

Literary Criticism (From Plato to Leavis)
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John Dryden’s “Preface to The Fables”

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THE GEOFFREY CHAUCER PAGE

John Dryden (1631-1700)

Preface to *The Fables* (1700) [Translations of Ovid and Chaucer]

[Dryden translates The Knight's Tale, the Nun's Priest's Tale, The Wife of Bath's Tale, and The Fleecce and The Leaf (then thought to be Chaucer's), and The character of a Good Person, based on (rather than translated from) the portrait of the Parson in the General Prologue.]

Chaucer and Ovid Compared

I proceed to Ovid, and Chaucer, considering the former only in relation to the latter. With Ovid ended the Golden Age of the Roman Empire: From Chaucer the Purty of the English Tongue began. The Manners of the Poets were not unlike: Both of them were well-bred, well-natur'd, amorous, and Libertine, at least in their Writings, it may be also in their Lives. Their Studies were the same, Philosophy, and Philology: Both of them were knowing in Astronomy; of which Ovid's Books of the Roman Feasts, and Chaucer's Treatise of the Astrolobe, are sufficient Witnesses. But Chaucer was likewise an Astrologer, as were Virgil, Horace, Persius, and Manilius. Both were with wonderful Facility and Chastity, neither were great Inventors: For Ovid only copied the Grecian Fables, and most of Chaucer's Stories were taken from his Italian Contemporaries, or their Producers: Boccaccio his Decamerone was first published, and from thence our Englishman has borrow'd many of his Canterbury Tales: Yet that of Palamon and Arcite was written in all probability by some Italian wit, in a former Age; as I shall prove hereafter. The tale of Grisild was the Invention of Petrearch, by him sent to Boccaccio: from whom it came to Chaucer: Troilus and Criseida was also written by a Learned Author, but much amplified by our English Translator, as well as beautiful, the Genius of our Countrymen, in general, being rather to improve an Invention than to invent themselves, as is evident not only in our Poetry, but in many of our Manufactures: I find I have anticipated myself, and taken up from Boccaccio before I came to him: But there is so much less behind, and I am of the Temper of most Kings, who love to be in Debt, ere all for present Money, no matter how they pay it afterwards: Besides, the Nature of a Preface is rambling, never wholly out of the Way, nor in it. This I have learnt from the Practice of honest Montagna, and return at my pleasure to Ovid and Chaucer, of whom I have little more to say.

Hello, and welcome to today's session. Today we are looking at one of the texts by John Dryden, *Preface to the Fables*, which includes translations of Ovid and Chaucer. And in the previous session, we had discussed how Dryden has been seen as the Father of English literary criticism and how he made it possible for the English literary critical tradition to have a standalone status and how he even went to the extent of comparing the English critical tradition far superior than the classical tradition itself.

And if you remember, he was the one who remarked that if Aristotle had seen our plays, our dramas then he would have perhaps changed his opinion about mixing tragedy and comedy. That said, it is important to remember at this point that this work *Preface to the Fables*, published in 1700 was also incidentally one of the final texts, one of the last texts that Dryden has written and published. So, in that sense, this also has significance in terms of being his last composition.

Dryden, as you remember, he was also known as a prefatory man, he had written extensive prefaces to all his works and those works have now come to be seen as a body of literary criticism that Dryden has written. So, in this work, we realize that in the *Preface to the Fables*, Dryden has translated “The Knights Tale”, “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale”, “The Wife of

Bath's Tale", "The Flower and the Leaf", which was then thought to be as Chaucer's but there is still some debate about that.

And he had also given an extensive commentary on his opinion, on his take, his critical take on Chaucer, and he was the one who had instantly referred to Chaucer's work as "Here is God's plenty." And this work is also seen as one of the earliest instances of comparative criticism, especially within English literary critical tradition. And as the title also suggests, he had attempted to compare Chaucer's works with that of Ovid's.

So, there is a very direct kind of comparison between the classical literary tradition and eventually he, without being overtly direct about his preferences, he does a comparative kind of an analysis and he showcases some of the merits and demerits of both kinds of writings. And eventually we also get the sense that Dryden seems to be upholding the English literary tradition and also trying to tell us how distinctive Chaucer and the subsequent literary writings have been within the English literary field.

So, the Preface is divided into different sections and there are subtitles too. He begins by talking about the comparison between Chaucer and Ovid. So, "I proceed to Ovid and Chaucer considering the former only in relation to the latter, with Ovid ended the Golden age of the Roman tongue. From Chaucer, the purity of English tongue began." So, he is looking at Ovid as a culmination of classical tradition, it was the work which also marked the end of the golden age of the Roman tongue.

And with Chaucer in whom, he finds an almost similar kind of literary distinction, he identifies Chaucer as the starting point of a new tradition in English. So, there is a marked difference over here in this comparison. While Ovid is seen as the culmination of a certain tradition Chaucer who has equal literary and critical faculties, literary and critical capacities, he is seen as the inaugurator of a certain tradition.

And we all know that now, when we look at the English literary tradition Chaucer is seen as the starting point, the proper starting point in various ways. Of course, there is *Beowulf* and other works, which are also anonymously written, but other than that, there is a proper way in which literary tradition begins, inaugurates with Chaucer. So, Dryden also had played a significant role in cementing this notion about, cementing this idea about literature and literary history.

And right at the outset, he begins to undertake this comparison between their manners. “The manners of the poets were not unlike, both of them were well-bred, well-natured, amorous and libertine, at least in their writings, it may be also in their lives. Their studies were the same-Philosophy and Philology. Both of them were knowing in Astronomy of which Ovid’s Book of the Roman Feasts and Chaucer’s Treatise of the Astrolabe are sufficient witnesses. But Chaucer was likewise an astrologer as were Virgil, Horace, Persius and Manilius. Both writ with wonderful facility and clearness, neither were great inventors. For Ovid only copied the Grecian fables and most of Chaucer’s stories were taken from his Italian contemporaries or their predecessors. Boccaccio, his Decameron, was first published and from thence our English man has borrowed many of his Canterbury tales. Yet that of Palamon and Arcite was written in all probability by some Italian wit in a former age, as I shall prove hereafter. The Tale of Grizild was the invention of Petrarch, by him send to Boccaccio, from whom it came to Chaucer. Troilus and Cressida was also written by a Lombard Author but much amplified by our English translator, as well as beautified. The genius of our countrymen in general being rather to improve an invention than to invent themselves as is evident not only in our poetry, but in many of our manufacturers.”

So, he has been critical as well as lavish in his praise of his own countrymen, he is being very balanced over here as well. He admits it very directly whenever he finds that certain texts, certain narratives have been borrowed and he is also very balanced in approach in situating Chaucer as well as other contemporaries of his times.

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[Devlin translates The Knight's Tale, the Nun's Priest's Tale, The Wife of Bath's Tale, and The Friar and The Leaf (then thought to be Chaucer's), and The character of a Good Person, based on (rather than translated from) the portrait of the Person in the General Prologue.]



Chaucer and Ovid Compared

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Both of them built on the Inventions of other Men, yet since Chaucer had something of his own, as The Wife of Bath's Tale, The Cock and the Fox, which I have translated, and some others, I may justly give our Countryman the Precedence in that Part: since I can remember nothing of Ovid which was wholly his. Both of them understood the Manners, under which Nature I comprehended the Passions, and, in a larger Sense, the Dispositions of Persons, and their very Habits. For an Example, I see Bucephalus as perfectly before me, as if some ancient Painter had drawn them, and all the Pilgrims in the Canterbury Tales, their Habits, their Features, and the very Dress, as distinctly as if I had sup'd with them at the Tabernacle in Southwick: Yet even there, too, the Figures of Chaucer are much more lively, and set in a better Light: Which though I have not time to prove, yet I appeal to the Reader, and am sure he will clear me from Partiality.

