

# Chaucer's Early Poetry

Wolfgang Clemen

Translated by C. A. M. Sym



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## Chaucer's Early Poetry

First published in 1963, this book provides an account of Chaucer's poetry written before *The Canterbury Tales*. W. H. Clemen gives full, comprehensive and intriguing accounts of three major poems including *The Book of the Duchess*, *The House of Fame*, and *The Parliament of Fowls* in addition to some other, more minor poems from Chaucer's oeuvre.

## Prefatory Note

The material of the present book is partly based on my former study *Der junge Chaucer* which was published in 1938 but soon went out of print. During the last ten years I had often been asked to prepare an English version of this book. Re-reading Chaucer's early poems, however, I realized that a mere translation would not do and that the former text would have to be expanded, altered and revised in order to take into account recent developments of Chaucerian studies as well as my own somewhat changed approach. Most chapters have therefore been re-written. In supplementing the notes, however, no effort was made to include all articles referring to these early poems, as such a procedure would have unduly encumbered the pages.

I wish to express my sincere thanks to Dr D. S. Brewer and Dr J. E. Stevens who read my manuscript and offered many valuable suggestions of which I availed myself. For further advice and information I feel obliged to Dr Eric Stanley, Mrs Ursula Dronke, Professor Dorothy Bethurum and Professor B. Bischoff. A considerable debt of thanks for help in the preparation of this book is due to my students who in the course of a Chaucer seminar helped me to clear up certain points and to investigate single aspects. For permission to make use of these valuable contributions I should like to thank H. Castrop, W. Föger, W. Maurer, M. Musiol, W. Riehle, G. Sievers, B. Thaler, H. Weber, W. Weiss. For the checking of notes and quotations, I owe many thanks to Gudrun Mattauch and to Gertrud Walter. Finally I should like to express my appreciation of the understanding and circumspection with which Dr C. A. M. Sym has undertaken the English translation. The German version of this book will be published simultaneously.

WOLFGANG CLEMEN

## Abbreviations

<i>Arch. f. Relig. Wissensch.</i>	Archiv für Religionswissenschaft
BD	The Book of the Duchess
EC	Essays in Criticism
ELH	English Literary History
ES	English Studies
ES <i>t</i>	Englische Studien
HF	The House of Fame
<i>Hist. Jbch.</i>	Historisches Jahrbuch
JEGP	Journal of English and Germanic Philology
MLN	Modern Language Notes
MLR	Modern Language Review
MP	Modern Philology
NED	New English Dictionary
PF	The Parliament of Fowls
PMLA	Publications of the Modern Language Association
PQ	Philological Quarterly
RES	Review of English Studies
RR	Roman de la Rose
SATF	Société des anciens textes français
SP	Studies in Philology
<i>Spec.</i>	Speculum
ZfFSL	Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur

The following books, which are repeatedly referred to in the notes, are mostly quoted merely with the author's name.

Bennett	Bennett, J. A. W., <i>The Parlement of Foules</i> , 1957
Besser	Besser, Ingeborg, <i>Chaucer's Hous of Fame</i> ( <i>Britannica</i> 20), 1941
Brewer	Brewer, D. S., <i>Chaucer</i> , 1953

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- |             |   |
|-------------|---|
| Brewer PF   | Brewer, D. S. ed., <i>The Parlement of Foulys</i> , 1960                                      |
| Bronson     | Bronson, Bertrand H., <i>In Search of Chaucer</i> , 1960                                      |
| Brusendorff | Brusendorff, A., <i>The Chaucer Tradition</i> , 1925  |
| Chesterton  | Chesterton, G. K., <i>Chaucer</i> , <sup>2</sup> 1948, repr. 1959                             |
| Coghill     | Coghill, Nevill, <i>The Poet Chaucer</i> , 1949, repr. 1960                                   |
| Curry       | Curry, Walter C., <i>Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences</i> , <sup>2</sup> 1960 rev. enl. ed. |
| Curtius     | Curtius, Ernst R., <i>European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages</i> , 1953                |
| Everett     | Everett, Dorothy, <i>Essays on Middle English Literature</i> , 1955                           |
| Huizinga    | Huizinga, J., <i>Waning of the Middle Ages</i> (Penguin), 1955                                |
| Kittredge   | Kittredge, George L., <i>Chaucer and his Poetry</i> , 1915, repr. 1956                        |
| Lewis       | Lewis, C. S., <i>The Allegory of Love</i> , 1936  |
| Lowes       | Lowes, John L., <i>Geoffrey Chaucer</i> , 1934  |
| Malone      | Malone, Kemp, <i>Chapters on Chaucer</i> , 1951   |
| Muscatine   | Muscatine, Charles, <i>Chaucer and the French Tradition</i> , 1957                            |
| Patch       | Patch, Howard R., <i>On Re-reading Chaucer</i> , 1939, repr. 1948                             |
| Shannon     | Shannon, E. F., <i>Chaucer and the Roman Poets</i> , 1929                                     |
| Shelly      | Shelly, Percy V. D., <i>The Living Chaucer</i> , 1940   |
| Speirs      | Speirs, John, <i>Chaucer the Maker</i> , 1951   |
| Sypherd     | Sypherd, W. O., <i>Studies in Chaucer's Hous of Fame</i> , 1908                               |
| Tatlock     | Tatlock, J. S. P., <i>The Mind and Art of Chaucer</i> , 1950                                  |
| Ten Brink   | Ten Brink, B., <i>Chaucers Sprache and Verskunst</i> , <sup>3</sup> 1920                      |

