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CHAPTER II.

FROM CHAUCER TO SPENSER.

1400-1599.

THE 15th century was a barren period in English literary history. It was nearly two hundred years after Chaucer's death before any poet came whose name can be written in the same line with his. He was followed at once by a number of imitators who caught the trick of his language and verse, but lacked the genius to make any fine use of them. The *manner* of a true poet may be learned, but his style, in the high sense of the word, remains his own secret. Some of the poems which have been attributed to Chaucer and printed in editions of his works, as the *Court of Love*, the *Flower and the Leaf*, the *Cuckow and the Nightingale*, are now regarded by many scholars as the work of later writers. If not Chaucer's, they are of Chaucer's school, and the first two, at least, are very pretty poems after the fashion of his minor pieces, such as the *Boke of the Duchesse* and the *Parlament of Foules*.

Among his professed disciples was Thomas Occleve, a dull rhymmer, who, in his *Governail of Princes*, a didactic poem translated from the Latin about 1413, drew, or caused to be drawn, on the margin of his MS. a colored portrait of his "maister dere and fader reverent."

This londés verray tresour and richesse
 Dethe by thy dethe hath harm irreparable
 Unto us done; hir vengeable duresse
 Spoiléd hath this londe of the swetnésse
 Of Rhetoryk.

Another versifier of this same generation was John Lydgate, a Benedictine monk of the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds,

in Suffolk, a very prolix writer, who composed, among other things, the *Story of Thebes*, as an addition to the *Canterbury Tales*. His ballad of *London Lyckpenny*, recounting the adventures of a countryman who goes to the law courts at Westminster in search of justice—

But for lack of mony I could not spede—

is of interest for the glimpse that it gives us of London street life.

Chaucer's influence wrought more fruitfully in Scotland, whither it was carried by James I., who had been captured by the English when a boy of eleven, and brought up at Windsor as a prisoner of state. There he wrote during the reign of Henry V. (1413-1422) a poem in six cantos, entitled the *King's Quhair* (King's Book), in Chaucer's seven-lined stanza, which had been employed by Lydgate in his *Falls of Princes* (from Boccaccio), and which was afterward called the "rime royal," from its use by King James. The *King's Quhair* tells how the poet, on a May morning, looks from the window of his prison chamber into the castle garden full of alleys, hawthorn hedges, and fair arbors set with

The sharpë, greenë, sweetë juniper.

He was listening to "the little sweetë nightingale," when suddenly casting down his eyes he saw a lady walking in the garden, and at once his "heart became her thrall." The incident is precisely like Palamon's first sight of Emily in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, and almost in the very words of Palamon the poet addresses his lady:

Ah, sweet, are ye a worldly créature
Or heavenly thing in likeness of nature?
Or are ye very Nature, the goddess,
That have depainted with your heavenly hand
This garden full of flowrës as they stand?

Then, after a vision in the taste of the age, in which the royal prisoner is transported in turn to the courts of *Venus*,

Minerva, and *Fortune*, and receives their instruction in the duties belonging to Love's service, he wakes from sleep and a white turtle-dove brings to his window a spray of red gilly flowers, whose leaves are inscribed, in golden letters, with a message of encouragement.

James I. may be reckoned among the English poets. He mentions Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate as his masters. His education was English, and so was the dialect of his poem, although the unique MS. of it is in the Scotch spelling. The *King's Quhair* is somewhat overladen with ornament and with the fashionable allegorical devices, but it is, upon the whole, a rich and tender love song, the best specimen of court poetry between the time of Chaucer and the time of Spenser. The lady who walked in the garden on that May morning was Jane Beaufort, niece to Henry IV. She was married to her poet after his release from captivity and became queen of Scotland in 1424. Twelve years later James was murdered by Sir Robert Graham and his Highlanders, and his wife, who strove to defend him, was wounded by the assassins. The story of the murder has been told of late by D. G. Rossetti, in his ballad, *The King's Tragedy*. The whole life of this princely singer was, like his poem, in the very spirit of romance.

