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THE
FOWLER PRIZE ESSAY
ON THE
LANGUAGE
OF
CHAUCER'S CANTERBURY TALES.

By ALFRED P. REID,
OF THE CLASS OF 1864, LAFAYETTE COLLEGE.

Published by request of F. A. March, Professor of the English
Language, and Lecturer on Comparative Philology
in Lafayette College, Easton, Pa.

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THE FOWLER PRIZE FOR PROFICIENCY IN ENGLISH PHILOLOGY.

An annual prize of thirty dollars was founded in 1862, by Rev. William C. Fowler, LL. D., under the following provisions:

"A committee of at least three shall be chosen by the Faculty, to determine which student of the Senior Class has made the greatest proficiency in English Philology."

"The decision of the Committee is to be made after attending an examination in some English classic, conducted by the Professor of English, and after reading essays written by the several members of the class, which shall contain a discussion of the language of some English classic."

REPORT.

The Committee selected to adjudge the "Fowler Prize," report that having attended the Examination of the Senior Class on the subject for which the prize has been given, and having carefully examined a number of Essays, written on the subject of examination, do, cheerfully and unanimously express their opinion that both are highly creditable to the Students as well as their Professor.

The Committee received seven Essays, all of them meritorious, and a number of them so very superior that they unanimously agreed to divide the prize among three of the competitors, viz: *Junius*, (W. P. Montelius,) *Clio*, (Alfred P. Reid,) and *Molorchus*, (N. McFetridge;) but being necessitated, by the express terms of the prize, to award it to the joint excellence of the examination and Essay, and learning that one of the contestants, and he one of the most superior in the estimation of the Committee, was absent and on a sick bed at the time of the examination, and being thereby precluded, have made the following award, viz:—To "Clio" $20, and to "Molorchus" $10.

J. W. WOOD,
M. H. JONES,
J. GRAY,
A. H. HAND.

Approved,

F. A. MARCH,
Prof. of the English Language.

Easton, Pa. May 21, 1864.

THE LANGUAGE
OF
CHAUCER'S CANTERBURY TALES.

The English language is the youngest in the family of languages. It began its growth shortly after the Norman Conquest. It reached its maturity about the end of the Sixteenth Century. From poverty, it has advanced to riches; and from barbarism to a great refinement. Languages, like individuals, grow up from infancy to maturity. They have their youth, manhood and old age. The works of Chaucer illustrate the first of these periods in the English language.

William the Conqueror attempted to give law to the language of his subjects. But he found it easier to subdue the Saxon nation than to conquer their language. It is generally found that a conquered nation, unless like the British, extirpated or expelled from the country, succeed in fastening their language upon the victors. By the intercourse, that necessarily took place between the two races—the Saxon and the Norman—their languages became assimilated, and a new speech was formed. Thus arose the English Language.

Political events, about the middle of the Fourteenth century, led the Court to give up the attempt to impose their language on an unwilling people. The new tongue became fashionable, and made rapid advances. The first marked and specific change in our mother tongue took place at this time. This was the age of Chaucer.

At this time, though the form of our language was Saxon, the matter was in a measure French. The novelties of all kinds, which the Revolution of 1066 introduced, demanded a large supply of new terms; and our ancestors very naturally took what they wanted from the language which was familiar to a considerable part of the community. Our poets, in particular, who have generally the principal share in modelling a language, found it to their interest to borrow as many words as they conveniently could, from the French. As they were for a long time translators, this expedient saved them the trouble of hunting for corresponding words in Saxon.

Nothing can be more interesting to the linguist, than the study of the diction of writers during this formative period.

To the philologist, Chaucer is a classic of the first rank ; for he is pre-eminently the most conspicuous of the makers, and methodizers of our language; the first, who taught it to flow in expressive harmony, and gave it grace and consistency. From the unsettled idioms then in use, he selected what was most suitable, and gave consistency and stability to that foundation upon which the polished structure of our present language has gradually risen.

