CHAUCER

BY

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Chaucer's Times

The biography of Geoffrey Chaucer is no longer a mixture of unsifted facts, and of more or less hazardous conjectures. Many and wide as are the gaps in our knowledge concerning the course of his outer life, and doubtful as many important passages of it remain--in vexatious contrast with the certainty of other relatively insignificant data--we have at least become aware of the foundations on which alone a trustworthy account of it can be built. These foundations consist partly of a meagre though gradually increasing array of external evidence, chiefly to be found in public documents,--in the Royal Wardrobe Book, the Issue Rolls of the Exchequer, the Customs Rolls, and suchlike records--partly of the conclusions which may be drawn with confidence from the internal evidence of the poet's own indisputably genuine works, together with a few references to him in the writings of his contemporaries or immediate successors. Which of his works are to be accepted as genuine, necessarily forms the subject of an antecedent enquiry, such as cannot with any degree of safety be conducted except on principles far from infallible with regard to all the instances to which they have been applied, but now accepted by the large majority of competent scholars. Thus, by a process which is in truth dulness and dryness itself except to patient endeavour stimulated by the enthusiasm of special literary research, a limited number of results has been safely established, and others have at all events been placed beyond reasonable doubt. Around a third series of conclusions or conjectures the tempest of controversy still rages; and even now it needs a wary step to pass without fruitless deviations through a maze of assumptions consecrated by their longevity, or commended to sympathy by the fervour of personal conviction.

A single instance must suffice to indicate both the difficulty and the significance of many of those questions of Chaucerian biography which, whether interesting or not in themselves, have to be determined before Chaucer's life can be written. They are not "all and some" mere antiquarians' puzzles, of interest only to those who have leisure and inclination for microscopic enquiries. So with the point immediately in view. It has been said with much force that Tyrwhitt, whose services to the study of Chaucer remain uneclipsed by those of any other scholar, would have composed a quite different biography of the poet, had he not been confounded by the formerly (and here and there still) accepted date of Chaucer's birth, the year 1328. For the correctness of this date Tyrwhitt "supposed" the poet's tombstone in Westminster Abbey to be the voucher; but the slab placed on a pillar near his grave (it is said at the desire of Caxton), appears to have merely borne a Latin inscription without any dates; and the marble monument erected in its stead "in the name of the Muses" by Nicolas Brigham in 1556, while giving October 25th, 1400, as the day of Chaucer's death, makes no mention either of the date of his birth or of the number of years to which he attained, and, indeed, promises no more information than it gives. That Chaucer's contemporary, the poet Gower, should have referred to him in the year 1392 as "now in his days old," is at best a very vague sort of testimony, more especially as it is by mere conjecture that the year of Gower's own birth is placed as far back as 1320. Still less weight can be attached to the circumstance that another poet, Occleve, who clearly regarded himself as the disciple of one by many years

his senior, in accordance with the common phraseology of his (and, indeed, of other) times, spoke of the older writer as his "father" and "father reverent." In a coloured portrait carefully painted from memory by Occleve on the margin of a manuscript, Chaucer is represented with grey hair and beard; but this could not of itself be taken to contradict the supposition that he died about the age of sixty. And Leland's assertion that Chaucer attained to old age self- evidently rests on tradition only; for Leland was born more than a century after Chaucer died. Nothing occurring in any of Chaucer's own works of undisputed genuineness throws any real light on the subject. His poem, the "House of Fame," has been variously dated; but at any period of his manhood he might have said, as he says there, that he was "too old" to learn astronomy, and preferred to take his science on faith. In the curious lines called "L'Envoy de Chaucer a Scogan," the poet, while blaming his friend for his want of perseverance in a love-suit, classes himself among "them that be hoar and round of shape," and speaks of himself and his Muse as out of date and rusty. But there seems no sufficient reason for removing the date of the composition of these lines to an earlier year than 1393; and poets as well as other men since Chaucer have spoken of themselves as old and obsolete at fifty. A similar remark might be made concerning the reference to the poet's old age "which dulleth him in his spirit," in the "Complaint of Venus," generally ascribed to the last decennium of Chaucer's life. If we reject the evidence of a further passage, in the "Cuckoo and the Nightingale," a poem of disputed genuineness, we accordingly arrive at the conclusion that there is no reason for demurring to the only direct external evidence in existence as to the date of Chaucer's birth. At a famous trial of a cause of chivalry held at Westminster in 1386, Chaucer, who had gone through part of a campaign with one of the litigants, appeared as a witness; and on this occasion his age was, doubtless on his own deposition, recorded as that of a man "of forty years and upwards," who had borne arms for twenty-seven years. A careful enquiry into the accuracy of the record as to the ages of the numerous other witnesses at the same trial has established it in an overwhelming majority of instances; and it is absurd gratuitously to charge Chaucer with having understated his age from motives of vanity. The conclusion, therefore, seems to remain unshaken, that he was born about the year 1340, or some time between that year and 1345.

