

## Chaucer's Place in English Literature

Chaucer was fitted by both natural genius and the circumstance of his life to become the most technically accomplished, the most widely ranging, and the most universally appealing of medieval English writers, and indeed, one of the most skilful and attractive of English writers of any period. He was the first great English poet, who combined the French and the Italian streams of literature and brought forth a type of poetry unrivalled in its sunny atmosphere and realism. His sunny soul provided him themes with an inexhaustible flow of humour, which tinged all incongruities with sympathy and distinguished him from his bitter contemporary Langland and 'moral' Gower. He was one of the finest of literary artists and his services to the English language, metre and diction were immense. He founded alike the English language and literature, each being indispensable to the other. Chaucer alone was to England nearly all that Boccaccio and Froissart, Petrarch and Dante were to Italy about the same period. Chaucer found his country without a literature ; he left it rich in the possession of works, especially *The Canterbury Tales*, not only rival to this hour the greatest productions of human genius, but has confessedly influenced in a direct and powerful degree the minds of his most illustrious successors. Spenser drank of Chaucer's 'well of English' ; Shakespeare was delighted to borrow from him, while Milton expressed his heartfelt desire :

To call him who left half told  
The story of Cambuscan bold.

Chaucer is great not only by his historical position, but also because of his genius. He is one of the greatest poets of the world. In the Middle Ages, he had no superior save Dante ; and if Dante is more sublime, Chaucer is at least more human. Indeed, in this thoroughly human quality of his best work, he yields to Shakespeare alone. That this estimate of Chaucer's rank is not exaggerated, may be attested by the universal appreciation which he has received for five centuries and more. The fifteenth century was filled with his name. In the age of Elizabeth he had been praised and imitated by Spenser, Sidney, Shakespeare and Fletcher. Milton lauded him, and even in the age of neo-classicism, he was highly appreciated by Dryden and Pope. The nineteenth century has endorsed this judgement by the mouths of its greatest poets and critics ; and it is safe to say that Chaucer's fame has never stood higher than it is today :