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PERSPECTIVES IN CHAUCER CRITICISM: 1400-1700

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Although the apparent topic of this paper is a survey
of Chaucer criticism over a span of approximately three
centuries, its primary focus is far more selective, or
perhaps systematic, than an all-encompassing tabloid of
critical commentary on Chaucer's poetry. For a critical
history of a poet of Chaucer's status and antiquity suggests
some interesting possibilities regarding both Chaucer and
English criticism. The most obvious is that a history of
Chaucer criticism could serve as a history of the poet's
literary reputation. Such, however, is not the purpose of
this paper; and while our discussion will frequently reflect
the status of Chaucer's prestige, or lack of it, in various
periods, it would be most misleading for the reader to
assume a correspondence between critical remarks on Chaucer's
poetry and a more widespread public esteem of that poetry on
the part of the critic's contemporaries. For example,
Dryden's high praise of Chaucer's achievement in the
"Preface" to <u>Fables</u>: <u>Ancient</u> <u>and</u> <u>Modern</u> in no way mirrors

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his age's literary opinion of Chaucer's poems. The student who is truly interested in the history of Chaucer's reputation, therefore, is referred to Thomas R. Lounsbury's fine, but dated, essay, "Chaucer in Literary History," in his Studies in Chaucer, Vol. III.[1]

Yet another function for a critical history of Chaucer's work would be as a touchstone by which to observe and measure the growth, development, and changes in English critical taste over the period under examination. In the "Introduction" to her Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion: 1357-1900 Caroline F. E. Spurgeon remarks that in one sense her collection reveals that:

> [T]he criticism Chaucer has received . . . in reality forms a measurement of judgment--not of him--but of his critics. Just as we trace the development of the mind of an individual by studying his opinions and works at different periods of his life, so it would seem that in looking at this ever-shifting procession of critics we can trace the development of the mind and spirit of the nation to which they belong. We know that as individuals our taste changes and fluctuates from youth to age; the favorite authors of our youth are not, as a rule, the favorites of middle age, or, if they are, we like them for other qualities, they make another appeal to us. Similarly, we can here watch the taste of a nation changing and fluctuating; Chaucer is now liked for one quality, now for another, while at times different ideals and interests so predominate that he makes no appeal at all.[2]

While Miss Spurgeon's suggestion is equally as inviting as the previous one, it too is not the subject of this paper, for, like Lounsbury's essay, such a pursuit would inevitably lead away from the art of Chaucer's poetry, which is the essential topic of literary criticism; that is, neither

approach is directed at the question of critical analysis and evaluation of the aesthetic qualities in Chaucer's poems as the reason for his poetic accomplishments and recognized enduring greatness as a poet.

The primary objective of our discussion, then, is simply an examination of the critical commentary from Chaucer's contemporaries, such as Lydgate and Hoccleve, to Dryden's pivotal essay, the "Preface" to the Fables in 1700, which will leave us at the beginning of truly modern and aesthetic critical appreciation of Chaucer's poetry. The importance of the Chaucer criticism in these three centuries, however, is myriad; for the contributions made during this period lay the foundation upon which Dryden is to construct his "Preface," and which later centuries are to return to more and more in their unceasing search for the full meaning and complexity of Chaucer's vision and artistry in his poetry. Moreover, we are intent on keeping in mind Northrop Frye's dictum that: "The real concern of the evaluating critic is with positive value, with the goodness, or perhaps the genuineness, of the poem rather than with the greatness of the author."[3] Our purpose, therefore, is to discuss Chaucer criticism in these centuries for what it reveals and contributes to the understanding and appreciation of Chaucer's poetry, instead of his literary reputation or how the criticism of Chaucer may or may not reflect the state of English criticism at large. Thus our interest is in

detailing the specific poetic qualities which the various critics point to in their comments; and, in turn, how preceding judgments influence, for better or for worse, subsequent criticism on Chaucer's work.

However, as Miss Spurgeon's above remark indicates, succeeding cultural epochs most often either discover or emphasize different aesthetic qualities and critical standards by which to judge literary merit. That is, the opinions in the Restoration regarding what constitutes a good poem differ distinctly from the Elizabethan conception, or still further, from the fifteenth century notion of what made a literary work noteworthy. Thus, the perspectives in criticism over a span of three centuries are continually shifting in focus; and the result is that a persisting object of critical analysis, such as Chaucer's poetry, is subjected to scrutiny from a multiplicity of perspectives which may concentrate on matters of rhetoric, metre, language, moral vision, or characterization, to name only a few. Robert O. Payne clarifies this thesis a bit in his statement that: "The 'oldest' criticism of Chaucer--what little we have of it--from Lydgate to Dryden, regularly found the major importance of his accomplishment in its relevance to the problems of poetry contemporary to the critic."[4] But the sum total of these ever-changing critical points of view, and the judgments based on them, is a complex body of critical commentary which contains an appreciable awareness

of Chaucer's strengths and weaknesses as an artist within the framework of the various perspectives. In addition, occasionally a critic emerges who fuses the suggestions offered to him by previous criticism and its traditions with his own intuitive genius, and the effect is a further insight, or insights, into the achievement of Chaucer's poetry. Such is the case, for example, with William Caxton in 1483, with Francis Beaumont and Thomas Speght in 1598, and above all with John Dryden in 1700.

Thus, one of the secondary, but important, considerations of our discussion is the individual critic's responsiveness to the aesthetic prejudices and tastes of his age and the use he makes of tradition, or the critical heritage of prior Chaucer commentators. Our interest on this point is merely to determine the aesthetic nature of the criticism on Chaucer's poetry in an effort to assess its validity both in its own right and for later Chaucer criticism. For, as Northrop Frye argues, all value judgments are really subjective; even when certain views are fashionable and generally held--and thus appear objective-- they are in reality subjective. For each age believes it has arrived at a standard of criticism, and that it "has finally devised a definitive technique for separating the excellent from the less excellent. But this always turns out to be an illusion of the history of taste. Value-judgments

are founded on the study of literature; the study of
literature can never be founded on value-judgments."[5]
However, it is not our intention that this question distract
us from our primary focus, namely, what the respective
value-judgments, as Frye terms them, contribute to the com-
prehension of Chaucer's poetry as literature, and to trace
how these succeeding critical statements lead to Dryden's
"Preface," which we shall posit as the turning point to
modern critical appreciation of Chaucer's work.

Perhaps the single major misconception this paper hopes
to clarify is the notion that genuine criticism of Chaucer's
poetry begins with Dryden. While it may be conceded that
modern criticism, as we know it--or at least conceive of it--
does indeed begin with Dryden, we shall show that Dryden is
drawing on a rich storehouse of Chaucer criticism, especially
from the Elizabethans, in his "Preface" to the Fables; and
that Dryden thus marks a significant turning point to new
directions and perspectives in Chaucer criticism, rather
than a ground-breaking innovator of new ideas, new terms,
and new value-judgments regarding Chaucer's poetic
accomplishment. Of particular interest to us is Elizabethan
criticism of Chaucer, which occupies nearly half of the
content of our discussion. For in the commentary of William
Webbe, George Puttenham, and especially Francis Beaumont and
Thomas Speght--and even Gabriel Harvey--lies the true
genesis of Dryden's suggestions about Chaucer.

What we are involved with in our discussion, therefore, is the development and trends in early Chaucer criticism which lead to Dryden's "Preface." For what such critics as Caxton, Beaumont, and Speght do is provide their successors with continually expanding perspectives on Chaucer's artistry by building new critical inroads into Chaucer's poetry which then enables succeeding generations to approach Chaucer from various critical points of view; and thus more fully and more accurately to assess the totality of Chaucer's poetic achievement. This means, then, that chronology is important, and is perhaps the best way to explore these critics and their ideas. So we shall proceed from the beginning, violating chronology only when it appears more sensible to present a more complete perspective of Chaucer's work in place of the confusion which sometimes occurs in a strict chronological examination. Finally, our survey cannot hope to discuss all the commentary on Chaucer in these three centuries, not only due to the volume of it, but because the bulk of it is negligible as criticism. We shall, therefore, select representative spokemen for the various responses to Chaucer's poetry who are significant, though not always commendatory, in their statements about Chaucer's work.

CHAPTER I

FOOTNOTES

[1]Thomas R. Lounsbury, Studies in Chaucer (1892; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1962), III, 3-273. Lounsbury's essay is a scholarly and thorough one, and examines Chaucer's literary reputation from the late fourteenth century up to the latter nineteenth century.

[2]Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion: 1357-1900 (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1925), I, cxxiv-cxxv.

[3]Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (1957; rpt. New York: Atheneum, 1968), p. 27.

[4]Robert O. Payne, The Key of Remembrance: A Study of Chaucer's Poetics (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 2.

[5]Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 20.

CHAPTER II

THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

In the Introduction it was predicated that critical theories of literature are most often the offspring of the interaction between tradition and the aesthetic prejudices in a particular era; and that the alliance of these two forces periodically yields fresh insights into a given author's work. However, the interplay of these two factors involves two variables which must constantly be kept in mind and referred to. The first is the fact that different authors and works are chosen as the sources of truth and imitation at various times. For example, sixteenth century literary practice witnessed the elevation of Virgil over the centuries-old reverence of Homer as the model epic poet. Yet another instance in the same period was the gradual ascendance of Aristotle's _Poetics_ over Horace's _Ars Poetica_ as the Bible of literary critical theory. Secondly, there is the question of the critical preoccupations and standards of a given time, for these often determine the preferences for the authors and works upon which the standards are based. Such was the case with the rhetorical approach and attitude towards

literature throughout the Middle Ages, which conditioned the response to and evaluation of literature well into the sixteenth century. Moreover, the intellectual interests of an individual cultural epoch can be the product of any number of forces--social, religious, political, even economic, to name a few. As we shall see, the commentary made on the poetry of Chaucer in the century after his death in 1400--and, for that matter, in the course of this paper-- will dramatize this fusion of the influence of tradition with the contemporary aesthetic prejudices of the times.

This chapter will trace, in particular, the two predominant themes contained in the criticism of Chaucer's work during the fifteenth century; namely, the evaluation of his poetry in light of the tradition of medieval rhetoric, and judgments upon it from a new consciousness of vernacular English as a literary medium. Most of the references to Chaucer discussed in this chapter, therefore, will seem to be repetitive; but repetition can be critically valuable for two reasons. The first is quite simply that a repeated idea gains credence, often whether valid or not, by sheer virtue of becoming a commonplace. Secondly, and more important, an oft-repeated theme sooner or later becomes a normative standard in its own right, which may then be critically examined to test its relevance and validity in the theory and history of literary criticism. Our purpose, then, in this discussion of commentary upon Chaucer in the fifteenth

century is to analyze both the content and the probable

causes underlying the various critical pronouncements on his

poetry, as well as to demonstrate in the course of the paper

what these observations contribute to the development of

subsequent Chaucer criticism. Furthermore, our survey, as

we have already stated, can in no way hope to list, let

alone discuss, all the remarks on Chaucer which exist in the

centuries under examination here. Representative figures

have been selected, therefore, because they are spokesmen

for a certain view of Chaucer's work as well as offering

important, often original, responses to his achievement.

Moreover, the fact that these critics fall into a number of

convenient groups facilitates our discussion of them.

I

The earliest commentators of Chaucer's poetry have been

traditionally labelled the "English Chaucerians,"[1] and they

are significant for establishing the two main themes of

fifteenth century criticism of Chaucer. The three key men,

all poets, who are most relevant here are Thomas Usk, Thomas

Hoccleve, and John Lydgate. Usk actually belongs in the

fourteenth century, for his life was concurrent with

Chaucer's, while Hoccleve and Lydgate are younger contempo-

raries of Chaucer. Scholars have, however, lumped Usk with

the other two because it seems probable that all three knew

Chaucer personally, and thus Usk, Hoccleve, and Lydgate may

have known each other as well; but more to the point, they are
treated as a critical unit for the reasons that the work of
all three shows the pervasive influence of Chaucer and that
their remarks about his poetry are so similar.

In his poem, The Testament of Love, c. 1387, Usk pays
tribute to Chaucer for two reasons, one pertaining to
content, the other to form, specifically style. The goddess
Love is speaking in the poem, and she calls Chaucer "the
noble philosophical poete / in Englissh . . .," and then she
says that: "In goodnes of gentyl manlyche speche / without
any maner of nycite of storieres ymagynacion in wytte and in
good reason of sentence he passeth al other makers."[2] In
this passage the goddess Love is praising Chaucer's Troilus
and Criseyde, but the comment is important critically and,
in a larger context, historically for what it reveals about
what one of Chaucer's contemporaries valued his work for.
Chaucer is regarded by Usk not just as a poet, but a
philosopher as well, and a "noble" one at that. The word
"noble" is not used by Usk to indicate a social status for
the poet, but rather to describe the high seriousness of
Chaucer's philosophy in such a poem as the Troilus.[3] Later
fifteenth century critics will repeat and amplify this
reference to Chaucer as a philosopher, but what is signifi-
cant about this sort of comment is that it is neither
unusual nor original for Chaucer to have been regarded as
such. It was commonplace in Europe and England at this time

to value a man, whether a poet or not, for his total wisdom. This was a long-established medieval tradition, and it would become a renaissance ideal, a fact we must keep in mind when we examine those comments on Chaucer throughout the fifteenth and much of the sixteenth century. D. S. Brewer has pointed out that "it is worth recognising both the achievement and the medieval acceptance of Chaucer as a scientist, moralist, man of letters, and poet."[4] Thus Usk's comment is only a link in a long chain of such remarks, and merely the first of several like it to be considered in this chapter.

