THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

GEOFFREY CHAUCER
VOLUME 1
1385–1837

Edited by
DEREK BREWER

ROUTLEDGE

GEOFFREY CHAUCER: THE CRITICAL HERITAGE
VOLUME 1, 1385–1837

THE CRITICAL HERITAGE SERIES

General Editor: B.C.Southam

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GEOFFREY CHAUCER

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DEREK BREWER

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General Editor's Preface

The reception given to a writer by his contemporaries and near-contemporaries is evidence of considerable value to the student of literature. On one side we learn a great deal about the state of criticism at large and in particular about the development of critical attitudes towards a single writer; at the same time, through private comments in letters, journals or marginalia, we gain an insight upon the tastes and literary thought of individual readers of the period. Evidence of this kind helps us to understand the writer's historical situation, the nature of his immediate reading-public, and his response to these pressures.

The separate volumes in the *Critical Heritage Series* present a record of this early criticism. Clearly, for many of the highly productive and lengthily reviewed nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, there exists an enormous body of material; and in these cases the volume editors have made a selection of the most important views, significant for their intrinsic critical worth or for their representative quality—perhaps even registering incomprehension!

For earlier writers, notably pre-eighteenth century, the materials are much scarcer and the historical period has been extended, sometimes far beyond the writer's lifetime, in order to show the inception and growth of critical views which were initially slow to appear.

In each volume the documents are headed by an Introduction, discussing the material assembled and relating the early stages of the author's reception to what we have come to identify as the critical tradition. The volumes will make available much material which would otherwise be difficult of access and it is hoped that the modern reader will be thereby helped towards an informed understanding of the ways in which literature has been read and judged.

B.C.S.

For Helena

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The late Dr. *Johnson* being asked his opinion of the expediency of Mr. Derrick's republishing an old book, with his usual bluntness replied,— 'Why, Sir, if you *must* print, it had better be some other person's nonsense than your own.' And yet, if one *must* print, how shall an undiscriminating editor know what to rescue from oblivion?

F.G.Waldron, Advertisement to
'The Loves of Troilus and Cresseid
    …with a commentary by Sir Francis Kinaston', 1796

It was Augustine, I believe, who invoked in jest or in earnest a curse on those who had anticipated him in the utterance of his ideas….

    A.C.Swinburne, 'Miscellanies', 1886, p. 123

Introduction

The heritage of criticism of Chaucer is a body of writing unique in English literature. No other author has been commented on in English so regularly and extensively over so long a period. The literary observations and discussions threaded together by their reference to Chaucer constitute a unique index to the course of English criticism and literary theory. Some well-known critical texts take on a fresh importance when seen in connection with Chaucer, while other less-known comments reveal an unexpected significance.

All the later major poets, and almost all distinguished English and American men of letters up to the first third of the twentieth century have made at least passing allusion to Chaucer. But it is not the purpose of the present volumes to collect such allusions, a task already superbly, though inevitably selectively, performed by Miss Spurgeon. (1) Nor is it their purpose to reprint the very many modernisations, translations and imitations made over the centuries, which imply various critical views, but views that are more explicit elsewhere and whose bulk would have required impracticably vast volumes for relatively small critical return. The aim of the present volumes is to give a copious selection, including all the significant passages, of all the 'critical' writings on Chaucer from his own day up to 1933. That date has been chosen, as the Introduction to Volume 2 more fully explains, as marking roughly the end of the tradition of the generally cultivated amateur critic and reader, who shared, usually unconsciously, the general tradition of Neoclassical, Romantic and Victorian premises about literature, with their social implications. This general tradition, as will be shown more fully below, began about the middle of the

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sixteenth century in England and became dominant with
Dryden.

   The first volume of these extracts covers the period
which begins from Chaucer's lifetime (when rhetorical
principles of thinking about poetry prevailed), continues
through the Neoclassical and Romantic periods (which begin
towards the end of the sixteenth century), and concludes at
1837 on the brink of the Victorian period, where, however,
there is no major break. The second volume covers the
subsequent hundred years. The range of both volumes is thus
slightly greater than that of Miss Spurgeon's monumental
work, and of a somewhat different orientation, as more
fully explained in the Bibliographical Note. The aim has
been to trace critical opinions and attitudes. Many
extracts are necessarily the same as in Miss Spurgeon's
work, but a few references have been added, a good many
have been extended, and very many have been dropped from
her list in the earlier centuries, while nineteenth-century
contributions have been much increased.

II

Chaucer's genius was recognised as outstanding even in his
own day. Leaving aside the probable intention of honouring
him by burial in Westminster Abbey, then normally reserved
for royalty, what other English author has been so heartily
praised by a *French* contemporary (No. 1)? It is worth
glancing for comparison at the reputations of Chaucer's
English contemporaries. Apart from Chaucer, only Lydgate
and Gower attracted comment in the fifteenth and sixteenth
centuries, and they were often noticed mainly because of
their association with Chaucer. From the seventeenth
century until the middle of the twentieth Lydgate has been
practically forgotten except, notably, by the poet Gray
(No. 81). During the same period Gower slumbered on without
being awakened even by Gray, though modern taste now places
him above Lydgate and in a few respects not too far below
Chaucer. Langland's 'Piers Plowman', widely read at the end
of the fourteenth century and in the fifteenth, was for
some reason not printed by Caxton, who was otherwise so
assiduous to preserve late medieval English culture. 'Piers
Plowman' was at last printed, probably for religious rather
than literary reasons, in 1550, but only from the middle
of the twentieth century has it been given the attention
its greatness deserves. The 'Gawain' -poet, as great a poet
as Chaucer, though very different, survived from the
fourteenth century in only one small MS., was unknown till

the nineteenth century, and hardly discussed till the 1950s. Chaucer alone, from his own day onwards, has been accepted as a major English poet, and, understandably though erroneously, has very often been taken as the founding father of English literature, and the first refiner of our language. His work has been present as a general, much-enjoyed, if often little understood, possession of the English literary mind, solidly 'there', since his own lifetime.

III

The tradition of commenting in reference to Chaucer is thus the only tradition of critical commentary in English that exists continuously from before the end of the sixteenth century, and it immediately reveals the remarkable change and innovation that began to take place around 1600 in England in the premises, expectations and theories held about literature. The change may be described as the change from Gothic to Neoclassical concepts of literature.

