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THE
YALE LITERARY MAGAZINE.

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No. IV.

EDITORS FOR THE CLASS OF '59.

S. D. FAULKNER,

H. N. HARRISON,

G. W. FISHER,

T. R. LOUNSBURY,

A. H. WILCOX.

The Father of English Poetry.

Exegi monumentum aere perennius.—HORACE, *Lib. III, Car. xxx.*

ENGLISH literature is the Westminster Abbey of England's intellectual life. Far down, at the end of the longest aisle, stands the first English monument of an English mind. The olden orthography, the obsolete words, the quaint pronunciation, like the brown moss-spots upon the marble, are the finger-marks of time. It is a sacred sepulcher. It has ever been and will ever be the favorite resort of poet-pilgrims. It is beautiful to think of Spencer standing by that tomb and attempting, with almost filial affection and reverence, to re-touch, re-chisel, retrace, recover to the world, those "labours" which two forgetful and ungrateful centuries had left to fade away. It is touching to hear his noble lament—"the meed of a noble mind"—when he finds that many a line is already illegible.

"And now their acts be no where to be found
As that renowned Poet them compyled,
With warlike numbers and herolcke sound,
Dan Chaucer, well of English undefyled,
On Fames eternall beadroll worthis to be fylde.

Geoffery Chaucer closed a long life with the close of the fourteenth century. His were times when the scholars of the Queenly Isle transmitted their contributions to literature through the Latin, which Bacon, as late as he lived, called the "universal language;" times when the English, which is now capable of a polish as perfect as the Parian, was but rough-hewn and freshly quarried. His poems are the infant lisplings of that language which has now a larger literature than any other; and which, by a modern British essayist, has been prophesied to be "the language of the Millennium."

Yet had Chaucer no other claim to attention and study than that of priority, it is doubtful whether more of him than his name would now be known.

Still, even if precedence *were* awarded him only in consideration of dates; were the title—the "Father of English poetry"—conferred upon him only on the ground that he was the pioneer poet of our tongue, yet no one, even then, could call in question his right either to the place or the title. It is of no small moment that it was in the golden age of our English that the laurel was awarded, and his position acknowledged. And there has since risen no Aeschines to question his right to the Crown;—no literary Iconoclast to hurl him from the pedestal on which the ages have placed him. And it is worthy of the world's remembrance and gratitude that Geoffery Chaucer, the accomplished scholar, to whom the Latin, the French and the English were equally familiar, dared, against the practice then prevalent, to challenge Fame in his own native English rather than in the stalwart Latin or the facile French; thus planting a national literature earlier by a century than otherwise it might have been. This fact, alone, should defend him from the paltry imputation that he introduced French idioms into the English. That he anglicized French words is a fact, but not a fault; or if a fault, he is not answerable for it.

The French was introduced, the historian tells us, as the language of the court, just before William's invasion, by Edward the Confessor, who "*natus in Anglia, sed nutritus in Normannia, pene in Gallicum transierat—had become almost a Frenchman.*" And the Norman conquest not only confirmed the custom at court but extended it to all the nobility and clergy, whence it soon spread to the people. The French now, the whole French, and nothing but the French was talked, written and read.

But the language of France, though it inundated England, was

too light and liquid to wear away her sturdy, sterling tongue,—a tongue already too powerful to be supplanted, though it was not until the reign of Edward the Third, the patron of Chaucer, that its use became prevalent and permanent. For three centuries the two languages had shared the Empire of England's Intellect; and now it is enacted that, whereas "the French tongue is too much unknown, all pleas in the courts of the king or any other lord shall be pleaded and judged in the English."

Who shall say how much this change is due to Chaucer who has been stigmatized as the corrupter of the language which he best loved? "Lette Frenchmen," said he, "in their French enditen their queint termes, for it is kindly to their mouthes: but lette us show our fantasies in such wordes as we learnden of our Dame's tongue." The censure should be changed to commendation!

"As much as then

The English language could express for men,
He made it do."

He should be honored both for using a little and for using so little of the foreign tongue;—in the first case, because the English was limited, and the French was still the language of the learned and the polite; in the second case, because it "proves him the patriot" who prefers the language of his native land to that of any other, how much soever more refined.

Chaucer wrote for the court, for he moved among them; and he wrote for the people, for he was of them. Perhaps the ratio of the quantity of his French to that of his English is as was the number of the Court to that of the Commons. It certainly is no greater. And it could with equal propriety be imputed to Homer as a fault that he introduced different dialects into the *Iliad*.

But it is not on the priority or the purity of his writings, that his claims to veneration chiefly depend. Yet were the question: "Who was Chaucer?" to be put, in nine cases out of ten, the answer would be: "He was the first English poet;" or, "He was the father of English poetry,"—all centering around the fact, not so much that he was a poet, as that he was the first poet. The adjective is suffered to overshadow the substantive. But the fact is no less real that he was not only the first poet, but a true poet. If the province of poetry is, as it is defined in the "*Ars Poetica*," "to instruct and to entertain;" and if he deserves the longest lease upon the land of song, who best conforms to the boundaries laid down by

this definition, then surely Chaucer's claims are co-equal with all that have obtained the acquiescence of the ages. Homer and Hesiod, Virgil and Horace are read in order to gain an insight into the language and leading principles which obtained in their times.

How they wrote and how they thought,
How they loved and how they fought,
These, the poet's lines have caught.