The real importance of Usk's praise of Chaucer, though, lies in his awareness of one aspect of the unique quality of Chaucer's poetic style, for it is in the latter part of the tribute by the goddess Love that Usk offers what J. W. H. Atkins, in his English Literary Criticism: The Medieval Phase, considers to be a significant and important insight into the nature of Chaucer's poetic language, and one which separates and distinguishes him from Hoccleve and Lydgate regarding the matter of Chaucer's style.[5] Both Hoccleve and Lydgate, as we shall see, value Chaucer's style against the background of medieval rhetoric and its poetic of artifice, obscurity, ornament, and elevated and elegant poetic diction. Usk's criticism, however, does not seem to conform to the traditional categorical evaluations based on rhetorical ideals and principles; in fact it contrasts

rather sharply with them. Usk is conscious that Chaucer's
Troilus is in the tradition of courtesy and the courtly love
romance when Love lauds it for being written "In goodnes of
gentyl manlyche speche"; but then Usk suggests that the poem
deserves recognition for being free from "any maner of
nycite," that is, its style seems instead to be unaffected
and natural. In addition, Chaucer "passeth al other makers"
in "ymagynacion in wytte and in good reason of sentence,"
that is, in the power of his imagination, in his "wytte" or
wisdom, and in the prudence and moderation--"good reason"--
of his judgments or "sentence." What Usk seems to be only
implicitly aware of in his remarks--if he is indeed con-
scious of it at all--is that Chaucer may have accomplished
a balance and unity between style and content in his poetry,
particularly in the Troilus, since it is this poem Usk is
holding up as the model for his own Testament of Love.
Usk's commentary, therefore, is of little importance in its
immediate context, for it seems to have gone either
unnoticed or unheeded at the time; however, later in the
fifteenth century other Chaucer critics will restate this
same theme and furnish it with some additional clarification
and meaning. At this point it is merely necessary to note
what Usk has said, for the real value of his suggestion lies
primarily in what it contributes to the development of a
critical approach, and eventually a normative standard, in

the growth not only of criticism of Chaucer, but also to the
aesthetics of English literary criticism as well.

Usk's brief tribute to Chaucer does not, however,
reflect the two dominant themes of fifteenth century com-
mentary on Chaucer, for he seems curiously unaware of an all-
important development in the history of the English lan-
guage, that is, the increasing use of English in place of
Latin during the second half of the fourteenth century,
especially in efforts to create a native literature. Atkins,
in his discussion of the growth of English literary
criticism, believes that the latter fourteenth century is
the turning point in the road which leads to modern
criticism. He writes:

> It was significant, to begin with, that English by the
> fourteenth century had become the official medium of
> instruction in schools, while in 1362 a statute was
> passed permitting the use of English in law courts.
> Meanwhile a national consciousness was slowly emerging;
> the voice of the people was making itself heard; new
> conceptions of personal and religious liberty were in
> process of forming; and with the break-up of the old
> literary commonwealth of the Middle Ages, Latin now
> ceased to be the only vehicle of deeper thought, while
> expression in the vernacular acquired a new dignity
> and importance.[6]

Here we have a prime example of an external factor influ-
encing and shaping the aesthetics of the criticism of the
period. As Atkins explains it, when English became the
primary language of literary expression, the use of the
vernacular created a whole new set of theoretical and
practical problems for both poets and critics alike. The

rapidly expanding use of English is the catalyst for the two
main concerns of fifteenth century criticism of Chaucer.
First of all, critics attempted to apply the standards and
rules of medieval rhetoric to the new vernacular literature;
and secondly, they sought to create in the English language
a literary tongue with the stability and dignity of Latin.

It is against this linguistic background that the
critical evaluations of Chaucer by Thomas Hoccleve and John
Lydgate must be viewed because to a great extent what this
linguistic movement did was predetermine what Hoccleve and
Lydgate were to look for in Chaucer's poetry. As we said
above, one effect of the more frequent use of the native
language was the revival of medieval rhetoric or poetic, as
the case may be, as both an ideal and a model for poets and
a tool for critics. Atkins states that: "Rhetoric is
studied with increasing zeal and medieval 'rhetoric' or
poetic, with its teaching adapted to vernacular needs,
becomes once more the main guide in literary matters."[7]
Thus poets like Hoccleve and Lydgate turned to a traditional
and off-used set of rules for the solution to a new problem.
The archetypal example of what their stylistic rule-book
might have been is Geoffrey of Vinsauf's Poetria Nova,
c. 1207, which Atkins considers to be "the central and
representative doctrine of medieval literary theory."[8]
Vinsauf's treatise lists 63 ornaments of style "divided into
difficult ornaments or tropes and easy ornaments or

'colors.' Colors (or figures) are in turn divided into
those of speech (_figurae verborum_) and those of thought
(_figurae sententiarum_). The distinctive features of the
system are the formal definition of the figures, the pre-
scription of the contexts in which each is at home, and the
practical illustration."[9] Atkins' elaborate and detailed
summary of Vinsauf's poetic bears this out visibly, along
with such information as eight methods of "amplification"
and seven of "abbreviation" for the serious student of the
art of rhetoric.[10]

But to confine a definition of medieval rhetoric to
Vinsauf's treatise is to unjustly overemphasize its
technical and mechanical aspects. In a larger sense,
according to Atkins, rhetoric included an elevated and
gilded diction, a demand for moral teaching under the veil
of pleasant fiction, and a high degree of subtlety in the
treatment of content.[11] These three features of rhetoric
quickly became in the course of the fifteenth century
practical standards by which to create and judge literary
works. It was within this conceptual framework, then, that
Hoccleve and Lydgate could find Chaucer to be the peerless
ideal among English poets with regard to his success at
meeting the rigorous demands of medieval rhetorical
theorists. In addition to this, they will also claim that
Chaucer was the first English poet to refine and sweeten
their native tongue, thus making it a respectable literary

medium for later English poets. This view of Chaucer on the part of Hoccleve and Lydgate and countless others is a mistaken notion due to ignorance about the existence of Old and Middle English poems, but nevertheless is a misconception which will persist another three centuries or more before the discovery of Old and Middle English manuscripts in the eighteenth century will provide knowledge about England's pre-Chaucerian literary heritage. However, the fact that Hoccleve and Lydgate were unaware of a vast amount of English literature prior to and contemporary with them does not, as we shall see later, invalidate their argument about the necessity of improving the state of the language in the fifteenth century.

In Hoccleve's <u>Regement of Princes</u>, c. 1412, there is a famous elegy and tribute to the man who was apparently his poetic master and teacher. He is apologizing to Chaucer for having been so "dul, and lerned lite or naght."[12] Literary history has tended to agree with Hoccleve's estimation of his own poetic efforts, but that is not really to the point here. Like Usk before him, Hoccleve lauds Chaucer for being more than just a poet; he is also for the English their "universel fadir in science," and Hoccleve even dares to ask: "Also, who was hier in philosophie / To Aristotle, in our tonge, but thow?"[13] Hoccleve becomes yet more emphatic when he commends Chaucer as the "flour of eloquence, / Mirour of fructuous entendement," and declares:

> O deth! thou didest naght harme singuleer,
> In slaghtere of him; but al this land it smertith
> But nathelees, yet hast thou no power
> His name sle; his hy vertu astertith
> Unslayn from the, which ay us lyfly hertyth,
> With bookes of his ornat endytyng,
> That is to al this land enlumynyng.[14]

The final accusation he flings at Death is that "hir

vengeable duresse / Despoiled hath this land of the

swetnesse / Of rethorik." Hoccleve's attitude towards

Chaucer's work as the model of rhetorical poetry thus seems

self-evident. Nor does Hoccleve forget to mention that he

considers Chaucer to be "The firste fyndere of our faire

langage,"[15] which reveals Hoccleve's acceptance of the false

notion that a void existed in English literature before

Chaucer's work. Hoccleve thus stresses three motifs which

will be constantly reiterated about Chaucer's poetry during

the rest of the century--namely, his learning, erudition,

and wisdom; his rhetorical skill, which to fifteenth century

poets like Hoccleve means Chaucer's poetic art; and lastly,

the freshness of his language, or the vitality and power

which Chaucer has given to his native tongue.

Hoccleve's remarks have been rather briefly passed over

in favor of a more detailed discussion of those made by John

Lydgate about Chaucer and his work, for Lydgate is without

question the central figure among the English Chaucerians.

Denton Fox to some extent explains why when he states:

"Lydgate constantly praises Chaucer, refers to Chaucer's

characters, borrows images and lines from Chaucer, and

inserts information and misinformation about classical
antiquity and other matter which seems to derive from
Chaucer."[16] However, for our purposes Lydgate is important
not only for the number of times he refers to Chaucer, and
imitates and borrows from him, but also because, as Fox
argues, Lydgate's "influence on the [fifteenth] century is
considerably greater than Chaucer's, and the century's
understanding of Chaucer was largely filtered through
Lydgate's understanding of him."[17] This means, therefore,
that Lydgate is not a man to give only nodding recognition
to in the development of the earliest stages of Chaucer
criticism. It is not so much what Lydgate says about
Chaucer, but why he says it, and what effect this is to have
on subsequent evaluations of Chaucer during the rest of the
century. In truth Lydgate's devotional utterances about
Chaucer can seem to us to be monotonously repetitious and
at times annoyingly verbose, but they were not so to his
audience in the fifteenth century, and it should be mentioned
that he commanded a large and interested one. At any rate,
a random selection will serve to demonstrate the essence of
Lydgate's reverence for Chaucer.

Like Usk and Hoccleve, Lydgate too addresses Chaucer
as "my maistir,"[18] and Fox has already noted above how
zealously Lydgate applied himself as a student of Chaucer's
works. What Lydgate manages to do, however, in his
commentary is to fuse to a degree the two thematic approaches

to Chaucer into a more unified critical conception of his
achievement than we have hitherto seen. Thus in a reference
to Chaucer's death in the Serpent of Division, 1400, Lydgate
asserts that Chaucer is the "flower of Poets in our English
tung, and the first that ever elumined our language with
flowers of rethorick eloquence."[19] He elaborates on this
statement several times over in later poems, such as in a
section entitled "A commendacioun of Chaucers," which is
contained in Lydgate's The Life of our Lady, c. 1409-11:

> And eke my master Chauceris nowe is grave
> The noble rethor Poete of breteine
> That worthy was the laurer to have
> Of poetrie and the palme atteine
> That made firste to distille and reyne
> The golde dewe droppis of speche and eloquence
> In-to oure tounge thourgh his excellence
> And founde the flourys first of rethoryk
> Our rude speche oonly to enlumyne
> That in oure tunge was ever noon him like.[20]

What Lydgate seems to be working out is the notion that
Chaucer has enriched and ornamented the vernacular--"Our
rude speche," as Lydgate calls it--through his skill as a
"rethor Poete," that is, because of his creation of "flowers
of rethorick eloquence." This is quite significant because
it is an attempt to account for just how Chaucer has refined
and supposedly improved, from Lydgate's point of view, the
native language. Lydgate's comment is, therefore, a good
piece of testimony to support Atkins' thesis that the
"poetic" of medieval rhetoric became a critical principle
and standard of criteria for fifteenth century poets and
critics due in great part to the revived emphasis on the art

of rhetoric in this period. Lydgate's role in the creation
of this rhetorical norm should also be mentioned, for it is
believed that he "established a school of rhetoric and poetry
at Bury St. Edmunds, so that both by precept and example he
inculcated the importance of rhetorical studies for poets."[21]
Whether or not we can prove that Lydgate operated such a
school at the monastery is really irrelevant, but this sort
of knowledgeable speculation does bring into sharper focus
for us the role which rhetoric played in the aesthetics of
Lydgate's judgment of Chaucer, and we must not forget that
he was establishing the aesthetics of Chaucer criticism for
a century or more.

During the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth
centuries it was the accepted critical dictum that this view
of Chaucer was a false, even a foolish one, for it was
argued that his poetry clearly demonstrates a breaking away
from the death-like strangle-hold of medieval rhetoric.
Critics cited, for example, the burlesque of rhetoric and
romance in the Tale of Sir Thopas and Chaucer's satirical
apostrophe to Geoffrey of Vinsauf in the Nun's Priest's Tale
as proof of Chaucer's own realization of the stifling and
outworn modes of rhetoric. However, Chaucer scholarship and
criticism in the last decade or so has been most helpful in
reassessing Chaucer's debt to the art of rhetoric, and it
has offered fresh suggestions about his poetry as a result of
this approach. We do not intend to take up this debate here,

especially since it is summarized so well by Robert O. Payne in his recent essay, "Chaucer and the Art of Rhetoric."[22] But if this argument is even partially correct in insisting that although Chaucer did indeed protest against false artifice and other forms of decadent rhetoric, his poetry nevertheless exhibits a formal and thematic awareness of the poetic of medieval rhetoric, then we must grant Lydgate and Hoccleve and several others their due for calling attention to this aspect of Chaucer's work in the first place. We should do this even though it is quite obvious that Lydgate's estimate of Chaucer is conditioned by his own belief that good poetry is the result of rhetorical expertise in the traditional mold.

