

MODERN FEATURES IN CHAUCER

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It might be somewhat surprising, or even shocking, to attend a conference on Medieval Studies and hear someone call Geoffrey Chaucer a modernist writer. But, in fact, that is exactly what this paper does. It outlines some features in Chaucer's work that are characteristic of 20th-century British Modernist Literature, some features which make us see Chaucer as a modern medieval writer.

Not only does our aim sound rather odd, but it may also seem quite ambitious. The whole of Chaucer's work is taken into account although examples and quotations mainly refer to the dream visions, *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales*. Perhaps on a future occasion we can concentrate our attention on just one poem or one particular characteristic and study them in detail, but for the time being we shall limit ourselves to making a brief mention of some striking similarities between Chaucer's work as a whole and the writings of the Modernist Period in Great Britain¹.

Giving a definition of this literary movement called "Modernism" in just a few lines is not an easy task. Julian Symons once said that "Modernism, like democracy, is a word often used but rarely defined."² Nevertheless, we could say that modernist writers, such as T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence or Virginia Woolf, are marked by constant experiments in subject matter, style and form. They break away from established rules and conventions and try to create a new type of

¹ Most of the revolutionary works of Modernism belong to the second and third decades of the twentieth century.

² *Makers of the New: The Revolution in Literature, 1912-1939* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1987), p. 9.

literature. They also rebel against escapist and romantic literature and tend to deal with everyday life in their art. New techniques and topics are, however, blended with an expression of love for the distant past which lead these writers towards a special use of classical references and myths. One should also note that they were influenced by mainland European writers rather than by other English authors: French Symbolism and Naturalism, Ibsen's modern realistic drama and the late 19th-century Russian fiction had a great effect on the leading practitioners of Modernism.

Geoffrey Chaucer shares these prominent features of Modernism. To begin with, he is an innovator who breaks some inviolable conventions of medieval literature and creates highly original narrative poems. He does this in the fourteenth century, a time when originality is rarely seen, when writers model their work on source texts and do not consciously want to free themselves from tradition. Chaucer, on the contrary, makes a great deal of poetic experiments and achieves a very original adaptation of literary source-material.

One of Chaucer's main claims to originality is the fact that his poems do not tend to conform to a particular traditional genre very closely. All his major works offer an unorthodox combination of literary forms, as well as variations in detail. Four of his poems, for example, apparently follow the dream-vision traditional form, but in fact they show new ways of shaping this type of material that create a clear impression of individuality³:

- **The Book of the Duchess** combines some basic conventions of the dream vision with the tradition of the lover's complaint and the elegy, without explicit use of allegorical elements or personifications. Besides, also quite new is the way in which Chaucer creates communication between disparate social levels in a dialogue between the middle-class narrator and the Black Knight, one of the most powerful lords in the realm⁴.
- **The House of Fame** begins in an orthodox style with the poet's dream used as an excuse to learn about love, but soon he deals with other topics: fame, rumours and poetry. Moreover, the comic character of the Eagle is another original creation.
- In **The Parliament of Fowls** we find again a fusion of different literary forms within the framework of the dream allegory: a humorous

³ Wolfgang Clemens discusses Chaucer's originality in these poems within the formal conventions of his sources. See *Chaucer's Early Poetry*, trans. C. A. M. Sym (London: Methuen, 1963).

⁴ Cf. David Wallece, "Chaucer's Continental Inheritance: The Early Poems and *Troilus and Criseyde*," in *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*, eds. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 20.

love debate, an animal fable, a *demande d'amour* (the choice of a mate), and, perhaps, even a political satire.

- **The Legend of Good Women** is also technically a love vision, but its structure, subject matter and characters do not fit into this traditional form.

On the other hand, Dieter Mehl notes that in *Troilus and Criseyde* Chaucer also turns away from conventions and creates an individual piece of art:

The poem has been associated with the classical epic, it has been described as a medieval romance, and interpreted as a predecessor of the modern novel. This variety of interpretation alone suggests that it is not strictly modelled on any particular conventional genre but attempts something new⁵.