The Styles of Chaucer and Ovid

The Thoughts and Words remain to be considered, in the Comparison of the two Poets, and I have said my self one half of that Labour, by saying that Ovid liv'd when the Roman Tongue was in its flourishing, Chaucer, in the Dying of our Language: Therefore that Part of the Comparison stands not on an equal Foot, any more than the Diction of Ennius and Ovid, or of Chaucer and our present English. The Words are given up as a Post not to be defiled in our Poet, because he wanted the Modern Art of Fortifying. The Thoughts remain to be consider'd. And these are to be consider'd only in their Prose: that is, in those that more or less naturally from the Persons



He also talks about the nature of his own writing. He is not the kind who was found overtly looking for any kind of praise of his own works. In fact, he has the confidence to even write that the nature of a Preface is rambling, “never wholly out of the way nor in it. This I have learned from the practice of honest Montaigne, who is considered the father of essay writing, and return at my pleasure to Ovid and Chaucer of whom I have a little more to say.”

So, he talks about the kind of digression that his own writing makes when he is writing a preface. And by this time, he is towards the end of his career, end of his life, and he has also garnered enough confidence to be critical, to be satirical, to be sarcastic about his own writings and the nature in which they have been organized together. So, after having pointed out the various ways in which English literary men have borrowed from other writers, other European writers, he now goes on to make a very pertinent point.

“Since Chaucer had something of his own, “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”, “The Cock and the Fox,” which I have translated and some others, I may justly give our countryman the precedence in that part.” So, he is attributing a sense of originality in this comparative analysis right at the outset. He says, most great literary men of those times and obviously, we are not referring to any of the women in any of these writings.

So, most literary men of those times they had borrowed from different traditions, and that is certainly not seen as a flaw, that is not seen as a setback. But nevertheless, that is being seen as a very appropriate thing in order to position Chaucer as someone with at least a little bit of originality, he had something of his own.

And he also says this very categorically, "I can remember nothing of Ovid, which was wholly his". So, the yardsticks are already set. The first point being originality in this comparative analysis. The first yardstick that Dryden has in mind is originality- that Chaucer was far more original than Ovid ever was.

"Both of them understood the manners under which name I comprehend the passions and in a larger sense the descriptions of persons and their very habits. For example, I see Baucis and Philemon as perfectly before me as if some ancient painter had drawn them. And the pilgrims in the Canterbury Tales, their Humours, their features and the very dress as distinctly as if I had supped with them at the Tabard in Southwark." So, this is the kind of graphic quality that both Ovid, Ovid's writings as well as Chaucer's writings had. He says, you know, it feels as if he had dined with those pilgrims at the Southwark inn. "Yet even there too the figures of Chaucer are much more lively and set in a better light which though I have not time to prove, yet I appeal to the reader. I am sure he will clear me from partiality."

So, he is very much aware that his observations will be seen as biased, that his observations will be seen as partial towards his own, which is Chaucer. But nevertheless, he has the confidence to reiterate that even if you do an analysis, you will see that Chaucer's characters are definitely brighter, more graphically drawn and certainly his narratives were original. So, having established this level of superiority that Chaucer has over Ovid, Ovid was also one of the greatest masters of the classical tradition.

So, having established this superiority at an individual level between Ovid and Chaucer, he is also elevating this to a larger scheme of things where the English literary critical tradition, maybe English literary tradition itself becomes superior to the classical literary writings.

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The Thoughts and Words remain to be considered, in the Comparison of the two Poets, and I have sav'd my self one half of that Labour, by owning that Ovid liv'd when the Roman Tongue was in its meridian, Chaucer, in the Dawning of our Language. Therefore that Part of the Comparison stands not on an equal Foot, any more than the Diction of Ennius and Ovid, or of Chaucer and our present English. The Words are given up as a Post not to be defended in our Poet, because he wanted the Modern Art of Verifying. The Thoughts remain to be consider'd. And they are to be measur'd only by their Property, that is, as they flow more or less naturally from the Persons describ'd, on such and such Occasions.


The Vulgar Judges, which are Nine Parts in Ten of all Nations, who call Conceits and Ingles Wit, who see Ovid full of them, and Chaucer altogether without them, will think me little less than mad for preferring the Englistman to the Roman. Yet, with their leave, I must presume to say, that the Things they admire are only glittering Trifles, and so far from being Witty, that in a serious Poem they are senseless, because they are unnatural. Would any Man, who is ready to die for Love, describe his Passion like Narcissus? Would he think of saying *me cupit jure*, and a Dozen more of such Expressions, pour'd on the Neck of one another, and signifying all the same Thing? If this were Wit, was this a Time to be merry, when the poor Wretch, was in the Agency of Death? This is just John I. Jilbert, an Englishman's Fair, who had a Conceit (as he tells you) fell him in his Misery, a miserable Conceit.

On these Occasions the Poet should endeavor to raise Pity. But instead of this, Ovid is tickling you to laugh. Virgil never made use of such Mechanics when he was moving you to commiserate the Death of Dido. He would not destroy what he was building, Chaucer makes Arcite violent in his Love, and unjust in the Pursuit of it. Yet, when he came to die, he made him think never reasonably. He reports not of his Love, for that had alter'd his Character, but acknowledges the Injustice of his Proceedings, and resigns Emilia to Palamon. What would Ovid have done on this Occasion? He would certainly have made Arcite witty on his Death-bed. He had complain'd he was farther off from Possession, by being so near, and a thousand such Boyisms, which Chaucer rejected as below the Dignity of the Subject. They who think otherwise, would by the same Reason, prefer Lucan and Ovid to Homer and Virgil, and Martial to all Four of them.

As for the Turn of Words, in which Ovid particularly excels all Poets, they are sometimes a Fault, and sometimes a Beauty, as they are us'd properly or improperly, but in strong Passions always to be allow'd, because Passions are serious, and will admit no Playing. The French have a high Value for them, and I confess, they are often what they call *Delicates*, when they are introduc'd with Judgment, but Chaucer writ with more Simplicity, and follow'd Nature more closely, than to use them. I have been far to the best of my Knowledge, been an upright Judge betwixt the Parties in Competition, not meddling with the Design nor the Disposition of it, because the Design was not their own, and in the disposing of it they were equal. It remains that I say somewhat of Chaucer in particular.

Chaucer the Father of English Poetry

In the first place, as he is the Father of English Poetry, so I hold him in the same Degree of Veneration as the Grecians held Homer, or the Romans Virgil. He is a perpetual fountain of good Sense, learn'd in all Sciences, and, therefore speaks properly on all Subjects. As he knows what to say, so he knows also when to leave off; a Courtesy which is practis'd by few Writers, and scarcely by any of the Ancients, excepting Virgil and Horace. One of our late great Poets is sunk in his Reputation, because he could never finish one Conceit which came in his way: but cannot like a Poet's art and craft. There was elaborate search, but the Poets were ill conduct.



He now moves on to the styles of Chaucer, and Ovid again in a very comparative sense, and as you have noticed in the first section, the comparison always leads to a certain kind of judgment as well. He does a very balanced comparison, where he discusses the merits and demerits of both the writers. And then he gives his own judgment about who he thinks is better than the other one.

“The thoughts and words remain to be considered in the comparison of two poets, I have saved myself one half that labour by owning that Ovid lived when the Roman tongue was in its meridian. Chaucer in the dawning of a language. Therefore, that part of the comparison stands not on an equal foot, any more than the diction of Aeneas and Ovid or of Chaucer and our present English.”