Furthermore, we have already noted that Lydgate and Hoccleve had some justification for being of the opinion that Chaucer was "the first in any age / That amendede our lan- gage,"[23] since they were, as Atkins points out, ignorant of earlier native literature and even current poets and works, such as Langland and the Pearl Poet.[24] Even if they had known the works of these two poets, there seems legitimate reason to conjecture that they would still have considered their poems "crude," so to speak, because Lydgate and Hoccleve would in all probability have regarded such poetry in the older alliterative tradition which they shunned as being barbaric and unworthy of use for poetry. They could, in fact, point to Chaucer himself for authority and support

for this attitude, for they are, like Chaucer's Parson,
"Southren" men who "kan nat geeste 'rum, ram, ruf,' by
lettre."[25] What they value in Chaucer is a poet that has
employed the fasionable conventions of contemporary conti-
nental poetry as well as the rules of medieval rhetoric, and
thus he represents to them the fusing point of two highly
popular styles of the day. One of Lydgate's tributes to
Chaucer seems to imply a comparison, or at least a con-
sciousness, of foreign poetry by way of citing Chaucer for
being the first to make English into a respectable language
for poetry. It is in his The Hystorye, Sege and Dystruccyon
of Troye, 1412-20, and the passage also reiterates the
essence of Lydgate's central theme about Chaucer:

> For he owre englishe gilt with his sawes
> Rude and boistous firste be olde dawes
> That was ful fer from al perfeccioun
> And but of litel reputacioun
> Til that he cam & thorugh his poetrie
> Gan oure tonge first to magnifie
> And adourne it with his elloquence
> To whom honour laude & reverence
> Thorugh-oute this londe given be & songe
> So that the laurer of oure englishe tonge
> Be to hym given for his excellence
> Right a whilom by ful highe sentence.[26]

Lydgate's statement is testimony that among fifteenth
century writers it was gradually becoming evident, as Atkins
quips, "that for Englishmen English was the natural medium of
expression."[27] It is easy for us to underestimate the
practical significance of this realization among these poets,
but Denton Fox urges us to remember that these men were most

sensitive to the influence of contemporary continental literature, especially French, and most dubious about using their native tongue in order to follow the current poetic vogue. John Gower's "safe" experiment only a generation earlier with three languages in writing his poems is proof of this uncertainty about English as a poetic vehicle with both dignity and stability. Chaucer's poetry, therefore, assumed an overwhelming importance to younger poets like Lydgate and Hoccleve; and Denton Fox offers an assessment of the myth of Chaucer and his work among these men:

> One might almost say that Chaucer, to the fifteenth-century poets, was in part a legendary and symbolic figure, honored because he represented the new and fashionable style of poetry: continental, learned, non-alliterative, and highly rhetorical. This style of poetry would certainly have come into English even if Chaucer had never been born, but the fifteenth-century poets had some excuse for holding the misguided notion that Chaucer was "the father of English poetry," since they could see coexisting with the old alliterative style the new style, to which Chaucer's name was indissolubly attached.[28]

This passage pretty well sums up the evaluation and view of Chaucer held among these early English Chaucerians. Critically speaking, from our perspective their contribution is indeed a limited one, and an offering which after the fifteenth century would go largely unnoticed and unappreciated until quite recently. In the specific historical context of their own century, however, the role of Lydgate and Hoccleve, and of Usk to a lesser degree, can hardly be overstated. They are responsible for establishing the dominant and popular themes and attitudes toward Chaucer expressed

throughout the rest of the century and even into the
sixteenth, as we shall see later in this chapter. This is
the two-fold image of Chaucer as the Homer of English
poetry, so to speak, because he was the first to refine the
rough vernacular and adorn it with rhetorical eloquence, and
also the first to employ the fashionable conventions--rime,
metre, allegory, and romance, to cite just a few--of
European poetry in his own poems. What seems appropriate at
this point, therefore, is that we trace the course of this
particular response to Chaucer through the rest of the
century, as well as witness the gradual emergence of
qualifying and counter-statements to it which would in turn
result in a couple of other interesting suggestions regarding
Chaucer's artistry.

II

We proceed directly into a discussion of the Scottish
Chaucerians, and in so doing disrupt chronology, in order to
achieve a continuity and progression in theme, because these
two poetic schools--the English and Scottish Chaucerians--
share such a similarity of statement about Chaucer's work
that they deserve to be examined as co-partners in the
elaboration of an idea. In their respective commentary on
Chaucer we have represented the beginning and what amounts
to the denoument of the appraisal of Chaucer in terms of his
qualities as a rhetorical craftsman, and his position at the

fountainhead of English poetry. Before proceeding further,
however, it should perhaps be noted that the adjective in
the term "Scottish Chaucerians" is, as Denton Fox explains,
a misleading one, for:

> [A]lmost all of the connotations which "Scottish" has
> for a modern Englishman or American are utterly
> irrelevant to the Middle Scots poets. When we think
> of Scotland we tend to think either of post-medieval
> inventions--Presbyterianism, Bonnie Prince Charlie,
> the myth of Scottish frugality--or of the Highlands,
> with their modern paraphernalia of kilt, bagpipes, and
> sentimentality. But the poets and their audience felt
> more affinity with the English on the other side of
> the border than with the Gaelic-speaking Highlanders
> whom they despised as wretched savages.[29]

What the label does designate, however, is the language, or
more precisely the dialect, which the poets wrote in; but
this fact too requires the annotation that the Middle Scots
dialect is "a development of Northern English, and the poets
who wrote in it (except for the politically conscious
Douglas) spoke of it as 'Inglis,' not as 'Scottis.'"[30] This
information is important to our study of the tributes to
Chaucer by these poets because it reveals that they thought
of themselves as working in the tradition of fifteenth
century English poetry rather than--though not exclusively
so--their own Scottish literary heritage which was part of
the alliterative revival in Northern England in the fourteenth
and fifteenth centuries, and which had produced such poems
as John Barbour's immensely popular Bruce, c. 1375, and
Blind Harry's Wallace, c. 1475. But for those reasons which
Fox has stated the late fifteenth century Scottish

Chaucerians deliberately rejected any intimate association
with that movement, and thus this means to a great extent
that they are more English than Scottish Chaucerians. They
are English in the respect that they knowingly adopted and
worked with the fashionable poetic vogues and norms of
fifteenth century English poetry, particularly the poetic
and standards of the rhetorical school of John Lydgate.
This in turn accounts for why they are thought of as
"Chaucerian," for, as we have already seen, Chaucer was held
up by Lydgate as the ideal teacher and model, and this is
the role he assumed among these Scots poets. Regarding the
poetic which determined their own creative efforts, Fox
points out that "the Scots took very seriously the tradi-
tional doctrine that poetry is thought dressed in beautiful
language and rhetorically ornamented."[31] Like their English
counterparts a half century before them, therefore, the
Scottish Chaucerians also had their view of the values in,
and the worth of, Chaucer's work conditioned for them by the
principles by which they wrote their own poems and by the
qualities which they sought to give their poetry. They were
taught by a whole century of poets and commentators from
Lydgate on that Chaucer embodied in his art the very essence
of rhetorical eloquence, and believing this they praised him
for it as vociferously as Hoccleve and Lydgate had done. In
addition--and this is a factor not to be lightly passed over
in their reverence for Chaucer--they could readily accept the

rationale for that claim for Chaucer which honored him as

the refiner of the vernacular, because they felt they saw in

Chaucer's poetic diction the possibilities, the hope, and

the goal which they desired for their own dialect, since

they considered it an organic part of the English language.

It is for these psychological, linguistic, and aesthetic

reasons, then, that we hope to account for the critical

acclaim which the Scottish Chaucerians give to Chaucer.

Among the several Middle Scots poets--Henryson, Dunbar,

Douglas, Lyndsay and others--the two who best illustrate the

theme which we are trying to portray here are Gavin Douglas

and William Dunbar. Their selection is suggested by Denton

Fox who is of the opinion that "both Dunbar and Douglas have

described their, and I think their age's, Chaucer."[32]

Robert Henryson, although a major poet in the group, offers

no critical judgments on Chaucer, though he did write a

masterful continuation of Chaucer's _Troilus_ in his _Testament_

of Cresseid, 1475; but imitation--no matter how good--is

generally agreed to be more a form of flattery than

criticism. Sir David Lyndsay, on the other hand, was

writing his poems in the second quarter of the sixteenth

century when Chaucer criticism had broken new ground in

England, and this diminishes the relevance of his remarks in

relation to the mainstream of Chaucer commentary among the

Scots poets. Moreover, the statements by Dunbar and Douglas

form a tight thematic unit which can be examined as a single

representative judgment. In addition, although both poets
make numerous references to Chaucer, a passage from each
will suffice to summarize and exemplify their and, as Fox
states, "their age's," assessment of Chaucer. Perhaps the
most famous of all praise of Chaucer as a rhetorical poet is
Dunbar's apostrophe to him in The Golden Targe, 1503, for
the lines are a lyrical restatement of the essential themes
of Chaucer criticism for over a century:

> O reverend Chaucere, rose of rethoris all,
> As in oure tong ane flour imperiall,
> That raise in Britane ewir, quho redis rycht,
> Thou beris of makaris the tryumph riall;
> Thy fresch anamalit termes celicall
> This mater coud illumynit have full brycht:
> Was thou noucht of oure Englisch all the lycht,
> Surmounting eviry tong terrestriall
> Alls fer as Mayes morow dois mydnycht?[33]

Dunbar's eulogy can be regarded in many ways as the swan
song of the dominant fifteenth century critical response to
Chaucer. We noted in our discussion of this idea in
Lydgate's opinion of Chaucer that this approach may be more
valid than critical historians have been willing to admit.
Denton Fox reaffirms what we suggested earlier about Lydgate
and the other English Chaucerians' regard for Chaucer from
this rhetorical perspective: "Dunbar has been sneered at
for calling Chaucer 'rose of rethoris' as if he thought
Chaucer was a mere rhetorician. Modern critics are begin-
ning to think that Dunbar had a very good point, and that
Chaucer's rhetorical skill was not the least of his
qualities."[34] (Although it is out of place at this moment,

there is a line included in Dunbar's stanza which should be
noted for later reference; namely, "This mater coud
illumynit have full brycht." What this phrase seems to be
is an acknowledgment of Chaucer's vivid descriptive powers,
which was an entirely new insight in fifteenth century
Chaucer criticism which had only recently been brought to
attention. Dunbar's hint about it will become more
meaningful when we turn to a fuller examination of this idea
in the criticism of Chaucer contained in The Book of
Curtesye and especially in the writings of William Caxton.)

The tribute to Chaucer by Gavin Douglas occurs in the
Prologue to Book I of his translation of Virgil's Aeneid,
1513. Like Dunbar, Douglas too uses the format of a direct
address to the poet himself:

> venerable Chaucer, principall poet but peir,
> Hevinlie trumpat, horleige and reguleir,
> In eloquence balmy, condit, and diall,
> Mylky fountane, cleir strand, and rose riall
> Of fresch endite, throw Albion iland braid.[35]

Quite obviously this quote echoes Dunbar, Lydgate, and a
host of others, but this is significant because it reveals
how firmly entrenched this specific argument about Chaucer's
merit was and how long the cliché endured and prevailed.
Dexton Fox offers a rather lengthy explanation as to why, in
the case of the Scottish Chaucerians, this critical view was
so important to them, and he also places this normative
standard in its historical context for these poets:

> [B]oth Dunbar and Douglas plainly value Chaucer not for
> his humour, nor for his genial insight into humanity,

nor for his interesting stories, but for his use of and improvement of English as a poetic language. The metaphors with which they describe Chaucer are very interesting. Both Dunbar and Douglas associate him with flowers, freshness, royalty and heaven, and agree in calling him the chief of all poets. They both imply that he has given life to poetry throughout Britain. . . . And they both provide images for the qualities they value in Chaucer. Dunbar's principal term is light. . . . Douglas speaks of Chaucer as a "reguler" ("regulator," perhaps a nonce-use), and equates him with instruments for telling time, "orlege" and "dyall," and also with the "Hevynly trumpat," God's regulator.

It is fair, I think to extrapolate from these passages the general feelings of the Middle Scots poets about Chaucer. They consider him to be, in a very essential sense, the father of modern English poetry, the man who purified, regularised, and clarified English, and so made it possible for highly civilised and highly wrought poetry to be written in the vernacular. From the troubadours to the Pleiade, European poets were engaged in a constant struggle to make their tongues into languages with the beauty, precision and stability of Latin. Henryson, Dunbar, and Douglas were fully conscious of the debt they owed to Chaucer.[36]

We can probably safely conclude that Fox's second paragraph speaks for the Chaucer critics of the fifteenth century as a whole, as well as summarizing the major themes of Chaucer criticism throughout the century. What Fox's analysis reveals is that there existed a poetic artistry in the Chaucer criticism itself, complete with metaphors and image patterns which become critical symbols for the poets in their attempt to portray the value of Chaucer's achievement. Thus the critical evaluation of Chaucer by these poets exhibits an irony which Chaucer himself would have appreciated perhaps more than the acclamations showered upon him; that is, that although much of the commentary on Chaucer during the century is indeed naive in a critical sense, it was undeniably

sophisticated in its method of expression--though this can
in no way increase its worth as criticism proper. But more
important, Fox places the criticism of Chaucer as the poet
who refined the vernacular with his rhetorical sweetness in
its historical perspective, which thus gives it critical
significance in the total development of contributions into
the true nature and genius of Chaucer's poetry. It also
reflects just how much the aesthetics, both creative and
critical, of a given period or poetic movement can be deter-
mined by an extrinsic factor--in this case the crucial
question of what to do with the vernacular--which in turn can
become the causal parent of evaluative judgments upon a poet
or artist. By no means is all criticism limited to this
hypothesis, however, for there occasionally occurs an origi-
nal insight into an artist's work which does not seem to show
any apparent organic relationship to the prevailing critical
attitudes and norms. Such is the case with some other
fifteenth century observations we turn to in the next section.

III

That criticism of Chaucer which we encounter in The Book
of Curtesye and in the writings of William Caxton is a com-
bination of something old and something new. Once again we
hear Chaucer honored for those laurels which the English
Chaucerians had awarded to him earlier in the century; but in
addition to this Chaucer is also commended for some other

qualities which seem the antithesis of his role as a "rethor poet." They are his clarity of statement, his conciseness and directness, his vivid descriptive powers, and the delight and pleasure of experiencing his poems. The first such instance we have of this unorthodox critical alliance is in the anonymous poem, The Book of Curtesye, published by Caxton in 1477. The poem is one of the many "how-to" instruction manuals so popular at this time, and its subject is advice to the aspiring poet or student of poetry, who is urged to read and imitate Chaucer. The following reasons are given why the young learner should regard Chaucer as the model English poet:

<pre>
O fader and founder of ornate eloquence
   That enlumened hast alle our bretayne
To soone we loste / thy laureate scyence
   O lusty lyquour / of that fulsom fontayne
   O cursid deth / why hast thow that poete slayne
      I mene fader chaucer / maister galfryde
      Alas the whyle / that euer he from vs dyde.