The effect of all this imitation of Chaucer was to fix a standard of literary style, and to confirm the authority of the East-Midland English in which he had written. Though the poets of the 15th century were not overburdened with genius, they had, at least, a definite model to follow. As in the 14th century, metrical romances continued to be translated from the French, homilies and saints' legends and rhyming chronicles were still manufactured. But the poems of Occleve and Lydgate and James I. had helped to polish and refine the tongue and to prolong the Chaucerian tradition. The literary English never again slipped back into the chaos of dialects which had prevailed before Chaucer.

In the history of every literature the development of prose is later than that of verse. The latter being, by its very form, artificial, is cultivated as a fine art, and its records preserved in an early stage of society, when prose is simply the talk of men, and not thought worthy of being written and kept. English prose labored under the added disadvantage of competing with Latin, which was the cosmopolitan tongue and the medium of communication between scholars of all countries. Latin was the language of the Church, and in the Middle Ages churchman and scholar were convertible terms. The word *clerk* meant either priest or scholar. Two of the *Canterbury Tales* are in prose, as is also the *Testament of Love*, formerly ascribed to Chaucer, and the style of all these is so feeble, wandering, and unformed that it is hard to believe that they were written by the same man who wrote the *Knight's Tale* and the story of Griselda. *The Voyage and Travaile of Sir John Maundeville*—the forerunner of that great library of oriental travel which has enriched our modern literature—was written, according to its author, first in Latin, then in French, and, lastly, in the year 1356, translated into English for the behoof of “lordes and knyghtes and othere noble and worthi men, that conne¹ not Latyn but litylle.” The author professed to have spent over thirty years in Eastern travel, to have penetrated as far as Farther India and the “iles that ben abouten Indi,” to have been in the service of the Sultan of Babylon in his wars against the Bedouins, and, at another time, in the employ of the Great Khan of Tartary. But there is no copy of the Latin version of his travels extant; the French seems to be much later than 1356, and the English MS. to belong to the early years of the 15th century, and to have been made by another hand. Recent investigations make it probable that Maundeville borrowed his descriptions of the remoter East from many sources, and particularly from the narrative

¹ Know.

of Odoric, a Minorite friar of Lombardy, who wrote about 1330. Some doubt is even cast upon the existence of any such person as Maundeville. Whoever wrote the book that passes under his name, however, would seem to have visited the Holy Land, and the part of the “voiage” that describes Palestine and the Levant is fairly close to the truth. The rest of the work, so far as it is not taken from the tales of other travelers, is a diverting tissue of fables about gryfouns that fly away with yokes of oxen, tribes of one-legged Ethiopians who shelter themselves from the sun by using their monstrous feet as umbrellas, etc.

During the 15th century English prose was gradually being brought into a shape fitting it for more serious uses. In the controversy between the Church and the Lollards Latin was still mainly employed, but Wiclif had written some of his tracts in English, and, in 1449, Reginald Peacock, Bishop of St. Asaph, contributed, in English, to the same controversy, *The Repressor of Overmuch Blaming of the Clergy*. Sir John Fortescue, who was chief-justice of the King's Bench from 1442–1460, wrote during the reign of Edward IV. a book on the *Difference between Absolute and Limited Monarchy*, which may be regarded as the first treatise on political philosophy and constitutional law in the language. But these works hardly belong to pure literature, and are remarkable only as early, though not very good, examples of English prose in a barren time. The 15th century was an era of decay and change. The Middle Age was dying, Church and State were slowly disintegrating under the new intellectual influences that were working secretly underground. In England the civil wars of the Red and White Roses were breaking up the old feudal society by decimating and impoverishing the baronage, thus preparing the way for the centralized monarchy of the Tudors. Toward the close of that century, and early in the next, happened the four great events, or series of events, which freed and widened

men's minds, and, in a succession of shocks, overthrew the mediæval system of life and thought. These were the invention of printing, the Renaissance, or revival of classical learning, the discovery of America, and the Protestant Reformation.