We propose to enter upon a critical examination of the diction of the Canterbury Tales. This is the most finished performance of Chaucer ;—replete, not only with philological lore, but with a genuine picture of society in the Fourteenth century. It is the most characteristic testimony to his genius, both as a creative poet and an accurate observer of society. Chaucer's writings have not received that attention their merits deserve, on account of their obsolete phrases and antiquated orthography. But these are easily mastered. A mere fraction of the time, requisite to acquire the most superficial knowledge of the modern languages, will enable the student to read everything Chaucer has written. A week's study with the usual aids, will open to him the whole of the " Well of English undefiled." He can then go to the very fountain-head of our literature.—For in the language of Marsh " Chaucer is eminently the creator of our literary dialect,—the introducer, if not the inventor of our finest poetical forms ; and so essential were his labors in the founding of English literature, that without him the Seventeenth century could have produced no Milton—the Nineteenth no Keats."

In order to find the comparative relation between the constituent elements of Chaucer's language, we have made a critical examination of the first two hundred lines of the Prologue. Proper names were excluded from the estimate; but all other words of whatever grammatical class, and all repetitions of the same word were counted. The result of our examination shows, that Chaucer, in this passage, uses eighty-eight per cent. of Anglo-Saxon and twelve per cent. of foreign words. His dialect is therefore essentially Saxon.

To illustrate the subject, we will compare the language of Chaucer, with the language of Wycliffe's Bible—Wycliffe was contemporary with Chaucer. He gave to the English nation the first translation of the entire Scriptures in their mother tongue.

The language of his translation is shown by a critical examination, to contain ninety-three per cent. of Anglo-Saxon and seven per cent. of foreign words. The passage examined was the 5th chapter of Matthew.

Thus we find Wycliffe's language more purely Saxon than that of his contemporary. It is not unusual for writers of the same age, to differ in the composition of their language. Their mental habits, education, and pursuits exert a great influence upon their language. To trace the connection between the latter and the former is an interesting task. We will point out the main reasons for this difference in the respective writings of Chaucer and Wycliffe.

(1) The first is found in the *classes of persons* for whom each wrote. One was a secular poet; the other a religious reformer. As such, they moved in different spheres, addressed themselves to different audiences, and the vocabulary and style of each was modified by the circumstances under which he wrote, and the subject on which he was employed. Wycliffe, ex-communicated by the church and despised by the court, aimed to bring before the popular mind the Word of God. The Norman dialect was the favorite speech of the Court party; the Saxon dialect, that of the more numerous serfs. The Reformer, writing for the latter class, would naturally use more Saxon words in order that he might be understood. The language of Wycliffe's Bible differs as much from that of his own controversial writings, as it does from the language of Chaucer. The former was for the edification of the people;—the latter to refute the learned monks. Chaucer, writing for ladies and caviliers, used the phraseology most likely to be intelligible, and acceptable to courtiers. These were mostly descendants of the Norman French. It was natural, therefore, that Chaucer, himself a courtier, should have imbibed a large share of the French element, and that his diction should exhibit it.

(2) Another reason for the difference in the language of these writers is found in the *character of their writings.*—Wycliffe wrote in prose; Chaucer, in verse. The common speech of the Saxons was copious. The habitual language of religious life was drawn almost wholly from the homely Anglo-Saxon. It furnished expressive words, in which the writer in prose might clothe his thoughts. In verse, the case was different. Its form, oftentimes, compels the use of particular words, especially rhyming words. The Saxon language was very deficient in this respect. Alliteration was the peculiar characteristic of their poetry.—Rhyme was unkown to their language. Hence, for these words, the poet was compelled to go to foreign sources.

The French words, too, being the remains of a polished language, were smoother and slid into metre better than the Saxon, which had never undergone any regular cultivation; their final syllables chimed together with more frequent consonances, and their accents were better adapted to rhyming poetry.

Of the small number of foreign words employed by Chaucer, a large portion were forced upon him by this necessity; for, while not less than nine-tenths of his vocabulary is pure Saxon, more than one-fourth of his terminal words are of French origin; and in the first two hundred lines of the Prologue more than one-third of the foreign words used are terminal words. His rhymed verse thus has forced him to use a large number of foreign words.

(3.) *The subjects* on which each was employed, is another cause of difference in their language.