Redith his workis / ful of plesaunce
   Clere in sentence / in langage excellent
Briefly to wryte / suche was his suffysance
   Whateuer to saye / he toke in his entente
   His langage was so fayr and pertynente
      It semeth vnto mannys heerynge
      Not only the worde / but verely the thynge.

Redeth my chylde / redeth his bookes alle
   Refuseth none / they ben expedyente
Sentence or langage / or bothe fynde ye shalle
   Ful delectable / for that good fader mente
      How to plese in euery audyence
      And in our tunge / was welle of eloquence.37
</pre>

The first stanza, which echoes Hoccleve in his Regement of Princes, merely repeats the stock rhetorical praise of Chaucer that by now should need no further clarification as a critical maxim. The apparent problem occurs in the second

stanza which seems to react to the normative standards upon which Chaucer is lauded in the previous one. We have already seen that the rhetorical "poetic"--as we have been calling it--valued subtlety and complexity of statement, elevated and gilded diction, and a treatment of serious subject matter in a tone of dignity and solemnity; and that Chaucer's poetry was heralded for exhibiting just these qualities. Yet those characteristics of Chaucer's poetry which are referred to in the second stanza seem to be a drastic qualification of the merits granted to him in the preceding one. First of all, "his werkis" are said to be "ful of plesaunce," that is, delight or amusement; and also "Clere in sentence / in langage excellent," that is, clear in thought or content, as well as in expression. Then Chaucer's ability--"his suffysance"-- to be concise is pointed out in the phrase "Briefly to wryte." Lastly, and perhaps most important, in the last three lines of this stanza Chaucer's language is praised for being "so fayr and pertynente"--that is, so exact and suitable to his "entente"--that it seems to the listener of his poems that he not only hears the words, but sees "verely the thynge" which Chaucer is describing or portraying.

This is the first reference we have to Chaucer's talent for visual description. What we find in this short stanza, then, are four truly fresh and remarkable suggestions concerning the nature of Chaucer's artistry of poetic language and narrative technique. But what they seem to require,

critically speaking, is a totally different aesthetic norm,
for quite obviously such criticism appears to be based upon
values distinct from those of the rhetorical poetic we have
been examining.

The third stanza develops the reference to Chaucer's
"plesaunce," in line one of the second stanza, by declaring
both Chaucer's subject matter--his "Sentence"--and "langage"
to be "Ful delectable," for Chaucer knew "Of al his purpose /
and his hole entente / How to plese in euery audyence." This
is the first annotation of the pleasure-giving quality of
Chaucer's poetry in an aesthetic sense, for the poet's
primary emphasis in this remark seems to be the delight which
Chaucer's poems create in his audience, over and above his
work's moral or didactic purpose--something which the
rhetorical poetic insisted was of uppermost importance. And
thus we have in the nature of this comment yet another predi-
cation for which there appears to be no existing aesthetic or
critical principle; and this suggestion, like the others in
these stanzas, must be taken into consideration in an analysis
of the validity of its statement. However, although there is
a strong temptation at this time to pursue the resolution of
the problems created by these stanzas, it seems prudent not
to do so until we have looked at a similar critical response
in the writings of William Caxton, and then we can attempt to
account for and justify the existence of these attitudes.

It is one of the ironies in the history of English literary criticism that the pragmatic man who invented the printing press in England should become one of the most important literary critics of the fifteenth century, and with reference to the Chaucer criticism in this century, he may be said to be in many ways the central figure. He deserves such recognition because he is the first real editor of Chaucer, for he published almost the whole corpus of Chaucer's works; and also because of the numerous Epilogues and Prologues which he wrote and appended to those volumes of Chaucer which he edited and printed. Caxton's critical remarks about Chaucer show an undeniable debt to The Book of Curtesye, which is partially accounted for by the fact that Caxton printed it. Not all of Caxton's commentary is, however, solely dependent upon those ideas in The Book of Curtesye, and those observations which he does borrow from the poem he most often elaborates further upon. There are two essays by Caxton which merit extended analysis; the first is his Epilogue to Chaucer's Book of Fame, as Caxton titled it, and the other is his Prohemye to his edition of The Canterbury Tales. In the Epilogue which he printed with the Book of Fame in 1483 Caxton offers an interesting hypothesis for the poem's abrupt and still unexplained ending, and then he comments on what qualities, in his opinion, the poem possesses:

> I fynde no more of this werke to fore sayd / For
> as fer as I can vnderstonde / This noble man Gefferey
> Chaucer fynysshyd at the sayd conclusion of the metyng
> of lesyng and sothsawe / wheras yet they be chekked and

maye not departe / whyche werke as me semeth is
craftyly made / and dygne to be wreton & knowen / For
he towchyth in it ryght grete wysedom & subtyll vnder-
stondyng / And so in alle hys werkys excellyth in myn
oppynyon alle other wryters in our Englyssh / For he
wrytteth no voyde wordes / but alle hys mater is ful of
hye and quycke sentence / to whom ought to be gyuen
laude and preysyng for hys noble makyng and wrytyng /
For of hym all other haue borrowed syth and taken / in
alle theyr wel sayeng and wrytyng / And I humbly
beseche & praye you / emonge your prayers to remembre
hys soule / on whyche and on alle crysten soulis I
beseche almyghty god to haue mercy. Amen.[38]

(Since this passage bears some similarity to the content of
the above quote from The Book of Curtesye, scholars have
naturally speculated that Caxton may have actually written
the poem. However, it is not among those works by Caxton
which William Blades lists in his authoritative two-volume
William Caxton: England's First Printer.[39] It seems safest,
therefore, to conclude that Caxton in all likelihood did not
write the poem; but since he edited and printed it, we can
probably assume, as we said above, his knowledge of its
ideas, particularly on Chaucer, for Caxton's interest in
Chaucer's work is unquestionably sincere and intense.)

Caxton's suggestion that Chaucer may have intended for
The Book of Fame to conclude with "the metyng of lesyng and
sothsawe"--since Fame and Rumor are each in a sense the bas-
tard offspring of the alliance of truth and deception--is in
itself a noteworthy critical comment. However, textual inter-
pretation of individual poems by Chaucer is, unfortunately,
not within the scope of this paper, for we are focusing our
attention on larger qualitative critical statements about the
nature of Chaucer's art rather than specific questions of

interpretation. What is of interest to us, therefore, is Caxton's choice of words and reasons as to why the Book of Fame is "dygne to be wreton and knowen." The poem is granted the traditional medieval laurel of containing "ryght grete wysedom & subtyll vnderstondyng"--which cliché we have witnessed showered on Chaucer from the time of Usk's Testament of Love. But Caxton does not credit this distinction to the Book of Fame alone, for he adds: "And so in alle hys werkys excellyth in myn oppynyon alle other wryters in our Englyssh." In such a categorical remark Chaucer is merely retaining his crown as the monarch of English poets, but we should note that this declaration comes from a man with an extensive--perhaps the broadest--knowledge of English poetry of the day, because of his untiring efforts to print as much of it as possible.

The crucial and problematical section is the short phrase: "For he wrytteth no voyde wordes / but alle hys mater is ful of hye and quycke sentence." Herein in one respect lies Caxton's debt to The Book of Curtesye, for Chaucer's conciseness is again referred to; but Caxton has somewhat clarified the comment--"Briefly to wryte"--in The Book of Curtesye by asserting that Chaucer achieves this by including in his poetry "no voyde wordes," that is, extraneous, unnecessary, and irrelevant poetic diction. In other words, Caxton attempts to explain to Chaucer's readers how the poet has managed a terse and temperate style. The remaining half of the clause is also quite significant, for

it can be interpreted, I believe, to suggest an original and fresh insight about Chaucer's poetry if we approach Caxton's language etymologically, which should in turn yield its ultimate critical meaning. Caxton simply states that all Chaucer's "mater is ful of hye and quycke sentence." The two key words in the phrase are "hye" and "quycke." The former for Caxton carried the age-old Longinian connotation of lofty and serious; Usk had used the word "noble" in order to imply the same status for Chaucer's "mater." This is in keeping with the spirit and the creed of fifteenth century rhetorical criticism. The term "quycke," however, points to an all-important meaning regarding a quality of Chaucer's poetry, for the word did not bear its present connotation of briefly or swiftly in the latter fifteenth century. Rather it meant alive or lively,[40] and so it would seem that Caxton is extolling Chaucer's poem--and by extension all his poetry--for throbbing with the pulse of life itself. One way to confirm our suspicion on this matter is to look at another of Caxton's essays to see if he repeats or expands his admittedly brief remarks in the Epilogue.

Perhaps the most impressive single statement by Caxton on Chaucer, and in some measure in the entire century, is his sensitive and detailed Prohemye to his second edition of The Canterbury Tales, which he printed in 1483. The Prohemye represents a summation of all the popular critical clichés and maxims in the fifteenth century, which we have been

discussing, and in addition, it further clarifies the meaning of the approach to Chaucer's work which we are examining in this section. Thus the Prohemye is a central document--maybe the most significant--in the century's criticism of Chaucer. It exhibits the crux of our problem at this juncture, namely, the alliance of the stock tribute to Chaucer as the founder and refiner of English poetic language through rhetorical eloquence along with Caxton's and The Book of Curtesye's apologia for Chaucer's poetry in terms of its clarity, brevity, visual vividness, its lively style, and the delight which it affords--that is, a whole new set of qualities regarding his narrative and poetic techniques. The essay is too lengthy to reprint here in its entirety, but the opening segment must be presented, for it amply demonstrates the nature of our critical dilemma. Caxton begins the Prohemye by requesting that:

> Grete thanks lawde and honour / ought to be gyuen vnto the clerkes / poetes / and historiographs / that haue wreton many noble bokes of wysedom of the lyues / passions / & myracles of holy sayntes of hystoryes / of noble and famous Actes / and faittes / And of the cronycles sith the begynnyng of the creacion of the world / vnto thys present tyme / by whyche we ben dayly enformed / and haue knowleche of many thynges / of whom we shold not haue knowen / yf they had not left to vs theyr monumentis wreton / Emong whom and inespecial to fore all other we ought to gyue a synguler laude ynto that noble & grete philosopher Gefferey chaucer the whiche for his ornate wrytyng in our tongue maye wel haue the name of a laureate poete /. For to fore that he by his labour enbelysshyd / ornated and / made faire our englisshe / in thys Royame was had rude speche & Incongrue / as yet it appiereth by olde bookes / whyche at thys day ought not to haue place ne be compared

emong ne to his beauteous volumes / and aournate
writynges / of whom he made many bokes and treatyces
of many a noble historye as wel in metre as in ryme
and prose / and them so craftyly made / that he
comprehended hys maters in short / quyck and hye
sentences / eschewyng prolyxyte / castyng away the
chaf of superfluyte / and shewyng the pyked grayn of
sentence / vttered by crafty and sugred eloquence / of
whom emong all other by hys bokes / I purpose temprynte
by the grace of god the book of the tales of
cauntyrburye / in whiche I fynde many a noble hystorye
of euery astate and degre / Fyrst rehercyng the
condicions / and tharraye of eche of them as properly
as possyble is to be sayd / And after theyr tales
whyche ben of noblesse / wysedom / gentyless / Myrthe /
and also of veray holynesse and vertue / wherin he
fynysshyth thys sayd booke . . . .[41]

This passage seems so familiar, yet uniquely innovative.

Most of it requires no further elaboration as to its meaning,

especially those time-worn, though still highly popular,

tributes given to Chaucer in the spirit and memory of

Lydgate. However, incongruously joined with this kind of

praise is what seems to be Caxton's own critical evaluation

of why he personally believes Chaucer's poetry to be of great

value. He begins by repeating his belief, stated in the

Epilogue to the Book of Fame, that Chaucer "comprehended hys

maters in short / quyck and hye sentences," and here it is

obvious that "short" and "quycke" cannot be construed to be

synonymous. Remarkably, Chaucer is cited for three qualities

in this phrase alone--his succinctness, liveliness, and yet

the seriousness of his ideas. Chaucer has done this

stylistically by "eschewyng prolyxyte / castyng away the

chaf of superfluyte," that is, as Caxton noted before,

Chaucer's poetry achieves its directness of statement and

clarity of vision by avoiding the obscurity and superfluous digressiveness prized by the rhetorical school. The result, as Caxton says, of the brilliance of Chaucer's poetic language is that it captures and reveals the naked essence of the idea or characterization--"The pyked grayn of sentence"--which Chaucer is working out or dramatizing.

One final term needs to be annotated before we attempt a general assessment of that criticism in The Book of Curtesye and Caxton's essays; and this is Caxton's use of the word "Myrthe" in listing the various kinds of stories in The Canterbury Tales. This is significant because it seems to possess some relationship to the words "plesaunce" and "delectable" in The Book of Curtesye. What I am perhaps suggesting is an awareness on the part of the author of The Book of Curtesye of Chaucer's poetic and aesthetic purpose in his poetry with reference to one of its intended effects on its audience; and also a realization by Caxton of the joyous and fun-loving spirit in some of Chaucer's poems which is in part responsible for this new emphasis on the pleasure which his poetry gives. In addition, with respect to this point we must not neglect to note that both the author of The Book of Curtesye and Caxton still grant to Chaucer's work the quality of high seriousness, and do not charge him with being either frivolous or immoral because of his occasional lightness of tone. Like the other observations we have been discussing, this last one will also be

taken up in the following examination of the plausible causes and reasons for these claims.