The Canterbury Tales could be seen as another unorthodox literary experiment. Here, Chaucer manipulates the medieval tradition of the frame-story in a very original way. In this book he juxtaposes many different styles, themes and literary forms. Each story has an individual narrator with his own particular voice which changes according to his social and moral position. Different tales deal with diverse topics and use a different narrative genre. There is also a great stylistic and thematic variety even within the individual tale. In addition the relationship between stories is quite complex. As David Benson puts it, "No other story-collection has a frame that is so lively and dynamic."⁶

The combination of different conventional genres in a single text, which abounds in Chaucer's poetry, is also a defining feature of Modernism. Some texts of this movement are made up of a juxtaposition of different pieces of text, each of which is in a specific genre. This technique is often referred to as "collage", something that can be clearly seen, for instance, in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

Modernist poets not only rebelled against form, but also against an outmoded diction. They wanted to create a new poetic language and experiment with new structures and idioms, showing a tendency to use a colloquial tone in some of their passages. Chaucer created a new literary language too. He chose to write in the East Midland dialect of English that was spoken in London, whereas most writers used

⁵ Geoffrey Chaucer: *An Introduction to his Narrative Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 64.

⁶ "The Canterbury Tales: Personal Drama or Experiments in Poetic Variety?" in *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*, op. cit., p. 93.

French or Latin. There was no accomplished literary language that he could use because the native tradition was not yet fully developed, so he had to invent what James Reeves calls "a viable English poetic style"⁷. And as happened with the Modernists, Chaucer's language often has the colloquial fluency of an essentially oral idiom which was then in the making: just think of the first lines in *The Book of the Duchess*, the conversation the Eagle holds with the poet in *The House of Fame*, the language used by the common sorts of birds in *The Parliament of Fowls*, or the conversational expressions used by members of all social classes in *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales*.⁸

The inclusion of the speech of ordinary people in Chaucer's poetry forced him to accommodate the rhythms of natural conversation within the limits of Middle English verse. To resolve this conflict, he relies upon freedom, flexibility and metrical licence. His versification, though following to some extent the textbooks of rhetoric, is less strict, regular and monotonous than that of his contemporaries. From time to time he drops the first unstressed syllable of a line or uses the couplet without the general restriction of the end-stopped line⁹. He breaks out of the conventions set by French or native authors and experiments with new types of verse, such as the Chaucerian rhyme royal. All this reminds us of the modernists' experiments with new rhythms and rhymes, the way they try to reconcile the rhythm of normal speech with their meters and their use of free verse.

Another similarity between the modernists and Chaucer is the use of a stylistic device for the purposes of composition. Modernist poets, like Pound, Yeats and Eliot, tend to use the dramatic monologue technique, that is to say, in their poems there is one imaginary speaker addressing an imaginary audience. One of the best-known instances is Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". Chaucer does something very similar in his major poetry; here there is also a speaker addressing an audience, but this time it is not imaginary, but real. As was the custom, Chaucer used to read his poems aloud to assembled audiences at court; therefore we have a living speaker addressing and interacting with a living audience in a specific situation.

In dramatic monologues, the speaker who utters the entire poem is patently not the poet as he exists in everyday life¹⁰. He is just a mask or *persona*, a character invented for a particular artistic purpose. W. B. Yeats was very interested in the composition of these masks and Ezra Pound published a collection of poems

⁷ Chaucer: *Lyric and Allegory* (London: Heinemann, 1970), p. 13.

⁸ See Margaret Schlauch, "Chaucer's Colloquial English: Its Structural Traits," *PMLA*, 67 (1952), 1103-16.

⁹ See Tauno F. Mustanoja, "Chaucer's Prosody," in *Companion to Chaucer Studies*, ed. Beryl Rowland (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 58-84.

¹⁰ Needless to say, Prufrock, an unattractive middle-aged man who has a bald spot, is not the young poet who wrote the poem.

entitled *Personae*. The "I" of Chaucer's poetry is not the poet either; it is a creation of the author as the Eagle, or the Pardoner. That is why most critics today distinguish between Chaucer the poet and a naive, modest, humourous and detached *persona* often called Chaucer the dreamer, Chaucer the narrator, or Chaucer the pilgrim¹¹.

Together with these formal characteristics, there is a certain thematic affinity between Modernist literature and some of Chaucer's poems. One of the recurrent topics in modern poetry and fiction is the problematic nature of human relationships, the establishment of genuine emotional communication, the possibility of love in a community composed of distinct individuals, each with his own private consciousness, in a society full of conventions and moral restrictions. These are, in different ways, the themes of some novels by James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, E. M. Forster or Virginia Woolf. A similar topic can be found in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, a poem whose central interest lies in "its exploration of the attempt by two human souls to establish the deepest and most searching of relationships."¹² This poem is a study of natural human love with all its romantic and sexual aspects, a thoughtful study which could have been the basis of a novel by D. H. Lawrence. The narrative presents two different types of consciousness (like characters in modern novels) who are psychologically analysed; two individual personalities whose intellectual processes are described in a way which resembles the modern stream of consciousness technique¹³. We are not surprised to come across some critical interpretations which consider this poem the predecessor of the modern novel¹⁴.

