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 PORTER PRIZE FOR PROFICIENCY IN ENGLISH PHILOLOGY.

An annual prize of thirty dollars was founded in 1863, by Rev. William C. Porter, L.L. 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 shall be made the greatest proficiencies in English Philology." The prize was to be made after admitting an examination in the English essays submitted by the students of the class, and after reading essays written by the several members of the class, which shall contain a discussion of the languages chosen in English classes."

REPORT.

The Committee selected to adjudge the "Porter Prize," report that having attended the Examination of the Senior Class on the subject for which the prize has been given, and heretofore 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: Joshua W. P. Montefiore, clo, Alfred P. Beed; and Alexander N. McFayden; but being assembled by the exigent nature of the prize, to award it to the joint excellence of the examination and Essay, having determined upon one of the competitors, and one of the most superior to the estimation of the Committee, was about and on a sick bed at the time of the examination, and being thereby precluded, have made the following award, viz:—

To "Clo" $20, and to "Alexander" $10.

J. W. Wood,
M. J. Jones,
J. Gray,
A. H. Hand.

F. A. March.
Prof. of the English Language.

Station, Pat. May 21, 1865.
THE LANGUAGE
or
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 in 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, succeeds in fastening their language upon the victors. By the intercourse, that necessarily took place between the two races—the Saxons and the Normans—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 everlasting people. The new tongue became understood, and such rapid advance. 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 static, the matter was in a moving 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 molding 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 historian, than the story of the decline of writers during this formative period.

To the philologist, Chaucer is a classic of the first rank; for he is pre-eminently the most complete 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 Latin, from the romance, 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 stories of the Canterbury Tales. This is the most finished performance of Chaucer—poetic, not only with philosophical 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 merit deserves, on account of their scatological phrases and antiquated orthography. But these are easily managed. A mere fraction of the time, requisite to acquire the first superficial knowledge of the modern language, 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 embellished." He can then go to the very fountain-head of our literature.—For in the language of Marsh, "Chaucer is the fountain of our literary dialect,—the introducer, if not the inventor of our first pointed verse; and so essential were his labors in the founding of English literature, that without him no Seventeenth century could have produced no Milton—the Nineteenth no Keats."

In order to find the comparative value 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 count; 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, 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 wrote in the English nearly 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 contemporaries. It is not second-rate, for writers of the same age, to differ in the composition of their language. Their mental habit, education, and pursuits exert a great influence upon their language. To trace the connection between the poet and the forms in an interesting book. 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 choice of persons for whom each wrote. Chaucer 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, co-memorialized by the church and inspired by the court, aimed to bring before the popular mind the Word of God. The Norman dialect was the favorite speech of the courtiers: the Saxon dialect, that of the more numerous poets. The Seelofster, 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 commercial writings, as it does from the language of Chaucer. The former was for the instruction of the people; the latter to refine the learned monks. Chaucer, writing for ladies and courtiers, used the phraseology most likely to be intelligible, most acceptable to courtiers. These were mostly descendants of the Norman French. It was natural, therefore, that Chaucer himself, a courtier, should have used a large share of the French elements, and that his Latin 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 nation was prose. 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 one was difficult. He must, sometimes, compound the use of peculiar words, especially rhyming words. The prose language was very definite in this respect. Alliteration was the peculiar characteristic of their poetry. Alliteration was unknown in their language. Hence, for these reasons, the poet was compelled to go to foreign sources.

The French words, now, being the remains of a polished language, were smoother and a little more literary than the Saxon, which had never undergone any regular cultivation; their final syllables formed together with more frequent consonants, and their accents were better adapted to rhyming poetry.

Of the small number of foreign words employed by Chaucer, a large portion were imported upon him by his necessity; for, while so little as one-sixth of his vocabulary is pure French, more than one-sixth of his vernacular speech is of French origin; and in the first two hundred lines of the Prologue more than one-third of the foreign words are derived from French. His rhymed verse thus has forced him to use a large number of foreign words.