What we find in The Book of Curtesye and in the two samplings of Caxton's writings, therefore, is a value judgment based on an awareness of several qualities in Chaucer's poetry which had hitherto not been discovered or at least publicly suggested in print; namely, his clear, concise, direct, lively, and vivid poetic language adapted to his subject matter; and an admission of the pleasurable intent of all his poems and the mirthful spirit in some of them. While we are willing enough to assent to what this criticism asserts about the nature of Chaucer's poetry, historically it poses some imperative questions for us which must be taken up. First of all, how can we account for its occurring, especially in the face of the dominance of rhetorical criticism throughout the century; in other words, are there reasons--aesthetic, linguistic, or otherwise-- which stimulated the discovery of such qualities within Chaucer's work? Secondly, do these sources and/or his-torical and cultural factors, like those of the rhetorical poetic, help make the criticism genuine and trustworthy both in itself and in what it predicates about Chaucer's art? Lastly, if this criticism is indeed valid, how can it co-exist with that of the rhetorical school, which we have already argued has at least been partially justified as correct in its view by recent scholarship?

The repeated emphasis on the clarity, simplicity, and conciseness of Chaucer's diction may be evidence of a reaction against a popular linguistic and poetic fashion of the times, but one which had become in some respects hopelessly decadent. One aspect of the movement to improve the vernacular was an attempt, specifically on the part of poets, to enrich the vocabulary of English by the creation or coining of "aureate" terms, as they came to be called. Denton Fox defines these as "decorative and polysyllabic Latinate words."[42] The inevitable result for poetry, as J. W. H. Atkins states, "was the cultivation of an ornamental and flowery style, tortuous, obscure, bombastic, overloaded with imagery and classical allusions, and with special attention paid to unusual diction."[43] The poems of John Lydgate in particular show how quickly this trend became a pompous and pedantic affectation in the poetry of the fifteenth century. Accordingly, there were those who protested against it, though ironically enough, its impetus did not come from a poet, but again from William Caxton. His most outspoken and explicit condemnation of this vogue is in the Prologue to his translation of Virgil's Aeneid, or Eneydos in Caxton's spelling. Caxton explains that he has been receiving pressure from two camps regarding his language—one requesting a simpler and plainer style, the other demanding a more ornate and elevated diction—and then he gives his readers his personal decision:

> I delybered and concluded to translate it in to
> englysshe / And forthwyth toke a penne & ynke and
> wrote a leef or / tweyne / whyche I ouersawe agayn to
> corecte it / And whan / I sawe the fayr & straunge
> termes therin / I doubted that it / sholde not please
> some gentylmen whiche late blamed me / sayeng that in
> my translacyons I had ouer curyous termes / whiche
> coude not be vnderstande of comyn peple / and desired /
> me to vse olde and homely termes in my translacyons. .
> . . And som honest and grete clerkes haue ben wyth me
> and desired me to wryte the moste curyous termes that I
> coude fynde / And thus bytwene playn rude & curyous I
> stande abasshed   but in my Iudgemente / the comyn
> termes that be dayli vsed ben lyghter to be vnderstonde
> than the olde & auncyent englysshe. . . . Therfor in a
> meane bytwene both I haue reduced & translated this
> sayd booke in to our englysshe not ouer rude ne curyous
> but in suche termes as shall be vnderstanded by goddys
> grace accordynge to my copye.[44]

Caxton's uncertainty with regard to the English language is,

as we have seen, not a new experience for writers during the

fifteenth century. Just how important this question was is

poignantly revealed in Caxton's somewhat distressed utter-

ance: "And thus bytwene playn rude & curyous I stande

abasshed." However, Caxton's linguistic instincts seem to

have been unusually accurate, for he argues that in his

judgment the best sort of writing should employ "the comyn

termes that be dayli vsed," because they are the most

readily understood. Thus he opts for a mean which he hopes

will be neither "ouer rude ne curyous," and in so doing

expresses his own distaste for "aureate" diction.

Moreover, we have seen from the commentary in The Book

of Curtesye that Caxton was not alone in his opinion of the

virtues of a plain, clear, and direct poetic language.

J. W. H. Atkins further predicates that Caxton's point of

view is not in fact a startlingly original one, for he

traces a plea for a simple and natural mode of expression in

English belle lettres to the influence of two persistent and

recurring forces. The first is the continuity of certain

post-classical theories of style "drawn mainly from the

pages of Horace, the younger Seneca and Quintillian":

> And among the precepts laid down are the primary needs
> for perspicuity and propriety of utterance, for the use
> in general of ordinary words, which however might
> acquire fresh values in new settings; or again, the
> matters dealt with are the virtues of brevity and
> variety of expression, and the effects of an
> injudicious use of figurative terms.[45]

The other factor, and the one which Atkins implies is the

more dominant, is what he finds to be a critical argument

for a plainer style in English from Aelfric, Alfred, the

Ancren Riwle, Richard Rolle, the Owl and the Nightingale,

John Wyclif, Chaucer himself, Caxton, and later John

Skelton,[46] as we shall shortly see. (This does not mean,

though, that the issue died with Skelton, for it remained a

viable polemic during the sixteenth century as well.)

Atkins points to Chaucer's satire on the "hauteyn speche"

the Pardoner says he uses for his sermons, which, he

explains, includes "in Latyn . . . a wordes fewe, / To

saffron my predicioun,"[47] as a comment from The Canterbury

Tales itself which may have in part influenced Caxton's

critical response to Chaucer's poetic language. In addition,

it is within this framework which Atkins places and values

Thomas Usk's above-quoted remark in his Testament of Love

about Chaucer's style being such that: "without any maner

of nycite of storieres ymagynacion in wytte and in good

reason of sentence he passeth al other makers."[48] Atkins

interprets this tradition as the gradual awakening to a

conscious need of reasoned artistic form, although he admits

that the epiphany does not occur until much later in English

criticism. However, in an attempt to evaluate the signifi-

cance of this particular linguistic and critical attitude,

Atkins insists that the remarks contained in the above list

of authors and works "constitute a striking manifestation of

literary taste, revealing a distrust of 'fine' and eccentric

writing, and embodying a demand for that element of direct-

ness which the national temperment requires."[49] Thus it

seems logical to conclude that while Caxton's criticism of

Chaucer, along with that in The Book of Curtesye, is an

original contribution to the knowledge of Chaucer's artistry

and achievement, the aesthetic of Caxton's rationale was not

of his own invention, for rather Caxton's insights seem to

be the result of his own utilization of the norms of this

tradition as they applied to Chaucer's poetry. Once again

it was a contemporary reaction--in this particular instance

it was the growing awareness of the artificiality of

"aureate" poetic diction--which acted as the catalyst for

the criticism produced. This is not to discredit or deny

the genius of the individual critic who works out the

possibilities inherent in the poetic and aesthetic

ideologies and standards which he discovers to exist in the
intellectual milieu around him. This is indeed what Caxton
has done for Chaucer's poetry, and in the final analysis, in
one sense, it is the poet's art which owes a debt to the
labors of the critic.

The references to the vitality--that is, the quickness
in the medieval sense of the word--of Chaucer's language, as
well as those to his vivid descriptive powers are somewhat
more difficult to account for on an aesthetic basis.
Besides the mention of these qualities in The Book of
Curtesye and by Caxton, we have noted Dunbar's line from his
poem The Golden Targe--"This mater coud illumynit have full
brycht"[50]--as a later critical remark on the same theme.
There are others, but these three suffice to demonstrate the
presence of the idea as a critical norm. What this particu-
lar critical response may reflect is the subconscious
influence of the Gothic art and architecture of the late or
high Middle Ages, which was characterized by a feeling for
realistic naturalism. In his Social History of Art Arnold
Hauser analyzes the opposing differences between the
Romanesque style of the early Middle Ages and the radical
Gothic mode. The "basic tendency of Romanesque art," states
Hauser, "remains anti-naturalistic and hieratic."[51] The
Gothic style, however, is marked by an essential change from
the "one-sided art of the early Middle Ages . . . to an art
that makes all validity of statement . . . depend upon

achieving a far-going correspondence with natural sensible reality."[52] Some of the dominant qualities of medieval Gothicism are an ever-changing, ever-flowing "drama of movement,"[53] as Hauser terms it. The unique trait of Gothic art for Hauser is its "sensitivity, intimacy of experience, and inwardness of feeling which were unknown to the subtlest artist of the ancient world."[54] When he specifically discusses late medieval literature, Hauser claims that: "Here for the first time we meet with real, lifelike characters. . . . The main difference between the character descriptions of late medieval literature and the method of the earlier period is that the writers do not come across the peculiarities of their characters by chance, but look for them, collect them, and spy them out."[55]

Recently medieval scholars, Chaucer critics among them, have begun exploring the aesthetics of Gothicism, and discerning in it a definite interaction and relationship to the literature of the period.[56] What this may indicate is an implicit consciousness on the part of Caxton and his contemporaries of certain qualities in English poetry, such as those declared to be in Chaucer's poems, which corresponded to their own familiarity and predilection for the characteristics of Gothic art and architecture—such as the life-like portrayal of humans, and the minute attention to detail. Hauser suggests that Gothic art seems designed to elicit a dynamic, often visual, response—as opposed to the

serene and soothing effect of the Romanesque--and it may be within this frame of reference that Chaucer is being lauded by Caxton and others for his "quyck" style and the vividness of his language and descriptions. That these critics could sense such qualities in Chaucer's poetry may be due in part at least to the unconscious presence of the Gothic aesthetic in the creative and critical assumptions of these men with regard to values in literature. However, there is no commentary or any other sort of evidence contemporary with them available to us which could serve to affirm this hypothesis with some conclusiveness. It is merely a suggestion about what may have been the interplay and perhaps inter-penetration of the aesthetics of various artistic disciplines.

Finally, a problem arises over the presence of the words "plesaunce" and "delectable" in The Book of Curtesye, and Caxton's term "Myrthe" when he is discussing the varying tone and content of The Canterbury Tales. First of all, it should be pointed out that there is very little likelihood that either the author of The Book of Curtesye or Caxton is referring to the humor in Chaucer's poems. D. S. Brewer, in his essay, "Images of Chaucer: 1386-1900," contends that: "None of these early writers comments on Chaucer's humour, and indeed the word itself, in the modern sense, did not exist. It is even doubtful whether the concept existed, though of course medieval writers recognized irony and

satire."[57] A check of the <u>New</u> <u>English</u> <u>Dictionary</u> verifies

Brewer's belief about the non-existence of the definition of

humor as it has been used in the past couple of centuries

to mean the comic and risible element in a work. Instead the

term "humour" was employed in the fifteenth century to

designate those physiological and psychological disorders of

the body and temperament.[58] However, the <u>NED</u> also reveals

that the words "plesaunce," "delectable," and "myrthe" were

frequently used both before and during this century in the

sense of meaning enjoyment or pleasure; while "myrthe" also

carried the connotation of a certain lightness or gaiety of

tone.[59] What this terminology may indicate, therefore, is--

as we hinted earlier--a new appreciation for the pleasure-

giving quality of Chaucer's poetry which is the result of

his ability to tell a story whose theme is considerably

serious and moral in the guise of a spirited, often self-

mocking, mode. If this is the case, and the language before

us seems to imply this, then perhaps we are witness to a

shifting emphasis on the scales of the Horatian dictum that:

"The poet's aim is either to profit or to please, or to

blend in one the delightful and the useful."[60] This response

is in all probability part of the current and growing

reaction to the rhetorical poetic, which among other things

places primary focus on the didactic, or, as Horace said,

"the useful" aspects of a work of literature. However, like

those other ideas we found in Caxton and <u>The</u> <u>Book</u> <u>of</u>

<u>Curtesye</u>, this argument for an equal status for pleasure in the aesthetic experience, especially of poetry, is also an old one in English literature. Atkins observes it to be at the heart of the debate in <u>The</u> <u>Owl</u> <u>and</u> <u>the</u> <u>Nightingale</u>, c. 1210, and running through the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries where the topic rears its head throughout the works of Chaucer himself.[61] The increasing discussion in these centuries of the inherent necessity of the effect of delight as well as that of teaching is, in addition, a symptom of the gradual breaking-away from the Church's strangle-hold on creative and critical writing. The monk Lydgate, given his poetics, could never have suggested what Caxton did about Chaucer's poetry, and this helps to explain why Lydgate rated Chaucer's early poetry--his allegorical dream-visions--above Chaucer's later work, for it seemed to him more openly didactic and serious. What Caxton and the author of <u>The</u> <u>Book</u> <u>of</u> <u>Curtesye</u> signal, therefore, in their commendation of Chaucer's poetry in terms of both its occasional lightness of tone and its pleasurable effects on its audience is the beginning of an aesthetic of pleasure which will become a dominant and operative norm in the sixteenth century, especially during the Elizabethan period, although the total abolition of the inclusion of serious moral or philosophical subject matter is never for a moment even considered.

We are forced, therefore, to offer an explanation for what seems to be in many ways an antithesis with respect to the criticism of Chaucer in this section. Since these new qualities predicated to Chaucer's work seem valid aesthetically within their own historical context, and have been granted such status by innumerable critics in later centuries--especially our own--we must attempt a reconciliation of this view with the two overriding themes of fifteenth century rhetorical criticism, which we have already examined, or we are faced with the dilemma of negating the thesis of one argument or the other. We have formerly mentioned that one approach of Chaucer criticism in recent years has argued for the accuracy of the rhetorical critics. Thus what we seem to have in the fifteenth century is two entirely different camps each asserting the integrity of its own point of view. Yet a synthesis seems not only possible, but far more logical and natural than it may initially appear. Instead of having to assent to one view and deny the other, we hope to show that we can quite readily accept both critical judgments because they depend on somewhat different, though not unrelated, aesthetic grounds. Textual critics and scholars working with Chaucer's own poetics during the past decade or so seem in general agreement that his poetry demonstrates his own conscious use of rhetorical figures, rules, and standards--both seriously and ironically.

Robert O. Payne is perhaps the most articulate and convincing

among this group, and his book, The Key of Remembrance, is

the most detailed and persuasive discussion of the thesis

that both in theory and in practice Chaucer had learned much

from the rhetoricians, both medieval and classical.[62] Thus,

without going into an outline and summary of this modern

argument, we should, I think, be willing to admit the

historical, linguistic, and critical significance of those

repeated judgments of Chaucer which portray his achievement

in terms of being the founder and refiner of literary

English through his ornate and graceful eloquence. For all

the evidence is with them in their claims for Chaucer, for we

have noted that they knew of no contemporary poets whose

diction, style and techniques could rival what Chaucer had

accomplished. Although this estimate by the English and

Scottish Chaucerians is admittedly a general one, critically

speaking, its thesis is, nevertheless, one of truth--though

in a limited sense--to the value regarding both Chaucer's

place in English literary history and in discerning part of

the inherent nature and quality of his poetic artistry.

