

4/20
Lecture No-10

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English (Hons.)
DI / Paper I / History of English Literature
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Chaucer and His Poetry (Topic)

Every writer and poet, it has been well said, is a product of his or her Age. All of them reveal some aspects of contemporary life and of prevailing thoughts. The Age of Chaucer was essentially an age of unrest and transition. The ~~discovery~~ discoveries of Columbus is regarded by many of us as marking the beginning of the modern era of history. yet these geographical milestones can only be the culmination of the movement which started almost a hundred years ago. Broadly speaking, the process of transition dates back to the second half of the fourteenth century. It was during this time that it is evident that men are becoming dissatisfied with the medieval ideas and practices.

Before coming to Chaucer himself it seems rather desirable to take a fleeting glance at the England of "The Canterbury Tales." The era in which Chaucer was born was, for England, an era of transition. To say the least, it was a tumultuous period of social, religious and political change. Chaucer's life covers the reign of three monarchs namely those of Edward III, dur-

(2) - ing whose reign he was born, Richard II whose reign he lived through and that of Henry IV, during whose reign he passed away. The era of Edward saw England reaching the climax of mediæval civilization as far as the spirit of chivalry and romantic idealism is concerned. To use the words of Hudson:- "Edward's reign marks the highest development of mediæval civilization in England. It was also the mid-drummer of English chivalry. The spirit of his court was that of the romantic idealism which fills Chaucer's own "Knight's Tale", and the story of his successive wars with France, and the famous victories of Crecy and Poitiers, as written in the "Chronicles" of Froissart, reads more like a brilliant novel than a piece of history."

Religious circles were marked by a "serious burst of ~~orthodoxy~~^{of} unorthodoxy" challenged as it was by a resurgent group of people led by Wyclif. We see the sprouting and preaching of a new kind of doctrine which was, later, to take shape of the full fledged "Protestantism". The dissatisfaction of the working classes gradually starved to develop into a ~~full fledged~~ quite open revolt. But,

nevertheless, if ~~at~~ on the one hand these negative forces were at work, on the other, political and military events were contributing to the National consciousness ^{in a positive manner}. If political upheaval sought to unleash a negative feeling, the military expedition did exert a positive one by stimulating pride of the general people.

It is not to be believed however, that England of that era was suddenly to break free of all influences of the past. Rickett rightly points out: "yet one must not exaggerate the change taking place in the life and thought of the Age, noticeable though it is. In some respects Chaucer's England is still characteristically medieval, and nowhere is the conservative feeling more strongly marked than in the persistence of chivalry. This strange amalgam of love, war and religion so far from exhibiting any ~~sign~~ signs of decay, reaches perhaps its fullest development at this time. More than two centuries were to elapse before it was finally killed by the satirical pen of Cervantes."

Apart from the social upheaval brought about by economic unrest which was accentuated by natural calamities like famine and plague; and ^{also by} reformist ~~and~~ onslaught effected by Wycliff, Tyler, Straw ~~against~~ etc. against the Church,

there is a third element of influence for all of us to reckon with; which more directly effected the literature of this era — the new learning. Hudson writes: — "Thus far, scholarship had been largely the concern of the Church, and men's thoughts and feelings about themselves and the world had been governed almost entire by theology. Ecclesiastical ideas and the mediæval habit of mind were still the controlling elements in Chaucer's period, but their sway was now to some extent broken by the influx of a fresh and very different spirit. That spirit had arisen in Italy. Chiefly from a renewed study of literature of classical antiquity, and from the consequent awakening of enthusiasm not only for the art but also for the moral ideas of Greece and Rome."

The Italian Flag bearers of this new stream of movement to "liberate themselves from theological trammels" were the writers Petrarch and Boccaccio. It is under their influence that the spirit of humanism passed into England. Though this new influence was held in check by the adverse economic, social conditions, its effects were beginning to appear in literature in form of evidences of "quickened sense of beauty, the delight in life, and the free secular

spirit."

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It is under this state of influx and transition that Geoffrey Chaucer was born about 1340 in London to a merchant vintner. Though nothing about his childhood is known for certain, his writings do bear the evidence that he must have received the advantages of liberal education to be able to pen the books of such high scholarship and ~~caliber~~ to make him "the greatest figure in the English literature of fourteenth century" to such an extent that "he has thrown all his contemporaries completely into the shade."

(to be continued in the next lecture)