Chaucer's poems are quoted after the text of Robinson (*The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd edition, 1957). This edition is referred to in the notes as Robinson.

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## Introduction

Until a short while ago Chaucer's work was viewed and judged from the perspective of the *Canterbury Tales*. These have appealed most to the modern reader; with their humour and realism they seemed almost to be speaking, 'our own language', and they could be understood and relished even by readers not versed in literary history. Indeed, the *Canterbury Tales* stand out from among the rest of English medieval literature as a remarkably modern work. A good deal of what is considered 'modern' in the *Canterbury Tales* is, to be sure, based upon faulty interpretation; yet the past three centuries have produced much evidence<sup>1</sup> that this quality of 'modernity' is precisely what has determined the value and the place which the *Canterbury Tales* hold in English literature. Furthermore, this same criterion has affected our judgment of Chaucer's early poetry;<sup>2</sup> for even up till quite recently his early poems have been thought of not so much as possessing a value and a discipline of their own, but rather as representing a transitional stage, a preliminary step towards the *Canterbury Tales*. Such a point of view, however, was bound to overlook much; for it involves succumbing to the bias of noticing and praising in the first place whatever seems to foreshadow the *Canterbury Tales*.

It led former critics to stress the humour and realism in Chaucer's early poetry.<sup>3</sup> Yet even qualities of this sort do not appear without foundation; and we shall only come to appreciate their uniqueness once we have grasped the characteristic changes in style and manner of composition which these early poems exemplify. We shall then realize that what is of importance are these structural alterations; the humour and the realism are

<sup>1</sup> Cf. C. Spurgeon, *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion*, 1925.

<sup>2</sup> On this term, as used in the present book, see p. 21 f.

<sup>3</sup> Although, as Miss Spurgeon shows, it was not until during the nineteenth century that Chaucer's humour came to be truly appreciated. Cf. the critical account in H. R. Patch, *On Re-reading Chaucer*, 1948 Ch. 1.

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merely resultant phenomena, appearing at surface-level and denoting profounder fundamental changes.

Another prejudice which has hindered our approach to the early poems has been the idea that in writing his first poems in the French style and the idiom of allegory, Chaucer had as it were made a false start. It was thought that he only gradually discovered his true and individual manner after having tried out literary forms unsuited to his own temper and to the age he lived in. Any such opinion – surely untenable as so expressed – was bound to lead to an underestimation of the early poems; for it overlooked the task Chaucer had set himself from the beginning. This was to take the French mode of composition – which was then at a more advanced stage in regard to techniques and design – and by transposing it into English, to give the language of English poetry as it were the 'entrée' to the court.

Finally, overemphasis on French and Italian influences has adversely affected our assessment of Chaucer's early poetry. The now discredited division of Chaucer's work into a French, an Italian, and an English period, is based upon the delusion that he copied first French, then Italian, and finally English models. In reality he was always making use of sources in other languages, even in his 'English period'; even in his 'French period', too, he was continually altering and reshaping such sources until the expression and the manner became his very own. His 'English period' begins with his first poem – it is hoped in the chapters that follow to demonstrate the truth of this statement.