  We are immediately in a difficulty here, because we owe most, if not all, of our ideas about what literature is, or should be, and the very idea of literary criticism and theory itself, to Neoclassicism; more strictly, to Humanism, i.e. the study of *literae humaniores,* 'the more humane writings'. In our era it was Humanism, and especially the Humanist scholars of Italy and France in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, who established the nature and importance of literature. (2) Almost everything that it seems natural for normal twentieth-century liberal educated Westerners to say about literature, for example that it represents 'reality', is 'educative', and in some way 'improving', and almost all our artistic criteria, derive specifically from Humanism. Naturally, not all Humanistic concepts were entirely original. Most were rooted in some aspect of medieval literature, in particular, medieval Latin literature, which itself was largely a product of the official ecclesiastical tradition, as well as heir to the prestige of ancient Roman literary culture. But even medieval Latin *literature* (in the sense of avowed verbal fictions) was not always highly thought of, especially as scholasticism became dominant from the beginning of the thirteenth century, and the vernacular was for long a poor relation of Latin. (3) One of the great achievements of literary Humanism, reflected in the course of the criticism of Chaucer, was to raise the status of the vernacular, as of literature itself—a dual achievement

to which, in England, Chaucer's own works also contributed. But the very diversity of attitudes to Chaucer's works in the latter part of the sixteenth century reveals some of the dilemmas of Humanistic, or more conveniently named Neoclassical criticism, when confronted with a substantial body of vernacular literature composed with no regard for Neoclassical rules. The difficulty is not that Neoclassical rules were broken (though they constantly were), but that in the earlier tradition fundamental attitudes towards, and within, literature, were different. It is convenient to sum up the pre-Neoclassical attitudes as 'rhetorical', typical of all sorts of traditional literature, including so-called 'oral literature'. The English segment of traditional literature which is represented by Chaucer's work is most conveniently called English Gothic literature, by analogy with the contemporary easily recognisable Gothic style in the visual and plastic arts, and like that style extending roughly from about 1200 to about the end of the sixteenth century. (4)

'Rhetoric' is a wide and confusing term. It is partly a technical term, and largely, since about 1700, a term of abuse. (5) Like the old soldier, it's dead but it won't lie down. The concept and practice of rhetoric are un-avoidable in language and above all in literature but they may well be misconceived, distorted or disregarded. The history of rhetoric has been well traced in general, (6) and the criticism of Chaucer, amongst much other evidence, gives specific examples of its use or absence as a critical premise. As a technical term 'rhetoric' may refer to the various treatises written from Classical Antiquity onwards, which in the Middle Ages degenerated into lists of verbal devices, with little (though still some) attention paid to underlying structural principle. It is easy to see how these, and even their sixteenth-century successors, came to be despised. Yet they offer a clue to a most important and until recently neglected aspect of language, its *intrinsic* vitality, its creative autonomy. Language, by elaboration, by choice of purely verbal resource, independent of external control, can be conceived as in itself a work of art. How this can be involves difficult questions of the relation of the universe of discourse to non-linguistic universes, and these cannot be examined here. Neoclassicism introduced a literalism of discourse, which denied its creative autonomy, subduing language (as far as it could) to a narrowly descriptive function. Since such literal description was plainly inadequate to convey personal feeling, Romanticism emphasised the expressive element through the speaker's or writer's own *self*-description. Accuracy and sincerity thus became important

criteria. Of course these have their places in traditional pre-Neoclassical writing, since most writing is a multiple-level activity, but accuracy and sincerity are only part of a general creative linguistic effort which allows other effects too, such as word-play, hyperbole, proverbial (not personal) wisdom. This *general* creative linguistic effort is what is denoted by a 'rhetorical', that is, traditional, way of writing. Failure to understand this underlies much modern misunder-standing of the Bible, Shakespeare, Chaucer. Our misun-derstanding may be partly excused by the lack of literary conceptualisation characteristic of traditional writers, and found even in the writers of technical rhetorical treatises, who were mostly men with a practical concern to teach the tricks of the trade. They were teaching how to generate verbal structures: 'creative writing', in fact. The treatises themselves were never intended as manuals of criticism or of the theory of literature, and hardly enter into the history of the criticism of Chaucer (though cf. Brathwait, No. 55). The notions about literature and language that underlie the treatises on rhetoric do however underlie critical commentary up to the middle of the sixteenth century, when Neoclassical ideas begin to enter. If we are sympathetic to these rhetorical, traditional and Gothic premises about literature we can learn a good deal about Chaucer's poetry, English poetry and criticism, and the nature of literature itself.

   The very first comment on Chaucer, by the contemporary French poet, Deschamps, emphasises Chaucer's variety. The warmest praise, if reiteration is any guide, is for Chaucer as a translator, and though there may be some French conceit in this, it accords well with the general medieval and indeed traditional sense, as implicit in medieval rhetoric, that a poet's greatness consists in his ability specifically to find *words* for matter which is already provided. Deschamps' praise of Chaucer as a *man* goes far beyond this, even taking hyperbole into account. Learned, scientific, good, practical, not too talkative: we are told that these were Chaucer's personal characteristics, though seen in his writing as well. As a *poet,* Chaucer is compared with Ovid, the master of pathos, of love, of comedy and witty verbal elaboration. The comparison is profoundly apt, but never significantly realised in the full Neoclassical period even though Dryden sees it, as well as one or two others (Nos 66, 77, 99a). Though both Chaucer and Ovid are extraordinarily creative and both in various ways may be said to teach, neither laid claim to the poet's sublime superiority of wisdom and morality over historian and philosopher, let alone over the non-writing

part of humanity, which the noble Neoclassical ideal of Sidney and Milton asserted.

The comments of Usk (No. 2), and of others in the early period, do however refer to Chaucer's serious and nourishing subject-matter, the 'fructuous entendement' (No. 7), that 'sentence', which the Gothic poet is certainly required to provide, as for example by the Host of the Tabard. But the Host also wants 'solas' or 'mirth'. The Gothic poet besides his learning should provide variety; 'some sad stories, some merry', as the very Gothic Skelton remarks (No. 19).