Now, we possess a charming poem by Chaucer called the "Assembly of Fowls," elaborately courtly in its conception, and in its execution giving proofs of Italian reading on the part of its author, as well as of a ripe humour such as is rarely an accompaniment of extreme youth. This poem has been thought by earlier commentators to allegorise an event known to have happened in 1358, by later critics another which occurred in 1364. Clearly, the assumption that the period from 1340 to 1345 includes the date of Chaucer's birth, suffices of itself to stamp the one of these conjectures as untenable, and the other as improbable, and (when the style of the poem and treatment of its subject are taken into account) adds weight to the other reasons in favour of the date 1381 for the poem in question. Thus, backwards and forwards, the disputed points in Chaucer's biography and the question of his works are affected by one another.

Chaucer's life, then, spans rather more than the latter half of the fourteenth century, the last year of which was indisputably the year of his death. In other words, it covers rather more than the interval between the most glorious epoch of Edward III's reign--for Crecy was fought in 1346--and the downfall, in 1399, of his unfortunate successor Richard II.

The England of this period was but a little land, if numbers be the test of greatness--but in Edward III's time as in that of Henry V, who inherited so much of Edward's policy and revived so much of his glory, there stirred in this little body a mighty heart. It is only of a small population that the author of the "Vision concerning Piers Plowman" could have gathered the representatives into a single field, or that Chaucer himself could have composed a family picture fairly comprehending, though not altogether exhausting, the chief national character-types. In the year of King Richard II's accession (1377), according to a trustworthy calculation based upon the result of that year's poll-tax, the total number of the inhabitants of England seems to have been two millions and a half. A quarter of a century earlier--in the days of Chaucer's boyhood-- their numbers had been perhaps twice as large. For not less than four great pestilences (in 1348-9, 1361-2, 1369, and 1375-6) had swept over the land, and at least one-half of its population, including two-thirds of the inhabitants of the capital, had been carried off by the ravages of the obstinate epidemic--"the foul death of England," as it was called in a formula of execration in use among the people. In this year 1377, London, where Chaucer was doubtless born as well as bred, where the greater part of his life was spent, and where the memory of his name is one of those associations which seem familiarly to haunt the banks of the historic river from Thames Street to Westminster, apparently numbered not more than 35,000 souls. But if, from the nature of the case, no place was more exposed than London to the inroads of the Black Death, neither was any other so likely elastically to recover from them. For the reign of Edward III had witnessed a momentous advance in the prosperity of the capital,-- an advance reflecting itself in the outward changes introduced during the same period into the architecture of the city. Its wealth had grown larger as its houses had grown higher; and mediaeval London, such as we are apt to picture it to ourselves, seems to have derived those leading features which it so long retained, from the days when Chaucer, with downcast but very observant eyes, passed along its streets between Billingsgate and Aldgate. Still, here as elsewhere in England the remembrance of the most awful physical visitations which have ever befallen the country must have long lingered; and, after all has been said, it is wonderful that the traces of them should be so exceedingly scanty in Chaucer's pages. Twice only in his poems does he refer to the Plague:--once in an allegorical fiction which is of Italian if not of French origin, and where, therefore, no special reference to the ravages of the disease IN ENGLAND may be intended when Death is said to have "a thousand slain this pestilence,"--

he hath slain this year
Hence over a mile, within a great village
Both men and women, child and hind and page.

