

GEOFFREY CHAUCER
AND
THE DEVELOPMENT OF HIS GENIUS

BY
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HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
BOSTON • NEW YORK • CHICAGO • DALLAS
ATLANTA • SAN FRANCISCO
The Riverside Press Cambridge

TO
GEORGE LYMAN KITTREDGE
'MYN OWENE MAISTER DEERE'

PREFACE

THE six chapters which follow were delivered as lectures at Swarthmore College on the William J. Cooper Foundation, in January and February, 1932, and are published in accordance with the terms of the Foundation. They are printed essentially as they were delivered, except that the second lecture has been split into two chapters, the present second and third. There are undoubtedly those — I should be, I am sure, of the number myself — who will be disturbed by the absence of means by which statements may be controlled and citations verified. But the requirement that the lectures be published as lectures precludes references and notes. Any study such as this, however, must build upon foundations laid by the long line of students and lovers of Chaucer, living and dead. And to them, even though it may be in general terms alone, I record my homage and gratitude.

To Swarthmore College too — ‘[our] frendshipe nas nat newe to bigynne’ — the generous response and warm-hearted welcome which lectures and lecturer alike received have placed me under a happy debt, which may only be acknowledged, never paid.

J. L. L.

29 December, 1933

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I

BACKGROUNDS AND HORIZONS

NOTHING more unlucky, I sometimes think, could have befallen Chaucer than that he should have been christened 'the father of English poetry.' For 'father' in such a context conveys to most of us, I fear, a faint suggestion of *vicarious* glory — the derivative celebrity of parents, otherwise obscure, who shine, moon-like, in the reflected lustre of their sons. What else than progenitors were the fathers of Plato, or Cæsar, or Shakespeare, or Napoleon? And so to call Chaucer the father of English poetry is often tantamount to dismissing him, not unkindly, as the estimable but archaic ancestor of a brilliant line. But Chaucer — if I may risk the paradox — is himself the very thing that he begat. He *is* English poetry incarnate, and only two, perhaps, of all his sons outshine his fame. It is with Chaucer himself, then, and not save incidentally with his ancestral eminence that we shall be concerned.

But more than five hundred and thirty years have passed since Chaucer died. And to over-leap five centuries is to find ourselves in another world — a *mundus alter et idem*, at once familiar and strange. Its determining concepts are implicit in all that Chaucer, who was of it, thought and wrote. And woven as they are into his web, they at once lend to it and gain from it fresh significance. To us they are obsolete; in the *Canterbury Tales*, and the *Troilus*, and the *House of Fame* they are current and alive. And it is in their habit as they lived, and not as mere curious lore, that I mean to deal with them.

I

Let me begin with the very tongue which Chaucer spoke — a speech at once our own and yet not ours. ‘You know,’ he wrote, recalling, in perfect keeping, Horace by way of Dante — and for the moment I rudely modernize lines as liquid in their rhythm as smooth-sliding Mincius — ‘you know that within a thousand years is change in form of speech, and words which were then deemed apt and choice now seem to us wondrous quaint and strange; and yet they spoke them so, and sped as well in love thereby as men now do.’ And to us, after

only half a thousand years, those very lines are an embodiment of what they state:

Ye knowe ek that in forme of speche is chaunge
 Withinne a thousand yeer, and wordes tho
 That hadden pris, now wonder nyce and straunge
 Us thinketh hem, and yet thei spake hem so,
 And spedde as wel in love as men now do.

Chaucer himself in his own day saw the change in English speech progressing, and with characteristic acumen recognized its menace to the future understanding of his verse. 'And for ther is,' he wrote at the close of the *Troilus*, addressing his 'litel bok' —

And for ther is so gret diversite
 In Englissh and in writyng of oure tonge,
 So prey I God that non myswrite the,
 Ne themysmetre for defaute of tonge.
 And red wherso thou be, or elles songe,
That thou be understonde, God I biseche!