The fullest near-contemporary criticism of Chaucer is by Lydgate, who very frequently comments on, alludes to, and imitates Chaucer. Lydgate is not writing criticism in our sense, for reasons already explained, but from his remarks emerges an account of Chaucer's poetry that deserves attention. After Chaucer's personal genius and primacy as a poet, which Lydgate is rightly never tired of praising, Chaucer's quality as a 'noble rethor' is for Lydgate most significant. Lydgate emphasises the richness of Chaucer's language, 'the gold dewdrops of rhetoric so fine' (No. 4c, cf. 4b), his 'sugared' style, (the same word that Francis Meres used to praise his own contemporary Shakespeare's Sonnets). Lydgate seems to register something of Chaucer's realism of style, by his reference to 'Word for word, with every circumstance' (No. 4 e) but the concept of 'flowers of rhetoric and eloquence' (No. 4 d) is essentially that of the creative power of language, which rhetorical theory implies, and not the imitative dependence on some external factor which dominated views of poetry from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, and which is characteristic of Neoclassical and Romantic views. Rhetorical theory, although it accepts the creative autonomy and thus elaboration of language, does not deny the validity of subject-matter, and Lydgate emphasises both the fullness of Chaucer's subject-matter and, especially, its variety: fictions, 'historial' things, morality, disport, comedy, tragedy and ribaldry (No. 4 e). Lydgate gives an account of many of Chaucer's works, but describes him as being particularly without a peer in his power to tell stories (No. 4 g). The status of poets, says Lydgate (owing something to Boccaccio here in his 'Chapitle' on poets (No. 4 g)), is to be maintained by princes, and he is pleased that Chaucer in his life attained a 'virtuous sufficiency', but no claim is made for the poet's supremacy as a man in society, for all his learning. Thus the outline of Chaucer the poet emerges, as one rich in linguistic resource, of a traditional kind, but in English an innovator; a story-teller, capable of telling many different kinds of stories,

and interested in writing many different kinds of works;
learned, wise, prudent, modest, dependent, and genial even
to the extent of being apparently uncritical. It seems a
very satisfactory account, granted its broad outline, both
of Chaucer himself, and of the Gothic ideal of a poet. The
notion in Lydgate's 'Chapitle' of the poet as a man
leading a quiet life, needing the support of wine and his
prince, may not fully correspond to the facts of Chaucer's
life as we know or guess them, but it corresponds quite
closely (apart from the detail about wine) with the way
Chaucer presents himself, and also of course with Lydgate's
own life. It will not be the only occasion when the
'critic' (if the term may be used so early as Lydgate) of
Chaucer is found to describe himself. Such self-description
does not necessarily invalidate the criticism. It is of the
nature of great poets that they mirror many readers of
different kinds; they are spokesmen for all or for many of
us. The Gothic poet, in his variety and his activation of
many different strands of tradition, from morality to
ribaldry, is especially to be conceived of as a spokes-man
for a culture, rather than its priest, prophet, or
unacknowledged legislator.

   Subsequent comments by other men in the fifteenth
century fill in the picture of the rhetorical Gothic poet,
with further emphasis on 'morality', e.g. by Scogan (No.
5), while Walton (No. 6) appears to mention Chaucer the
'flower of rhetoric' and 'excellent poet' in order
implicitly to contrast him with Gower's 'morality' and to
condemn his use of pagan morality.

   Chaucer's social setting and possible contemporary
references are reflected in Shirley's gossipy remarks (No.
9), while on the other side Henryson (No. 11) is
perceptively aware of the fictional inventiveness of
Chaucer. A sense emerges from such contrasts, not only of
the critic's own interests and of the poet's multiplicity,
but also of the way that Chaucer's poetry spans the range
between pure fiction and actual historicity: it is not a
self-enclosed fictional mirror set against a true
'reality', any more than it is simply documentary. Hence
arises an ambivalence of ontological status very
characteristic of Gothic poetry, and perhaps represented by
the mingled collection of books once owned by Sir John
Paston II (No. 12).

   After Lydgate, Caxton (No. 14) is Chaucer's most copious
commentator, reiterating the same general characteristics
of rich language and pregnant meaning. The elaboration of
rhetoric is seen not as empty flourishes, but as the
delightful conveyance of solid nourishment, so that the
translation of Boethius's 'Consolation of Philosophy' ranks

as high among the poet's achievements as the great poems.
But Caxton also does full justice to the variety of 'The
Canterbury Tales', and displays a laudable anxiety—which
seems not to have extended to his actual practice—to get
the text accurate. (7) Hawes (No. 18) once again strikes
familiar notes, employing the useful word 'sententious'
(specifically of 'The House of Fame') which describes that
rhetorical Gothic rich verbalisation of an accepted
tradition characteristic of so much of the poetry of
Chaucer as of Shakespeare, but which was rejected by
Neoclassical theory and practice.

There are some aspects of Gothic poetry which are easily
assimilated to Neoclassicism: moralising is one; another is
'realism'. Realism, which is certainly present in Chaucer's
poetry, is touched lightly on by Lydgate, as already noted,
and occasionally picked up elsewhere, as in the anonymous
comment of *c.* 1477 (No. 13).

Humour is traditionally related to realism through
satire, as in Chaucer's poetry itself, but though it is
clear enough that Lydgate, for example, greatly appreciated
Chaucer's humour, it is not much commented on in the
fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Skelton (No. 19),
for all his New Learning a very Gothic poet, responds to
it most vigorously, as we might expect from his own works.

Skelton also seems to be the first to feel the need to
defend Chaucer's language; and the passage of time, making
Chaucer 'an ancient', for good and bad, begins to be felt.
Furthermore, the sixteenth century sees the steady rise of
the tide of Humanism. Gavin Douglas condemns Chaucer's
'lakar' (faulty) style (No. 20) in translating Virgil in an
insufficiently Virgilian way—a true enough judgment, if
somewhat beside the point. Sir Brian Tuke, in his
dedication (No. 22) to Thynne's edition of 'The Workes of
Geffray Chaucer', on the other hand, reveals how the
Humanist inspiration received from the great literary
achievements of Classical Antiquity could lead not only to
veneration of Chaucer and a higher valuation of the
importance of literature in itself, but also to the
practical achievements of scholarship and the first edition
of the complete works of Chaucer by Thynne in 1532.
Scholarship is a product of Neoclassicism rather than of
the multiple, fluid, casual, Gothic spirit. But Tuke is
also the first to express a characteristic Humanist, anti-
medieval, surprise that so good a poet as Chaucer could
exist as it were against the cultural climate, in so
barbarous a time 'when all good letters were laid asleep
throughout the world'. Sidney echoes this in a memorable
phrase (No. 43).