Chaucer's early poems can tell us much about the relation between outside influence and a poet's own manner of composition, between tradition and originality, between convention and its application in a new way; some of what we shall learn applies to medieval poetry in general, some in particular to Chaucer. The medieval poet was not primarily concerned with originality, with his own inventiveness, but with giving due consideration to prescribed forms and genres, rules of composition and stylistic conventions. These accepted forms and rules carried far more weight then than they did in later times. A precise knowledge of literary traditions, 'topoi', stylistic models and rhetorical devices, was among the most important conditions which the poet was obliged to satisfy if he was to do justice to his

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task. For they outlined the well-defined framework within which the poet had to keep. His merit did not consist in stepping outside these transmitted forms, in contributing something completely 'new'; it lay in keeping – as tradition demanded – within this framework and yet at the same time moving freely within these given limits and displaying his individuality through his own particular use of the traditional formal and stylistic elements. The medieval reader or hearer, meeting with new poems or a new poet, had no wish to 'break new ground'. What he wanted was to be reminded of what he knew already, to meet once again with what was familiar, and at the same time to take pleasure in the variations and occasional differences in the shaping and treatment of these well-known phrases and expressions. This tension between adjustment to tradition and deviation from it should be kept in mind; for that is what must have determined both the poet's process of creation and his reader's attitude. In the case of each poem, we must not fail to recognize this mutual relationship between on the one hand the limitations diversely imposed by these models, poetic conventions and genres, and on the other, the poet's individual idiom revealed both despite and within these restraints.

Chaucer's case is a particularly strongly contrasted and unusual one. Not only was he conversant with the complex development of his own native literary tradition; he also knew the French and Italian writers – better, indeed, than his English contemporaries did – and he was widely read in medieval Latin literature. This enabled him to link up with the most diverse developments and to draw upon the most varied sources. Chaucer had an extensive knowledge of literary tradition together with a feeling for the formal and stylistic merits of what had been handed down; and both these faculties were united in a remarkable way with a superb ability to deal in a new and often quite revolutionary manner with all these differing elements rooted in tradition. He sets free much of what he borrows from the past by turning it to new uses. He disregards what had previously been the function of certain themes, and gives them a new connotation which often produces an ironic contrast between their former overtones and what they now imply and signify. With light-hearted dexterity he simply reverses the plus and minus signs in front of these

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traditionally conditioned themes, and fits them into a context which is the very opposite of their previous one.

But Chaucer's early poetry displays the phenomenon of literary influence, too, in a new and unusual light. The very numerous instances in the early poems of either literal borrowing, similarity, or conscious imitation, at first seem to give colour to the view formerly held that French and Italian poetry must have 'very strongly influenced' Chaucer. But in this case we must carefully define and delimit what is meant by 'influence'. We shall have to consider what affinity or specific poetic aim may lie behind Chaucer's response to certain influences in a given case. We shall further have to distinguish between those elements in another writer which most strongly influenced Chaucer and other essential features in the same writer to which he was consistently resistant or unresponsive. We must recognize what fruitful impulses in Chaucer were released by these stylistic models, and what elements enriched his diction. By concentrating not merely on the authentication of parallels and similarities, but making a more general view which would include the function, connotation, context and aim of what he took over, we shall arrive at an appreciation of Chaucer's artistry in transforming what largely belonged to others until it became all his own. Often minute changes, inversion, trifling additions, or fresh arrangement suffice for Chaucer to bring the considerable material he borrows by almost imperceptible stages into line with the new basic aim and style of his own poems. Over and over again Chaucer takes two similar elements, and without necessarily altering much, makes them entirely different from one another. Even the poets of today who are particularly adept in the art of quoting, borrowing and alluding, can admire Chaucer's virtuosity in this field, a skill which he hides beneath a cloak of artlessness and improvisation.

As Chaucer's contemporaries read these early poems, it must have been an added delight to them to meet again with familiar turns of phrase in a new connotation, and they must have responded to Chaucer's skill in waking an 'echo' of other poets' work. But if we readers of today are also to appreciate this art we shall be obliged to undertake a comparison at different levels. The method used in former studies, that of comparing Chaucer's earlier poetry with its sources, models and literary

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tradition, should be applied to a new purpose. For our aim will not be to establish Chaucer's 'debt' to this or that source or to detect isolated parallels in the texts, but to use comparison and contrast to recognize Chaucer's own achievement, the manner of composition which characterizes his writings even from an early stage. We shall also hope to assemble criteria for estimating his poetic intention and use the method of comparison in order to gain some insight into the development of literature during the later Middle Ages. Comparison and contrast can serve as 'heuristic principles' leading us to recognize what is characteristic and what is 'different'.

