

**CURSORY REMARKS ON
SOME OF THE
ANCIENT ENGLISH POETS,
PARTICULARLY MILTON**

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Cursory Remarks on Some of the Ancient English Poets, Particularly Milton by Philip Neve

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PHILIP NEVE

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C H A U C E R.

CHAUCER, who was born in 1328, from the long age that intervened between him and any other poet of reputation, seems entitled to a great share of that fame, as father of the *English* muse, which *Homer* enjoys, as father of the *Grecian*. The one had (as is generally believed) his contemporary, *Hesiod*; and the other, *Gower*: and, though the uncertain date of *Gower*'s birth be, by some, placed seven or eight years before that of *Chaucer*, and he had written his great work, the *Confessio Amantis*, before *Chaucer* had published his *Canterbury Tales*, yet the general voice of every class of readers has consented to give *Chaucer*, among the

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writers

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writers of that age, the first place in his own *House of Fame*.

Of the seniority of *Homer*, or *Hesiod*, though it be a matter quite extraneous to the subject of English Poets, it may not be improper to point out, that the text of *Hesiod's Theogony* seems to afford sufficient proof, that he had at least seen *Homer's* writings, before he composed that work: for, in enumerating there twenty-five rivers, the offspring of *Oceanus* and *Tethys*, those two of them only, which wash the *Trojan* plain, are called, *Deios*, divine. Now, the *Isther*, the *Eridanus*, and the *Nile* being among them, and, of course, of the same origin as the *Simois* and *Scamander*, it would be very remarkable, that these two latter only should be divine, and yet not receive their divinity from the *Ilias*.

The *general Prologue* is justly the most celebrated part of *Chaucer's* works. The acuteness of his observation, his judgment, and discrimination of character are there alike conspicuous. Nor is it wonderful, that a
mind

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mind, possessing much native humour, and enriched by long experience and extensive information, should exhibit characters, such as are there found, with striking resemblance to nature and living manners.

Chaucer, for the time when he wrote, was a very learned, and a very powerful master in his art. When he began his *Canterbury Tales*, English could scarcely be called the predominant language of the country. French was yet used in all publick proceedings; and also in schools, as the language, into which the *Classics* were construed. To enrich his English style, therefore, he consulted the best foreign sources. With the graces of the *Provençal* poetry all *Europe* was then in admiration: and he not only adopted words and phraseology from that dialect; but, from a close study of *Dante's* sublimity, the elegance of *Petrarca*, and the style and manners of *Boccaccio*, he gained copiousness, harmony, and whatever was formed to give poetical expression.

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Of his metres, some were originally his own, and others by him first introduced into our language, from the *Provençal*: in the former of which, he has (with a small alteration) been followed by *Spenser*; and, in the latter, by *Milton*.

In the *Second Nonnes Tale*, Chaucer has taken three stanzas together from the beginning of the 33d Canto of Dante's *Paradiso*; which copy from the Italian remains, as yet, unnoticed by his commentators.

Dr. *Johnson* has said of *Chaucer*, "that he was the first English versifier, who wrote poetically." An expression, taken from that excellent treatise, *The Defense of Poesy*, by Sir *Philip Sidney*; who says, "one may be a poet, without versing, and a versifier, without poetry."

The *Canterbury Tales*, by which *Chaucer* is more generally known as a poet, were the works of his latest years: at the earliest, not begun before 1382, his 54th year; nor much advanced before 1389, his 61st. The
last

last historical fact, mentioned in them, is the death of *Barnardo Visconti*, Duke of *Milan*, who died in prison, in 1385.

Of these Tales, it is much lamented by every reader, that six are entirely wanting, and some others left imperfect. Amongst his other poems, *The Rhyne of Sir Thopas*, the first poetical satire in our language, stands a perpetual monument of his taste; and *Troilus*, or *The House of Fame*, had singly been sufficient to secure his name to posterity. The latter of which, and some of his tales, and other pieces, have excited the imitation of two of our greatest latter poets, *Dryden* and *Pope*.

Against his diction, his uncouth and obsolete terms (as they are called), the general prejudice is unreasonably strong. *Chaucer* is not now what he was, before the year 1775. In that year, *Mr. Tyrwhitt*, a gentleman, who can never be named, without respect and gratitude, by any scholar, or reader of *Chaucer*, published the *Canterbury Tales*, with a Glossary, Notes, and Illustrations, executed with

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method, acumen, and perspicuity, no where exceeded, among all the commentators on books. In this edition, the text is published in its original purity; and a reader, to go through with it, has only to consult his faithful guide, the editor; who will equally amuse and instruct him, on the pilgrimage. Of corruptions in the text of *Chaucer*, every page, sentence, almost every line would afford example, before the publication of this edition. To take the instance, which offers itself most readily to those, who have not at hand the different editions of *Chaucer* to compare; that couplet of *Pope*, in his Epistle of *Eloisa to Abelard*,

Love, free as air, at sight of human ties,
Spreads his light wings, and in a moment flies—

is taken from Chaucer's *Frankleines Tale*,

Love wol not be *constreined* by maistrie.
Whan maistrie cometh, the *God* of Love anon
Beeteth his winges, and, *farewel*, he is gon.

Bishop *Warburton*, in his notes on *Pope*, has quoted these lines of *Chaucer*, from that vile edition,

edition, published by Mr. Urry; and they stand,

Love will not be *confin'd* by maisterie :
 When maisterie comes, the *Lord* of Love anon
Flutters his wings, and *forthwith* is he gone.—

by which it is seen, that, in three lines, are four words, which do not belong to *Chaucer*.

If in any one passage, or even couplet, the harmony and flow of this antient poet's lines will stand in compare with those, from the polished pen of *Dryden*, he is not surely to be called "obsolete." In the *Knights Tale*, he describes the morning,

The besy larke, the messenger of day,
 Saleweth in hire song the morwe gray;
 And firy Phebus riseth up so bright,
 That all the orient laugheth of the fight,
 And with his strēmcs drieth in the greves
 The silver dröpēs, hanging on the leves.

which lines *Dryden* renders,

The *morning* lark, the messenger of day,
 Saluteth in her song the *morning* gray;