So, if you are familiar with Chaucer's writings, his *Canterbury Tales*, you will know that the language is very distant from us, it feels like it is almost a foreign tongue for us, English language was still in the stage of infancy. It had yet to evolve into something more refined, the spellings were different, the vocabulary was different. It, as we mentioned, looks almost like a distant foreign tongue.

So, Ovid was writing during a time when Roman tongue had already reached its perfection, just like their literature and culture also had. But it had culminated and then it had begun to descend as well. It was almost the end of the glorious period of Roman literature. But when Chaucer was writing language was not yet fully formed. So, this needs to be taken into

account, this needs to be factored in when we are trying to compare their literary styles, their language, so says Dryden.

So, in some sense, if somebody finds that Ovid's literary style was far more superior to that of Chaucer, he says, that is also a very imbalanced way of looking at things. And he goes on to give these examples from both of them, from Ovid as well as Chaucer in their ability to invoke different kinds of emotions. "On these occasions the poet should endeavour to raise pity. But instead of this Ovid is tickling you to laugh. Virgil never made use of such machines when he was moving you to commiserate the death of Dido. He would not destroy what he was building, Chaucer makes Arcite violent in his love and unjust in the pursuit of it. Yet when he came to die, he made him think more reasonably, he repents not of his love for that had altered his character but acknowledges the injustice of his proceedings and resigns Emilia to Palamon". What would Ovid have done on this occasion? He would certainly have made Arcite witty on his deathbed. He had complained he was further off from possession by being so near and a thousand such Boyisms which Chaucer rejected as below the dignity of the subject. They who think otherwise would by the same reason prefer Lucan and Ovid to Homer and Virgil and Martial to all four of them."

So, he is making a more extensive kind of comparison over here in order to prove that it was not just about the language, but also about the emotions which were invoked by a certain stylistic presentation of language. Here he gives certain context from classical literary tradition and he tells us about how certain emotions were invoked by a particular use of language and how Chaucer would not have done some of those things for instance, you know invoking laughter even at the face of death, Chaucer would not have done that, because that was below the dignity of the subject. So, there is again a sense of superiority, which is attributed to Chaucer and his style of writing.

And the other important thing that he highlights in the next passage is about the simplicity that Chaucer had. "Chaucer writ with more simplicity and followed nature more closely than to use them. I have thus far to the best of my knowledge, been an upright judge between the parties in competition, not meddling with the design nor the disposition of it because the design was not their own, and in the disposing of it they were equal. It remains that I say somewhat of Chaucer in particular."

So, he himself is aware of the bias which could be identified in this comparative analysis that this is heavily tilted towards identifying Chaucer as a superior writer, as a superior narrator

and a superior master in terms of his use of language, not just in terms of language per se, but in terms of using language to invoke, to evoke particular kinds of emotions.

And now he moves from this comparative analysis, he moves on to focus on Chaucer in particular, and this is a very definitive move, this is a very significant move in the tradition of English literary criticism. Because this is also one of the earliest and finest critical observations available on Chaucer's works.

And on this we can say that much of the literary reputation of Chaucer also rests, just the way we will find later on how Johnson's preface had given a lot of mileage to Shakespeare's works to cement his literary reputation. In the same way, we will find that Chaucer's literary reputation gained a lot of mileage through this Preface written by Dryden and more so because Dryden had this status, literary status during his time, during the neoclassical time and whatever he said did leave a mark on the literary and critical tradition of England.

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As for the Turn of Words, in which Ovid particularly excels all Poets, they are sometimes a Fault, and sometimes a Beauty, as they are us'd properly or improperly; but in strong Passions always to be shunn'd, because Passions are serious, and will admit no Playing. The French have a high Value for them, and I confess, they are often what they call Delicate, when they are introduc'd with Judgment; but Chaucer writ with more Simplicity, and follow'd Nature more closely, than to use them. I have thus far, to the best of my Knowledge, been an upright Judge between the Parties in Competition, not meddling with the Design nor the Disposition of it, because the Design was not their own, and in the disposing of it they were equal. It remains that I say somewhat of Chaucer in particular.

Chaucer the Father of English Poetry

In the first place, as he is the Father of English Poetry, so I hold him in the same Degree of Veneration as the Grecians held Homer, or the Romans Virgil. He is a perpetual Fountain of good Sense, learn'd in all Sciences, and therefore speaks properly on all Subjects. As he knew what to say, so he knows also when to leave off; a Contenance which is practis'd by few Writers, and scarcely by any of the Ancients, excepting Virgil and Horace. One of our late great Poets is sunk in his Reputation, because he could never forgive any Conceit which came in his way; but swept like a Dragonet, great and small. There was plenty enough, but the Dishes were ill serv'd, whole Pyramids of Sweetmeats for Boys and Womans, but little of solid Meat for Men. All this proceeded not from any want of Knowledge, but of Judgment; neither did he want that in discerning the Beauties and Faults of other Poets, but only judg'd himself in the Luxury of Writing; and perhaps knew it was a Fault, but hept the Reader would not find it. For this Reason, though he must always be thought a great Poet, he is no longer esteem'd a good Writer. And for Ten Impressions, which his Works have had in so many successive Years, yet at present a hundred Books are scarcely purchas'd once a Twelvemonth. For, as my last Lord Rochester said, though somewhat profanely, Not being of God, he could not stand.

Chaucer follow'd Nature every where, but was never so bold to go beyond her. And there is a great Difference of being Poets and minor Poets, if we may believe Catullus, as much to invent a modest Behaviour and Affectation. The Verse of Chaucer, I confess, is not Harmonious to us, but 'tis like the Floppiness of one whom Tacitus commands, it was *arbitrio iuris inoperto accomodate*. They who liv'd with him, and some time after him, thought it Musical, and it continues so even in our Judgment, if compar'd with the Numbers of Lucretius and Ovid, his Contemporaries. There is the rule Sweetness of a Scotch Tune in it, which is natural and pleasing, though not perfect.

Chaucer's Meter Defective

'Tis true, I cannot go so far as he who publish'd the last Edition of him, for he would make us believe the Fault is in our Ears, and that there were really Ten Syllables in a Verse where we find but Nine. But this Opinion is not worth confuting, 'tis so gross and obvious an Error, that common Sense (which is a Rule in everything but Matters of Faith and Revelation) must convince the Reader, that Equality of Numbers, in every Verse which we call Heroick, was either not known, or not always practis'd, in Chaucer's Age. It were an easier Matter to produce some thousands of his Verses, which are lame for want of half a Foot, and sometimes a whole one, and which no Pronunciation can make otherwise. We can only say, that he liv'd in the Infancy of our Poetry, and that nothing is brought to Perfection at the first: we must be Children before we grow Men. There was an Eunuch, and in process of Time a Lucianus, and a Lucetius, before Virgil and Horace; even after Chaucer there was a



So, here he moves a bit away from his comparison between Chaucer and Ovid. And here while situating Chaucer as the father of English poetry, he compares him with Homer. This is how this passage begins, “In the first place, as he is the Father of English poetry so, I hold him in the same degree of veneration as the Grecians held Homer or the Romans Virgil. He is a perpetual fountain of good sense.” These are some of the often quoted lines on Chaucer and his work, “learned in all sciences and therefore speaks properly on all subjects, as he knew what to say, so he knows also when to leave off, a contenance which is practiced by few writers and scarcely by any of the ancients excepting Virgil and Horace.”

So, there is a very marked, very visible way in which Chaucer is always elevated over the others who were always considered excellent in terms of their classical position. One of our late great poets is sunk in his reputation because he could never forgive any conceit which came in his favour, but swept like a dragnet, great and small. There was plenty enough, but the dishes were ill sorted, whole pyramids of sweet-meats for boys and women, but little solid meat for men.”