That petition has not gone unheard, yet the obstacle to instant understanding does exist, and I have no intention of belittling it. But I should like to say with emphasis — and I am speaking not to the student of Chaucer, but to the lover of books — that it seems more formidable than it is. A bare fraction of the time which we spend in learning to read Homer or Virgil or Dante or Molière or Goethe will en-

able any of us to read Chaucer as he is meant to be read, to wit, with delight — as Dryden read him, knowing less than we, though seeing more. For it is in words and idioms whose nearness to ours is greater far than their distance is remote that Chaucer's men and women speak — speak, at their best, with a raciness and point and flavour that have never been surpassed. Nor is it a *sine qua non* — and I think I know — to master all the complexities of Middle English in order to follow with intelligence Chaucer's language, and to feel his 'divine liquidness of diction,' and the 'divine fluidity' of his verse. It is, I suspect, the awe-inspiring *chevaux de frise* of technical Chaucerian scholarship which has often scared the laymen for whom Chaucer wrote from entrance upon their rights. That technical erudition, however, may safely be left by the lover of poetry until its results have fertilized the common soil.

But it is not only Chaucer's speech which has undergone transformation. The change in his world is greater still. And the situation which confronts us, to put it in a word, is this. In Chaucer's greatest work we have to do with *timeless creations* upon a *time-determined stage*. And it is one of the inescapable ironies of time that creations of the imagination which are at

once of no time and for all time, must nevertheless think and speak and act in terms and in ways which are as transient as they themselves are permanent. Their world — the stage on which they play their parts, and in terms of which they think — has become within a few lifetimes strange and obsolete, and must be deciphered before it can be read. For the immortal puts on mortality when great conceptions are clothed in the only garment ever possible — in terms whose import and associations are fixed by the form and pressure of an inexorably passing time. And that is the situation which we have to face.

It is characteristic of Chaucer's penetration that he recognized as a practical problem of his own precisely this complication, and discussed it with singular felicity and point. The story of Troilus and Criseyde which he was retelling was set on the stage of a far-distant time. And the background against which he had to throw his characters and his action was remote from the familiar knowledge of his audience. And in the Proem to his Second Book he faces the difficulty in a passage as charming as it is acute. You know, he says (for it is with the stanza which I have already quoted that he begins) you know how *speech* has changed within a thousand years;

yet words now strange were potent enough then.
And as it is with words so is it also with the
affairs of love:

... in sondry ages,
In sondry londes, sondry ben usages.

And then, in lines compact of exquisite insight and humour, he warns his hearers — for he was reading the poem aloud — against the risk of allowing changes in manners and customs to confuse their perception of that fundamental human nature common to lovers, alike in London and Troy.

Chaucer's shrewd caveat is no less pertinent now than then. Criseyde and Pandare and the Wife of Bath and Harry Bailly and the Miller and the Reeve and the Squire are more vividly alive today than you and I. They are of one blood with Falstaff and Sancho Panza and Tom Jones and Mr. Pickwick and Becky Sharp and Mrs. Proudie and Captain Ahab. But they think in terms and act in ways which are no longer ours, and the stage on which they move is strange to us. And what I wish first of all to attempt is to reconstruct at least a portion of that time-determined stage — to reanimate, in a word, if may be, a few of the notions now obsolete which permeated the thinking of their period.

By Chaucer's world, then, I mean for the moment that complex of conceptions in terms of which he and his contemporaries thought, as we, for example, think (when we think!) in terms of evolution, and electrons, and time-space continuums, and the second law of thermodynamics, and an expanding or contracting universe — all of which concepts, in their turn, will give place to other conditioning ideas. But for Chaucer's planes of reference we must go back to a pre-Copernican, pre-Newtonian, pre-Einsteinian world — a world to us fantastic, but less fantastic, perhaps, than ours will be five hundred years from now. For, once more, as Chaucer wrote to his old friend Scogan — and the belief lies deep in his philosophy,

... al shal passe that men prose or ryme;
Take every man hys turn, as for his tyme.

And that now remote world of his, with its backgrounds and presuppositions, we must get clear about for a very definite reason.

For it is not as if Chaucer at one time thought the thoughts of his period, and at another stopped his thinking and gave his emotions and his imagination rein. He was, on the contrary, singularly of a piece. His poetry did not occupy one compartment of his brain and his knowledge and his ponderings another. The two coalesced.