In England Humanism also often drew strength and moral

conviction from the immense zeal of Protestant reform,
though the case of Erasmus shows that Humanism need not
necessarily go with Protestantism. At first Protestant zeal
took over one aspect of medieval Latin official culture in
comdemning literature for being fiction, and fiction for
being in itself reprehensible; and contrasted Chaucer's
works (especially 'The Canterbury Tales') un-favourably
with the Bible (Nos 21, 23, 31). But the literary
perception of Ascham, severe moralist though he was, marks
a more subtle appreciation, and an assimilation of
Chaucer's works to the status of the Classics. The literary
prominence of the men of St John's College, Cambridge,
around the end of the sixteenth century, with their
numerous comments on Chaucer, may reflect the influence of
Ascham, or at least of his type of Humanism. In the later
seventeenth century and the eighteenth the Protestant
interest in Chaucer lapsed, as he was seen primarily as a
humorist, to return with vigour in the nineteenth century
(cf. No. 99). (8)

   Humanism was the main force that transformed Chaucer
criticism by introducing those Neoclassical concepts of
literature and of the superior status of the poet that
help to disclose, as well as to develop, a new feeling,
beginning in the sixteenth century, about our experience of
the world, and of the relation of language (and hence
literature) to the world. Although there are important
adumbrations, the significant text in English is Sidney's
'An Apology', where the reference to Chaucer is
significantly brief (No. 43). Sidney's genius creamed off
the long labours of many brilliant European scholars and
critics, to offer England for the first time in English a
coherent theory of literature. (9) 'An Apology' is only
casually and incidentally 'criticism'. But 'criticism' is
often taken to be Sidney's principal aim, and in
consequence 'An Apology' has been often misunderstood, and
undervalued, by readers looking primarily for critical
'insights', rather than a theory of literature.
Nevertheless, some of Sidney's critical 'insights', or
judgments, usefully point to the nature of what he was
looking for in literature. Of these judgments his remarks
on drama are the most striking, for there, as is well
known, he categorically condemns that current English
drama, developed from medieval sources, that Shakespeare
was to write—the English language's supreme achievement.
Why should Sidney have been so wrong?

   The reason is that he was applying the wrong literary
principles, or at least principles different from those
hitherto accepted. Perhaps Sidney, had he lived to see or
read Shakespeare's mature work, might have recognised his

genius as an empirical fact, as did Ben Jonson; but again like Jonson, he might well have reiterated his criticisms. Sidney's Neoclassical doctrine required in the drama obedience to the celebrated pseudo-Aristotelian three unities of time, place and action. Well-known as these are, their underlying significance is often not recognised. It consists in the attempt to make the presentation of the events of the play apparently identical with the way things appear to happen in life, but in a self-enclosed, self-consistent, completed fiction. Thus a fundamentally mimetic theory of literature is being invoked by Sidney for the first time in the vernacular English tradition. Ben Jonson's implicit criticisms of Shakespeare in the various Prologues to his plays apply the same theory. Jonson explains that his own plays do not cover a person's lifetime, i.e. they do not represent time symbolically, nor violate time-keeping; as with time, so other aspects of 'reality', such as war, are not, he boasts, given purely token or symbolic, verbal, representation: 'three rusty swords,/And help of some few foot-and-halfe-foote-words' (Prologue to 'Every Man in his Humour', with which Neoclassical Jonson begins his collected 'Works' (1640).) Gothic Shakespeare never bothered to collect and publish his own plays. The status of the poet (and Jonson calls himself poet, not playwright) is claimed to be different. Jonson specifically claims an authoritative, edifying and improving function for himself as poet. To quote Sidney again, the 'poet's nobleness' (*ed. cit.*, p. 104) can never, by definition, create mockery, indecency, or the grotesque; that is, such abuse as infects the fancy with unworthy objects (p. 125) or as, 'in the comical part of our tragedy', the 'scurrility, unworthy of any chaste ears' (p. 136). Thus the Neoclassical true poet will never be in such a position that he will need to 'revoke' as Chaucer did, in the name of the official culture, the larger proportion of his works. The Neoclassical poet is not only better than other men, he is more learned: 'of all sciences (I speak still of human, and according to the human conceits) is our poet the monarch' (p. 113). There is here a glance at the supremacy of religious truth, but Sidney effectively assumes an identity of interest and conviction between poet and theologian or preacher, for 'ever-praiseworthy Poesy is full of virtue-breeding delightfulness' (p. 141).

Yet 'Poesy is an art of imitation' (p. 101), and Sidney's whole theory, like that of the great European scholars on whom he drew, is based on this premise. Thus in the Neoclassical view poetry is by definition both imitative of life and morally improving. The poet is a

monarch of realistic representation, of learning, and of morality, whose very humour has no need of laughter (which 'hath only a scornful tickling' (*ed. cit.,* p. 136)). It is hard to fit Chaucer, or Shakespeare, into such a frame. Yet so powerful and seductive is the Neoclassical doctrine that Dr Jonson in the eighteenth century, whose empirical contemplation of Shakespeare forced him to reject the doctrine of the necessity of the three unities in a play, because Shakespeare who violated them was so successful, was still impelled to maintain (No. 79) that the graces of a play are 'to copy Nature and instruct life'; that is, the aim is to be 'realistic' and didactic at the same time. Such an aim is often self-contradictory, for Nature is by no means always edifying. Yet Neoclassicism is irremediably committed to an essentially didactic view of literature, which involves also the superiority of poetry, as Sidney claims, over history and philosophy, and the superiority of the poet over everyone else. 'A good book is the life-blood of a master-spirit', says Milton who also maintains the (alas) extraordinary notion that good poets are *ipso facto* good men. Both Samuel Johnson and Shelley describe poets, in Shelley's famous final phrase in his 'Defence', as 'the unacknowledged legislators of mankind'. It is not surprising that Shelley has nothing to say of Chaucer. Neoclassical subsumes Romantic in this as in several other matters. The poet is no ordinary man, he is 'a curious universal scholar', as Gabriel Harvey was to call him, simultaneously a law-giver, priest and prophet; *vates,* as even so early as 1556 Chaucer was described on his tomb (cf. Foxe, No. 36).

Thus Chaucer in the sixteenth century can only be represented as a moral teacher, by those who approve of him (and not all do), by emphasising his moral elements and disregarding both his 'mirth' and his modesty, in contrast with the less unified, more miscellaneous, Gothic view, in accordance with which Chaucer, Langland, Gower, the 'Pearl' -poet, Deschamps, Machaut, Boccaccio, Dante, all present themselves in their own poems as ignorant, and sometimes foolish or absurd learners. Those who disapprove of Chaucer in the sixteenth century can, on the other hand, like Harington (No. 49) or the early Protestants, condemn him for his undignified or unedifying aspects, his modesty and 'mirth', which is to disregard the equally Gothic traditional moralising and morality also fully present in Chaucer's work, and frequently noted in the sixteenth century.

Sidney resolves his Neoclassical dilemma between 'following Nature' and 'instructing life' by stipulating that the poet must create a 'second Nature', a golden

Nature, different from the tarnished brass of ordinary experience; and the poet himself must be a 'better teacher than Aquinas', as Milton was to call Spenser, not just a genius with words. Indeed, words tend to become suspect or unimportant, in the seventeenth century, and regarded as mere labels to things; often misleading labels.