So, these are the comparisons that he makes, in order to make criticism palatable for the common readers as well. “All this proceeded not from any want of knowledge, but of judgment, neither did he want in discerning the beauties and faults of other poets, but only indulged himself in the luxury of writing and perhaps knew it was a fault but hoped the reader would not find it.” So, these many comparisons from contemporary writers as well as from classical writers are brought in, in order to further cement the reputation of Chaucer.

And in this process, Dryden is very much aware that Chaucer’s work perhaps is not perfect due to various reasons, due to the limitations of language, due to the limitations of content, due to the limitations of the work itself, *Canterbury Tales* itself being an incomplete tale in a certain sense. So, this is how he ends this section. “There is a rude sweetness of a Scotch Tune in it, which is natural and pleasing, though not perfect.”

And this also ties up very well with one of the important functions of literature- to please- and this has been reiterated by various critics from the time of Sydney onwards, about the ability of the writer to please over even to instruct and to persuade. And how in the later romantic tradition we would also know that this ability to please through imagination eventually becomes the most superior kind of faculty attributed to any kind of artistic production as well.

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Chaucer follow'd Nature every where, but was never so bold to go beyond her: And there is a great Difference of being Poets and mimic Poets, if we may believe
Candide, as much as betwixt a modest Behaviour and Affectation. The Verse of Chaucer, I confess, is not Harmonious to us, but 'tis like the Eloquence of one whom
Tacitus commendeth, it was *arabes sine imperio accommodata*: They who liv'd with him, and some time after him, thought it Musical, and it continues so even to our
Judgment, if compar'd with the Numbers of Lidgate and Gower, his Contemporaries. There is the rude Sweetness of a Scotch Tune in it, which is natural and pleasing,
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practic'd, in Chaucer's Age: It were an easy Matter to produce some thousands of his Verses, which are lame for want of half a Foot, and sometimes a whole one, and
which no Pronunciation can make otherwise. We can only say, that he liv'd in the Infancy of our Poetry, and that nothing is brought to Perfection at the first: we must be
Children before we grow Men. There was an Eunuch, and in process of Time a Lucullus, and a Lucullus, before Virgil and Horace, even after Chaucer there was a
Spencer, a Harrington, a Fairfax, before Waller and Denham were in being: And our Numbers were in their Sonage till these last appear'd.

Chaucer's Political Connections

I need say little of his Parentage, Life, and Fortunes: They are to be found at large in all the Editions of his Works. He was employ'd abroad, and favour'd by Edward the
Third, Richard the Second, and Henry the Fourth, and was Poet, as I suppose, to all three of them. In Richard's Time, I doubt, he was a little dip't in the Rebellion of the
Commons, and being Brother-in-Law to John of Ghant, it was no wonder if he follow'd the Fortunes of that Family, and was well with Henry the Fourth when he depos'd
his Predecessor: Neither is it to be admir'd, that Henry, who was a wise as well as a valiant Prince, who claim'd by Succession, and was sensible that his Title was not
sound, but was rightfully in Mortimer, who had married the Heir of York; it was not to be admir'd, I say, if that great Politician should be pleas'd to have the greatest Wit
of those Times in his Interest, and to be the Patron of his Princes. Augustus had given him that Example, by the Advice of Mecenas, who recommended Virgil and
Horace to him; whose Praises helped to make him Popular while he was alive, and after his Death have made him Precious to Posterity.

Chaucer's Religion

As for the Religion of our Poet, he seems to have some little Bysas towards the opinions of Wickliff, after John of Ghant his Patron, somewhat of which appears in the
Tale of Piers Plowman: Yet I cannot blame him for averring so sharply against the Vices of the Clergy in his Age: Their Pride, their Ambition, their Pomp, their
Avarice, their Worldly Interest, deserv'd the Lashes which he gave them, both in that, and in most of his Canterbury Tales: Neither has his Contemporary Boccaccio spar'd
them: Yet both these Poets liv'd in much esteem, with good and holy Men in Orders: For the Scandal which is given by particular Priests reflects not on the Sacred
Function, Chaucer's Monk, his Chanon, and his Fryar, took not from the Character of his Good Patron. A Satyrical Poet is the Check of the Laymen on bad Priests, ...
I have followed Chaucer, in his Character of a Holy Man, and have enjoy'd on that Subject with some Pleasure, reserving to myself the Right, if I shall think fit



So, coming back to this text, there is a way in which now, Dryden begins to locate some flaws, some very significant limitations that Chaucer's work had, and this is being situated in different ways. He first talks about the writing; he also talks about the political affiliations and also the religious opinions that Chaucer had. So, it is a three-dimensional way of looking at Chaucer's life and Chaucer's writings almost together.

So, here we find, Dryden, though inadvertently, employing different modes of criticism. He is looking at the text, he is also looking at the socio-political conditions. He is also, in the same vein, looking at the work in the context of the biography of the writer. So, there is historical criticism, biographical criticism, and a purely textual criticism, which is at work over here, though very inadvertently.

So, the methods and the techniques would come across as very raw, but given that this was written in 1700, and that such techniques were still in its infant stage, we find this a very remarkable achievement. A very remarkable kind of a milestone in terms of the English literary critical tradition.

So, first of all, Dryden finds Chaucer's meter defective, and he says maybe we could also forgive him for that because language was still evolving. And it could be because of such limitations as well. It were an easy matter to produce some thousands of his verses, which are lame for want of half a foot and sometimes a whole one, and which no pronunciation can make otherwise, we can only say that he lived in the infancy of our poetry." And that is very important to notice.

In spite of language, literature, culture, everything being in a very infant state and politically England was not really well-formed during the time when Chaucer was writing. There were a lot of things happening during his lifetime and England was still engaging with wars and there was famine and amidst this distress, Chaucer continued to write. So, one needs to make allowance for whatever kind of faults and limitations that one could find in his poetry.

So, as Dryden would say, “he lived in the infancy of our poetry, and that nothing is brought to perfection at the first, we must be children before we grow men.” So, that is how he sees it. Chaucer is by far the best, but we also need to admit that he was also working within the limitations of all the circumstances within which he was placed.

And given that there is also this critique about Dryden’s critique on Chaucer that Dryden also perhaps did not really understand the depth of Chaucer’s works and he also was caught up in the stylistic limitations and then these linguistic limitations. So, we will not go into the details of those.

Now, we will move on to the other point that Dryden makes about Chaucer’s political connections. Chaucer was one of those rare writers who had the good fortune or the misfortune to live and write under three different monarchs. “I need say a little of his parentage, life and fortunes, they are to be found at large in all the editions of his work.”

So, this also tells us that during the time when Dryden was writing a lot of biographical information was always already available on Chaucer. So, he does not repeat those things. But he focuses on one point that he finds extremely interesting. “He was employed abroad and favoured by Edward the Third, Richard the Second, and Henry the Fourth.”

So, Chaucer lived and wrote under three different monarchs, and this had also influenced the varied quality, had determined the varied quality of Chaucer’s writings. And it also tells us how Chaucer also had to be very diplomatic in his articulations in order to not get into any kind of political controversies.

And Dryden says, “He was poet I supposed to all three of them, in Richard’s time I doubt he was a little dipped in the Rebellion of the Commons and being brother-in-law to John of Gaunt, it was no wonder if he had followed the fortunes of that family and was well with Henry the fourth when he deposed his predecessor. Neither is it to be admired that Henry who was a wise as well as a valiant Prince, who claimed by succession, and was sensible that his title was not sound, but was rightfully in Mortimer who had married the Heir of York, it

was not to be admired, I say, if that great politician should be pleased to have the greatest wit of those times in his interest, and to be the trumpet of his praises. Augustus had given him the example, by the advice of Mecaenas who recommended Virgil and Horace to him, whose praises held to make him popular while he was alive, and after his death have made him precious to posterity.”