All of Chaucer was apt to be present when he wrote, and the conceptions held in solution in his thinking were continually precipitated in his verse. Sometimes they emerged in detail, but more often, especially when he was writing at high tension, in swift, passing, and enriching references — the ‘spontaneous overflow’ of what he knew. And even apart from the light they throw on what he wrote, the modest effort demanded in thinking his thoughts after him has, like even temporary residence in a country akin to yet different from our own, the virtue of enlarging our scope. And every conception which will concern us survives, in one form or another, in your speech and mine today.

II

It is with backgrounds and bounds alone, then, that I mean this time to deal, and the background of backgrounds is Chaucer’s universe. How did he think of it? And in what relation does it stand to ours? Let us start, at least, from common ground.

We live in terms of *time*. And so pervasive is that element of our consciousness that we have to stand, as it were, outside it for a moment to realize how completely it controls our lives. For we think and act perpetually, we mortals

who look before and after, in relation to hours and days and weeks and months and years. Yesterday and tomorrow, next week, a month from now, a year ago, in twenty minutes — those are the terms in which, wittingly or automatically, we act and plan and think. And to orient ourselves at any moment in that streaming continuum we carry watches on our wrists, and put clocks about our houses and on our public towers, and somewhere in our eye keep calendars, and scan time-tables when we would go abroad. And all this is so utterly familiar that it has ceased to be a matter of conscious thought or inference at all. And — to come to the heart of the business — unless we are mariners or woodsmen or astronomers or simple folk in lonely places, we never any longer reckon with the *sky*. Except for its bearing on the weather or upon our moods, or for contemplation of its depths of blue or fleets of white, or of the nightly splendour of its stars, we are oblivious of its influence. And therein lies the great gulf fixed between Chaucer's century and ours.

For Chaucer and his contemporaries, being likewise human, also lived in terms of time. But their calendar and time-piece was that sky through which moved immutably along predestined tracks the planets and the constella-

tions. And no change, perhaps, wrought by the five centuries between us is more revealing of material differences than this shift of attitude towards 'this brave o'erhanging firmament,' the sky. And it is that change, first of all, that I wish, if I can, to make clear.

There could be, I suspect, no sharper contrast than that between the 'mysterious universe' of modern science, as interpreters like Eddington and Jeans have made even laymen dimly perceive it, and the nest of closed, concentric spheres in terms of which Chaucer and his coevals thought. The structure of that universe may be stated simply enough. Its intricacies need not concern us here. About the earth, as the fixed centre, revolved the spheres of the seven then known planets, of which the sun and the moon were two. Beyond these seven planetary spheres lay the sphere of the fixed stars. Beyond that in turn, and carrying along with it in its 'diurnal sway' the eight spheres which lay within it, moved the *primum mobile*, a ninth sphere with which, to account for certain planetary eccentricities, the Middle Ages had supplemented the Ptolemaic system. We must think, in a word, of Chaucer's universe as geocentric — the 'lytel erthe,' encompassed by 'thilke speres thryes thre.' As an interesting

fact which we have learned, we know it; to conceive it as reality demands an exercise of the imagination. And only with that mental *volte-face* accomplished can we realize the cosmos as Chaucer thought of it.

Now the order of succession of the planetary spheres had far-reaching implications. Starting from the earth, which was their centre, that succession was as follows: Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn. And implicit in that order were two fundamental consequences — the astrological status of the successive hours of the day, and the sequence of the days of the week. The two phenomena stood in intimate relation, and some apprehension of each is fundamental to an understanding of the framework of conceptions within which Chaucer thought, and in terms of which he often wrote.

There were, then, in the first place — and this is strange to us — two sorts of *hours*, with both of which everybody reckoned. There were the hours from midnight to midnight, which constituted the 'day natural' — the hours, that is, with which we are familiar — and these, in Chaucer's phrase, were 'hours equal,' or 'hours of the *clock*.' But there were also the hours which were reckoned from sunrise to sunset (which made up the 'day artificial'), and on