William Caxton, the first English printer, learned the art in Cologne. In 1476 he set up his press and sign, a red pole, in the Almonry at Westminster. Just before the introduction of printing the demand for MS. copies had grown very active, stimulated, perhaps, by the coming into general use of linen paper instead of the more costly parchment. The scriptoria of the monasteries were the places where the transcribing and illuminating of MSS. went on, professional copyists resorting to Westminster Abbey, for example, to make their copies of books belonging to the monastic library. Caxton's choice of a spot was, therefore, significant. His new art for multiplying copies began to supersede the old method of transcription at the very head-quarters of the MS. makers. The first book that bears his Westminster imprint was the *Dictes and Sayings of the Philosophers*, translated from the French by Anthony Woodville, Lord Rivers, a brother-in-law of Edward IV. The list of books printed by Caxton is interesting, as showing the taste of the time, since he naturally selected what was most in demand. The list shows that manuals of devotion and chivalry were still in chief request, books like the *Order of Chivalry*, *Faits of Arms*, and the *Golden Legend*, which last Caxton translated himself, as well as *Reynard the Fox*, and a French version of the *Aeneid*. He also printed, with continuations of his own, revisions of several early chronicles, and editions of Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate. A translation of *Cicero on Friendship*, made directly from the Latin, by Thomas Tiptoft, Earl of Worcester, was printed by Caxton, but no edition of a classical author in the original. The new learning of the Renaissance had not, as yet, taken much hold in England.

Upon the whole the productions of Caxton's press were mostly of a kind that may be described as mediæval, and the most important of them, if we except his edition of Chaucer, was that "noble and joyous book," as Caxton called it, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, written by Sir Thomas Malory in 1469, and printed by Caxton in 1485. This was a compilation from French Arthur romances, and was by far the best English prose that had yet been written. It may be doubted, indeed, whether, for purposes of simple story telling, the picturesque charm of Malory's style has been improved upon. The episode which lends its name to the whole romance, the death of Arthur, is most impressively told, and Tennyson has followed Malory's narrative closely, even to such details of the scene as the little chapel by the sea, the moonlight, and the answer which Sir Bedwere made the wounded king, when bidden to throw Excalibur into the water, "'What saw thou there?' said the king. 'Sir,' he said, 'I saw nothing but the waters wap and the waves wan.'"

I heard the ripple washing in the reeds
And the wild water lapping on the crag.

And very touching and beautiful is the oft-quoted lament of Sir Ector over Launcelot, in Malory's final chapter: "'Ah, Launcelot,' he said, 'thou were head of all Christian knights; and now I dare say,' said Sir Ector, 'thou, Sir Launcelot, there thou liest, that thou were never matched of earthly knight's hand; and thou were the courtiest knight that ever bare shield; and thou were the truest friend to thy lover that ever bestrode horse; and thou were the truest lover of a sinful man that ever loved woman; and thou were the kindest man that ever strake with sword; and thou were the goodliest person that ever came among press of knights; and thou were the meekest man and the gentlest that ever ate in hall among ladies; and thou were the sternest knight to thy mortal foe that ever put spear in the rest.'"

Equally good, as an example of English prose narrative, was the translation made by John Bouchier, Lord Berners, of that most brilliant of the French chroniclers, Chaucer's contemporary, Sir John Froissart. Lord Berners was the English governor of Calais, and his version of Froissart's *Chronicles* was made in 1523-1525, at the request of Henry VIII. In these two books English chivalry spoke its last genuine word. In Sir Philip Sidney the character of the knight was merged into that of the modern gentleman. And although tournaments were still held in the reign of Elizabeth, and Spenser cast his *Faerie Queene* into the form of a chivalry romance, these were but a ceremonial survival and literary tradition from an order of things that had passed away. How antagonistic the new classical culture was to the vanished ideal of the Middle Age may be read in *Toxophilus*, a treatise on archery published in 1545, by Roger Ascham, a Greek lecturer in Cambridge, and the tutor of the Princess Elizabeth and of Lady Jane Grey: "In our forefathers' time, when papistry as a standing pool covered and overflowed all England, few books were read in our tongue saving certain books of chivalry, as they said, for pastime and pleasure, which, as some say, were made in monasteries by idle monks or wanton canons: as one, for example, *Morte Arthure*, the whole pleasure of which book standeth in two special points, in open manslaughter and bold bawdry. This is good stuff for wise men to laugh at or honest men to take pleasure at. Yet I know when God's Bible was banished the court, and *Morte Arthure* received into the prince's chamber."