So, this is the kind of accolade that Dryden gives to Chaucer for having lived and written successfully through these different regimes and they were all radically different from each other, one even, you know, killed the other to claim the throne. So, that is the kind of history through which Chaucer was living. And through this very turbulent history, it is very interesting, it is very commendable that Chaucer could produce such excellent verse, which even earned him the title of being the first proper English literary writer.

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Chaucer follow'd Nature every where, but was never so bold to go beyond her: And there is a great Difference of being Poets and minor Poets: if we may believe Cardan, as much as betwixt a modest Behaviour and Affectation. The Verse of Chaucer, I confess, is not Harmonious to us; but 'tis like the Eloquence of our whom Tacitus commands, it was *arabes in his imperio accommodata*: They who liv'd with him, and some time after him, thought it Musical, and it continues so even in our Judgment, if compar'd with the Numbers of Lucretius and Gower, his Contemporaries: There is the rude Sweetness of a Scotch Tune in it, which is natural and pleasing, though not perfect.

Chaucer's Meter Defective

'Tis true, I cannot go so far as he who published the last Edition of him, for he would make us believe the Fault is in our Ears, and that there were really Ten Syllables in a Verse where we find but Nine: But this Opinion is not worth confuting, 'Tis so gross and obvious an Error, that common Sense (which is a Rule in everything but Matters of Faith and Revelation) must convince the Reader, that Equality of Numbers, in every Verse which we call Heroick, was either not known, or not always practis'd, in Chaucer's Age: It was an entire Matter to produce some thousands of his Verses, which are here for want of half a Foot, and sometimes a whole one, and which no Poet or Critic can make otherwise. We can only say, that he liv'd in the Infancy of our Poetry, and that nothing is brought to Perfection at the first: we must be Children before we grow Men. There was an Eumen, and a process of Time a Lucianus, and a Lucetinus, before Virgil and Horace, even after Chaucer there was a Spenser, a Harrington, a Fairfax, before Waller and Dunbar were in being: And our Numbers were in their Swage till these last appeared.


Chaucer's Political Connections


I need say little of his Parentage, Life, and Estates: They are to be found at large in all the Editions of his Works. He was employ'd abroad, and favour'd by Edward the Third, Richard the Second, and Henry the Fourth, and was Poet, as I suppose, to all three of them. In Richard's Time, I doubt, he was a little dip't in the Rebellion of the Commons, and being Brother-in-Law to John of Gaunt, it was no wonder if he follow'd the Fortunes of that Family: and was well with Henry the Fourth when he depos'd his Predecessor: Neither is it to be admir'd, that Henry, who was a wise as well as a valiant Prince, who claim'd by Succession, and was sensible that his Title was not sound, but was rightfully in Mortimer, who had married the Heir of York; it was not to be admir'd, I say, if that great Politician should be pleas'd to have the greatest Wit of those Times in his Interests, and to be the Trumpet of his Praises. Augustus had given him the Example, by the Advice of Mecaenas, who recommended Virgil and Horace to him, whose Praises helped to make him Popular while he was alive, and after his Death have made him Precious to Posterity.

Chaucer's Religion

As for the Religion of our Poet, he seems to have some little Biass towards the opinions of Wickliff, after John of Gaunt his Patron, somewhat of which appears in the Tale of Piers Plouman: Yet I cannot blame him for inveighing so sharply against the Vices of the Clergy in his Age: Their Pride, their Ambition, their Pomp, their Avarice, their Worldly Interest, deserv'd the Lashes which he gave them, both in that, and in most of his Canterbury Tales: Neither has his Contemporary Boccaccio, spar'd them: Yet both these Poets liv'd in much esteem, with good and holy Men in Orders: For the Scandal which is given by particular Priests reflects not on the Sacred Function, Chaucer's Monk, his Canon, and his Friar, look not from the Character of his Good Priests: A Sordid Priest is the Check of the Laymen on bad Priests. ...

I have followed Chaucer, in his Character of a Holy Man, and have enlarg'd on that Subject with some Pleasure, reserving to myself the Right, if I shall think fit





While Dryden is being very sympathetic and quite in adulation about the political life that Chaucer had, rather the apolitical life that he led, during these turbulent times, he seems to be a bit critical of Chaucer's religious opinions. Chaucer was very critical of the clergy of his times, and Dryden does not entirely appreciate that attitude which was critical in Chaucer.

“I cannot blame him for inveighing so sharply against the vices of the clergy of his Age, their Pride, their Ambition, their Pomp, their Avarice, their Worldly interest, deserve the lashes, which he gave them both in that and in most of his Canterbury Tales. Neither has his contemporary Boccaccio, spared them yet, but both those poets lived in much esteem with good and holy men in orders, for the scandal which is given by particular priests reflects not

on the sacred function. Chaucer's monk, his Chanon and his Friar took not from the character of his good parson. A Satirical poet is the check of the layman on bad priests, I have followed Chaucer in his character for holy man and have enlarged on that subject with some pleasure reserving myself to the right, if I shall think fit hereafter to describe another sort of priest such as are more easily to be found, than the good parson, such as have given the last blow to Christianity in this age by a practice so contrary to their doctrine, but this will keep cold till another time, in the meanwhile I take up Chaucer where I left him."

So, there are certain things that Dryden perhaps does not agree with, but he does not want to take this discussion upon himself at this point of time and then he moves on to tell us something extremely powerful about Chaucer's work, which also has cemented Chaucer's reputation almost forever within the literary tradition. "Here is God's plenty", and this is perhaps the greatest tribute that Dryden is paying to Chaucer.


"He must have been a man of a most wonderful comprehensive nature because as it has been truly observed of him, he has taken into the compass of his Canterbury Tales, the various manners and Humours of the whole English nation in his age, not a single character has escaped him." As you can see, this is a stellar tribute that Dryden is giving to Chaucer's works. All his pilgrims are severely distinguished from each other, and not only in their inclinations, but in their very physiognomies and Persons."

So, this is the one of the observations, which has always stood, Chaucer's works in good stead. And about him being maybe representative of his age in spite of staying apolitical to a very large extent, in spite of having had to live through diplomatically under three different monarchs and we also find that in between, he even had to change some of his writerly affiliations because of the kind of difficulties that he began to face in terms of finances.

So, that is it, we continue to focus on Dryden's observation "'Tis sufficient to say, according to the proverb, that here is God's plenty. We have our forefathers and great grand-dames all before us, as they were in Chaucer's days, their general characters are still remaining in mankind", and that is perhaps really a wonderful thing to say about Chaucer's characters that they were true representations of Chaucer's times and we still find their remnants, we still find the vestiges of those types even during the contemporary, Dryden says, even during his own times.

And this is in spite of the realization that Dryden notes towards the end of this passage, “For mankind is ever the same, and nothing lost out of nature, though everything is altered.” So, in spite of this peculiar nature of human nature, we find that Chaucer had managed to do his best in order to graphically represent his characters in the truest way that he could stay to his times.

