

Chaucer as a Narrative Poet

Chaucer is rightly regarded as the Supreme narrative poet of his country and his 'Canterbury Tales' is a standing monument of his genius as a narrator in verse. Other writers have greater monuments, but nobody has Chaucer's excellence of narration in verse. 'Chaucer is one of the world's three or four story tellers', says Lowell. He further says, "Chaucer is known to everybody as the prince of story tellers, as incomparably the greatest of our narrative poets. Indeed if we disregard the epic which stands in a class by itself, do not see why we should not hesitate to call him the greatest of all narrative poets whatsoever making no reservation of era or of language". Chaucer was inspired in his art of narration by example of the 'Middle Ages' where in story telling was an art, and a true poet was rega-

rded to be a story teller. In the good old days it was believed that a perfect story should be full of action and should have truth as its basis. Like Shakespeare, Chaucer rarely took the trouble of inventing a plot for his stories. His tales have no originality of plot. He borrowed his plots from Latin, French and Italian sources. "But Chaucer never conceals his sources as Shakespeare did." He borrowed his plot but the style was his own. By the alchemy of his genius he changed the dress into gold. He poured wine in new bottle but the bottle was his own. In this sense both R. K. Root and G. R. Chesterton regard Chaucer as an original poet. Chaucer had originally planned to narrate a number of tales but all that he has left behind are twenty four tales differing in character like the characters who narrate them.

These tales can be divided according to their subject matter. Of the twenty four tales some are romantic tales, some are fabliaux and some centre round the life of saints. 'The Knight' relates the story of chivalry and war and the 'Clerk' gives the story of Griselda's wifely devotion. 'The Squire' narrates the story of eastern magic. The stories of the 'Miller' and the 'Reeve' are fabliaux. They are tales of contemporary life dealing with lower classes. 'The Pardoner's Tales' is a moral allegory and the tale of 'Hun's Priestess' is an episode of 'Reynard the Fox'. Thus of the twenty four tales some are pious and some profane, but each story is in perfect conformity and harmony with the narrator. This gives to the stories their tone of sincerity and truthfulness. All the tales of Chaucer have movement and variety. The story moves ahead uninterruptedly

and there is a constant progress in the narration. The movement of the story goes on unabated. The action of the story is not the same. It varies according to the nature of the story. Each story is artistically narrated that it gives rise to a sequence of fresh tales. The wife of Bath's views about marriage furnish a quarrel between the Friar and the Summoner and a fresh story starts. Thus the narration does not become tedious and boring. In Chaucer's narrative art, there are well marked dramatic touches. He breaks away from the hold of personification and allegory and becomes a dramatist introducing life and vigour in his narration. He gives new life to an old story and unravels the complexities of sentiment by his hints as a dramatic observer. The deft touches and the imagination with which he brings up the personality of a character and the sense

of humour and pathos make for dramatic elements in his stories. Some of his stories can be easily turned into plays and acted on the stage. Some of the Canterbury Tales - those of the Wife of Bath, the Friar and the Pardoner can ~~easily~~ easily be made into lively little plays. An essentially dramatic spirit pervades Chaucer's work.

Chaucer is a great narrator because he infuses humour in his stories and never allows them to become dull and dreary. There is a humorous lining even to the serious as well as the farcical stuff of the tales. The humorous touches and personal comments at the end of the story make the stories lively and entertaining.

The end.

Munir Bhushan Sinha
Deptt. of English
S. S. College Jehanabad