When we confront the suggested merits of Chaucer's work

in The Book of Curtesye and in Caxton, it becomes apparent

that their judgment is, in effect, a reaction to what had

become the decadent poetic of the established and popular

view. We observe, then, a cause and effect relationship

between the two responses which provides a real and organic

interrelationship between them. The critical standards and

norms of the latter argument have in the course of the

history of English criticism become accepted maxims and

guides for the evaluation of English poetry, for, as Atkins

earlier pointed out, the English critical temper has always

had an instinctive predilection for a plain and natural

style, and for realistic and graphic detail. Furthermore,

Atkins considers the discovery of such qualities in Chaucer's

poetry by the author of The Book of Curtesye and by Caxton

to be critically "discerning"[63] and of more permanent critical

significance than the former view; and of those stanzas in

The Book of Curtesye and Caxton's comments he states:

> Here, then, is evidence that some of Chaucer's
> qualities were being appreciated, notably his
> simplicity and directness, his natural and life-like
> mode of expression, his language adapted to his
> theme, yet "ful of plesaunce"; and not least sig-
> nificant was the claim advanced on behalf of the poet
> that his constant aim had been to afford delight, as
> opposed to the didactic conception of the poetic
> function which then held the field.[64]

What Atkins is perhaps suggesting--though we must take into

consideration his own rather obvious preference for the

poetics of the plain style--is that the criticism of Caxton

and the poet of The Book of Curtesye in its pragmatic

approach does, in the final analysis, yield a more important

insight into the heart of Chaucer's poetic techniques and

artistry than the more vociferous rhetorical argument.

However, the question forces itself out--how can

Chaucer be praised on the one hand as the "rose of rethoris

all," and the poet who eschews "prolyxitye" and avoids

"superfluyte" on the other. The answer may lie in the fact
that Caxton's criticism never protests the poetic of the
rhetoricians, but only the abuse of it. Moreover, we should
hasten to point out that no fifteenth century critic of
Chaucer, especially among those who commended him as a
"rethor poet," ever attributes to Chaucer's language the
epithet "aureate." For it was Lydgate's poetry which became
the epitome of the "aureate" style, and his poetic eclipse
may have no small relationship to this fact. Chaucer's
style, however, was heralded as the rose of a pure eloquence
and an unadulterated rhetoric before the cult withered
because of its own self-conscious stylization. This is why
and how the Scottish Chaucerians viewed him as they did, and
the same is true for the seemingly paradoxical nature of
Caxton's criticism; for the Scottish Chaucerians and Caxton
and a few of his contemporaries saw in Chaucer simultaneously
the presence of rhetorical figures and norms, but they also
discerned that his poetic language had none of the pompous
decadence of so many of his fifteenth century imitators. We
hope, therefore, that the contributions of both judgments of
Chaucer's poetry can be appreciated and valued for the
knowledge and new light they each offer about his work. Such
a conclusion throws into deeper relief and meaning the full
significance of Gavin Douglas' brief tribute to Chaucer,
which we have already quoted in the Prologue to Book I of
his translation of the <u>Aeneid</u>. But perhaps it should be

repeated at this point because in its own poetic imagery it
represents the working fusion of these two fifteenth century
critical approaches--especially in the last three lines--
since the aesthetics and critical language of both responses
are incorporated into Douglas' apostrophe to:

> venerable Chaucer, principall poet but peir,
> Hevinlie trumpat, horleige and reguleir,
> In eloquence balmy, condit, and diall,
> Mylky fountane, cleir strand, and rose riall
> Of fresch endite, throw Albion iland braid.[65]

IV

We have arrived at a curious intersection in our
progression because from this stage on the dominant rhe-
torical themes recede in importance, and the criticism of
Chaucer's poetic language rapidly assumes ascendancy in
critical polemics. Both views will continue to be heard,
however, but the question of the quality of Chaucer's
diction will become one of the two obsessions and thorns of
sixteenth century Chaucer commentators. A transitional
period is represented in the attitudes and comments towards
Chaucer of two early sixteenth century poets, John Skelton
and Stephen Hawes. Thematically, they signify a continua-
tion, yet a discernible turning point, in the history of
Chaucer criticism; and thus, they become both necessary and
valuable links to a period of furious debate over Chaucer in
the last two-thirds of the sixteenth century. Neither man,
however, is essentially important for his critical
judgments--since neither has anything new to offer--but

rather because each foreshadows and illustrates in his

remarks the sources for the specific issues of the Chaucer

criticism in the century which follows them.

In The Boke of Phyllyp Sparowe, c. 1507, Skelton makes

occasional references to Chaucer which reflect for the most

part a familiarity with the criticism of Caxton, in ·

particular; accordingly, Skelton values Chaucer for the same

reasons as Caxton. The two men were, in fact, acquaintances,

for in Caxton's Prologue to his translation of Eneydos he

mentions Skelton by name, and requests that the poet proof-

read his translation and suggest any necessary corrections:

"I praye mayster Iohn Skelton late created poete laureate /

in the vnyuersite of exenforde to ouersee and correcte this /

sayd booke. And taddresse and expowne where as shalle / be

founde faulte to theym that shall requyre it."[66] The

following passage from Phyllyp Sparowe indicates, in turn,

what influence Caxton's critiques seem to have exerted on

other Chaucer readers in the late fifteenth and early

sixteenth century. The child speaker in the poem who is

mourning the death of her pet bird, Phyllyp Sparowe, is

apologizing for her English not being of the quality of other

English poets, but especially Chaucer, about whom she says:

> In Chauser I am sped
> His tales I haue red:
> His mater is delectable
> Solacious and commendable;
> His englishe wel alowed,
> So as it enprowed
> For as it is enployed

There is no englyshe voyd--
At those days moch commended,
And now men wold haue amended
his english, where at they barke,
And marre all they warke:
Chaucer, that famous Clarke,
His tearmes were not darcke,
But pleasaunt, easy, and playne;
No worde he wrote in vayne.[67]

In one respect, Skelton's appraisal is further testimony to

the continuing presence and acceptance of those critical

norms and values employed in The Boke of Curtesye and by

Caxton, with special emphasis on the delight of Chaucer's

"mater" and the simple directness of his diction. The

comment, however, is not significant primarily as a restate-

ment of those critical opinions and terms already discussed

in The Boke of Curtesye and in Caxton, but rather for its

revelation about the state of the English language at the

turn of the sixteenth century, and what effect this is having

on both the understanding and appreciation of Chaucer's

poetry. In just a little over a century since his death

Chaucer's language has become such that "men wold haue

amended / his english," apparently because his readers are

unable to comprehend it. Now, notes Skelton, "they barke"

at Chaucer's English, "And marre all they warke." Yet

Skelton realizes that in Chaucer's own day and throughout most

of the fifteenth century his language was "moch commended,"

and "His tearmes were not darcke, / But pleasaunt, easy, and

playne."

Oddly enough, Skelton's protest about both what the changing nature of the language has done regarding Chaucer's poetry as well as what current editors are suggesting about updating it echoes a similar dilemma facing Caxton in his translation of the Eneydos. In what is clearly one of Caxton's most important pieces of writing--this Prologue to Eneydos--he too discusses the remarkable flux of the language and the diversity of dialects within the country itself, even to the point of illustrating his argument with a somewhat humorous incident about some "certayn marchauntes" who were merely looking for some eggs:

> And certaynly our langage now vsed varyeth ferre from
> that whiche was vsed and spoken whan I was borne / For
> we englysshe men / ben borne vnder the domynacyon of
> the mone. / whiche is neuer stedfaste / but euer
> wauerynge / wexynge one season / and waneth &
> dyscreaseth another season / And that comyn englysshe
> that is spoken in one shyre varyeth from a nother. In
> so moche that in my dayes happened that certayn
> marchauntes were in a ship in tamyse for to haue
> sayled ouer the see into zelande / and for lacke of
> wynde thei taryed atte forlond and wente to lande for
> to refreshe them / And one of theym named sheffelde a
> mercer cam in to an hows and axed for mete. and
> specyally he axyd after eggys / And the goode wyf
> answerde that she coude speke no frenshe. And the
> marchaunt was angry. for he also coude speke no
> frenshe. but wolde haue hadde egges / and she vnder-
> stode / hym not / And thenne at laste a nother sayd
> that she vnderstod hym wel / Loo what sholde a man in
> thyse dayes now wryte egges or eyren / certaynly it is
> harde to playse euery man by cause of dyuersite &
> chaunge of langage. For in these dayes euery man that
> is in ony reputacyon in his countre wyll vtter his
> comynycacyon and maters in suche maners & termes /
> that fewe men shall vnderstonde theym.[68]

On the basis of these remarks from Skelton and Caxton it seems obvious that the language had changed markedly in

the span of a single century or less. Linguistic scholar-
ship in the past couple of centuries has discovered just how
radical and rapid the evolution was. However, our concern
with the language is more limited, and Atkins points out the
alterations which most affected the understanding of poetry:
"By the end of the fifteenth century, owing to natural
causes, final '-e' had ceased to have syllabic value; there
was a general clipping of inflexional endings; and a host of
new words had been introduced, a continuation of the process
already visible in Chaucer's day."[69] A couple of essential
inflexions which lost their syllabic stress were the
genitive singular and plural "-es," and the "-ed" ending. It
is needless to exemplify what these omissions meant in terms
of completely understanding the metres and rhythms of earlier
poetry, such as Chaucer's. The significance of Skelton's
commentary on Chaucer, therefore, is his awareness of the
changing nature of the English language and the extent to
which this was responsible for the growing confusion over
the quality of Chaucer's poetry. What we are witness to is
yet another example of an extrinsic factor--again, as with
the English and Scottish Chaucerians, it is a linguistic
problem--becoming the source of trouble and eventually the
catalyst for subsequent literary value judgments. Skelton's
observation is a preliminary indication of what is to come
later in the century, for it reveals that there was indeed a
legitimate reason and need for all the investigations and

polemics over poetic metre and language during the last half of the sixteenth century. With specific reference to Chaucer, the main question would be whether or not his rhythms were rough and irregular or smooth and regular. Skelton seems aware, though, that both Chaucer's language and metre were in his own day perfectly comprehensible and melodious; but this would by no means be the case with Skelton's successors who were interested in Chaucer's work. Even such a devotee of Chaucer's as Spenser, who defended and imitated Chaucer's style and diction, did not basically understand, as we shall see, the phonetics and rhythms of Chaucer's poetic language. Skelton is in a sense, then, a harbinger of the direction and nature which most Chaucer criticism will take in the century ahead.

There is a strong and justifiable temptation to by-pass Stephen Hawes altogether, because he is such a dyed-in-the-wool disciple of John Lydgate and his rhetorical poetic. Predictably, therefore, Hawes values Lydgate above all other English poets for reasons which are in accordance with Lydgate's poetic principles and norms, especially the primacy of moral teaching by way of subtlety and obscurity of expression. Chaucer does, however, receive his due from Hawes as Lydgate's stylistic master and teacher. But Chaucer's reputation is not our primary concern, and Hawes does merit some discussion because his attitude illustrates and signals the beginning of what will be a common objection

to Chaucer's poetry in the sixteenth century, namely, the question of the morality of some of Chaucer's poems. In a passage in The Pastime of Pleasure, c. 1506--which is the process of learning the seven Liberal Arts--Hawes reveals that his evaluation of Chaucer rests fundamentally on the moral instruction afforded in Chaucer's work. It is part of a larger digression on "poetes olde,"[70] particularly Lydgate, Chaucer, and Gower, who by the end of the fifteenth century had become a commonplace poetic triumvirate with each poet vying--among the critics, that is--for supremacy over the others. Dame Rethoryke has just finished a lengthy lecture on the five parts of Rhetoric to Grand Amour, the poem's hero. Hawes then seizes the occasion for Grand Amour to pay tribute to these three poets as shining exemplars of rhetorical eloquence, and so after lauding Gower for his "sentencious dewe,"[71] he says of Chaucer:

> And after Chaucers, all abroade dothe shewe
> Our vyces to clense, his depared streames
> Kindlyng our hartes, wyth the fiery leames
> Of morall vertue, as is probable
> In all his bokes, so swete and profitable
>
> The boke of fame, which is sentencious
> He drewe him selfe, on his owne inuention
> And then the tragidies, so pitious
> Of the nintene ladyes, was his translation
> And upon his ymagination
> He made also, the tales of Caunterbury
> Some vertuous, and some glad and merye
>
> And of Troylus, the piteous douloure
> For his ladye Cresyde, full of doublenes
> He did bewayle, full well the langoure
> Of all his loue, and great vnhappines

> And many other bokes doubtles
> He did compyle, whose goodly name
> In prynted bookes, dothe remayne in fame.[72]

Chaucer is, then, important for Hawes as a poet of moral edification, for he "dothe shewe / Our vyces to clense," and further, Chaucer's poems--"his depared streames"--kindle "our hartes, wyth the fiery leames / Of morall vertue." On the basis of his particular prejudices about the purpose and effect of poetry, Hawes ranks The House of Fame, The Legend of Good Women, and Troilus and Criseyde highest among Chaucer's works for their moral seriousness of subject matter and tone. The Canterbury Tales, on the other hand, he seems to mention only in passing, and the implication of the phrase that some of "the tales of Caunterbury" are "glad and merye" is quite clear, for they are contrasted with those that are "vertuous." The pejorative connotation which Hawes establishes in this remark by way of opposing "vertuous" with "glad and merye" will become more open and defined later in the century when a Canterbury tale comes to mean a lewd or scurrilous story, that is, it becomes closely identified with that long-standing medieval prototype of scurrillity, the fabliau.