(5) The subjects on which each was employed, is another cause of difference in their languages. Wycliffe made his translation directly from the Latin Vulgate. His translation contains fewer foreign words and is explained directly from the original. They are mostly technical phrases and persons exclusively to the Latin Vulgate.
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 on the subject of the books of the Talmud, except in the writings of Paul, and in a less degree of Luke. They narrate plain facts. They present the doctrine, addressed to the moral and spiritual truths, and exhibit general truths in facts and examples, leaving the inference to be drawn by the intuitive sagacity of human nature. Their subjects and illustrations are taken from very primitive and beneficial 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 reason 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 enable us to show that the language of the thirteenth century. 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. Few words in its vocabulary had become obsolete. A condensed 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 a profane dialect; the former idiomatic and stational; the latter, composite and fluctuating; the one pure and expensive, the other distorted and conventional. Wycliffe may truly be said to have originated the division and pleasure.
ology of the Bible. Tyndale preserved the general grammatical structure of the older version, most of the abbreviations, word order, and the rhythm and metre of the periods. Successive translations preserved the same general characteristics. The translations of 1611, retained all of the original structure, but 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 Chaucer's writings. The relics of Queen Anne have been decorated in the Augustan age of English literature. Poets and philosophers, historians and moralists, thus scattered over the fields of literature, flowers of every line, and of the most delightful fragments. The language had gained its growth in simplicity and strength, at the beginning of the Seventeenth century. The writers of this age gave it the finishing touch of beauty and grace. Among those, 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 the model 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 the immature period, Addison, when it was fully developed. In Chaucer's time the language was rude and unfixed. 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 eclectic poets. The Greek and Roman expanded the vocabulary by their mechanical process, which are almost entirely of foreign origin. Thus, our language was enriched and glorified by the clear and splendid numerals 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 philosophical remark. Of all languages the English has the most imperfect system of inflections. Few if any possess as much as 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; but when 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 latter part of the middle ages, the conqueror, the Norman, took the language and conceptions of their hearers, and would learn as little as possible; that is, they would conquer 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. —

Chaucerian work would decide the same course to the unguished,

in holding intercourse with their companions. Thus,

while the scan of the language remained the same, the

twig and taller branches were torn away by the storms.

This change would be gradual; some inflections would

stand longer than others; some even withstand the storm

and wind in our present forms. Thus, some, which are

not to our present language, but which are found in

Chaucer, are the old verbal plural ending in -es, and

the plural ending -es, in the adjective "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

and Chaucer's language. They give it a superior rhythmical beauty,

and rhetorical elegance, which would otherwise be wholly lost.

Our meaning is illustrated by the following lines from the

Prologue in the Canterbury Tales:

"And said our host anon,

This drouth the night with soft rain." If these lines were written and pronounced according to modern rules, the passage would lose much of its force and beauty. Chaucer has another facility of expression, the want of which has been strongly felt in modern English poetry. This consists in using the contracted -re, as in a prefix to all verbs beginning with a vowel, the noun -re, or the semi-vowel -re. This is the initial letter of the Seven negative particle an, and gave a negative form and meaning to the words in which it was attached. Thus we find to chanting, "I may," for "I am not;" "I may" for "I was not;" "I will," for "I will not." An example of this occurs in the one hundred and twentieth line of the Prologue:

"Now goest thou, O wise, to sacred thyly." The careless pronunciation of the age has led Chaucer to use some curious compounds. He makes the definite article "the" coincide with prepositions in, on, and off; "fist" being written for "in the," "fist" for "in the," "after" for "at the," an instance of the latter change occurring in the twenty-ninth line of the Prologue:

"And was we toward Cambridge sent."

"For to know! "For to lesson," "For to done," are examples of an idiom peculiar to Chaucer. "To wise," "to take,

away," are forms of the same inflection. "For" was the French preposition "pour." The meaning of the two languages, one-word thoughts to be retained for a time. As Chaucer uses it, it has partly changed; probably because it is out of the common mass of expression.