Wycliffe made his translation directly from the Latin Vulgate. His translation contains few foreign words not transplanted directly from the original. They are mostly technical phrases that pertain exclusively to the Christian church. With the exception of these technical terms, the language of the Bible is simple. The writers of most of it were illiterate men. There is little evidence of literary culture, or of a wide and varied range of thought in the authors of the Books of the Testament, except in the writings of Paul, and in a less degree of Luke. They narrate plain facts. They promulgate doctrines, addressed to the moral and spiritual faculties, and exhibit general truths in facts and examples, leaving the inferences to be drawn by the instinctive sagacity of human nature. Their subjects and illustrations are taken from very primitive and inartificial life. Hence their vocabulary contains for the most part, only such words as have corresponding terms in every language. Few foreign words were, therefore, needed to render the Bible into the English tongue. On the other hand, the greater part of Chaucer's writings are translations from the French. The French language was the remains of the Latin speech, and contained a great number of words that belong wholly to a more refined state of society than the Saxon nation ever reached. Chaucer's thorough acquaintance with the French had made him familiar with many of these words, that his native speech could not furnish. Copying thus from foreign models and translating from foreign authors, it was inevitable, that his diction should exhibit traces of French influence. These facts will suffice to show, that the language of the Reformer and that of the Poet, must necessarily have differed.

To illustrate the subject further, let us compare the language of Chaucer with that of the present authorized version of the Scriptures. An examination of the same passage, in King James' version, as we previously examined in Wycliffe's Bible, gives ninety-one per cent. of Anglo-Saxon; or two per cent. less than in Wycliffe's translation, and three per cent. more than in the language of Chaucer. At first it may seem somewhat singular, that Chaucer's language should contain a greater proportion of the foreign element, than a translation of the Bible made two hundred and fifty years later. But a slight consideration of the history of the latter will satisfactorily explain it.

As, is well known, King James' Bible was simply a revision of those already existing; its dialect was not that of the written and spoken language of that period. The language of writers, contemporary with the translation of the Bible, shows clearly that its diction was not that of the secular literature of the age. The most prominent writers of that period were Shakespeare and Ben. Johnson. The language of the former, contains about eighty-eight per cent. of Saxon words; that of the latter, about eighty-nine per cent. Thus we find a wide difference, between the religious and secular dialect, at the time of the translation.—The reason for this difference is obvious. The language of the Scriptures had been stationary almost from the time of Wycliffe. It was more purely Saxon, than the secular literature of the time, at first. Few words in its vocabulary had become obsolete. A consecrated diction had grown up between the Fourteenth and Seventeenth centuries, by the instrumentality of numerous translations of the Bible, and by its general diffusion among the people, which, though it differed widely from the secular literature of the time, was perfectly intelligible to every English reader. From the very dawn of literature, there had been a sacred and profane dialect; the former, idiomatic and stationary; the latter, composite and fluctuating; the one pure and expressive, the other distorted and conventional. Wycliffe may truly be said to have originated the diction and phraseology of the Bible. Tyndale preserved the general grammatical structure of the older version, most of its felicitious verbal combinations and the rhythmic flow of its periods. Succeeding translators preserved the same general characteristics. The translators of 1611, retained all of the original structure, that had not become unfamiliar to the English ear. Our Bible is therefore found to differ very little from Wycliffe's translation. As a necessary consequence, it contains a larger proportion of Saxon words than Chaucer's writings.

In order to compare the language of Chaucer with the present standard of our language, we have critically examined some of Addison's writings. The reign of Queen Anne has been denominated the Augustan age of English literature. Poets and philosophers, historians and moralists, then, scattered over the fields of literature, flowers of every hue, and of the most delightful fragrance. The language had attained its growth in copiousness and strength; at the beginning of the Seventeenth century. The writers of this age gave it the finishing touch of beauty and grace. Among these, none is more conspicuous than Addison, distinguished alike for the simplicity and elegance of his style, and the purity of his language. He has given us most beautiful specimens of elegant writing, and fine models of a pure, English style.

The result of our examination shows that Addison employs eighty-three per cent. of Saxon words, or five per cent. less than Chaucer.