The other allusion is a more than half humorous one. It occurs in the description of the "Doctor of Physic," the grave graduate in purple surcoat and blue white-furred hood; nor,

by the way, may this portrait itself be altogether without its use as throwing some light on the helplessness of fourteenth-century medical science. For though in all the world there was none like this doctor to SPEAK of physic and of surgery;-- though he was a very perfect practitioner, and never at a loss for telling the cause of any malady and for supplying the patient with the appropriate drug, sent in by the doctor's old and faithful friends the apothecaries;-- though he was well versed in all the authorities from Aesculapius to the writer of the "Rosa Anglica" (who cures inflammation homeopathically by the use of red draperies);--though like a truly wise physician he began at home by caring anxiously for his own digestion and for his peace of mind ("his study was but little in the Bible"):--yet the basis of his scientific knowledge was "astronomy," i.e. astrology, "the better part of medicine," as Roger Bacon calls it; together with that "natural magic" by which, as Chaucer elsewhere tells us, the famous among the learned have known how to make men whole or sick. And there was one specific which, from a double point of view, Chaucer's Doctor of Physic esteemed very highly, and was loth to part with on frivolous pretexts. He was but easy (i.e. slack) of "dispence":--

He kepte that he won in pestilence.
For gold in physic is a cordial;
Therefore he loved gold in special.

Meanwhile the ruling classes seem to have been left untouched in heart by these successive ill-met and ill-guarded trials, which had first smitten the lower orders chiefly, then the higher with the lower (if the Plague of 1349 had swept off an archbishop, that of 1361 struck down among others Henry Duke of Lancaster, the father of Chaucer's Duchess Blanche). Calamities such as these would assuredly have been treated as warnings sent from on high, both in earlier times, when a Church better braced for the due performance of its never-ending task, eagerly interpreted to awful ears the signs of the wrath of God, and by a later generation, leavened in spirit by the self-searching morality of Puritanism. But from the sorely- tried third quarter of the fourteenth century the solitary voice of Langland cries, as the voice of Conscience preaching with her cross, that "these pestilences" are the penalty of sin and of naught else. It is assuredly presumptuous for one generation, without the fullest proof, to accuse another of thoughtlessness or heartlessness; and though the classes for which Chaucer mainly wrote and with which he mainly felt, were in all probability as little inclined to improve the occasions of the Black Death as the middle classes of the present day would be to fall on their knees after a season of commercial ruin, yet signs are not wanting that in the later years of the fourteenth century words of admonition came to be not unfrequently spoken. The portents of the eventful year 1382 called forth moralisings in English verse, and the pestilence of 1391 a rhymed lamentation in Latin; and at different dates in King Richard's reign the poet Gower, Chaucer's contemporary and friend, inveighed both in Latin and in English, from his conservative point of view, against the corruption and sinfulness of society at large. But by this time the great peasant insurrection had added its warning, to which it was impossible to remain deaf.

A self-confident nation, however, is slow to betake itself to sackcloth and ashes. On the whole it is clear, that though the last years of Edward III were a season of failure and disappointment,--though from the period of the First Pestilence onwards the signs increase of the king's unpopularity and of the people's discontent,--yet the overburdened and enfeebled nation was brought almost as slowly as the King himself to renounce the proud position of a conquering power. In 1363 he had celebrated the completion of his fiftieth year; and three suppliant kings had at that time been gathered as satellites round the sun of his success. By 1371 he had lost all his allies, and nearly all the conquests gained by himself and the valiant Prince of Wales; and during the years remaining to him his subjects hated his rule and angrily assailed his favourites. From being a conquering power the English monarchy was fast sinking into an island which found it difficult to defend its own shores. There were times towards the close of Edward's and early in his successor's reign when matters would have gone hard with English traders, naturally desirous of having their money's worth for their subsidy of tonnage and poundage, and anxious, like their type the "Merchant" in Chaucer, that "the sea were kept for anything" between Middelburgh and Harwich, had not some of them, such as the Londoner John Philpot, occasionally armed and manned a squadron of ships on their own account, in defiance of red tape and its censures. But in the days when Chaucer and the generation with which he grew up were young, the ardour of foreign conquest had not yet died out in the land, and clergy and laity cheerfully co-operated in bearing the burdens which military glory has at all times brought with it for a civilised people. The high spirit of the English nation, at a time when the decline in its fortunes was already near at hand (1366), is evident from the answer given to the application from Rome for the arrears of thirty-three years of the tribute promised by King John, or rather from what must unmistakeably have been the drift of that answer. Its terms are unknown, but the demand was never afterwards repeated.