This last point, about the status of words, introduces the final element in the critical developments of the seventeenth century, which owed much to the influence of Bacon. There was a shift in the general sense of the relationship of 'words' to 'things'. It is clear that the development of scientific empiricism, the 'mechanical philosophy', accompanied or helped to cause, or was partly caused by, a distrust of the intangible, irremediable vagueness of language. (10) The metaphorical nature of language was attacked, for example, by Hobbes. Sprat's famous account in his 'History of the Royal Society', 1667, of the Royal Society's ideal of a 'close, naked and natural way of speaking', by which, as in primitive times, men might deliver 'so many *things,* almost in an equal number of words', represented a determined down-grading of language as itself autonomous and creative (No. 61). Instead of thinking of language as taking its proper origin and validity from the mind, as being a communication between minds, language was thought of as validated by its correspondence with 'external', 'objective' reality, which comes to be thought of increasingly as primarily material. (11) The demand was for language to reject metaphor and abstraction and to become more literalistic. This is essentially a 'mimetic' theory of language, which obviously chimed with the mimetic or naturalistic basis of more specifically Neoclassical literary principle. As with Neoclassical 'naturalism', linguistic 'realism', or literalism, was at that time limited by certain social, moral and religious constraints, by the conservatism which preserved older ways of thought and feeling, and by the ordinary human situation. The importance of the change, however, may be measured by the fact that in the twentieth century we often retain the didactic naturalism in literature and in behaviour that is derived from Neoclassical theory, even though we have cast off the traditional restraints. (12)

However, in Sidney and in the seventeenth century, traditional moral and social constraints accompanied literary theory. When combined with the desire for edification and for consistency in literary works they led to the notion of 'decorum' (which, as Milton says, 'is the grand masterpiece'), meaning an avoidance of the undignified Gothic mixture of different tones and of

different kinds of material or attitude in the same work
of art, such as allowed, in Shakespeare, comic scenes in
tragedies; or, in Chaucer, a tasteless mixture of the
indecent with the devout, the flippant with the serious,
'sad stories with some merry'. Neoclassical literary
criticism is firmly based on a theory of the clearly
separate *genres* of literature, to which it is very hard to
adapt the actual practice of Chaucer and other Gothic
writers (or indeed of much literature of other periods,
though that is a different question). (13) In England we
may see the clash between Gothic and Neoclassical principle
played out before our eyes around 1600 by the juxtaposition
and contrast between Shakespeare, our last and greatest
Gothic writer, and Ben Jonson, our first great Neoclassical
writer.

IV

What now of Chaucer? The purest Neoclassical critics who
'rode al of the newe jet' avoid or condemn him. Sidney is
lukewarm; and Ben Jonson though citing him in his grammar
is not influenced by him and hardly mentions him
critically, in contrast to Shakespeare who frequently
echoes him (though, as a true Gothic writer, Shakespeare
does not practise formal literary criticism). Rymer, our
most extreme Neoclassical critic, has no good to say of
Chaucer (No. 64), nor has Addison (No. 65). Cowley could
not read him (cf. No. 66). Samuel Johnson, our greatest
Neoclassical critic, is evidently unsympathetic (No. 79).
Chaucer's mixture of *genres,* his fantasy in so many poems,
his humour, satire, irony, his touches of the grotesque,
his lack of decorum, the hyperbolical or at least non-
mimetic nature of so much of his language, his strangeness
because of the passage of time, his refusal of the role of
poetic *vates,* all make him unsympathetic to the immediate
requirements of Neoclassicism. Hence the pause in
appreciation of Chaucer in the seventeenth century (though
it is somewhat over-emphasised by Miss Spurgeon). One must
recognise here the increasing difficulty of Chaucer's
language, commented on with increasing frequency, and
resulting in Kynaston's Latin translation (cf. No. 59) and
Sidnam's (?) English modernisation of about 1630 (cf. No.
57), each of 'Troilus and Criseyde'. But 'The Canterbury
Tales' apparently gave less trouble (or seemed, as usual,
more worth it), and Chaucer continued to be read. An
edition, with the conscious antiquarian appeal of
blackletter (i.e. Gothic) type (very mannered and

beautiful), was published in 1687, though the interval between that and Speght's last edition of 1602 was the longest between any editions of Chaucer. Old-fashioned people, or people with traditional tastes (which usually includes the majority of the reading public), courtiers like Wentworth, Earl of Strafford, or at a lower social level, Pepys (No. 60), and Cambridge men in general, all continued to enjoy him. The strong vein of Gothicism in Milton (a Cambridge man, who had for many years intended to write his epic on the Gothic subject of King Arthur) rejoices in the romance element in Chaucer, as we know from the allusion in 'L'Allegro'. Dryden too (No. 66), who was yet another Cambridge man, appreciated the romance, 'The Knight's Tale'; but it is highly significant that he transposed appreciation of it into the terms of epic, or heroic poem, which, as W.P.Ker showed many years ago in his Introduction to Dryden's 'Essays' (1926), was one of the most characteristic, as it was the most valued, of *genres* acknowledged by early Neoclassical criticism. Dryden's praise and his translation of 'The Knight's Tale' in 'The Fables' ensured that it was frequently commented on in the next century, but as epic, which is in some respects an anti-type of romance.

Yet when considering Chaucer's sustained appeal one may feel that the relish for Chaucer in the latter part of the seventeenth century felt by dirty-minded courtiers like Mennes (cf. No. 60), as revealed in his imitations of Chaucer reprinted with his own scatological effusions, is coarser and far narrower than the pleasure felt by earlier courtiers like Wyatt (No. 26). The advent of a new realism, Neoclassical and 'scientific' rather than Gothic, reinforced the Gothic alliance between laughter, satire, and gross realism, which is of course genuinely present in Chaucer, but broke the vital link between these and the more idealising styles and works. One cannot help feeling that this new coarse realism in Dryden and Pope, with their new marked vein of scatological or sexual grossness, over-emphasised some elements of Chaucer's work, for the sake of finding a mirror to itself, even though Dryden felt he could not publish a translation of 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue' because of its indecency.