A study of Chaucer's early poems in particular brings out the truth now recognized that a historical method of analysis must be accompanied by intensive textual interpretation. If we merely ask what aspects of Chaucer's early poetry we feel to be 'alive' and aesthetically attractive today, we shall overlook much that is essential and the result will be a picture which is not only incomplete but even distorted. It would, however, be equally misguided to try to make Chaucer and medieval poetry in general fit into the modern conception of poetry whereby everything is 'symbolic' and to be interpreted as an extended metaphor. This, too, would give a false picture. The 'historical approach' cannot of course claim to be the only gateway to an artistic appreciation of the individual poems. For what determines the artistic impact of a poem and of its individual themes is not their earlier development, provenance and historical limitations, but the entire verbal shaping and composition, the way in which each part is linked to the whole, how one item follows on from another and how certain images and impressions are awakened thereby. The aim of the three chapters devoted to the major poems (*The Book of the Duchess*, *The House of Fame*, and *The Parliament of Fowls*) will be to lay bare this essential structure, the cumulative effect of the poem and to show by what stages this is brought about. Every poem has, to be sure, two aspects; it does not exist purely in isolation as an individual work of art; it also represents a stage in its creator's development as an artist and in the course of literature. Every work of art is thus permeated with tendencies and trends that lead backwards and forwards beyond its own individual limits. The pursuit of literary history involves a

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recognition of these overlapping processes of growth, these lines of development, and these relationships. Yet, we must also avoid misinterpreting or even disrupting the unity of the individual work of art which offers us once and for all its own imprint and shaping of the diverse material.

A consideration of the basic tendencies and lines of development in the course of late medieval literature will help us to recognize the foundations of Chaucer's early poetry. We must know something of this basis, too, if we are to appreciate Chaucer's own achievement in developing and recasting existing elements of form and style and in infusing them with new life. In the case of any poet we must know what he started with if we are to understand his subsequent artistic development. In Chaucer we have a striking example of how the earlier stages of artistic growth can throw special light on the establishment of certain characteristic features.

With Chaucer, however, 'artistic development' is by no means the same thing as the evolution of the poet's own personality. In his case, as in that of almost every medieval poet, it would be quite inappropriate to regard the development of the artist as reflecting certain individual experiences, to try to reach the person – even the 'inner life' of the poet, perhaps – by way of the poem. All we can do is to come to some idea of how he writes and of how at times he envisages the world about him. As a 'person', despite the many apparently personal touches in certain of his poems, Chaucer escapes us. More than other poets, he remains hidden behind a part he has assumed in his poems, in which he plays the dreamer, the narrator, the innocent and artless spectator. And even here there is a paradox; for while Chaucer himself more than once appears in his poems, with characteristic touches that portray both himself and his attitude, yet he always gives us a blend of what we can believe and what we can not; and we are never quite sure where we stand. Chaucer applies his own typical evasion and disguise, his quizzical manner, in his own case as well. He draws an ironical picture of himself; and what his poems offer is a composite and refracted image of the poet.

For this reason the present study makes no attempt to recapitulate the various theories concerning certain historical

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personages or contemporary events which might fit in with the 'allegory' of the poems. None of these hypotheses can be proved to satisfaction; and even if it could be established, the fact that some event at court, in politics or within the country was alluded to in the poems, would after all do little to further our appreciation of their individual artistic quality.

But there is an important aspect of the connection between these early poems and a courtly audience. From the beginning it was Chaucer's intention to give the idiom of English poetry the entrée to the court,<sup>1</sup> to ennoble it after the French pattern. His contemporaries and successors held that by so doing Chaucer had done great service to English poetry; he was extolled as the master of refined eloquence, of rhetoric, as the man

That made firste to distille and reyne  
The golde dewe droppis of speche and eloquence  
In-to oure tounge thourgh his excellence  
And founde the flourys first of rethoryk  
Oure rude speche oonly to enlumyne.

John Lydgate, *The Life of our Lady*<sup>2</sup>

— to quote the well-known passage from Lydgate. But Lydgate is not alone in his high opinion: Occleve, Shirley, Caxton, Dunbar, Hawes and many other fifteenth-century poets praise Chaucer in particular as the first to beautify and refine the English language, ridding it of 'roughness' and stiffness; like 'Tullius', he was a master of rhetoric. These views, then, all stress something less obvious to the reader of today who looks in the main for the more 'modern' elements in Chaucer's art.

