

**J.M.S. COLLEGE, MUNGER**  
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*Department of English*  
**B.A. Part-I, English (Hons.), Paper-I**

### **Chaucer as the Father of English Poetry**

It was Rev. John Dart, who called Chaucer as the father of poetry in the history of English literature due to his unforgettable contributions to the English language and literature. There is something in the literary works of Chaucer that John Dart was compelled to compose a very lengthy poem in his praise. He praises Chaucer in the following lines:

*To Chaucer's Name eternal Trophies raise.*  
*And load the antique Stone with wreaths of Bays.*  
*Father of Verse! who in immortal Song,*  
*First taught the Muse to speak the English Tongue.*  
(Westminster Abbey by Rev. John Dart)

It was Chaucer, who preferred English language over Latin and French. It was a fashion and vogue of the time to use Latin and French languages in church, courts and in any literary work, but Chaucer refused to adopt these languages for his poetry. Though, the English language was in raw form, yet he ventured upon using the English Language for his poetry. He transformed the East Midland dialect into a full-fledged language of England. Lowell says in this regard: "Chaucer found his English a dialect and left it a language."

He was the first poet, who tried his hands on English poetry. During his time, poetry was in its raw shape. He made several experiments in versification and gave it a new shape. His contemporaries were used to too much alliteration in their poetry. Chaucer could not withstand with it and brought about drastic changes in alliteration. In the old fashioned alliteration, the number of syllables was irregular. Chaucer discarded this method of alliteration and introduced a new one, which had regular number of syllables, end rhyme and absence of frequent repetition. He sounded the death-knell of the Old Saxon alliterative measure and firmly established the modern one. Even in the fourteenth century the old alliterative measure had been employed by such a considerable poet as Langland for his *Piers the Plowman*, and the writer of *Sir Gawayne and the Grene Knight*. Let us give the important features of the old measure which Chaucer so categorically disowned:

- (i) There is no regularity in the number of syllables in each line. One line may have as few as six syllables and another as many as fourteen.
- (ii) The use of alliteration as the chief ornamental device and as the lone structural principle. All the alliterative syllables are stressed.
- (iii) The absence of end-rimes; and
- (iv) Frequent repetition to express vehemence and intensity of emotion.

Chaucer had no patience with the “rum, ram, ruf” of the alliterative measure. So does he maintain in the *Parson’s Tale*:

*But trusteth wel, I am a southern man,  
I cannot geste-rum, ram, ruf,-by lettere,  
Ne, God wot, rym holde I but litel bettere.*

For that old-fashioned measure he substituted the regular line with end-rime, which he borrowed from France. The new measure has the following characteristics:

- (i) All lines have the same number of syllables,
- (ii) End-rime,
- (iii) Absence of alliteration and frequent repetition.

After Chaucer, no important poet ever thought of reverting to the old measure. Thus, Chaucer may be designated “the father of modern English versification.”

Chaucer employs three principal metres in his works. In *The Canterbury Tales* he mostly uses lines of ten syllables each (with generally five accents); and the lines run into couplets; that is, each couple of lines has its end-syllables rhyming with each other. For example:

*His eyes twinkled in his heed aright  
As doon the sterres in the frosty night.*

In *Troilus and Cryseyde* he uses the seven-line stanza of decasyllabic lines with five accents each having the rhyme-scheme *a b abb c c*. This measure was borrowed by him from the French and is called the rhyme-royal or Chaucerian stanza. The third principal metre employed by him is the octosyllabic couplet with four accents and end-rime. In *The Book of the Duchesse* this measure is used. The measures thus adopted by Chaucer were seized upon by his successors. The decasyllabic couplet known as the heroic couplet, was to be chiselled

and invigorated to perfection three centuries later by Dryden and Pope. Apart from those three principal measures Chaucer also employed for the first time a number of other stanzaic forms in his shorter poems.

Not only this, Chaucer seems to be the first Englishman who realised and brought out the latent music of his language. "To read Chaucer's verse," observes a critic, "is like listening to a clear stream, in a meadow full of sunshine, rippling over its bed of pebbles."

He made English a pliant and vigorous medium of poetic utterance. His astonishingly easy mastery of the language is indeed remarkable. With one step the writings of Chaucer carry us into a new era in which the language appears endowed with ease, dignity, and copiousness of expression and clothed in the hues of the imagination.

Chaucer was a pioneer not only in the linguistic and prosodic fields, but was one in the strictly poetic field also. Not only the form of poetry, but its content, too, is highly indebted to him. Not only did he give English poetry a new dress, but a new body and a new soul. His major contribution towards the content of poetry is in his advocacy of and strict adherence to realism. His *Canterbury Tales* embodies a new effort in the history of literature, as it strictly deals with real men, manners, and life. In the beginning of his literary career Chaucer followed his contemporaries and immediate predecessors, and wrote allegorical and dream poetry which in its content was as remote from life as a dream is from reality. But at the age of about fifty he realised that literature should deal first-hand with life and not look at it through the spectacles of books or the hazy hues of dreams and cumbersome allegory. He realised, to adopt Pope's famous couplet (with a little change):

*Know then thyself: presume not dreams to scan,  
The proper study of mankind is man.*

And the product of this realisation was *The Canterbury Tales*. This poem, as it were, holds a mirror to the life of Chaucer's age and shows its manners and morals completely, "not in fragments." Chaucer replaces effectively the shadowy delineations of the old romantic and allegorical school with the vivid and pulsating pictures of contemporary life.

And Chaucer does not forget the universal beneath the particular, the dateless beneath the dated. The portraits of the pilgrims in the *Prologue to The Canterbury Tales* constitute not only an epitome of the society of fourteenth-century England, but the epitome of human nature in all climes and all ages. Grierson and Smith observe about Chaucer's pilgrims:

“They are all with us today, though some of them have changed their names. The knight now commands a line regiment, the squire is in the guards, the shipman was a rum-runner while prohibition lasted and is active now in the black market, the friar is a jolly sporting publican, the pardoner vends quack medicines or holds séances, and the prioress is the headmistress of a fashionable girls’ school.”

Mathew Arnold has gone to the extent of saying that “*With him is born our real poetry.*”

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