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THAT THE VARIOUS MANNERS ARE EXHIBITED (BY THE SEVERAL CHARACTERS) IN HIS AGE: AND A SINGLE MANNER HAS ESCAPED HIM. AS HIS CHARACTERS ARE SEVERALLY DISTINGUISHED FROM EACH OTHER, AND NOT ONLY IN THEIR INCLINATIONS, BUT IN THEIR VERY PHYSIONOMIES AND PERSONS. HAPPY POETS COULD NOT HAVE DESCRIB'D THEIR NATURES BETTER, THAN BY THE MARKS WHICH THE POET GIVES THEM. THE MANNER AND MANNER OF THEIR TALES, AND OF THEIR TELLING, ARE SO SUITED TO THEIR DIFFERENT EDUCATIONS, HUMOURS, AND CALLINGS, THAT EACH OF THEM WOULD BE IMPROPER IN ANY OTHER MOUTH. EVEN THE GRAVE AND SERIOUS CHARACTERS ARE DISTINGUISHED BY THEIR SEVERAL SETS OF GRAVITY. THEIR DISCOURSES ARE SUCH AS BELONG TO THEIR AGE, THEIR CALLING, AND THEIR BREEDING, SUCH AS ARE BECOMING OF THEM, AND OF THEM ONLY. SOME OF HIS PERSONS ARE VICIOUS, AND SOME VIRTUOUS; SOME ARE MISERABLE, OR (AS CHAUCER CALLS THEM) LEVISED, AND SOME ARE LEVISED. EVEN THE RIBALDRY OF THE LOW CHARACTERS IS DIFFERENT: THE REEVE, THE MILLER, AND THE COCK, ARE SEVERAL MENS, AND ARE DISTINGUISHED FROM EACH OTHER, IN MUCH AS THE MERRING LADY-PROVISED, AND THE BROAD-SPEAKING, POP-STOOL'D WIFE OF BATH.

But enough of this. There is such a Variety of Game springing up before me, that I am distracted in my Choice, and know not which to follow. 'Tis sufficient to say according to the Poet's, that here is God's Plenty. We have our Five Fathers and Great Grand-fathers all before us, as they were in Chaucer's Days; their great Characters are still remaining in Muscad, and even in England, though they are call'd by other Names than those of Monks, and Fryars, and Chanons, and Lady Abbesses, and Nuns: For Muscad is ever the same, and nothing lost out of Nature, though every thing is alter'd.

Chaucer's Bawdry

May I have leave to do myself the Justice, (since my Enemies will do me none, and are so far from granting me to be a good Poet, that they will not allow me so much as to be a Christian, or a Moral Man), may I have leave, I say, to inform my Reader, that I have confid'd my Choice to such Tales of Chaucer as savour nothing of Immorality. If I had don'd more to please than to instruct, the Reeve, the Miller, the Shipman, the Merchant, the Summoner, and above all, the Wife of Bath, in the Prologue to her Tale, would have pleas'd me as many Friends and Readers, as there are Banns and Ladies of Pleasure in the Town. But I will not more offend against Good Manners: I am sensible as I ought to be of the Scandal I have given by my loose Writings; and make what Reparation I am able, by this Public Acknowledgment.


If anything of this Nature, or of Profaneness, be crept into these Poems, I am so far from defending it, that I disown it. *Titum hoc iudicium vobis*. Chaucer makes another manner of Apologie for his broad-speaking, but Boccace makes the like; but I will follow neither of them. Our Country-man, in the end of his Characters, before the Canterbury Tales, thus excuses the Ribaldry, which is very gross in many of his Novels.

But first, I pray you of your courtesy,
That ye be wroth if I might my villany,
Though that I plainly speak in this matter, [etc.: *gostes GP 725-42*].

Yet if a Man should have enquir'd of Boccace or of Chaucer, what need they had of introducing such Characters, where obscene Words were proper in their Mouths, but very indecent to be heard, I know not what Answer they could have made: For that Reason, such Tales shall be left untold by me.

Chaucer's Language and the Need for Translation

You have here a Specimen of Chaucer's Language which is so obsolete that his Sense is scarce to be understood; and you have likewise more than one Example of his



In the following section Dryden is trying to give us a rationale for omitting a couple of translations. And he says towards the end, for that reasons such tales shall be left untold by me. So, there is a certain kind of bawdiness in Chaucer’s writing, especially in some of his tales, which became quite unpalatable to the English audience during the neoclassical time.

So, we find Dryden, for that reason, leaving out some of these aspects from this work and he says, “If anything of this nature, or of profaneness be crept into these poems I am so far from defending it that I disown it. Chaucer makes another manner of apology for his broad-speaking, but I will follow neither of them. Our country man in the end of his characters before the Canterbury Tales thus excuses the ribaldry which is very gross in many of his novels.”

So, he distances himself from the bawdiness and the licentiousness of Chaucer’s writings and he says, these tales shall be left untold by me. There is a sense of judge mentality over here, there is a way in which the moral conditioning of those times begin to influence the way in which Dryden attempts to translate Chaucer.

But nevertheless, we find that the response is very balanced, too. And the reason for this and the rationale for this choice he gives at the beginning of this passage, "If I had desired more to please than to instruct". So, here the priorities of neoclassical literary tradition exemplified in Dryden's works and Dryden's translations and his prefaces is very clear over here. His priority, his most important objective is to instruct and not to please and he also says, "I will no more offend against good manners, I am sensible as I ought to be of the scandal I have given by my loose writings and make what reputation I am able by this public acknowledgement."

So, he is trying to distance himself from any kind of controversy that might ensue out of the translation of any of the licentious verses or the bawdy verses from Chaucer's writings and he also tries to rationalize this, tries to legitimize this in the name of the accountability that he thinks, he holds towards the society.

And we also need to keep in mind that Dryden writes this towards the end of his career, towards the end of his lifetime. And there is also a certain rigidity perhaps which has crept into his vision of the world and that must have also conditioned the ways in which he looked at morality and immorality and also about what kind of writings could be made available for public consumption.

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Chaucer's Language and the Need for Translation

You have here a Specimen of Chaucer's Language, which is so obsolete, that his Sense is scarce to be understood; and you have likewise more than one Example of his unequal Numbers, which were mention'd before. Yet many of his Verses consist of Ten Syllables, and the Words not such behind our present English: as for Example, these two Lines, in the Description of the Carpenter's Young Wife.

Wincing she was, as is a jolly Colt,
Long as a Mast, and upright as a Bolt.



I have almost done with Chaucer, when I have answer'd some Objections relating to my present Work. I find some People are offended that I have writ'd these Tales into modern English, because they think them unworthy of my Pains, and look on Chaucer as a dry, old-fashioned Wit, not worth receiving. I have often heard the late Earl of Rochester say, that Mr. Cowley himself was of that opinion; who having read him over in my Lord's Report, declared he had no Taste of him. I dare not advance my Opinion against the Judgment of so great an Author. But I think it fair, however, to leave the Decision to the Publick. Mr. Cowley was too modest to set up for a Dictator, and, being shock'd perhaps with his old Style, never examin'd into the depth of his good Sense.

Chaucer, I confess, is a rough Diamond, and must first be polish'd, e'er he shines. I deny not likewise, that, living in our early Days of Poetry, he writes not always of a piece; but sometimes mingles trivial Things with those of greater Moment. Sometimes also, though not often, he runs riot, like Ovid, and knows not when he has said enough. But there are more great Wits beside Chaucer, whose Faults in their Excess of Conceits, and those ill vers'd; he Author is not to write all he can, but only all he ought. Having observ'd this Redundancy in Chaucer, (so it is an easy Matter for a Man of ordinary Parts to find a Fault in one of greater, I have not try'd myself to a Literal Translation; but have often enquir'd what judg'd unnecessary, or not of Dignity enough to appear in the Company of better Thoughts. I have press'd it farther in some Places, and asked somewhat of my own where I thought my Author was deficient, and had not given his Thoughts their true Lustre, for want of Words in the Beginning of our Language: but to do this I was the more unskilful, because, (if I may be permitted to say it of my self) I found I had a Soul congenial to his, and that I had been conversant in the same Studies. Another Poet, in another Age, may take the same Liberty with my Writings; if at least they live long enough to deserve Correction.