The power of England in the period of an ascendancy to which she so tenaciously sought to cling, had not been based only upon the valour of her arms. Our country was already a rich one in comparison with most others in Europe. Other purposes besides that of providing good cheer for a robust generation were served by the wealth of her great landed proprietors, and of the "worthy vavasours" (smaller landowners) who, like Chaucer's "Franklin"--a very Saint Julian or pattern of hospitality--knew not what it was to be "without baked meat in the house," where their

tables dormant in the hall alway
Stood ready covered all the longe day.

From this source, and from the well-filled coffers of the traders came the laity's share of the expenses of those foreign wars which did so much to consolidate national feeling in England. The foreign companies of merchants long contrived to retain the chief share of the banking business and export trade assigned to them by the short-sighted commercial policy of Edward III, and the weaving and fishing industries of Hanseatic and Flemish immigrants had established an almost unbearable competition in our own ports and towns. But the active import trade, which already connected England with both nearer and remoter parts of Christendom, must have been largely in native hands; and English

chivalry, diplomacy, and literature followed in the lines of the trade-routes to the Baltic and the Mediterranean. Our mariners, like their type the "Shipman" in Chaucer (an anticipation of the "Venturer" of later days, with the pirate as yet, perhaps, more strongly marked in him than the patriot),--

knew well all the havens, as they were
From Gothland, to the Cape of Finisterre,
And every creek in Brittany and Spain.

Doubtless, as may be noticed in passing, much of the tendency on the part of our shipmen in this period to self-help in offence as well as in defence, was due to the fact that the mercantile navy was frequently employed in expeditions of war, vessels and men being at times seized or impressed for the purpose by order of the Crown. On one of these occasions the port of Dartmouth, whence Chaucer at a venture ("for aught I wot") makes his "Shipman" hail, is found contributing a larger total of ships and men than any other port in England. For the rest, Flanders was certainly still far ahead of her future rival in wealth, and in mercantile and industrial activity; as a manufacturing country she had no equal, and in trade the rival she chiefly feared was still the German Hansa. Chaucer's "Merchant" characteristically wears a "Flandrish beaver hat;" and it is no accident that the scene of the "Pardoner's Tale," which begins with a description of "superfluity abominable," is laid in Flanders. In England, indeed the towns never came to domineer as they did in the Netherlands. Yet, since no trading country will long submit to be ruled by the landed interest only, so in proportion as the English towns, and London especially, grew richer, their voices were listened to in the settlement of the affairs of the nation. It might be very well for Chaucer to close the description of his "Merchant" with what looks very much like a fashionable writer's half sneer:--

Forsooth, he was a worthy man withal;
But, truly, I wot not how men him call.

Yet not only was high political and social rank reached by individual "merchant princes," such as the wealthy William de la Pole, a descendant of whom is said (though on unsatisfactory evidence) to have been Chaucer's grand-daughter, but the government of the country came to be very perceptibly influenced by the class from which they sprang. On the accession of Richard II, two London citizens were appointed controllers of the war-subsidies granted to the Crown; and in the Parliament of 1382 a committee of fourteen merchants refused to entertain the question of a merchants' loan to the king. The importance and self-consciousness of the smaller tradesmen and handicraftsmen increased with that of the great merchants. When in 1393 King Richard II marked the termination of his quarrel with the City of London by a stately procession through "new Troy," he was welcomed, according to the Friar who has commemorated the event in Latin verse, by the trades in an array resembling an angelic host; and among the crafts enumerated we recognise several of those represented in Chaucer's company of pilgrims--by the "Carpenter," the "Webbe" (Weaver), and the "Dyer," all clothed in one livery
Of a solemn and great fraternity.

The middle class, in short, was learning to hold up its head, collectively and individually. The historical original of Chaucer's "Host"--the actual Master Harry Bailly, vintner and landlord of the Tabard Inn in Southwark, was likewise a member of Parliament, and very probably felt as sure of himself in real life as the mimic personage bearing his name does in its fictitious reproduction. And he and his fellows, the "poor and simple Commons"--for so humble was the style they were wont to assume in their addresses to the sovereign,--began to look upon themselves, and to be looked upon, as a power in the State. The London traders and handicraftsmen knew what it was to be well-to-do citizens, and if they had failed to understand it, home monition would have helped to make it clear to them:--

Well seemed each of them a fair burgess,
For sitting in a guildhall on a dais.
And each one for the wisdom that he can
Was shapely for to be an alderman.
They had enough of chattels and of rent,
And very gladly would their wives assent;
And, truly, else they had been much to blame.
It is full fair to be yclept madame,
And fair to go to vigils all before,
And have a mantle royally y-bore.