The fashionable school of courtly allegory, first introduced into England by the translation of the *Romaunt of the Rose*, reached its extremity in Stephen Hawes's *Passeytyme of Pleasure*, printed by Caxton's successor, Wynkyn de Worde, in 1517. This was a dreary and pedantic poem, in which it is told how Graunde Amoure, after a long series of advent-

ures and instructions among such shadowy personages as Verite, Observaunce, Falshed, and Good Operacion, finally won the love of La Belle Pucel. Hawes was the last English poet of note whose culture was exclusively mediæval. His contemporary, John Skelton, mingled the old fashions with the new classical learning. In his *Bowge of Courte* (Court Entertainment or Dole), and in others of his earlier pieces, he used, like Hawes, Chaucer's seven-lined stanza. But his later poems were mostly written in a verse of his own invention, called after him *Skeltonical*. This was a sort of glorified doggerel, in short, swift, ragged lines, with occasional intermixture of French and Latin.

Her beautye to augment.
 Dame Nature hath her lent
 A warte upon her cheke,
 Who so lyst to seke
 In her vysage a skar
 That semyth from afar
 Lyke to the radiant star,
 All with favour fret,
 So properly it is set.
 She is the vyolet,
 The daysy delectable,
 The columbine commendable,
 The jelofer¹ amyable;
 For this most goodly floure,
 This blossom of fressh colour,
 So Jupiter me succour,
 She flourysheth new and new
 In beaute and vertew;
Hac claritate gemina,
O gloriosa femina,, etc.

Skelton was a rude railing rhymer, a singular mixture of a true and original poet with a buffoon; coarse as Rabelais, whimsical, obscure, but always vivacious. He was the rector of Diss, in Norfolk, but his profane and scurrilous wit seems

¹ Gilliflower.

rather out of keeping with his clerical character. His *Tunnyng of Elynoure Rummyng* is a study of very low life, reminding one slightly of Burns's *Jolly Beggars*. His *Phyllipp Sparrowe* is a sportive, pretty, fantastic elegy on the death of a pet bird belonging to Mistress Joanna Scroupe, of Carowe, and has been compared to the Latin poet Catullus's elegy on Lesbia's sparrow. In *Speke, Parrot*, and *Why Come ye not to Courte?* he assailed the powerful Cardinal Wolsey with the most ferocious satire, and was, in consequence, obliged to take sanctuary at Westminster, where he died in 1529. Skelton was a classical scholar, and at one time tutor to Henry VIII. The great humanist, Erasmus, spoke of him as the "one light and ornament of British letters." Caxton asserts that he had read Vergil, Ovid, and Tully, and quaintly adds, "I suppose he hath dronken of Elycon's well."

In refreshing contrast with the artificial court poetry of the 15th and first three quarters of the 16th century, was the folk-poetry, the popular ballad literature which was handed down by oral tradition. The English and Scotch ballads were narrative songs, written in a variety of meters, but chiefly in what is known as the ballad stanza.

In somer, when the shawes¹ be shene,²
 And leves be large and longe,
 Hit is full merry in feyre forést,
 To here the foulys song.

To se the dere draw to the dale,
 And leve the hillés hee,³
 And shadow them in the levés grene,
 Under the grene-wode tree.

It is not possible to assign a definite date to these ballads. They lived on the lips of the people, and were seldom reduced to writing till many years after they were first composed and sung. Meanwhile they underwent repeated

¹ Woods.² Bright.³ High.

