

14th Century Poetry

Two important developments that took place during hundred and fifty years from 1200 A.D. to Chaucer and affected poetry much were (i) European or international and (ii) English or national. Throughout the middle ages poetry was common to all the civilised countries of Europe but it was by the close of the thirteenth century that the English numbers developed some originality in theme and treatment. The development continued and increased enormously in the latter half especially of the fourteenth century. By 1275 A.D. English poetry struck a new national pathos of its own in its political songs. "Rude and imperfect as is the vehicle of expression," says Courthope, "the popular songs of England in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries reveal a consciousness of united purpose and a corporate pride in the nation."

for which no contemporary parallel can be found in any other country of Europe."

Geoffrey Chaucer - The age of Chaucer was an age of transition and unrest because a number of changes were taking place. According to A. C. Rickett "Chaucer's world is mediæval, but beneath the mediævalism the heaven of Renaissance is already at work." The religious world was in a turmoil. People were revolting against orthodoxy, the working class was stirring, political and military events were supporting the growth of nationalism by minimizing the limit of Papal influence and, hence, the prestige of the church was declining. The decline was three fold political, intellectual and spiritual. Then came the birth of Parliament and people started fighting their own political battle. It is in this age of turmoil and social upheaval that Chaucer

was writing his verses. Chaucer was born in 1340. His early life was spent in London and hence, urban impression with its bustling life made an ineffaceable impression on his mind. He was appointed to the household of Queen Elizabeth in 1357 and continued in the service till 1369. He remained busy in a number of diplomatic and commercial missions from 1370 to 1378. He lost the favour of the court in 1389 and became relatively poor. Luckily in 1389 he once again got an appointment as clerk of the works but was superseded in 1391 and lived on pension throughout his life. The writings of Chaucer may be divided into three periods.

- (i) The French period or the period of Translation (1369-1378) - A prayer to the virgin named A.B.C. written during his tenure as an esquire to Edward III is taken to be his first extant poem. Two

things that influenced him much were 'Roman de la Rose' and the early Italian Renaissance. At a later date he translated the poem. His early translations, though lost, are 'origines upon the maudelyne', 'The wretched Engendering of mankinde' and 'Roman of the Rose'. Graceful and tender sentiment which is found in the 'Compluynt to Pite' was followed by the 'Book of Duchesse' or 'Death of Blanche'. The Duchesse was no other than the wife of John of Gaunt, the patron of Chaucer. One more work of translation is 'Translation of Boethius'.

- (ii) The Italian Period or the period of imitation (c. 1378 - 1384) - This was the period of travel, the time of his mission abroad. He travelled extensively, met Petrarch, talked to him and studied the story of Boccaccio. On his return to England he wrote 'Troilus and Criseyde'. According to Rickett it was

"Boccaccio chastened by English reticence and religious feeling." He wrote also 'The Story of Griselda'. His other works of the period are 'The Story of Constance', 'The man of law's Tale', 'The Complaynt of merris', 'The Complaynt to His Lady', 'Parliament of Fowls', 'To Rosamond', 'Lines to Adam Scrivener', 'The House of Fame' and 'The Legend of good women' which was either influenced by Dante or derived from Boccaccio.

(iii)

The English Period or the original Period (1384 - 1390) - The main work of this period is 'The Canterbury Tales' written in heroic couplet and Chaucer's stanza which remained unfinished. It is true that his work had been affected by Italian subjects but he never tried to copy Italian verse except for once. Some of the 'Canterbury Tales' had been written in the early period but those most English

were written in this period. The poem puts us in the heart of London and contains stories told by the pilgrims on way to Canterbury. Among the minor poems the best is 'Truth'. Some of the qualities of Chaucer as a poet are his dramatic power, art of characterisation, humour, paintings of society, realism and poetic art. Chaucer will always be remembered as the father of modern English poetry.

William Langland - He was born in 1332. Educated at Merton he came to London with his wife and children. He was a poor man earned his bread by singing. He attracted some patrons but after their death once again became hard up. He had the zeal of a reformer and this is the reason why he could not rise in church though he had put aside his married state. He was tall and lanky and was commonly or popularly known as "longwill". He was melan-

chole, sensitive, large hearted and devoid of the mannerisms of Chaucer. Rickett has compared him with Hardy - "Like our own Thomas Hardy, he was more keen to note the ironies of life, the suffering and misery that lay about him, than to note those brighter aspects of mediæval life which Chaucer loved to paint". In his famous book 'The Book of Piers the Plowman' in which he poured his life blood brings out his hopes, despair, sorrows and aspirations and, anger and compassion. The poem is a series of dreams or visions like 'Roman de la Rose'. The poet aims at reform and not at revolution. He puts forward the gospel of Truth, Love, Duty and Work. His deep religious sense and the power of feeling of social duty are for all the time. In addition to this unfinished work he wrote a poem entitled, 'Richard the Redeless' which is related to the expected deposition of Richa-

rd II in 1399. Nobody is very sure about his later work. He died in the same year Chaucer had died.

John Gower - He was an aristocratic, conservative wealthy man from Kent. He was a shrewd business man. He married late in life but whether first or second nobody knows. He became blind in his old age and spent his days in devout observation. Gower's chief works are 'Speculum Hominis' written in French, 'vox Clamantis' written in Latin and 'Confessio Amantis' written in English. The first of his poems consists of 30,000 lines and is in the nature of a morality play. The poet has depicted his society as Chaucer and Langland have done. His last work is 'Traite'. The poem deals with love and marriage.

The end.

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