However that may be, a new sense of Chaucer's own realism develops in the appreciation and criticism of Chaucer's work in the late seventeenth and the eighteenth century. Great verbal art has by definition an ability to answer historically inappropriate questions, to meet demands different from those of its own age. Chaucer's supreme realisation of the variety inherent in fourteenth century English empiricism paradoxically made some elements

of his work very readily available to Neoclassical
assumptions, especially if other elements in his work were
ignored. Dryden, responding perhaps to something of
Chaucer's own Gothic casualness, stepped with majestic ease
across the gulf between Neoclassical and Gothic to seize on
Chaucer's realism and make it compatible with Neoclassical
premises. Henceforth, that Chaucer follows 'Nature',
especially as a comic, and has a command of pathos, are
the dominant notes of the criticism. His reputation for
'epic' after a while fades, and he is further assimilated
to the novelist, and especially the dramatist.

　　There were some important changes in the Romantic
period, and in the nineteenth century, which will be
discussed in the Introduction to the second volume; but
here it may be worth briefly noticing how persistent is
the notion of Neoclassical realism, of the emphasis on the
derivativeness of word from thing, throughout both the
eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, Neoclassical and
Romantic. For Samuel Johnson, great lexicographer, in his
Preface to his 'Dictionary' (1755), 'words are the
daughters of earth' and 'things are the sons of heaven',
which has an anti-feminist bias in favour of male things.
Blake (No. 90) emphasises the importance of character, and
can say that names alter, but things do not. Hazlitt (No.
95) remarks that Chaucer describes as if giving evidence on
oath. Lowell (Vol. 2, No. 17) thinks that for Chaucer what
is important is 'the thing in itself, not the description:
'names alter, things never do'—consciously or not echoing
Blake. Arnold (Vol. 2, No. 24) speaks of Chaucer's 'large,
free, sound representation of things'. Arnold is
particularly interesting because his general notions of
poetry as 'a criticism of life', of the need for a poet
'to know life and the world before dealing with them in
poetry', and of the critical power 'to see the object as
in itself it really is', (14) are all extensions of the
Neoclassical division between objective experience and the
subjective mind, between 'real things' and their dependent
verbalisation. Arnold cannot bring himself to admit
Chaucer's absolute greatness as a writer because he wants
more than great writing; he wants great writing arising out
of and concerned with the subject-matter of serious moral,
indeed religious, exaltation. Arnold recognises that this
is sometimes present in Chaucer, as it is much more fully
in Dante; but even in Dante, and especially in Chaucer,
seriousness is mixed with such variety, indecorum, and
'modesty' that the vatic demand often receives a check, as
if the same man should appear as both priest and clown. A
flexibility of response, a humour, on the part of a reader
is required, which Neoclassical and Romantic principles

hardly allow for. It is significant that Arnold barely
notices the existence of Dickens, his great contemporary,
who of all nineteenth-century writers, with his fantasy-
realism, his hyperbolical manner and style, his pathos and
his laughter, his closeness to the popular mind and
remoteness from Neoclassicism, is closest to Chaucer in
genius and temperament. Bagehot (Vol. 2, No. 10), more
worldly, does better here.

   Once the Neoclassical and Romantic emphasis on 'realism'
is recognised as part of a characteristic outlook, the
question how far Chaucer's own work can legitimately be
said to be 'realistic' would take us further afield than
an introductory essay on the history of the criticism of
Chaucer should extend. (15)

   Another important Neoclassical literary concept had a
remarkably delayed action in the criticism of Chaucer. This
is the concept expressed in the curious term 'poetic
justice', implying that kind of justice, too rarely met
with in real life, which imposes appropriate punishment 'to
fit the crime'. W.S.Gilbert's Mikado expressed the notion
most vividly in the wider world in 1885. Chaucer criticism
soon followed on, most clearly with the work of W.M.Hart
(Vol. 2, No. 32) at the beginning of the twentieth
century, and since then 'poetic justice' has been the most
hardworked of all inappropriate concepts that have been
applied to Chaucer's popular comic tales, or *fabliaux*. It
is a characteristic Neoclassical concept and emerges in the
early eighteenth century. (16) The main use of the term in
relation to Chaucer has, however, been in the twentieth
century.

V

Neoclassical principles never so seized hold of the English
literary mind as, for example, they seem to have occupied
the French in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.
There are several reasons. One is the presence of some
inherent self-contradiction, as briefly discussed above, in
the principles themselves; another is the existence of
Shakespeare and, to a lesser extent, of Chaucer. The work
of Shakespeare, our greatest Gothic writer, is self-
evidently almost totally recalcitrant to Neoclassical
principles, while any critical principles which deny
Shakespeare his greatness stand self-condemned. The classic
confrontation between Shakespeare and Neoclassical critical
theory is Samuel Johnson's 'Preface to Shakespeare'.
Shakespeare is not even as realistic as Chaucer, and

cannot, as a dramatist, be treated as selectively as the poet, though Johnson does significantly, like most eighteenth-century critics of Chaucer, respond most easily to Shakespeare's comedy and realism.

The presence of Shakespeare and Chaucer kept the English literary mind to some extent open to Gothic romance and humour, even with such sturdy Neoclassics as Milton and Pope. Then as early as 1760 the great stirrings of Romanticism, in England as in Europe, led to a more sympathetic interest in the past and the beginning of the historical imagination that sees the past as different from the present. The works of Hurd (No. 82) and Thomas Warton (No. 83) are very important in this respect in the English context. Yet though Chaucer benefits from the new sensibility, Romantic literary principles are sufficiently a natural development of Neoclassical principles, at least as they focus on Chaucer, for the changes in the critical appreciation of Chaucer among Romantic writers not to be so great as one might have expected.

VI

The deeper changes significantly begun in the seventeenth century affected the value put on the various parts of Chaucer's works. 'The Canterbury Tales', and especially 'The General Prologue' and 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue', had always been appreciated. Lydgate's imitation of Chaucer's 'Prologue to the Canterbury Tales' in the Prologue to his own 'Thebes'; the several early references to the Wife of Bath, besides Chaucer's own references; perhaps the proverbial phrase 'a Canterbury tale'; Caxton's printings and comments; Skelton's appreciation of the mixture of 'some sad stories, some merry': all testify to knowledge of and pleasure in 'The Canterbury Tales' in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Yet up to the end of the seventeenth century the highest praise of specific works is for 'Troilus and Criseyde', commended by Sidney's aristocratic taste, chosen for modernisation by Sidnam (No. 57), and for translation into Latin by Kynaston. The general effect of the changes in the seventeenth century, on which Dryden sets his seal, is that 'The Canterbury Tales' comes to the fore. 'Troilus and Criseyde' has since 1700 been relatively neglected until well into the twentieth century. We may take the opportunity here to notice that the didactic element in Gothic literature found some expression in the non-fictional 'Parson's Tale', which in Chaucer, as in at least part of his source, reflects

the characteristically Puritanical tones of the devout
layman, rather than the subtleties, so much more liberal in
effect, of the professional theologian. But apart from
Ascham no critic refers to 'The Parson's Tale', and even
Ascham's knowledge is doubtful (No. 29).