The importance of this sort of moral inference by Hawes is that this attitude will rapidly gain strength as a critical response to Chaucer's work in the sixteenth century. This view is, of course, an outgrowth and extension of the medieval emphasis on didacticism as the lone justification

for a work of the creative imagination; and this principle was absorbed into the rhetorical poetic, and thus perpetuated into the sixteenth century. However, in the wake of the break with Rome by the English Church and the ensuing Puritan movement, this clamor over morality in literature will rise to a crescendo. In addition, the moral question will be further complicated by the influx and popularity of what seemed to many to be a naked strain of secular and pagan literature from Italy. Chaucer's poetry will unwittingly be caught in the cross-fire, and Hawes is noticeable because his moralistic approach to Chaucer will be taken up by many others who will use him for their own purposes, so that one group will be hailing his moral vision, while another is attacking his work as blatantly and seditiously immoral.

The roles which Skelton and Hawes play in the development of sixteenth century Chaucer criticism are, therefore, admittedly minor ones. They are relevant to our discussion because they are prophetic of the two main issues of the century's criticism of Chaucer--the quality of Chaucer's language and metre, and the questionable nature of the moral content of some of his poems. This does not mean that the sixteenth century will have little to offer in the way of insights into Chaucer's art. Quite to the contrary, a period of doubt and debate can often lead, as it will among many Elizabethan critics, to a greater certainty and

conviction about Chaucer's genius. In the meantime, we can leave Chaucer securely in the hands of Skelton and even Hawes, for neither man would have dared to raise any of the objections which later sixteenth century critics raised. In his own work Skelton seems to have better sensed the nature of Chaucer's satiric wit, while Hawes prized him for the "piteous dolore" of his sad and oftentimes tragic poems; but for both men the essential greatness of Chaucer's achievement is never in question.

We have observed, then, the continuance of the rhetorical approach throughout the fifteenth century and on into the sixteenth in the poetry of Hawes and the Scottish Chaucerians; and we have set forth the contributions of this particular response regarding one fundamental aspect of Chaucer's art. The emergence late in the century of a poetic of plain style in reaction to some of the decadent and stylized poetry in the rhetorical mode led to an emphasis on, in Chaucer's poetry, certain qualities in his style and language despite his affiliation with the rhetorical tradition. Chaucer, in other words, was illustrative of the best of both critical arguments. However, the claims of both critical views will encounter disfavor in the century ahead, for the sixteenth century is not nearly as certain as the rhetorical critics about Chaucer's graceful eloquence and moral uprightness, or about the naturalness of his language and metre which Caxton seemed so sure of. But

the pattern at all times remains one of growth and further constructive judgments rather than a process of decay or destruction, or still worse, meaningless chatter in a critical vacuum. Instead there are moments of insight ahead which none of the previous commentators would perhaps have dreamed of; yet in most instances they are the ancestors and sources for these later observations.

In a summary chapter, Atkins assesses the contribution of medieval English criticism to later developments, but especially to the imminent Renascence. He is cautious, as he should be, about just what medieval criticism accomplished. Essentially he sees these honest, though limited, attempts at value judgments as historically significant, for they throw "into clearer relief what was actually done at the sixteenth-century Renascence";[73] and they "show that the difference in conditions was in reality one of degree rather than of kind."[74] As Saintsbury too realized, there exists a strong interrelationship between medieval English criticism and Renascence criticism. Just what some of these relationships are we will examine in the opening pages of the next chapter when we establish the critical perspectives which sixteenth century Chaucer criticism will assume, and to what extent they are the continuation of questions and problems initiated by fifteenth century Chaucer critics, for Atkins states that: "not a little of Renascence criticism is of the nature of unfinished controversies handed on from the Middle Ages."[75]

Chaucer is at all times a focal point in these debates, and the share which the foregoing commentators have in these discussions is that they were in most cases the first to bring the critical suggestions to light with reference to Chaucer's poetry, and it is from them that the sixteenth century Chaucer critics are forced to work. With this sense of continuity, then, we can proceed to the next period of our survey of the critical biases with regard to Chaucer criticism in the sixteenth century.

CHAPTER II

FOOTNOTES

[1]Derek Pearsall, "The English Chaucerians," in Chaucer and Chaucerians: Critical Studies in Middle English Literature, ed. D. S. Brewer (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1966), pp. 201-39.

[2]Thomas Usk, The Testament of Love, in Chaucerian and Other Pieces, ed. Walter W. Skeat (Oxford, England: The Clarendon Press, 1907), p. 123.

[3]The New English Dictionary (1933; rpt. Oxford, England: The Clarendon Press, 1961), IX, 170.

[4]D. S. Brewer, "Images of Chaucer: 1386-1900," in Chaucer and Chaucerians, p. 243.

[5]J. W. H. Atkins, English Literary Criticism: The Medieval Phase (1934; rpt. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1961), p. 179.

[6]Atkins, p. 142.

[7]Atkins, p. 164.

[8]Atkins, pp. 184-5.

[9] William K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Cleanth Brooks, _Literary Criticism: A Short History_ (New York: Random House, 1957), p. 144.

[10] Atkins, _English Literary Criticism: The Medieval Phase_, pp. 201-3.

[11] Atkins, p. 178.

[12] Thomas Hoccleve, _The Regement of Princes_, in _Early English Text Society Publications_, ed. F. J. Furnivall (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1897), LXXII, 75.

[13] Hoccleve, LXXII, 76.

[14] Hoccleve, LXXII, 71.

[15] Hoccleve, LXXII, 179.

[16] Denton Fox, "Chaucer's Influence on Fifteenth-Century Poetry," in _Companion to Chaucer Studies_, ed. Beryl Rowland (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 393.

[17] Fox, p. 392.

[18] John Lydgate, _The Chorle and the Bird_, in _Percy Society Publications_, ed. J. O. Halliwell (London: T. Richards, 1840), II, 193.

[19] John Lydgate, The Serpent of Deuision, ed. H. N. MacCracken (London: H. Frowde, 1911), p. 65.

[20] John Lydgate, The Life of Our Lady, in Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion: 1357-1900, ed. Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, I, 19. Some of the material quoted in this paper is available in print only in Miss Spurgeon's book, and I wish at this time to acknowledge my debt to and appreciation for her invaluable collection of Chaucer commentary.

[21] Atkins, English Literary Criticism: The Medieval Phase, p. 165.

[22] Robert O. Payne, "Chaucer and the Art of Rhetoric," in Companion to Chaucer Studies, pp. 38-57.

[23] John Lydgate, The Pilgrimage of the Life of Man, in Early English Text Society Publications, ed. F. J. Furnivall (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1901), II, 528.

[24] Atkins, English Literary Criticism: The Medieval Phase, p. 177.

[25] Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Parson's Prologue," in The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. F. N. Robinson (1933; rpt. Cambridge, Mass.: The Riverside Press, 1957), p. 228.

[26] John Lydgate, The hystorye, sege and dystruccyon of Troye, in Early English Text Society Publications, ed. Henry

Bergman (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1908),
CIII, 516-17.

[27]Atkins, English Literary Criticism: The Medieval
Phase, p. 163.

[28]Fox, "Chaucer's Influence on Fifteenth-Century
Poetry," in Companion to Chaucer Studies, p. 387.

[29]Fox, "The Scottish Chaucerians," in Chaucer and
Chaucerians, p. 165.

[30]Fox, p. 166.

[31]Fox, p. 171.

[32]Fox, p. 168.

[33]William Dunbar, The Golden Targe, in The Poems of
William Dunbar, ed. W. MacKay MacKenzie (London: Faber &
Faber, 1932), p. 119.

[34]Fox, "The Scottish Chaucerians," in Chaucer and
Chaucerians, p. 169.

[35]Gavin Douglas, Proloug of the First Buik of Eneados,
in Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion:
1357-1900, I, 71-2.

[36]Fox, "The Scottish Chaucerians," in Chaucer and
Chaucerians, pp. 169-170.

[37]The Book of Curtesye, in Early English Text Society Publications, ed. F. J. Furnivall (London: N. Trubner & Co., 1867), III, 35.

[38]William Caxton, Epilogue to Chaucer's The Book of Fame, in William Caxton: England's First Printer, by William Blades (1861; rpt. New York: Burt Franklin, n.d.), II, 165.

[39]William Blades, William Caxton: England's First Printer, 2 vols.

[40]The New English Dictionary, VIII, 51-54.

[41]Caxton, Prohemye to Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, in William Caxton: England's First Printer, I, 173.

[42]Fox, "Chaucer's Influence on Fifteenth-Century Poetry," in Companion to Chaucer Studies, p. 388.

[43]Atkins, English Literary Criticism: The Medieval Phase, p. 180.

[44]Caxton, Prologue to Eneydos, in William Caxton: England's First Printer, I, 189-90.

[45]Atkins, English Literary Criticism: The Medieval Phase, p. 186.

[46]Atkins, pp. 187-88.

[47]Chaucer, "The Pardoner's Prologue," in The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, p. 148.

[48]Usk, The Testament of Love, in Chaucerian and Other Pieces, p. 123.

[49]Atkins, English Literary Criticism: The Medieval Phase, p. 188.

[50]Dunbar, The Golden Targe, in The Poems of William Dunbar, p. 119.

[51]Arnold Hauser, The Social History of Art (1951; rpt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, n.d.), trans. Stanley Godman, I, 187.

[52]Hauser, I, 235.

[53]Hauser, I, 239.

[54]Hauser, I, 244.

[55]Hauser, I, 263.

[56]See, for example, D. W. Robertson, Jr., A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1962); and Robert M. Jordan, Chaucer and the Shape of Creation: The Aesthetic Possibilities of Inorganic Structure (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967).

[57]Brewer, "Images of Chaucer: 1386-1900," in _Chaucer and Chaucerians_, p. 247.

[58]_The New English Dictionary_, V, 452-53.

[59]_NED_, VII, 985-86; III, 156; VI, 490.

[60]Horace, _The Art of Poetry_, in _Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden_, ed. Alan H. Gilbert (1940; rpt. Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1962), p. 139.

[61]Atkins, _English Literary Criticism: The Medieval Phase_, p. 143.

[62]Robert O. Payne, _The Key of Remembrance: A Study of Chaucer's Poetics_ (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1963).

[63]Atkins, _English Literary Criticism: The Medieval Phase_, p. 180.

[64]Atkins, p. 180.

[65]Douglas, Proloug of the First Buik of _Eneados_, in _Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion: 1357-1900_, I, 71-72.

[66]Caxton, Prologue to _Eneydos_, in _William Caxton: England's First Printer_, I, 190.

[67]John Skelton, <u>The</u> <u>Boke</u> <u>of</u> <u>Phyllyp</u> <u>Sparowe</u>, in <u>John</u> <u>Skelton</u>: <u>Poems</u>, ed. Robert S. Kinsman (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 50.

[68]Caxton, Prologue to <u>Eneydos</u>, in <u>William</u> <u>Caxton</u>: <u>England's</u> <u>First</u> <u>Printer</u>, I, 189-90.

[69]Atkins, <u>English</u> <u>Literary</u> <u>Criticism</u>: <u>The</u> <u>Medieval</u> <u>Phase</u>, p. 168.

[70]Stephen Hawes, <u>The</u> <u>Pastime</u> <u>of</u> <u>Pleasure</u>, in <u>Early</u> <u>English</u> <u>Text</u> <u>Society</u> <u>Publications</u>, ed. William Edward Mead (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), CLXXIII, 54.

[71]Hawes, p. 54.

[72]Hawes, pp. 54-55.

[73]Atkins, <u>English</u> <u>Literary</u> <u>Criticism</u>: <u>The</u> <u>Medieval</u> <u>Phase</u>, p. 193.

[74]Atkins, p. 195.

[75]Atkins, p. 197.

CHAPTER III

THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY TO 1590

While it is, in fact, impossible to draw clear-cut
chronological lines in developments both in literature and
in criticism, nevertheless, a three-stage pattern of
response does seem to emerge in the course of sixteenth
century criticism of Chaucer. However, as we have seen in
the commentary on Chaucer in the fifteenth century, these
trends are often concurrent with each other, and even at
times include the vocabulary and rhetoric of what appears
to be an opposing critical movement. Such was the case with
Caxton's criticism of Chaucer's poetry. The critical
assessments of Chaucer in the sixteenth century are no
exception, even though for the sake of order and logic we
shall postulate some distinctions among the numerous
judgments passed on Chaucer's work. In the first place,
there exists a continuation of the fifteenth century view of
Chaucer as a rhetorical craftsman and overt moralist and
philosopher. However, with the advent of the debate in the
1550's over classical meters in English poetry, the question
of Chaucer's versification becomes a matter of confusion

which soon results in total uncertainty, even ignorance, about the nature of both his metrics and his language as well. The result is that prior critical preoccupations are set aside, especially those which had absorbed the interest of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. This particular development may be traced from Sir Brian Tuke's introductory essay in William Thynne's edition of Chaucer's works in 1532 through the 1570's. Despite the apparent bewilderment, some surprising and valuable suggestions are contributed by Roger Ascham, Thomas Wilson, George Gascoigne, and Raphael Holinshed.