The orthography of Chaucer is suggestive of some interesting facts. It shows 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 were copied 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 sometimes made mistakes conform to the three of orthography, or to their own taste for 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 manuscript 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 short 'e' before 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 subject to 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 vernacularism of Chaucer, and as to his share in reforming it. From a want of knowledge, his decision and vernacularism have been condemned as rude and unfinished. There are indeed some deficiencies which have not yet been fully solved. Yet even now the general trend of his verse is admirably inferior to the poetry of Spenser. There can be no doubt that his vernacular system was in accordance with the orthodoxy of his age. The orthodoxy 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 show the accent on the second syllable, which is usually found in the first syllable. In French words the stress of voice is extremely shown on the last syllable. When words were taken from the French into our own language, by the early poets, the utter accentuation was taken along with them. This was accentedly a disturbing element in the old English, which for a long time kept the pronunciation unaltered. In words taken from the French, Chaucer retained the original accent. Hence they must be pronounced to render his works metrical. It must also be kept in mind that the genitive 's' was 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 particle was pronounced. The 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, first, most of his verses composed in the basic metre, either in couples or stanzas. The measure of the inventory 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 understand 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 accent being properly placed. All of the Canterbury Tales, except the Rhyme of Sir Thomas, are in this metre. The latter is in the seven verse stanzas, then most employed. The improvement that Chaucer made in versification were great. In his time the use of rhyme was established, so that in this respect he laid the foundation to do, but to imitate his predecessors.

The metrical part of our poetry was capable of more im-
prevement, by the polishing of the measures already in
use, as well as by introducing new modes of versification.
Even in point of rhythmic accuracy, 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 Spencer gave so much sweetness, and
Milton, such majestic sublimity; that metre, in fact, which
has become the established hexameter of our poetry, and
the constant vehicle of our graver and more sturdy 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 judiciously entitles him to the appella-
tion of "Father of English Poetry." The changes in the
pronunciation of our language have hidden whatever
other improvements as 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 studier of our Oral language;" "The light of
our English;" and William Thynne, in dedicating a collec-
tion of his works to Henry VIII, expressly praises him for his
"composition so apt," and his "perfection in metre."

The characteristics of Chaucer's versification are mingled
steadiness and beauty. His great love of all things beauti-
ful appears in every part of his poetry, sweet-smelling

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

"And thought that he was worthy he was wise,
And of his part so meek as a seraph;
In all his doings he did no manner wrong,
He was a very pilot royal knight.
But he was fallen by his name
His heart was good, but his heart was not true."

Or the following passage from the description of the
Friar—

"Somehow he leaped for his merriness,
To make his English quite upon his tongue;
And in his bantering, when that he had some.
He eyes twinkled in his head about,
As do the stars 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
satchet. The description of the Miller is graphic and
forcible—

"The pelter was a stout chap for the town,
Full big he was of frame, and she of bones;
That proved well, for over all that he came,
As writhing he would bear away the run.
He was short thick-jawed, beaked, a thickly那就,
Ther was no doors, that he could not have of bars,
Or brake it as a running with his hoes.
His head as any sows or fox was rude,
And thence broke, as though it were a plate.
Upon the eye right of his bones he made
A crease, and therein stole a fable of horns,
Rode as the strength of a score men.
His nose-thistles blushed were and wide.
A sweet and tender face 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 style, which, commanding the admiration of his contemporaries, gave currency to his volume, and rendered his rhythmic arrangements the models of succeeding generations.

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

"And on a clear and moonless night,
To serve him was matter in endless hours."

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

"My own bird, my own adoration,
A nest I'll build, and rest thee in."

"I'll feed thee, I'll clothe thee, and feed thee till thou art weak."

"I'll weep for thee in the blackest night."

Alliteration is not an organic element of English poetry. Yet it has been used by many of the earliest writers. Chaucer employs it with very happy effect. Most of the sentences 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 senti-