changes, so that we have numerous versions of the same story. They belonged to no particular author, but, like all folk-lore, were handled freely by the unknown poets, minstrels, and ballad reciters, who modernized their language, added to them, or corrupted them, and passed them along. Coming out of an uncertain past, based on some dark legend of heart-break or bloodshed, they bear no poet's name, but are *ferae naturae*, and have the flavor of wild game. In the form in which they are preserved, few of them are older than the 17th or the latter part of the 16th century, though many, in their original shape, are doubtless much older. A very few of the Robin Hood ballads go back to the 15th century, and to the same period is assigned the charming ballad of the *Nut Brown Maid* and the famous border ballad of *Chevy Chase*, which describes a battle between the retainers of the two great houses of Douglas and Percy. It was this song of which Sir Philip Sidney wrote, "I never heard the old song of Percy and Douglas but I found myself more moved than by a trumpet; and yet it is sung but by some blind crouder,¹ with no rougher voice than rude style." But the style of the ballads was not always rude. In their compressed energy of expression, in the impassioned way in which they tell their tale of grief and horror, there reside often a tragic power and art superior to any thing in English poetry between Chaucer and Spenser; superior to any thing in Chaucer and Spenser themselves, in the quality of intensity. The true home of the ballad literature was "the north country," and especially the Scotch border, where the constant forays of moss-troopers and the raids and private warfare of the lords of the marches supplied many traditions of heroism, like those celebrated in the old poem of the *Battle of Otterbourne*, and in the *Hunting of the Cheviot*, or *Chevy Chase*, already mentioned. Some of these are Scotch and others English; the dialect of Lowland

¹ Fiddler.

Scotland did not, in effect, differ much from that of Northumberland and Yorkshire, both descended alike from the old Northumbrian of Anglo-Saxon times. Other ballads were shortened, popular versions of the chivalry romances, which were passing out of fashion among educated readers in the 16th century and now fell into the hands of the ballad makers. Others preserved the memory of local country-side tales, family feuds, and tragic incidents, partly historical and partly legendary, associated often with particular spots. Such are, for example, *The Dowie Dens of Yarrow*, *Fair Helen of Kirkconnell*, *The Forsaken Bride*, and *The Twa Corbies*. Others, again, have a coloring of popular superstition, like the beautiful ballad concerning *Thomas of Ersyldowne*, who goes in at Eildon Hill with an elf queen and spends seven years in fairy land.

But the most popular of all the ballads were those which cluster about the name of that good outlaw, *Robin Hood*, who, with his merry men, hunted the forest of Sherwood, where he killed the king's deer and waylaid rich travelers, but was kind to poor knights and honest workmen. Robin Hood is the true ballad hero, the darling of the common people as Arthur was of the nobles. The names of his confessor, Friar Tuck; his mistress, Maid Marian; his companions, Little John, Scathelock, and Much, the miller's son, were as familiar as household words. Langland in the 14th century mentions "rimes of Robin Hood," and efforts have been made to identify him with some actual personage, as with one of the dispossessed barons who had been adherents of Simon de Montfort in his war against Henry III. But there seems to be nothing historical about Robin Hood. He was a creation of the popular fancy. The game laws under the Norman kings were very oppressive, and there were, doubtless, dim memories still cherished among the Saxon masses of Hereward and Edric the Wild, who had defied the power of the Conqueror, as well as of later freebooters, who

had taken to the woods and lived by plunder. Robin Hood was a thoroughly national character. He had the English love of fair play, the English readiness to shake hands and make up, and keep no malice when worsted in a square fight. He beat and plundered the fat bishops and abbots, who had more than their share of wealth, but he was generous and hospitable to the distressed, and lived a free and careless life in the good green wood. He was a mighty archer with those national weapons, the long-bow and the cloth-yard shaft. He tricked and baffled legal authority in the person of the proud sheriff of Nottingham, thereby appealing to that secret sympathy with lawless adventure which marked the free-born, vigorous yeomanry of England. And, finally, the scenery of the forest gives a poetic background and a never-failing charm to the exploits of "the old Robin Hood of England" and his merry men.

The ballads came, in time, to have certain tricks of style, such as are apt to characterize a body of anonymous folk-poetry. Such is their use of conventional epithets; "the red, red gold," "the good green wood," "the gray goose wing." Such are certain recurring terms of phrase like,

But out and spak their stepmother.

Such is, finally, a kind of sing-song repetition, which doubtless helped the ballad singer to memorize his stock, as, for example,

She had'na pu'd a double rose,
A rose but only twae.

Or again,

And mony ane sings o' grass, o' grass,
And mony ane sings o' corn;
An mony ane sings o' Robin Hood,
Kens little whare he was born.

It was na in the ha', the ha',
Nor in the painted bower;
But it was in the gude green wood,
Amang the lily flower.