It was also necessary sometimes to restore the Sense of Chaucer, which was lost or mangl'd in the Errors of the Press. Let this Example suffice at present in the Story of Palamon and Arcite, where the temple of Diana is describ'd; you find these Verses in all the Editions of our Author.

There saw I Dione trimm'd into a Tree;
I mean not the goddess Diana,
But Venus Daughter, which that light Dione

Which, after a little Consideration, I knew was to be reform'd into this Sense, that Dione, the daughter of Peneus, was trim'd into a Tree. I durst not make this bold with Ovid, lest some future Millstone should arise, and say, I varied from my Author, because I understood him not.



The following section is where he talks about Chaucer's language and the need for translation. And here, he minces no words while he is trying to point out that Chaucer's language is certainly obsolete and that unless this is translated into a proper kind of English, this cannot be understood at all. So, a lot of later critics have found this very problematic because they feel that Dryden perhaps did not know how to decipher Chaucer's language well, that he did not know how to be appreciative of the qualities of old English writings.


But here also what is very remarkable is the balanced attitude with which he presents this, "I dare not advance my opinion against the judgment of so great an author. But I think it fair, however, to leave the decision to the public. Mr. Cowley was too modest to set up for a dictatour and being shocked perhaps with his old style never examined the depth of his good sense."

So, he talks about the needs to present these works in contemporary English, he was also aware that many people were unhappy about it. "I find some people are offended that have turned these tales into modern English, because they think they are unworthy of my pains and look on Chaucer as a dry, old fashioned wit, not worth receiving." So, this is the context in which we need to look at the criticisms that Dryden presents against Chaucer. That was also the time when Chaucer perhaps did not receive the kind of literary merit, the kind of literary accolades that he really well deserved.

So, it is important for Dryden to maintain a critical distance for the leading public to take him seriously enough, to take his judgment seriously enough, wherein he is also undertaking this

laborious task of making Chaucer relevant to the modern public, Chaucer relevant to the 17th as well as 18th centuries.

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the other Part of the Argument that his Thoughts will lose of their original Beauty by the Innovation of Words, in the first place, not only their Beauty, but their being in fact, when they are no longer understood, which is the present Case: I grant that something must be lost in all Translations, but the Sense will remain, which would otherwise be lost, or at least be nam'd, when it is scarce intelligible, and that but to a few: How few are there who can read Chaucer, so as to understand him perfectly? And if imperfectly, then with less Profit, and no Pleasure.

'Tis not for the Use of some old Saxon Friends, that I have taken these Poems with him: Let them neglect my Version, because they have no need of it. I made it for their sakes who understand Sense and Poetry, as well as they; when that Poetry and Sense is put into Words which they understand. I will go farther, and dare to add, that what Baudes I lose in some Places, I give to others which had them not originally: But in this I may be partial to my self: let the Reader judge, and I submit to his Decision. Yet I think I have just Occasion to complain of them, who because they understand Chaucer, would deprive the greater part of their Countrymen of the same Advantage, and board him up, as Misers do their German Gold, only to lock, on it themselves, and hinder others from making use of it.

In sum, I seriously protest, that no Man ever had, or can have, a greater Veneration for Chaucer than my self: I have translated some part of his Works, only that I might perpetuate his Memory, or at least refresh it, amongst my Countrymen. If I have alter'd him any where for the better, I must at the same time acknowledge, that I could have done nothing without him: *Facile est invidiosus addere, in no great Commendation, but I am not so vain to think I have deserv'd a greater.*


I will conclude what I have to say of him singly with this one Remark. A Lady of my Acquaintance, who keeps a kind of Correspondence with some Authors of the Fair Sex in France, has been inform'd by them, that Mademoiselle de Sevelly, who is as old as Sibly, and inspir'd like her by the same God of Poetry, is at this time translating Chaucer into modern French: From which I gather, that he has been formerly translated into the old Provençal: (for how she should come to understand Old English, I know not). But the Matter of Fact being true, it makes me think, that there is something in it like Fatality: that after certain Periods of Time, the Fame and Memory of Great Wits should be renew'd, as Chaucer is both in France and England. 'Tis but wisely Chance, 'tis extraordinary; and I dare not call it more, for fear of being trac'd with Superstition.

Chaucer and Boccaccio Compared

Boccaccio comes last to be considered, who, living in the same Age with Chaucer, had the same Genius, and followed the same Studies. Both writ Novels, and each of them cultivated his Mother-Tongue: But the greatest Resemblance of our two Modern Authors being in their familiar Style, and pleasing way of relating Comical Adventures, I may pass it over, because I have translated nothing from Boccaccio of that Nature: In the serious part of Poetry, the Advantage is wholly on Chaucer's Side; for though the Englishman has borrow'd many Tales from the Italian, yet it appears, that those of Boccaccio were not generally of his own making, but taken from Authors of former ages, and by him only modell'd: So that what there was of invention, in either of them, may be judg'd equal: But Chaucer has relier'd on Boccaccio, and has borrow'd the Stories which he has borrow'd, as his way of telling, though Prose allows more Liberty of Thought, and the Expression is more easy, when unconfin'd by Numbers. Our Countryman carries Weight, and yet wins the Race at disadvantage: I desire not the Reader should take my Word; and therefore, I will set two of their Discourses on the same Subject, in the same Light, for every Man to judge betwixt them.

The Wife of Bath's Tale

Prologue of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and *Decamerone* by Boccaccio. NPTEL logo



And if someone is suspicious about the kind of admiration that Dryden has for Chaucer, he spells this out very clearly, “In sum I seriously protest that no man ever had or can have a greater veneration for Chaucer than myself, I have translated some part of his works, only that I might perpetuate his memory, or at least refresh it amongst my countrymen. If I have altered him anywhere for the better, I must at the same time acknowledge that I could have done nothing without him. I am not so vain to think I deserved a greater.”

So, this is again, a marvellous way in which Dryden tries to tell his contemporaries as well as his posterity that he could not have, perhaps wished for a better kind of beginning or better kind of an ancestor, or a better person as the Father of English poetry.

And Dryden whose has been rightly given the title of being the Father of English literary criticism, he takes this onus upon himself to re-present Chaucer to his contemporary audience, and as he himself says, “To perpetuate his memory, or at least refresh it, amongst my countrymen.” This is also a way in which he brings back to memory, he reinstates not just Chaucer but an entire literary critical tradition that followed from the time of Chaucer.

And then he is also reminding his audiences, reminding his readers about another translation which is also at work during this time, translating Chaucer into modern French. And he also in this sense, is underscoring the kind of relevance that Chaucer has, not just on the English


political tradition, but on the European tradition itself. “The fame and memory of great wits should be renewed as Chaucer’s both in France and England. If this be wholly chance, ‘tis extraordinary and I dare not call it more for fear of being taxed with superstition.”

And this bringing together of France and England over here is it extremely important because for the longest time as we know, the political as well as territorial rivalry between France and England was quite legendary. It had led to a number of wars, including the Hundred Years war, and that was also one of the things which had continually weighed down on both England as well as France.

So, this coming together and also the linguistic rivalry was also quiet infamous to such an extent that for 200 years, as we know, English language was completely overshadowed by French. And English actually had to make a comeback after almost two centuries of obsoleting.

So, in this context, making Chaucer to bridge this gap, the linguistic gap, the literary gap, the cultural gap, and so at this point to bring in Chaucer to bridge these gaps between the two nations is extremely important. It also tells us about the transnational capacity of writers such as Chaucer and how translations and also these sort of critical evaluations would help us in cross-cultural transactions.