Another important topic which arises in modernist literary works is the position of women in society, as a consequence of the growing popularity of movements for women's social, economic and cultural freedom and equality. Virginia Woolf is a clear exponent of this new trend; even Ezra Pound at one point took charge of the literary side of a feminist magazine called *New Freewoman*¹⁵. Geoffrey Chaucer is also very much concerned with this topic, women's position

¹¹ The distinction between the poet and the *persona* has been discussed in many articles and books. See James R. Kreuzer, "The Dreamer in *The Book of the Duchess*," *PMLA*, 56 (1951), 543-7; Charles A. Owen, Jr., "The Role of the Narrator in the *Parliament of Fowles*," *College English*, 14 (1953), 264-9; E. T. Donaldson, "Chaucer the Pilgrim," *PMLA*, 69 (1954), 928-36; Robert M. Jordan, "The Narrator in Chaucer's *Troilus*," *Journal of English Literary History*, 25 (1958), 237-57; Dorothy Bethurum, "Chaucer's Point of View as Narrator in the Love Poems," *PMLA*, 74 (1959), 511-20; David M. Bevington, "The Obtuse Narrator in Chaucer's *House of Fame*," *Speculum*, 36 (1961), 288-98; Albert C. Baugh, "Chaucer the Man", in *Companion to Chaucer Studies*, ed. Beryl Rowland (London: Oxford University Press), 1968, pp. 1-19.

¹² Ian Bishop, *Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde: A Critical Study* (Bristol: University of Bristol, 1981), p. 18.

¹³ See, for example, *Criseyde's* long soliloquy in the second book, where we are shown her inner feelings, thoughts, wishes and fears.

¹⁴ Cf. James I. Wimsatt, "Medieval and Modern in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*," *PMLA*, 92 (1977), 203-16.

¹⁵ Symons, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

in society, and his work does not strike the reader as particularly anti-feminist. It seems that he manages to rise above the sexual prejudices of this time enough to understand and discuss this matter in a very modern way:

- Those poems in which courtly love is discussed always show man in a total submission to the lady he is to serve.
- In *The Legend of Good Women* Chaucer presents women in a sympathetic way¹⁶. Moreover, they are usually powerful women and politically or domestically active - like Cleopatra, Dido, Hypsipyle, Medea - all of them in a position superior to men.
- Chaucer also conceived the character of the Wife of Bath, an "exponent of medieval Women's Lib"¹⁷, who in the prologue of her tale clearly points out that women must wear the trousers in married life:

An housbonde I wol have, I wol nat lette,
Which shal be bothe my dettour and my tral,
And have his tribulacion withal
Upon his flessh, whil that I am his wyf.
I have the power durynge al my lyf
Upon his propre body... (1. 154-9)¹⁸

Chaucer's themes are sometimes presented in stories with a certain realism. He is rich in settings and vivid descriptions in his dream visions, a type of poetry that does not need such realistic details for its didactic purpose. There is also realism in *Troilus and Criseyde*¹⁹ and *The Canterbury Tales*; in these books, as is quite common in modern literature, Chaucer lays a special emphasis on a "naturalistic" description of society and character.

Similarly, both Chaucer and the modernists create a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity. Classical mythology has always played an important role in English Literature, but the Modernist movement feels a special attraction for different sorts of myths. James Joyce in *Ulysses* and T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*, for example, weave their modern materials on the pattern of ancient myths. Ezra Pound also included in his *Cantos* dozens of references back to Greek

¹⁶ Not all critics think this way. See Elaine Tuttle Hansen, "Irony and the Antifeminist Narrator in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 82 (1983), 11-31.

¹⁷ See Harry Blamires, *A Short History of English Literature* (London: Methuen, 1974), p. 8.

¹⁸ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd. ed. (Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 77.

