older models is obvious, as we find in Ezekiel xxxii. 21 of Isaiah xiv. 9. Homer is probably much indebted to previous poets, although, happily perhaps for his fame, there is now no possibility of tracking him in their snow. Shakspeare is notoriously starred over with borrowed gems, although his native beauty and magnificence of form are thereby enhanced, instead of being dwindled or deformed. Milton had the magical faculty of turning pebbles into gold, and golden pieces into diamonds—he never appropriated without improving, and, when he throws a disguise over his stolen splendours, the veil is more valuable than the objects concealed. Coleridge has been compared to one of those *millionnaires* who are sometimes seized with the insane desire of stealing trifles from shops. He rather reminds us of the beautiful story told about him when a boy, detected on the Strand with his hand in a gentleman's pocket, imagining the while that he was Leander swimming in the Hellespont! So, in sheer absence of mind, he sometimes thrust his hand where it had no right to be, and was rather cavalierly treated therefore by those who were more wide awake than the "noticeable man with large gray eyes." But, for Chaucer's somewhat large transcriptions rather than transfusions from Petrarch, Dante, Boccaccio, and other writers, it may be, and has been, ingeniously pled—a plea which avails also for his numerous classical allusions—that, at the period of the revival of letters in Europe, information, and especially information connected with the history of literature, was so precious, that for a poet to exhibit the extent of his reading in his verses was deemed a perfectly legitimate mode of exciting interest, and that at that time "a thought, a sentiment, a plot, an image, a description, were all valuable to the poet wheresoever obtained, and that the duty of repeating or translating the fine passages of another author was more strongly felt than the desire of being original." Writers, and the public too, had then very different ideas from what they have now of the design of a poem. It answered then somewhat the purpose of an American store, where goods of all

kinds are collected without much regard to selection or arrangement, and in which the great point sought is, to have everything, whether paid for or not, stowed up for all possible demands. The readers, too, of that day were usually, to some extent, scholars themselves, and perhaps understood recondite allusions better than many who are reputed intelligent now. In all Chaucer's classicalities, however, as well as in those of Spenser and Milton, there are a freshness and a gusto which were entirely lost in the writers of Queen Anne's days. And in the contrast between them on this point, we see the difference between the irrepressible exudation of the learning of scholars and that forced accumulation of commonplaces in which sciolists and schoolboys glory. There have been three stages in the history of the use of the classics in British poetry. In the first instance, Chaucer, Spenser, and others, used them with lavish profusion, although, in general, with great felicity. Then, in the reign of Charles II. and Queen Anne classical figures became a nuisance, and the public and the critics alike began to sicken of Delias and Phillises, Neptunes and Proserpines, although we find Dr Moore, so late as the rise of Robert Burns, exhorting the peasant bard to fill his poetry with these *fade* ornaments—an advice which he very wisely did not follow. And in fine, came Keats, Barry Cornwall, Leigh Hunt, Shelley, and Landor, who ventured to shoot their own genius into the dead forms of the Pagan mythology, to give it a new glory by giving it a new interpretation, and whose object was not to imitate but to emulate the elder models, not to garnish their sepulchres but to renew their life.

In considering Chaucer's genius and writings, we ought never to forget that they were written before the invention of printing, and for the use of a manuscript-reading public. What a curious train of thoughts this fact opens up to the present readers or writers of literature! Compare the sensation which now attends the appearance of a popular poem or novel—the hum of expectation which precedes it—the preliminary puffs and extensive bookselling subscription—the rush for copies on publication day—the newspaper notices swelling out into magazine articles, and then reverberated by the voices of the reviews—till, through the

length and breadth of the land, there arises a storm of praise—the multiplying editions—epistles of congratulation and bank-cheques—with the cold gestation of a work in the days of our ancestors—the MS. handed round from the author to one or two of his friends—the deliberate perusal characteristic of the leisure of the times, and of the scarcity of books—the letters of acknowledgment travelling at a snail's pace to the patient scribe—the copies transcribed by a few earnest but tranquil admirers—the successive but slow voices by which the impulse was transmitted to a circle which was not, after all, very wide; and we may have some conception of the disadvantages under which writers and writings were then placed, notwithstanding all that princes sometimes did to reward their genius, and wandering minstrels, reciters of poetry, and peripatetic monks, to circulate their fame. The knowledge of this might probably tend to render their efforts more strenuous and more solid, and their motto more than in latter times, *Pingimus in eternitatem;* but often, too, their hearts would fail them, their fingers would drop powerless upon the lyre, or be able only to play out the *sentiment* of verses to be written in an after age—

> "Oh! who can tell how hard it is to climb
> The steep where Fame's proud temple shines afar!"

The same fact has led, according to an ingenious writer, to a peculiarity in Chaucer's writings, which he thus expounds:—"There is a LARGENESS about his poetry, as if it were written not for men of ordinary stature or moderns, but for giants or leisurely antediluvians. There is no haste about it, no literary eagerness, no deference to a standard of length or proportion, no subordination of parts to the whole; all is slow, calm, arbitrary, immense, as if an Egyptian temple were a-building. Perhaps the special manifestation of this largeness which will most readily strike a reader of Chaucer, is his fondness for minute and elaborate descriptions of scenery, ceremonials, &c. This characteristic may have been, in some degree, a constitutional peculiarity of Chaucer. We think, however, it may be referred to more general causes. In the age of manuscripts, when a reader could not turn as he pleased from one composition to another, what was written