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Chaucer's Contribution to English Language

Chaucer is a father figure in English language and literature. He has been regarded as the pioneer in poetry, drama, novel, characterization, versification, realism, and humour in English literature.

Still, one of the most important contributions that Chaucer made is his contribution to the English language. It was all due to his treatment of English language in his poetry that English secured a prominent position amongst the languages of the world not only today but in that time as well. It was Chaucer, who preferred English language over Latin and French. In fact, Latin and French were more fashionable than the poor “vernacular” English. Latin was considered “the universal language” and was patronised at the expense of English by the Church as well as the learned. Before Wyclif translated it into the “vulgar tongue”, the Bible was read in its Latin version called the Vulgate. French was the language of the court and was used for keeping the accounts of the royal household till as late as 1365. Perplexed by the variety of languages offering themselves for use, Chaucer's friend and contemporary Gower could not decide which one of them to adopt. He wrote his *Mirour del'Omme* in French, *Vox Clamantis* in Latin, and *Confessio Amantis* in English, perhaps because he was not quite sure which of the three languages was going to survive. But Chaucer had few doubts about the issue. He chose English which was a despised language, and as the legendary king did to the beggar maid, raised her from the dust, draped her in royal robes, and conducted her coronation. That queen is ruling even now. Though, the English language was in raw form, yet he ventured upon using the English Language for his poetry. It was not as polished and full of vocabulary as Latin and French. Lowell says in this regard:

“Chaucer found his English a dialect and left it a language.”

Borrowing Saintsbury's words about the transformation which Dryden effected in English poetry, we may justly say that Chaucer found the English language brick and left it marble. When Chaucer started his literary career, the English speech, and still less, the English of writing was confusingly fluid and unsettled. The English language was divided into a number

of dialects which were employed in different parts of the country. The four of them vastly more prominent than the others were:

- (i) The Southern
- (ii) The Midland
- (iii) The Northern or Northumbrian
- (iv) The Kentish

Out of these four, the Midland or the East Midland dialect, which was spoken in London and its surrounding area, was the simplest in grammar and syntax. Moreover, it was the one patronised by the aristocratic and literary circles of the country. Gower used this dialect for his poem *Confessio Amantis* and Wyclif for his translation of the Bible. But this dialect was not the vehicle of all literary works. Other dialects had their votaries too. Langland in his *Piers Plowman*, to quote an instance, used a mixture of the Southern and Midland dialects. Chaucer employed in his work the East midland dialect, and by casting the enormous weight of his genius balance decided once for all which dialect was going to be the standard literary language of the whole of the country for all times to come. None after him thought of using any dialect other than the East Midland for any literary work of consequence. It is certain that if Chaucer had adopted some other dialect the emergence of the standard language of literature would have been considerably delayed. All the great writers of England succeeding Chaucer are, in the words of John Speirs, “masters of the language of which Chaucer is, before them, the great master.”

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