Chaucer's poems, too, are a portrait of his age. They give us a knowledge, of the state, that then existed, of the laws, of chivalry, of literature and religion, both in their public and—more—in their private operation. He was cultivated by the court, and had the confidence of the king; yet no where in his works, can be found one line dedicated to their praise. He venerates the church; but this does not sanctify in his sight, its ages and decrepit errors. He *angelizes* woman; but this does not prevent him from representing her, when fallen, in the character of a fallen angel.

Surprise has been expressed that he has not heralded the achievements of those warriors,—“the Black Prince, and his brother, the scar-worn John of Gaunt, the chivalrous De Mauny, the heroic Chandois, and the brave Derby,”—whose names were then ringing through the realm. But, to us, it seems more surprising that none of his numerous critics have discovered that many a passage in his poems, which speaks of valor, bravery, chivalry, points to those living characters who embodied these qualities.

Surprise, too, a surprise that rises into wonder, has often been repeated, that, to quote the words of Geshler, “a poet, whose pictures of women are so exquisitely tender and delicate, should neglect to do homage to the matchless purity of Queen Philippa, whom all hearts loved.” Now is it not plain here, too, that Philippa is in the mind of the poet whenever he speaks of female beauty and purity? As “the statuary of those days used to make her their model for images of the Virgin Mary,” so our poet saw, in her, the paragon of perfection, when he would paint a portrait of female purity. The compliment to the Queen is the more valuable as it is the more indirect. Chaucer's soul, while it was too proud to flatter, was too appreciative to forget.

As to the literature—the English literature of his day—it might almost be said that it consists of his writings. That mountain range, of great names that now adorn and dignify our language, had not yet emerged from the billowy years. Shakspeare—the Mont Blanc

of all Literature—was yet two centuries in that unfathomed future. Chaucer was the first to emerge; and though many of those that rose after him, have risen above him, yet his weight has helped to thrust them up. It is no uncommon thing for a mind to excel the model that it sets before itself. One author begets another. There is a family resemblance from Chaucer to Tennyson. As the news of the Conquest of Troy flashed from Ida, through a long succession of beacons built on mountain heights, to the Atreidan roof; so, the same light of thought that blazed from Chaucer's brow flashed forward to Spencer, and Milton, and Dryden, whence it has illuminated that long line of lower heights—down to the present day.

Such has been Chaucer's influence upon England's later literature; and such is the comparative position of his poetry. It is no majestic height which looks over the horizon and sees the sun long before the rest of the world does; for Chaucer did not, like Milton, write sentiments centuries in advance of his times; but it is a low, yet lovely, undulating land of as genial clime as that of his friend and fellow-poet, Petrarch,—a land where no plain disgusts with its unvaried platitude, no peak overpowers with its imposing majesty,—a land, in fine, most truthfully, yet unconsciously figured forth in one of his own descriptions:

" There grow the bilder oke, the hardë asche,
The piller elme, the coffre unto c'raïne,
The boxë pipe tree, holme to whippës lache,
The sailing firre, the cipres deth to plaine,
The shooter ewe, the aspe for shaftës plaine,
The olive of peace, and eke the drunken vine,
The victor palme, THE LAURER, TOO, DIVINE."

" The aîrë of the place so tempre was,
That grevance was ther ne'er of hot ne cold,
There was eke every holsome spice and gras,
Ne no man may there waxë sick ne old,
Yet was there mörë joy, o thousand fold,
Than I can tell, or ever could of might;
There's ever clärs day, AND NE, NE NEVER, NIGHT."

G. W. F.

The Student in New Haven Society.

A faint tradition has come down to us, from good old times, of a Grand Ball which used to be given annually by the Junior Class, as a sort of accompaniment, to Junior Exhibition. A suitable hall was procured, the music was of the best description, and the affair was graced by the beauty and intelligence of the city. Those who had distinguished themselves in the Exhibition were the "lions" of the occasion, and the tradition says, that their performances on the floor afforded even greater satisfaction than their eloquence on the stage. Juniors in those days were happy fellows. But this custom has, very naturally, fallen into disuse, and there now remain but one or two occasions, where students *as a class* have access to New Haven Society.

In Harvard for instance, this is not so. There the Professors are accustomed to give frequent entertainments, and the mere fact of being a student in the College furnishes an introduction to Society and gives to those who have the abilities, and the desire, an opportunity to enjoy it.

And in most other colleges which are comparatively small, or are located in smaller places than New Haven, the students receive a large share of the attention and hospitalities of its citizens.

We suppose there must be a cause for the comparative absence among us, of social intercourse outside of the college walls, between students and their professors. That there is a lack in this respect is a palpable fact.

Sometime, indeed, towards the early Spring in each year, when

"A young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love,"

a lecture is given strongly recommending the marital relation to the consideration of the Senior class, and an invitation is extended to the "Soirée." Visions of Syren beauties float now in the imagination of the Seniors. Sparkling eyes and laughing lips cast a radiance over the joyous scene. And filled with eager anticipations, they adorn their persons with extra care, and proceed to the festal halls. There they enjoy the rare privilege of a conversation with their chums in a corner, or are introduced for the first time to a few young ladies, who discourse to them learnedly about the "Buddhist Religion," or the Geology, Ichthyology, and Chonology of the Cannibal Islands. After this the young gentlemen are glad enough