The cause of this difference is found in the development of the language itself. Chaucer wrote during its formative period. Addison, when it was fully developed. In Chaucer's time the language was rude and unformed. With the increase of knowledge, a more extensive vocabulary was required. The English language has no power of expansion and self-development within itself, like the inflected languages. Hence, it was compelled to draw new words from foreign sources to supply its wants. When classical learning revived, it brought many words with it into the common speech. The arts and sciences expanded the vocabulary by their technical terms, which are almost entirely of foreign origin. Thus, our language was enriched and adorned by the lawful plunder of numerous other tongues. Its growth, therefore, is sufficient to account for the difference in the language of these two writers.

Chaucer's writings furnish us with other peculiarities, besides those relating to the composition of his language, which are worthy of philological remark. Of all languages the English has the most imperfect system of inflections. The few it possesses are of Saxon origin. In Chaucer, we find some inflections characteristic of the period of transition, but which have become obsolete. It may seem singular that a language formed on the Saxon, which was copious in inflections, should be deficient in this particular; that while the mass of roots remain the same in both languages, the grammatical structure should have undergone so great a change. The reason is found in the political condition of the country at the time of the transition. Two distinct languages were spoken by the subjects of the same government. In the intercourse that necessarily took place between the conquerors and the conquered, the former, both from indolence and contempt of their bondsmen, would learn as little as possible; that is, they would content themselves if they could make themselves understood. They would learn the vocabulary and disregard the grammar. The complicated inflections and variable terminations would be entirely neglected.—Convenience would dictate the same course to the vanquished, in holding intercourse with their conquerors. Thus, while the trunk of the language remained the same, the twigs and frailer branches were torn away by the storm. This change would be gradual; some inflections would stand longer than others, some even withstood the storm and exist in our present idiom. Those inflections, which are lost to our present language, but which are found in Chaucer, are the old verbal plural ending in *en*, and the plural ending *e*, in the adjectives "all," "small," and the like, and in the past tense of the strong verbs. The loss of these forms has been felt in our literature, particularly in our poetry. Their use is one of the great merits of Chaucer's language. They give it a superior rythmical beauty, and metrical cadence, that would otherwise be wholly lost. Our meaning is illustrated by the following lines from the Prologue to the Canterbury Tales:

"And smale foules maken melodie,
That slepen alle night with open eye."

If these lines were written and pronounced according to modern rules, the passage would lose much of its force and beauty. Chaucer uses another facility of expression, the want of which has been strongly felt in modern English poetry. This consists in using the consonant *n*, as a prefix to all verbs begining with a vowel, the aspirate *h*, or the semi-vowel *u*. This *n* was the initial letter of the Saxon negative particle *ne*, and gave a negative form and meaning to the words to which it was attached. Thus we find in Chaucer, "I nam," for "I am not;" "I nas," for "I was not;" "I nill," for "I will not." An example of this occurs in the one hundred and twentieth line of the Prologue:

"Hire gretest othe n'as but by Seint Eloy."

The careless pronunciation of the age has led Chaucer to use some curious compounds. He makes the definite article "*the*" coalesce with prepositions *in*, *on* and *at*; "ith" being written for "in the," "oth" for "on the," "atte" for "at the;" an instance of this latter change occurs in the twenty-ninth line of the Prologue:

"And wel we weren esed atte beste."

"For to rise," "For to tellen," "For to don," are examples of an idiom peculiar to Chaucer. "To rise," "to tellen," &c., were forms of the Saxon infinitive. "For" was the French preposition "poure." The commingling of the two languages, caused both idioms to be retained for a time. As Chaucer uses it, it has peculiar charms; probably because it is out of the common road of expression.

The orthography of Chaucer is suggestive of some interesting facts. It shows us how little the spelling of our language has varied in five centuries. In general, there is little difference between Chaucer's orthography and the present standard. It is difficult, however, to determine the exact orthography of Chaucer. Printing was not introduced into England for seventy-five years after his death. During that period his works existed only in manuscript. The process of copying was laborious, and inaccurate. It has introduced different readings in the manuscripts themselves. Again, the first English printers were foreigners, who understood the language imperfectly, and who oftentimes made the text conform to their ideas of orthography, or to the space it was to occupy upon the page. Thus, they would often add, or cut off a letter to make the word suit their forms. The first printed editions of Chaucer are, on this account, very different in orthography from the manuscripts themselves. Antiquarians tell us that the orthography of the best manuscripts conforms more closely to the present standard than does that of the English Bible of 1611.