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English, I know not, nor the manner of fact being true, it makes me think, that there is something in it else ordinary, nor any certain persons or time, the fame and Memory of Great Wits should be renew'd, as Chaucer is both in France and England. If this be wholly Chance, 'tis extraordinary, and I dare not call it more, for fear of being tax'd with Superstition.

Chaucer and Boccaccio Compared

Boccaccio comes last to be considered, who, living in the same Age with Chaucer, had the same Genius, and followed the same Studies. Both writ Novels, and each of them cultivated his Mother-Tongue; But the greatest Resemblance of our two Modern Authors being in their familiar Style, and pleasing way of relating Comical Adventures, I may pass it over, because I have translated nothing from Boccaccio of that Nature; In the serious part of Poetry, the Advantage is wholly on Chaucer's Side; for though the Englishman has borrow'd many Tales from the Italian, yet it appears, that those of Boccaccio were not generally of his own making, but taken from Authors of former ages, and by him only model'd; So that what there was of invention, in either of them, may be judg'd equal; But Chaucer has refin'd on Boccaccio, and has amend'd the Stories which he has borrow'd, as his way of telling, though Prose allows more Liberty of Thought, and the Expression is more easy, when unconfin'd by Numbers. Our Countryman carries Weight, and yet wins the Race at disadvantage; I desire not the Reader should take my Word; and, therefore, I will set two of their Discourses on the same Subject, in the same Light, for every Man to judge between them.

The Wife of Bath's Tale


I translated Chaucer first, and amongst the rest, pitch'd on The Wife of Bath's Tale; not during, as I have said, to adventure on her Prologue, because 'tis too licentious; There Chaucer introduces an old Woman of mean Parentage, whom a youthful Knight of Noble Blood, was forc'd to marry, and consequently lov'd her. The Crime being in love with him on the wedding Night, and finding his Actions endeavours to win his Affection by Force, and spends a good While for herself, (as she could blame her?) in hope to mollify the sultry Bedroom: She takes her Topiques from the Benefits of Poverty, the Advantages of old Age and Ugliness, the Vanity of Youth, and the silly Pride of Ancestry and Titles, without inherent Vertue, which is the true Nobility.

When I had clos'd Chaucer, I return'd to Ovid, and translated some more of his Fables; and, by this time, had so far forgotten The Wife of Bath's Tale, that when I took up Boccaccio, unawares I fell on the same Argument of preferring Vertue to Nobility of Blood, and Titles, in the Story of Sapphronde, which I had certainly avoided for the Resemblance of the two Discourses, if my Memory had not fail'd me. Let the Reader weigh both; and if he thinks me partial to Chaucer, 'tis in him to right Boccaccio.

The Knight's Tale

I prefer in our Countryman, far above all his other Stories, the Noble Poem of Palamon and Arcite, which is of the Epique kind, and perhaps not much inferior to the Iliad or the Aeneis; the Story is more pleasing than either of them, the Manners as perfect, the Diction as poetical, the Learning as deep and various, and the Disposition full as artful; only it includes a greater length of time, as taking up seven years at least, but Aristotle has left undecided the Duration of the Action; which yet is easily reduc'd into the Compass of a year, by a Narration of what preceded the Return of Palamon to Athens.

I had thought for the Honour of our Nation, and more particularly for his, whose Laurel, tho' unworthily, I have worn after him, that this Story was of English Growth; and Chaucer's own; But I was misinform'd by Boccaccio; for I casually look'd on the End of his seventh Giornata; I found Thomas (under which name he shadoon himself) and



Dryden seeks to wrap up this discussion with the comparison of Chaucer and Boccaccio and also by focusing on the “Wife of Bath’s Tale” and “The Knights Tale”. And in these final

sections, to the details of which we shall not be going into, we find that the partiality that is how Dryden himself refers to his attitude, the partiality shown towards Chaucer is quite evident over here. But the rationale that he gives for it, the literary rationale that he gives for it, is also very evident. And if you look at the ending of this Preface, he had begun with a comparative note, comparing Chaucer and Ovid, he had begun with a comparison between classical tradition as well as English tradition.

But towards the end, we find that he focuses entirely on Chaucer, and on his particular kinds of works. He also tells us about how he had to circumvent his way around these two tales- “Wife of Bath’s Tale” and “The Knight’s Tale” due to its licentious nature. But that does not take away the appreciation or the kind of literary critical value that Dryden places upon Chaucer and his works.

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Youth, and the silly Pride of Ancestry and Titles, without inherent Vertue, which is the true Nobility.

When I had choic'd Chaucer, I return'd to Ovid, and translated some more of his Fables; and, by this time, had so far forgotten The Wife of Bath's Tale, that when I took up Boccace, amongst I fall on the same Argument of preferring Vertue to Nobility of Blood, and Titles, in the Story of Sigismunda, which I had certainly avoided for the Resemblance of the two Discourses, if my Memory had not fail'd me. Let the Reader weigh both, and if he thinks me partial to Chaucer, 'tis in him to right Boccace.

The Knight's Tale

I prefer in our Countryman, far above all his other Stories, the Noble Poem of Palamon and Arcite, which is of the Epique kind, and perhaps not much inferior to the Iliad or the Aeneid: the Story is more pleasing than either of them, the Manners as perfect, the Diction as poetical, the Learning as deep and various, and the Disposition full as artful: only it includes a greater length of time, as taking up seven years at least, but Aristotle has left undecided the Duration of the Action; which yet is easily reduc'd into the Compass of a year, by a Narration of what preceded the Return of Palamon to Athens.

I had thought for the Honour of our Nation, and more particularly for his, whose Laurel, tho' unworthily, I have worn after him, that this Story was of English Growth, and Chaucer's own: But I was undeceiv'd by Boccace; for casually looking on the End of his seventh Decamer, I found Dives (under which name he shadows himself) and Fiametta, who represents his Mistress, the natural Daughters of Robert, King of Naples; of whose these Words are spoken, *Divesse e Fiametta gran parte contemponanea insieme d'Avella, e di Palomara*: by which it appears, that this Story was written before the time of Boccace; but the Name of its Author being wholly lost, [Boccace is now become an Original, and I question not but the Poem has receiv'd many Beauties, by passing through his Noble Hands](#).

Besides this Tale, there is another of his own Invention, after the manner of the Provencalls, call'd The Flower and the Leaf, with which I was so particularly pleas'd, both for the Invention and the moral: that I cannot hinder myself from recommending it to the Reader.

From The Poetical Works of John Dryden, ed. George Gillman, Edinburgh, 1855, Vol. II [Wid 15435 9.5] Paragraphing and section titles are added for clarity.

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And this is how he ends this preface. “Chaucer is now become an original and I question not but the poem has received many beauties by passing through his noble hands”. And he is in the process of giving what is due to the various translations, the various editions that went before him. He is taking this occasion to reiterate that Chaucer is by far the original and also this is seen as perhaps the most important reason to identify Chaucer as the starting point of this literary critical tradition and also, for placing him far above the classical tradition. And this is how the other final line goes. “Besides this tale, there is another of his own invention after the manner of the provencalls, called “The Flower and the Leaf” with which I was so

particularly pleased both for the invention and the moral that I cannot hinder myself from recommending it to the reader.”

Not only does he further cement the reputation of Canterbury Tales, he is also recommending a new work for highlighting its visibility, highlighting its critical quality to the contemporary readers. So, this is how the contributions of Chaucer were evaluated in 1700 by Dryden, and you also realize how that had contributed directly to the emergence of comparative criticism, and also for identifying English literary critical tradition as a standalone critical tradition. Thank you for your time. I look forward to seeing you in the next session.