VII

The changes in the seventeenth century displaced rhetoric
as a central Humanistic activity. It may be objected
against this that Neoclassical critics used and even
revived rhetoric in the sixteenth century, and that
rhetoric was still flourishing in the eighteenth century.
One might add too that some form of rhetoric is inherent
in almost all human communication. Granted that these
objections have force, it still seems that traditional
rhetoric conceived as a primary mental activity
manipulating speech for various purposes, received its
death-blow in the seventeenth century, though it was an
unconscionably long time dying. Even in the Middle Ages
rhetoric was frequently concerned merely with stylistic
adornment. But, to recapitulate the essential nature of
rhetoric, the characteristic praise of Chaucer by Lydgate,
Hoccleve, or Dunbar (Nos 4, 7, 17), reveals their inner
sense, however little consciously realised, of the
importance of rhetoric as a mode of knowledge and creative
perception, using language as a mental tool. Chaucer, they
continually say, refined and extended language, as well as
adorning it. There is an underlying sense in the early
period that Chaucer *created* meaning; not that he 'imitated'
it in words. By contrast, from Dryden onwards the tendency
is quite different. When critics say that Chaucer 'followed
Nature' they imply a theory of literature that can only
attribute an at best 'second-hand reality' (if the
expression may be permitted) to words. A necessary
corollary is that the more literalistic the use of words,
the better; the less literalistic (i.e. by using pun,
hyperbole, sententiousness, mixed metaphor—which are in
fact the common coin of most common speech and traditional
literature) the worse. (17) Such an attitude is still
frequently met with in criticism as late as the second
half of the twentieth century. Literalism is totally
opposed to rhetoric. Rhetoric was not, can never be,
completely destroyed, but in England it was progressively
weakened until it was finally discredited by Romanticism.
   The fictionality of the subject-matter of literature is
necessarily emphasised by literalism, since the subject-

matter so vividly and (in intention) concretely focused is
confessedly non-existent. Literature has often been thought
to 'mirror' life, but in the eighteenth century the image
takes on a new precision. (18) In consequence, works of
art were felt to be enclosed fictions which 'imitated' life
by 'mirroring' it in convincing detail. This amounts to an
'illusionist' theory of art. (19) Such at least may be
deduced from the apparently increasing awareness in the
eighteenth century of Chaucer's work as a fiction, filled
with convincing illusionist detail, of which the verses
published in 1740 by Astrophil (No. 77) are the earliest
clear example after Dryden. A work of fiction is then
necessarily conceived as concerned with self-subsistent
dramatic characters. The general inspiration of all this,
which leads to the novelistic and dramatic concept of
Chaucer, is that Neoclassical movement of which for our
present purposes Dryden is the head. It of course genuinely
responds to something in Chaucer which is not in most, if
any, of his contemporaries, and it still flourishes in the
latter part of the twentieth century. A tiny but vivid
example of the difference of feeling about Chaucer's
dramatic realism as initiated in the seventeenth century
and developed in the eighteenth and later centuries may be
found in regard to 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue', III,
585-6, a couple of lines where we have to modern eyes a
literalistic, or illusionist, imitation of the Wife
forgetting for a moment what she was going to say. The
lines provide an excellently dramatic touch, but for the
old-fashioned literary amateur Brathwait (No. 55), writing
in 1616 (though published much later), it is a delightful
piece of rhetoric, an example of the figure 'Epanodos' (in
Latin *Regressio*). Literalistic and rhetorical
interpretations need not be mutually exclusive, but they
approach the poetry in very different ways.

VIII

There is another more practical and limited aspect of
language which in the history of the criticism of Chaucer
naturally calls for comment: that is, the problem of
intelligibility of language, which is often connected by
critics with such stylistic qualities as simplicity or
purity or elaboration. Again the seventeenth century marks
a watershed. Chaucer as the 'first finder of our fair
language' (No. 7) has already been noticed, but it is
worth emphasising how often his early admirers remarked
upon his brilliant new complexity of vocabulary—'fresh

anamalit terms celical'—even as late as Dunbar (No. 17).
Poets in particular responded to the improvement of the
language as an instrument. But already early in the
sixteenth century Skelton the Englishman (as opposed to the
more intellectual Scots?) has to tell his English audience
that Chaucer's terms are not *really* dark (No. 19). By 1546
Peter Ashton (No. 30) (one of two Cambridge men of this
name), who wrote 'A Short Treatise vpon the Turkes
Chronicles', finds Chaucer's words 'almost out of use'.
Both Ashton, and Betham who wrote in 1543 (No. 28), are
chiefly concerned with the problem of writing plain
English, which seems to have been a Cambridge obsession in
the mid-sixteenth century, (cf. Wilson, No. 32); but
whereas Ashton condemns, Betham recommends Chaucer as a
model. Betham was an Oxford man who became a fellow of
Peterhouse, Cambridge, 1540–7, and one of the Ashtons was
also a fellow of Peterhouse, 1543–53. Perhaps they were
members of that Peterhouse group which Speght (No. 53)
refers to, which may well have had a great influence on
Chaucer criticism, and on knowledge of Chaucer. However
that may be, the signs of the increasing remoteness and
difficulty of Chaucer's language multiply, even though he
continues to be sturdily exalted by some Cambridge men, as
for instance, Spenser. Paradoxically the difficulty of
Chaucer's language made it seem all the more 'natural' and
'native', original, of ancient stock, not adulterated like
the modern tongue with newfangled 'inkhorn' terms which all
true Cambridge men abhor. In fact Chaucer's language was
full of French and Latin neologisms which were exactly what
the sixteenth century called 'inkhorn terms'. There is,
however, one difference. It seems likely that many of
Chaucer's new, more polished and elaborate words, came from
courtly *speech*. (20) They do not smell of the lamp and the
inkpot. By the end of the sixteenth century Spenser's 'well
of English undefiled' (No. 41b) needed, in Speght's
edition, a glossary of his 'hard works explained'. As
already noted, translation by Kynaston (cf. No. 59) and
modernisation by Sidnam (cf. No. 57) were attempted in the
1630s. By the end of the seventeenth century it seems that
Chaucer's text had really become quite difficult, though
the first edition of Dryden's 'Fables' (1700) contained an
Appendix with the original texts of Chaucer; and nearly
half of a cross-section of later seventeenth-century
gentlemen's private libraries owned a copy of Chaucer's
'Works'. (21) Throughout the eighteenth century we are
liable to hear how hard Chaucer is to read, and
modernisations increase in number. But from Coleridge
onwards (No. 96) a more energetic attitude develops, though
with exceptions, and with still more modernisations.