Two facts may be noticed. The tendency of our language is to drop the silent letters in certain classes of words; thus, we find in Chaucer, many words that are spelled exactly as they are now, with the exception of the final *e;* then, it was pronounced. It became silent in the changes of pronunciation, and was dropped. By a change of pronunciation in words, the letters in a word in Chaucer's time ceased to represent the sound now given. Other letters were then substituted, which more nearly represent the sound in the word.

There has been much discussion about the versification of Chaucer, and as to his share in reforming it. From a want of knowledge, his diction and versification have been condemned as rude and unpolished. There are indeed some difficulties in his prosody which have not yet been fully solved. Yet even now the general flow of his verse is scarcely inferior to the melody of Spenser. There can be no doubt but that his metrical system was in accordance with the orthœpy of his age. The orthœpy of our language did not become fixed until several centuries after Chaucer's time. It is difficult to determine exactly what it was then. The tendency of the English tongue is to throw the accent on the radical letter, which is usually found in the first syllable. In French words the stress of voice is commonly thrown on the last syllable. When words were taken from the French into our own language, by the early poets, the native accentuation was taken along with them. This was accordingly a disturbing element in the old English, which for a long time kept the pronunciation unsettled.—In words taken from the French, Chaucer retained the original accent. Hence they must be so pronounced to render his works metrical. It must also be kept in mind that the genitive case singular, and the plural number of nouns, then consisted of two syllables, where now one is used, and that the regular termination of the past tense, and its participle was pronounced. The *e* feminine, as in French, also formed a separate syllable.

Observing these facts in our examination of the metre, it is easy to settle upon the versification. We find, thus, most of his verses composed in the heroic metre, either in couplets or stanzas. The measure is of the Iambic form, consisting of ten, eleven or twelve syllables; the tenth in all cases being the last accented syllable. So large a number of his verses are evidently composed according to this rule, that it is reasonable to suppose that this was the plan he pursued, and that the irregular verses would also be metrical, if we correctly understood all the changes in the language since his day. This view appears so satisfactory, both from an examination of his works, and from the consideration of the manner in which the language grew up, that we cannot doubt its correctness. In Chaucer's verses, the accent is invariably on the even syllables; and the number of the latter is commonly eleven, though sometimes there is one wanting, or one added, without, however, destroying the harmony of the verse. For the latter more especially depends upon the accents being properly placed. All of the Canterbury Tales, except the Rhyme of Sir Thopas, are in this metre. The latter is in the six-verse stanza, then most employed. The improvements that Chaucer made in versification were great. In his time the use of rhyme was established; so that in this respect he had little to do, but to imitate his predecessors.

The metrical part of our poetry was capable of more improvement, by the polishing of the measures already in use, as well as by introducing new modes of versification.

Even in point of rhythmical harmony, the obligations of our language to Chaucer are not less decisive than in phraseology and structure. He was without doubt the first that introduced the heroic metre into our language; that metre to which Spenser gave so much sweetness, and Milton, such majestic sublimity; that metre, in fact, which has become the established hexameter of our poesy, and the constant vehicle of our graver and more stately modes of composition.

We have no records of its use in England before his writings appeared. He doubtless transferred it from France or Italy, where it had been cultivated with great diligence and success, for many years.

In these languages he could find many models of correct and harmonious versification. So well adapted has it been found to our language, that it has been used by all great English poets that came after him. Byron declared it to be "the best adapted measure to our language."

This great improvement justly entitles him to the appellation of "Father of English Poetry." The changes in the pronunciation of our language have hidden whatever other improvements he may have made. The opinions of his contemporaries will show how he was then regarded. He is called by them, "The load-star of our language," "The first finder of our fair language," "The light of our English;" and William Thynne, in dedicating a collection of his works to Henry VIII, expressly praises him for his "composition so adapted," and his "perfection in metre."