The English State had ceased to be the feudal monarchy --the ramification of contributory courts and camps--of the crude days of William the Conqueror and his successors. The Norman lords and their English dependants no longer formed two separate elements in the body politic. In the great French wars of Edward III, the English armies had no longer mainly consisted of the baronial levies. The nobles had indeed, as of old, ridden into battle at the head of their vassals and retainers; but the body of the force had been made up of Englishmen serving for pay, and armed with their national implement, the bow--such as Chaucer's "Yeoman" carried with him on the ride to Canterbury:--

A sheaf of peacock arrows bright and keen
Under his belt he bare full thriftily.
Well could he dress his tackle yeomanly:
His arrows drooped not with feathers low,
And in his hand he bare a mighty bow.

The use of the bow was specially favoured by both Edward III and his successor; and when early in the next century the chivalrous Scottish king, James I (of whom mention will be made among Chaucer's poetic disciples) returned from his long English captivity to his native land, he had no more eager care than that his subjects should learn to emulate the English in the handling of their favourite weapon. Chaucer seems to be unable to picture an army without it, and we find him relating how, from ancient Troy,--

Hector and many a worthy wight out went
With spear in hand, and with their big bows bent.

No wonder that when the battles were fought by the people itself, and when the cost of the wars was to so large an extent defrayed by its self- imposed contributions, the Scottish and French campaigns should have called forth that national enthusiasm which found an echo in the songs of Lawrence Minot, as hearty war-poetry as has been composed in any age of our literature. They were put forth in 1352, and considering the unusual popularity they are said to have enjoyed, it is not impossible that they may have reached Chaucer's ears in his boyhood.

Before the final collapse of the great King's fortunes, and his death in a dishonoured old age, the ambition of his heir, the proudest hope of both dynasty and nation, had overleapt itself, and the Black Prince had preceded his father to the tomb. The good ship England (so sang a contemporary poet) was left without rudder or helm; and in a kingdom full of faction and discontent the future of the Plantagenet throne depended on a child. While the young king's ambitious uncle, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster (Chaucer's patron), was in nominal retirement, and his academical ally, Wyclif, was gaining popularity as the mouthpiece of the resistance to the papal demands, there were fermenting beneath the surface elements of popular agitation, which had been but little taken into account by the political factions of Edward the Third's reign, and by that part of its society with which Chaucer was more especially connected. But the multitude, whose turn in truth comes but rarely in the history of a nation, must every now and then make itself heard, although poets may seem all but blind and deaf to the tempest as it rises, and bursts, and passes away. Many causes had concurred to excite the insurrection which temporarily destroyed the influence of John of Gaunt, and which for long cast a deep shade upon the effects of the teaching of Wyclif. The acquisition of a measure of rights and power by the middle classes had caused a general swaying upwards; and throughout the peoples of Europe floated those dreams and speculations concerning the equality and fraternity of all men, which needed but a stimulus and an opportunity to assume the practical shape of a revolution. The melancholy thought which pervades Langland's "Vision" is still that of the helplessness of the poor; and the remedy to which he looks against the corruption of the governing classes is the advent of a superhuman king, whom he identifies with the ploughman himself, the representative of suffering humility. But about the same time as that of the composition of this poem--or not long afterwards--Wyclif had sent forth among the people his "simple priests," who illustrated by contrast the conflict which his teaching exposed between the existing practice of the Church and the original documents of her faith. The connexion between Wyclif's teaching and the peasants' insurrection under Richard II is as undeniable as that between Luther's doctrines and the great social uprising in Germany a century and a half afterwards. When, upon the declaration of the Papal Schism, Wyclif abandoned all hope of a reform of the Church from within, and, defying the injunctions of foe and friend alike, entered upon a course of theological opposition, the popular influence of his followers must have tended to spread a theory admitting of very easy application ad hominem--the theory, namely, that the tenure of all offices, whether spiritual or temporal, is justified only by the personal fitness of their occupants. With such levelling doctrine, the Socialism of popular preachers like John Balle might seem to coincide with sufficient closeness; and since worthiness was not to be found in the holders of either spiritual or temporal authority, of either ecclesiastical or lay wealth, the time had palpably come for the poor man to enjoy his own again. Then,