IX

Along with his language Chaucer's metre offered a problem,
not entirely settled even today. The fifteenth- and early
sixteenth-century writers occasionally remark upon the
delightful ease of his metre, (e.g. Lydgate, No. 4, Metham,
No. 8), but the briefest acquaintance with manuscripts
themselves (either direct or through the Chaucer Society
transcripts), or with sixteenth-century editions, or
facsimiles, demonstrates clearly, especially when comparisons
between copies are made, how careless Gothic scribes and
printers were in omission or addition of words that ruin
the metre. The complaint of one of Caxton's customers (No.
14c), about the variations of Caxton's edition from a
manuscript, assures us that some early readers were as
sharp as those at any other time in these matters, and were
as concerned to get the text right as we know Chaucer
himself was, from his poem to Adam Scriveyn and his anxious
reference at the end of 'Troilus' (V, 1793-9). But readers
must have been used to many mistakes. George Gascoigne
seems to be the first to make much comment on metre. His
remarks (No. 37), and even more Puttenham's a little later
(No. 47), about 'riding rhyme' suggest that, as we might
guess, Chaucer's metre, especially in 'The Canterbury
Tales', had to be read as joggling along, though Gascoigne
has a strong sense of some underlying regularity, and there
is perhaps a difference recognised between 'The Canterbury
Tales' and 'Troilus'. A true sense of Chaucer's metre could
not begin to be reestablished until the need was realised
usually to sound the final -e when it represents an earlier
fuller inflexion, and more accurate texts were available.
The much maligned Urry, or rather, the 1721 edition begun
by him and known under his name, made a not unintelligent,
though very unscholarly, attempt to recover the metre, as
Gray notes (No. 81), and the Urry edition deserves a credit
which it has been usually denied for this intention. Gray
himself has some remarkably percipient things to say about
metre as about many other matters. He is a rare example of
a fine poet whose critical remarks are not merely a
projection of his own designs, and whose scholarship is as
good as his poetry. His remarks on Chaucer's metre are not
particularly original (cf. Morell, No. 74), but they sum up
the matter exactly, including the use or not of final -e as
required, and one can only lament that his Commonplace
Books have remained so long unpublished, and are even now
available only in a partial and (except, I hope, in the
present quotation) very inaccurate transcript. Warton
insists on the harmony of Chaucer's versification (No. 83e),
and by the early nineteenth century most intelligent readers

recognised, as Hazlitt did (No. 95), that the pronunciation, when required, of final -e was the secret of understanding Chaucer's versification, though Nott (No. 94) disputes this. Controversy continued at a usually more scholarly level in the nineteenth century.

X

An important element in the historic changes in English society in the sixteenth century had been the decision of the gentry to send their sons to one or other of the two universities, which up till then had been more like professional seminaries and research institutes. Thus the universities took on a broader educational concern, and under Humanist interest rhetoric was intensively studied, at least at Cambridge, and there was much more interest in literature. From Wyatt onwards it is a rare English poet (though this interestingly includes Shakespeare) who has not attended a university, usually, until the late nineteenth century, Cambridge. The fanciful biography of Chaucer which was developed in the sixteenth century (No. 24), itself a product of Humanist interests, followed this trend and made sure of Chaucer's education by sending him to *both* universities. Cambridge men tended to show more interest in Chaucer than Oxford men, although there are one or two exceptions. Much, no doubt, stems from the group of Chaucer enthusiasts at Peterhouse in the mid-century already noted. It seems, too, that Cambridge was more interested in rhetoric than was Oxford: Thomas Wilson (No. 32) and Gabriel Harvey (No. 45) are obvious names of distinguished rhetoricians, but there were others, like Peacham (No. 56); sixteenth-century Oxford has no-one similar. (In the late nineteenth century, the situation changes.)

XI

In the matter of texts, Cambridge in the late sixteenth century seems to have led the way with the editions of Speght, 1598 and 1602, the latter reprinted in 1687 (see note on the editions). After Urry's bad start, Oxford developed a textual tradition that triumphed with Tyrwhitt (No. 84). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Oxford men usually seem to have had more difficulty with the language and to have insisted more on the 'barbarism' of the past.

XII

Chaucer was himself close to the courtly centre of power
and prestige in his own day, and was always a courtiers'
poet, until the late seventeenth century, when the English
Gothic court tradition, with much else that had some
organic connection with Chaucer's own time, finally ended.
In the eighteenth century Chaucer changes in appearance
from courtier to man-of-the-world, as Warton calls him (No.
83a), and indeed a gentleman (cf. No. 85) like so many of
his admirers. In the seventeenth century Chaucer was less
admired by men of letters (like Cowley) perhaps because men
of letters were less easily absorbed into the courtier's
circle than in the eighteenth century they were absorbed
into the world of polite society.

   In the eighteenth century the topics of Chaucer's humour
and his decency are necessarily re-handled in the light of
what is felt to be his realism. His humour had always been
enjoyed as an integral part of his Gothic multiplicity.
Lydgate refers to his comedies, Skelton to his merry tales.
By the end of the sixteenth century the indecency that a
fourteenth-century monk could easily stomach was being
questioned by so coarse a feeder as Harington (No. 49),
but Harington is looking for excuses for himself. By the
latter part of the seventeenth century it seems clear that
the grossness of Mennes (or of his collaborator, the Rev.
James Smith) was felt to correspond with a vein of
Chaucer. Pope, in a comic pastiche of Chaucer's language,
in his 'Imitations of English Authors' said to have been
written in youth, is more gross than Chaucer ever was.
Chaucer's Gothic indecency tends to be an aspect of the
grotesque, both realistic and humorous, asserting the
existence of the physical world in absurd but related
contrast to the mental. It has already been argued that
this relationship begins to break down in the seventeenth
century under a doctrine that considers that literature
ought to be a literalistic imitation which instructs life,
since that doctrine indicates that literature has a direct
effect on life. Immoral literature, or, what is not the
same thing, literature about immorality, may thus seem to
encourage immorality in life, whereas Gothic humour is more
of a conscious invocation of 'the world-upside-down',
grotesque fantasy, parody, satire and release by laughter.
However, much of the response to literary indecency also
depends on the general social climate of permissiveness,
and on the nature of the critic, so that in Chaucer's case
the problem whether he encourages indecency is variously
treated in later centuries without much discernible