The characteristics of Chaucer's versification are mingled liveliness and beauty. His great love of all things beautiful appears in every part of his joyous, sweet-humored

writings. He seems to aim at binding his words in the reader's mind by their harmonious flow in connection with all things lovely. It would be difficult to find in English literature, a more spirited and melodious passage, than the following, from the description of the Knight:—

"And though that he was worthy he was wise,
And of his port as meke as is a mayde.
He never yet no vilanie ne sayde
In alle his lif, unto no manere wight.
He was a veray parfit gentil knight.
But for to tellen you of his araie,
His hors was good, but he ne was not gaie."

Or the following passage from the description of the Friar:—

"Somwhat he lisped for his wantonnesse,
To make his English swete upon his tonge;
And in his harping, whan that he hadde songe,
His eyen twinkled in his hed aright,
As don the sterres in a frosty night,"

In fluent and forcible description Chaucer excels. When he chose he could wield his pen with all the power of a satirist. The description of the Miller is graphic and forcible:—

"The miller was a stout carle for the nones,
Full bigge he was of braun, and eke of bones;
That proved wel, for over all ther he came,
At wrastling he wold bere away the ram.
He was short shuldered, brode, a thikke gnarre,
Ther n'as no dore, that he n'olde heve of barre,
Or breke it at a renning with his hede.
His berd as any sowe or fox was rede,
And therto brode, as though it were a spade.
Upon the cop right of his nose he hade
A wert, and theron stode a tufte of heres,
Rede as the bristles of a sowes eres.
His nose-thirles blacke were and wide.
A swerd and bokeler bare he by his side."

These lines contain none but Saxon words, and most of them are monosyllables. Upon these the force of the description rests. The copious use of monosyllables, makes it strong, significant, and comprehensive. Chaucer well knew how to employ the stores of our language. And nothing is so conspicuous in his writings, as the adaptation of his language to his subjects and his characters.

Herein we perceive that dramatic power and brilliant versatility of genius, which, commanding the admiration of his contemporaries, gave currency to his idioms, and rendered his rythmical arrangements the models of succeeding generations.

The frequent use of alliteration in his verses gives energy and elegance to most of Chaucer's poetry. The following lines from the Prologue, illustrate our meaning :—

> "And palmeres for to seken strange strondes,
> To serve halwes couthe in sondry londes."

This is particularly noticeable in the Miller's Tale, where Absolon sings to his sleeping sweetheart :—

> "My faire bird, my swete sinamome,
> Awaketh, lemman min, and speketh to me.
> Ful litel thinken ye upon my wo,
> That for your love I swete ther as I go.
> No wonder is though that I swelte and swete.
> I mourne as doth a lamb after the tete.
> Ywis, lemman, I have swiche love-longing,
> That like a turtel trewe is my mourning.
> I may not ete no more than a maid."

Alliteration is not an organic element of English poetry. Yet it has been used by many of the earliest writers. Chaucer employes it with very happy effect. Most of the quotations that are made from his writings owe their existence in the popular mind to this characteristic. In fact, many of our most favorite, and frequently quoted sentiments, and similes both in prose and poetry, owe their currency to the same cause.

The peculiar grace and gaiety which distinguished the muse of Chaucer has made our examination of the Canterbury Tales delightful. The familiarity and even homeliness of many of his incidents, characters and sentiments, has maintained a growing interest throughout our work, and chained down our attention, while we examined his diction. We seemed in fancy to mingle among our long buried ancestors, to partake of their enjoyments, and to enter into all their petty rivalries.

The "Campagnie of nine and twenty sondry folk," seemed alive and breathing. All their humors and habits were as familiar to us as though the living drama had passed in review before us.

And the verse of the poet, so smooth, so full of melodious sounds, has been so musical to our ears, that the harp of Orpheus could not have been more charming.

The literature of few nations can boast so fresh and beautiful a morning as opened with that noble Chaucer,

> "Who first enriched our English with his rhymes.
> And was the first of ours that ever broke
> Into the Muse's treasures, and first spoke
> In mighty numbers, delving in the mine
> Of perfect knowledge."