

Chaucer's Humour

Chaucer's humour is inseparable from Chaucer's mental make up. He does not tell jokes and expect us to laugh at them. His humour is of a subtle variety which inspires and pervades the whole poem and constantly provides us with new enjoyment. Humour is seen in such medieval works as ~~the~~ The Owl and the Nightingale and the miracle and morality plays, but it was crude and unrefined, almost akin to broad farce and horse-play. Moreover, Humour was not the persistent quality of that literary literature. Humour is 'an attitude to life' and as a way of thinking is nowhere to be met with before Chaucer. In the course of evaluating Chaucer's humour, Cazamien says, "In Chaucer, humour is no longer a momentary gleam, a lucky accident, or at best an incipient disposition gathering strength into some distinct flashes. For the first time in the history of English literature, it is the soul and essence of an artist and his art." Chaucer showed interest in the motley multitude of humanity, and his sympathy and geniality make his humour real and place him in the distinguished company of the celebrated humourists like Shakespeare, Fielding, and Charles Lamb. His large-hearted genial humour cuts across the barrier of time and custom, language and idiom and exhilarates us like a tonic as it did the prince and the clown, the clergy and the laity in the fourteenth century England.

The humour of Chaucer is without a tinge of illwill and malice, spite and animosity. It is sympathetic and genial, free from even that amiable cynicism which gives to the humour of Jane Austen a certain piquant flavour. It is like the play of summer lightning, which hurts no living creature, but surprises

illuminates and charms. The secret of Chaucer's gentle humour lies in his love for humanity. He was a philanthropist. He had no disdain for fools and no disgust for rascals. He was grateful to rogues to unmask the roguery and for the pleasure they gave him. He dealt with their funny traits and visualized at their tricks with amused delight.

The humour of Chaucer is protean in its variety. Charles Dickens also puts emphasis upon the cultivation of virtue in his novels. But Chaucer is not committed to one way of thinking. E. Albert is of view that "the humour which steeped nearly all his poetry, has great variety: kindly and patronizing as in the case of the Clerk of Oxford, broad and semi-farical as in the wife of Bath. The prevailing feature of Chaucer's humour is its urbanity."

Chaucer's humour is all-pervading and all-pervasive. In Shakespearean plays humour is not only confined to comedy, but it is also seen in tragedy. 'The Porter Scene' in Macbeth and 'The Grave Diggers Scene' in Hamlet are instances of Shakespearean humour in tragedy. Similarly, Chaucer's humour is not confined to comedy alone. Compton-Rickett remarks "There are tragedies as well as comedies in the tales. Some are grave and subdued; some others ablaze with colour and merriment; but the thread of honest and kindly laughter runs through them all serious and gay alike."

The test of a humorist is his readiness to laugh at himself as much as at others and Chaucer emerges successful in this test. He evokes his humour at his own cost as well as at the cost of his pilgrims. He spares not even himself and provides humour at his own expense. He takes a gentle delight

in raising a gentle smile at himself when he speaks of his poverty of wit; my wit is short, ye may well understand.

The Canterbury Tales reveal Chaucerian humour in all its variety. In the Prologue every character is dexterously enlivened by humorous touch and the pageant of merry pilgrims lives vividly in our memory as fresh as the rose. There is the light-hearted touch of a genial humourist when Chaucer presents the Prioress. Chaucer deals with her tenderness with slight humour and amusement. He says that she is so charitable and tender hearted that she would weep if she saw a mouse caught in a trap. Though a prioress, she indulges in love making. To Chaucer, her French appeared perhaps rather Londonish and hardly Parisian.

And French she spak ful faire and fetis.

After the scole of startford atte Bowe.

For French of Paris was to him unknowen.

we find kindly and patronising humour

in the case of the clerk of Oxford. The Oxford clerk was a scholar in shoes but he loved to learn and to teach.

But all be that he was a philosopher,
yet he hadde he but litte gold in cofre.

Chaucer's humour becomes

and semifarical in the case of the wife of Bath. She was a little deaf and gapedtoothed. All her life she was an honourable woman. She had five husbands at church doors, besides other company in her youth. All the remedies of love at her finger's tips.

of remedies of love she knew per charite.

For she coude of that art she old was.

There is ironic humour in the case

the Doctor of Physik.

For gold in physik is a cordial.
Therefore he loved gold in special.

Chaucer's humour becomes coarse and rough when he says
poor Miller and the Reeve. He hits the Miller:
wel could he stelen chese, and tullen thoyes;
And yet he hadde a thombe of gold, purdee.

The satirical tone of Chaucer's humour is well represented in the character of the Monk, the Friar, the Pardoner, and the Summoner. These religious characters deserted their religious duties. Materialistic and amorous things became the part and parcel of their lives. But in Chaucer's satirical humour there is the lack of gall and venom which we find in Langland.

The Pardoner was a cheat and hypocrite. By his feigned flattery he duped innocent persons and squeezed money out of their pocket. He made the person and the people his ape.

In conclusion, Chaucer's humour is not tinged with bitter satire. Where Langland cries aloud in anger threatening the world with hell-fire, Chaucer looked on and smiled. He was a master of irony and humour. His humour is almost innocent fun in the real sense of the term.