¹⁹ See James I. Wimsatt, "Realism in *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Roman de la Rose*," in *Chaucer Studies III: Essays on Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. Mary Salu (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer- Rowman and Littlefield, 1979), pp. 43-56.

mythology and even offered a very peculiar translation of a fragment of the *Odyssey*²⁰. Chaucer was also absorbed by the legends and stories of the distant past²¹. Ovid and Virgil are constant sources for classical references in Chaucer's poetry and some of his tales are taken directly or indirectly from these Latin and Greek authors.

Classical references are not the only link with the past that we find in his poems. They are full of other literary, historical and biblical allusions which sometimes make Chaucer difficult to understand. He is a great lover of books and packs his poems with the products of his reading. Obviously he presupposes immense literary knowledge on the part of his readership. He writes for those who live at court and enjoy the advantages of the best education. This can also be said of the modernist writers. James Joyce, Wyndham Lewis, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound do not write for the ordinary reader either. Their use of oblique references to other works of literature, to ancient myths and stories, has given them the reputation of being difficult writers.

In addition to this, Chaucer as well as the British modernists owe much to European culture and literature. They are writers who look to the Continent in order to find guide-lines, models and inspiration. Most of them even lived there for some time. Chaucer was at various times on diplomatic missions in Flanders, France and Italy; James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis and D. H. Lawrence also lived in France, Switzerland and Germany at some point in their lives. Their art would have been completely different without this Continental atmosphere and influence. Thus, it is difficult to understand the British Modernist movement without the French Symbolists and Naturalists, Ibsen's modern realistic plays and the late 19th-century Russian novelists, and it is also difficult to understand Chaucer's poetry without the famous 13th-century French work *Roman de la Rose*, his contemporary French poets - Deschamps, Machaut, Jean Froissart, Oton de Grounson-, and the three great Italian poets of the trecento - Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio.

There is one final characteristic that Chaucer shares with the modernists: their function as literary critics. Modernist writers engaged in great critical activity. They showed and defended their new ways of writing in different literary magazines²²; Joyce also introduced discussions of criticism and aesthetics into his novels, usually through the character Stephen Dedalus. In the same way, every now and then Chaucer introduces in his poetry ideas and opinions from which we

²⁰ The opening 67 lines of Canto I.

²¹ We can find a list of Chaucer's mythological references in F. P. Magoun, Jr., "Chaucer's Ancient and Biblical World", *Medieval Studies* (Toronto), 15 (1953), 107-36.

²² See, for example, a collection of modernist critical writings which includes articles by Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound, W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Wolf and D. H. Lawrence, edited by Peter Faulkner, *A Modernist Reader* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1986).

might infer his own literary theories²³. He is, therefore, one of the first English poets to comment upon his own literary production in his verses. He discusses the problems of the nature of literature, its function, its techniques or the reputation of its practitioners. This is clearly seen, for example, in the prologue of *The Legend of Good Women*, where he also includes a bibliography of his work and references to the critical reception of his poetry.

After this catalogue of similarities between Chaucer and the Modernist movement discussed here, and despite all the differences which obviously also exist and have been left out, we could conclude that Chaucer is not so distant from the modernist writers as he may seem at first sight. Although there is a gap of more than five hundred years between them, they have many features in common. Generally speaking, they share attitudes, interests, techniques and sources. They both open the way to a new age of literature. The medieval poet left a school of "Post-Chaucerians" which might be the 15th-century version of Post-Modernism.

The comparison between these two apparently different literary productions developed in different periods of time might lead us to the idea that literary history moves in a cyclical way, repeating itself again and again with little variation. Or, perhaps, we could say that, in spite of their reputation for being something new in literature, Modernism was not so modern after all. And, if we wished to be more extreme still, we could add that little or nothing has been invented in the field of art and culture after the Greek and Latin civilizations.

Anyway, all the similarities discussed above make us understand why Chaucer is still read and praised in our day. Modern readers feel very close to his work because they find there a voice which speaks to them in a familiar tone. The modernity of Chaucer's poetry has a lot to do with all those features that he shares with 20th-century writers, such as his withdrawal from conventions, his topical subjects, his realism, his sense of character, his use of colloquial idioms or his love for the classical myth. All these are elements which make us consider Chaucer a modern medieval poet.

²³ See Whitney H. Wells, "Chaucer as a Literary Critic," *Modern Language Notes*, 39 (1924), 255-68; and Robert O. Payne, "Chaucer and the Art of Rhetoric," in *Companion to Chaucer Studies*, op. cit. pp. 38-57.