The course of English literature since the Norman Conquest offers repeated instances of English poets seeking to transplant French poetry, with its greater refinement and elaboration of stylistic forms, into their own tongue. There were of course other tendencies besides, which aimed at banning French elegance and fostering a style of poetry based on the tradition of the country. Chaucer combines both tendencies. In fact he was

<sup>1</sup> This was the period, too, when English was ousting French as the language of the courts and parliament and then of instruction as well. In 1362 Parliament ordered that court cases were to be tried in English; and in 1363 Parliament was opened for the first time with an address in English, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Spurgeon, *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism* I, p. 19.

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the first to succeed in implanting within the English idiom the skilled discipline, the polished speech, the elegance and the flexibility of Romance metres. He thus realized an old ambition of English poetry;<sup>1</sup> and his example shows how fruitful foreign influences can be to the literature of the country that receives them. Yet despite this close familiarity with French and Italian thought and expression, how very English Chaucer in essence remains!<sup>2</sup> So English, indeed, that many passages from his work can still be quoted today for their typically English quality; and this quality is quite unmistakable even in the poems of his youth. Chaucer combines two things in a most fortunate way; he is exceedingly responsive to influences from other poets, and he possesses the most vigorous poetic individuality imaginable.

The following chapters will give concrete examples from individual poems which illustrate Chaucer's attitude towards French and Italian literature. His responsiveness to the qualities of Romance verse led to a greater stressing of artistic considerations in the composition and structure of poems; more attention was now paid to achieving polished expression and a clear, well-turned narrative style. Other examples of poetry of high artistic standard in the fourteenth century, about the time of Chaucer and Gower, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and a few other alliterative works, belong to quite a different literary tradition. It is not certain whether Chaucer knew these poems; at least he did not draw upon them. The rhymed romances, on the other hand, with few exceptions have no artistic pretensions and often try to give no more than an artless rendering of the story. These works do occasionally contain a lively and forceful account, but there is little sign of any subtlety in tone or mood, or of artistry in expression. If we look at the works of doctrinal instruction, the political and religious satires, the didactic allegories, then the general absence of artistic or aesthetic principles is still more striking. It is true that the writers of these works had other aims.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. W. P. Ker, *Essays on Medieval Literature*, 1905 p. 137.

<sup>2</sup> This must be stressed in view of interpretations which see Chaucer as essentially a French poet at heart. In Legouis and Cazamian we can still read: 'C'est son esprit même qui est français comme son nom . . . Il descend en droite ligne de nos trouvères et il a tout d'eux sauf la langue' (*Hist. de la Littérature Anglaise*, 1925, p. 131).



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They intended to impart instruction and salutary doctrine in a form which the laity could understand; their poetry served – in so far as it is religious – to popularize the spread of doctrinal teaching during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Chaucer's early poems contrast with most of these works; for they are the creation of a conscious artist; in those works in particular, where he used models and had before him formal patterns – largely lacking in artistic principles – and applied them to the traditional forms he employs. We can now do justice at more than one level to Chaucer's 'art' in these early poems; we can, indeed, appreciate his skill in expression and portrayal, in combination and transition, in veiled reference and subtle allusion. It is just this subtlety, however, which often conceals Chaucer's art that may present itself in an artless guise. Especially in the early poems he frequently expresses something 'by implication', making the sense he intended reveal itself without the need of words, and keeping silent where others would have spoken out plainly. Today we see all this as an indication of a great degree of artistic skill; and it is by precisely these features (which are not found in this form in any of his contemporaries or immediate successors) that Chaucer anticipates developments not carried through in English poetry until very much later.

In general, new traits can only come to the fore when other and opposing tendencies recede. In Chaucer's case a strongly didactic basic tendency had to make way before any new qualities could emerge. Didacticism had been very largely dominant in the literature of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Even those middle-English rhymed romances (now toned down to middle-class proportions) which seem at first glance to aim purely at 'entertainment', seek to edify and bring home some practical moral by means of a tale skilfully told. Their endeavour to make the story easier to follow and thereby to point the moral more clearly may be the reason for the lack of vivid description of milieu and for the very simplified action in these works.

Later generations praised Chaucer as a 'moral poet', and his work certainly contains didactic elements; but these are introduced in a subtle, unobtrusive fashion which exactly matches the form in which they are presented. He has achieved a new way of uniting entertainment with instruction. But the blending of the