The second phase is initiated in part as a reaction to Stephen Gosson's School of Abuse, 1579, which produced in response a decade or so of moral apologies for poetry. Since Chaucer still ranked as the exemplar of English poets, it was inevitable that his poems would play a role in the discussion. Accordingly, one by-product of this heated debate is the argument over what seemed to be the questionable nature of the moral purpose and content in some of Chaucer's works. Thus, Chaucer critics found themselves groping to defend and explain the moral intent and vision in his poetry with the result that within the space of a few short years a renewed certainty about Chaucer's moral integrity as an artist is reaffirmed, although admittedly in only a limited and general way. The most important spokesmen for Chaucer in this exchange are Thomas Lodge, Sir Philip Sidney, George

Puttenham, and William Webbe. Furthermore, the efforts of
these apologists in the 1580's lead to the third and final
development in sixteenth century criticism of Chaucer. The
tone for the attitude towards Chaucer in the 1590's is
sounded in Spenser's lyrical tribute to Chaucer in Book IV
of The Faerie Queene, which may be the finest compliment
ever offered by one poet to another. Contrasting to
Spenser's acritical appreciation, but simultaneously
complementing his enthusiasm, is the critical commentary of
Francis Beaumont, Thomas Speght, and Gabriel Harvey. What
is up to this time the most brilliant and penetrating piece
of criticism on Chaucer comes from the pen of a judge,
Francis Beaumont, the father of the dramatist. Thomas
Speght, the editor of the 1598 edition of Chaucer's poems,
points to qualities in Chaucer's art which are both the
result of Beaumont's ideas and his own labors in Chaucer's
poetry. Finally, Gabriel Harvey provides some marginalia
which form an appropriate footnote to the century's ever-
growing love affair with the poetry of Chaucer. What
emerges from these three latter critics is a totally unprece-
dented awareness of Chaucer's artistic purpose and achieve-
ment, especially in The Canterbury Tales, which had been a
moral and poetic enigma for many in the fifteenth and
sixteenth centuries. These suggestions contributed by
Beaumont, Speght, and Harvey may quite properly be termed
genuine aesthetic literary criticism. In review, then, what

the first period of sixteenth century Chaucer commentary emphasizes is Chaucer's form; the second stresses his matter, or content, particularly the morality of it; and the third offers a synthesis of the two approaches, and in so doing discovers what has become the accepted thesis and plan of Chaucer's art by the majority of subsequent Chaucer critics.

Moreover, it seems necessary to add that, as with the fifteenth century critics, those in the following century value and judge his merits and demerits in terms of contemporary issues, most notably the linguistic and religious controversies of the day. Derek Brewer supports this notion in his essay, "Images of Chaucer: 1386-1900," when he states that: "[I]t was inevitable that the greatest English writer so far should be called in evidence in controversy, and seen in terms of the preoccupations of the age."[1] This is especially true in the first two periods; however, the suggestions offered by Beaumont, Speght, and Harvey form one of those rare moments in the history of criticism when the particular prejudices of the critic and the specific totems of the times seem to act as catalysts to produce a more universal and far-reaching value judgment. With this overview in mind, then, let us turn to an examination of the individual critics who comprise the rich heritage of sixteenth century Chaucer criticism.

I

The link between the critical remarks of Skelton and
Hawes and those in the latter half of the century, which is
where our focus is in this chapter, is found in Sir Brian
Tuke's "Dedication to Henry viii," prefixed to William
Thynne's 1532 edition of The Workes of Geffray Chaucer.
Although this preface purports to be written by Thynne,
scholars have discovered it to have been composed by Tuke,
who was a close friend of Thynne's.[2] Since the edition was
commissioned by King Henry, it would seem to indicate an
interest in Chaucer's poetry at this time which extended
beyond just poets and scholars. The essay is primarily "an
account of Thynne's search for and collation of Chaucer's
works";[3] however, there are a few remarks in praise of
Chaucer's poems which are for the most part in the tradition
of the two main themes of fifteenth century Chaucer commen-
tary, although they are much closer in spirit to Caxton than
to Lydgate. Chaucer's poetry, says Tuke, is to be commended
for exhibiting:

> such frutefulnesse in wordes / wel accordynge to the
> mater and purpose / so swete and plesaunt sentences /
> suche perfectyon in metre / the composycion so
> adapted / suche freshnesse of inuencion / compendyous-
> nesse in narration / such sensyble and open style /
> lackyng neither maieste ne mediocrite couenable in
> disposycion / and suche sharpnesse or quycknesse in
> conclusyon / that it is moche to be marueyled / howe
> in his tyme / whan doutlesse all good letters were
> layde a slepe through out the worlde / . . . suche an
> excellent poete in our tonge / shulde, as it were
> (nature repugnyng) spryng and aryse:[4]

The poetic which dictated Caxton's preference for a natural and tempered style in contrast to the more florid eloquence of the rhetorical school is clearly in evidence in Tuke's assessment of Chaucer's work. What is of prime significance in Tuke's evaluation is his assertion of the aptness of Chaucer's poetic diction, the "perfectyon in metre," his originality, and his conciseness in narration. He mentions Chaucer's "mater" only in passing, and altogether omits any reference to the moral nature of Chaucer's poems, although he implies its presence in his remark that Chaucer's "wordes" are "wel accordynge to the mater and purpose," that is, Chaucer's language ably serves his themes and artistic intentions. Because of hindsight it is possible to speculate that Tuke is suggesting that Chaucer's poetic language possesses the quality of decorum, for although the term had not been used yet, it was to become a critical commonplace later in the century. This comment by Tuke, simple though it is, is the last of its kind until Francis Beaumont more explicitly discerns and explains in 1598 the moral artistry of Chaucer's poetry in terms of its dramatic decorum. Unfortunately, the "mater and purpose" of Chaucer's work were soon to be divorced by his critics in the debate over his morality, and again it would be the 1580's before a critic or two begins to realize Chaucer's fusion of the two. At this point it is regrettable that Tuke did not elaborate

on what he seemed to sense in the organic relationship
between Chaucer's language and his content.

Furthermore, Tuke affirms the perfection of Chaucer's
metre, although this certitude, like that with respect to
Chaucer's language and morality, is fated to be the final
tribute of this nature to Chaucer's poetry in this century,
and for that matter for over two centuries to come. The two
generations of poets and critics which followed Tuke, that
is, the Elizabethans, are to lose--because of changes in the
language--the syllabic pattern of Chaucer's metrical rhythms.
The result, as we said above, will be confusion and conjec-
ture to the point of even suggesting that Chaucer's metre is
classical.

Finally, Tuke establishes a frequent tribute to Chaucer
in the sixteenth century and subsequent centuries as well,
which is the erroneous notion that "it is moche to be
marueyled / howe in his tyme / whan doutlesse all good
letters were layde a slepe through out the worlde / . . .
suche an excellent poete in our tonge / shulde, as it were
(nature repugnyng) spryng and aryse." We have previously
pointed out that this view of Chaucer was, given its
historical context, a valid and forgivable one due to the
lack of any known manuscripts contemporary with Chaucer,
with the notable exception of _Piers Plowman_, which was
believed to be by Chaucer anyway. Thus it appeared to

readers of Chaucer, such as Tuke, that like Homer, Chaucer too lived and wrote in a barbaric and dark age.

Quite obviously, this last comment by Tuke is of little, if any, critical importance; it deserves mention only because it is to be repeated so often in later Chaucer commentary. Tuke's other remarks are significant, however, for in his commendation of the harmony between Chaucer's language and subject matter, his metre, his originality, and brevity in narrative technique, he penetrates to the heart of Chaucer's artistry. But Tuke's suggestions are destined to remain undeveloped because of the supercedence of linguistic and religious issues with regard to poetry in England. The result is that for the next two-thirds of the sixteenth century critical judgments are most often gauged according to the particular problem confronting the individual critic. It is clear in Tuke's statement, however, that the aesthetics of plain style which determined Caxton's evaluation of Chaucer had secured a niche in English criticism; and they would remain a viable standard, although they would be repeatedly qualified by the various problems and controversies waged during the remainder of the century.

However, Sir Brian's essay is not the only reason that William Thynne's 1532 edition is important to the student of Chaucer criticism. First of all, Thynne appended a gloss to the text, which seems to indicate that Thynne believed his readers would need assistance with Chaucer's vocabulary. It

also lends credence to Skelton's remark that Chaucer was
being "amended."[5] Since no modernizations are extant, it
seems most probable that Skelton is referring to the inclu-
sion of such glosses in editions of Chaucer's poems. Today
we know how drastically and rapidly the English language was
changing in the sixteenth century, and to what extent Middle
English had already become a lost language even in Skelton's
day, which helps to justify and explain why later sixteenth
century readers of Chaucer experience ever increasing
difficulty with his language and poetic rhythms.

Moreover, Thynne's edition was reissued in 1542, and
was followed in 1561 by John Stowe's edition. All three
include a number of poems ascribed to the authorship of
Chaucer, but which subsequent scholarship has disclaimed for
him. Most polemic among these are the Plowman's Tale, that
is, Piers Plowman, and the Pilgrim's Tale. Since both are
savage anti-papal satires, Chaucer's poetry became ensnared
in the religious and moral questions to a much greater degree
than he, in fact, deserved. Derek Brewer notes that: "Such
accretions, and others, rather blurred the outline of
Chaucer as known to the sixteenth century, and caused him to
appear more of a religious reformer than he was."[6] Thus,
Chaucer could and would be claimed by Protestant reformers,
such as John Foxe, as one of their own. Yet this somewhat
erroneous conception of Chaucer's purpose in his poetry
would lead in the course of the century via some curious

critical routes to a clearer picture of Chaucer's aim and achievement in his work. It is imperative, therefore, that we keep these two aspects of Thynne's edition--the gloss and the spurious additions to Chaucer's canon--in mind in our discussion of the criticism and commentary upon his poems.

We stated in the preface to this chapter that along with the continuation of the aesthetic of plain style the influence of the rhetorical tradition persists well into the sixteenth century. Its two-fold emphasis on moral didacticism and a formalized style is promulgated by the humanists and classical scholars of the mid-century. The favor which the aureate style enjoyed in the fifteenth century, however, had been qualified, as we have seen, by the emergence of a taste for a more temperate, natural, and common poetic language; so that rhetoric as it was known and practiced in the fifteenth century had undergone a considerable metamorphosis. Nevertheless, the rhetorical poetic had lost none of its insistence on the necessity of moral instruction in poetry. In the previous chapter we pointed out that Stephen Hawes--while linked to the tradition of Lydgate--was a precursor of this particular sixteenth century response to Chaucer's work; and thus we hear echoes of Hawes--and Lydgate as well--in Roger Ascham's reference to _The Pardoner's Tale_ as an example of the evils of gaming. The comment occurs in Ascham's _Toxophilus_, 1544, which is a patriotic treatise on the value of training young Englishmen in the

skills of archery and other disciplines as part of their
educational preparation for becoming their country's
defenders. Ascham's use of the tale in this instance is
thus a moral and utilitarian one, although he does call
Chaucer "our Englishe Homer,"[7] and admits that: "I euer
thought hys sayinges to have as much authoritye as eyther
Sophocles or Euripedes in Greke . . . ."[8] He then concludes
his condemnation of idleness, gaming, and cursing--those
sins most tempting to the soldier--with a parting tribute to
The Pardoner's Tale:

> Yet this I woulde wysche that all great men in
> Englande had red ouer diligentlye the Pardoners tale
> in Chaucer, and there they shoulde perceyue and se,
> howe moche suche games stande with theyr worshyppe,
> howe great soeuer they be. . . . I wyll make an
> ende with this saying of Chaucer:
> Lordes might finde them other maner of pleye
> Honest ynough to driiue the daye awaye.[9]

However, as readers of Ascham's Scholemaster know, he
is not as kind to the rest of The Canterbury Tales, and he
lumps Chaucer's major opus with Malory's Morte D'Arthur in a
scathing attack on the immorality of much poetry. The
dilemma presented by The Canterbury Tales, of course, is the
dubious moral world of the fabliaux, and Ascham is only the
first of many sixteenth century Englishmen who are so
perplexed by their incomprehension of Chaucer's moral vision
that they are doomed to become infamous for rejecting not
only The Canterbury Tales, but the moral seriousness in much
of Chaucer's other work as well.

Ascham does, however, deserve more credit than we have
so far allotted to him, for he offers a startling suggestion
about Chaucer's powers of character description and por-
trayal in a treatise entitled A Report and Discourse written
by Roger Ascham of the affaires and state of Germany and the
Emperour Charles his court duryng certaine yeares while the
sayd Roger was there. The remark appears in a cataloguing of
the qualities which a historian must possess, and Homer and
Chaucer are cited, quaintly enough, as examples of Ascham's
point:

> Diligence also must be vsed in kepyng truly the
> order of tyme: and describyng lyuely, both the site
> of places and nature of persons not onely for the
> outward shape of the body; but also for the inward
> disposition of the mynde, as Thucidides doth in many
> places very trimly, and Homer everywhere, and that
> alwayes most excellently, which obseruation is
> chiefly to be marked in hym. And our Chaucer doth
> the same, very praise worthely: marke hym well and
> conferre hym with any other that writeth of in our
> tyme in their proudest toung, whosoeuer lyst.[10]

Chaucer's ability at "describyng lyuely, both the site
of places and nature of persons" had, as we have noted, been
acclaimed in The Book of Curtesye, and by Caxton and the
Scottish Chaucerians. But Ascham's tribute to Chaucer and
Homer--and we must not overlook the fact that Ascham
ascribes this quality to both poets--seems to be the first
allusion to Chaucer's skill in revealing the "inward disposi-
tion of the mynde" of his characters as well as his exactness
in detailing their physical appearance. Ascham's insight,
though, is a result of his attempt to state what a good

historian should be; and thus it would seem that Homer and
Chaucer are being honored by Ascham more as historians than
as literary artists, especially since they are compared with
Thucydides in the passage. This may rightly be so, and
several other commentators in this century will laud the
historical value of Chaucer's work in the tradition of
English literature. Ironically, however, this approach to
Chaucer's poems will, like the moral pronouncments upon
them, eventually lead at the century's end to an appreciation
of both the depth of his realism and the universality of the
characters which he has given to the world. At any rate,
Ascham's comment is not to be slighted in its own right, for
despite the premise upon which it is based it is, according
to J. W. H. Atkins, "a judgment which marked a notable advance
in Chaucer criticism at this date."[11]

In our discussion of Caxton's criticism of Chaucer's
poetry we postulated that the influence of Gothic naturalism
may have to some extent underlain the aesthetics of his
judgment which emphasized Chaucer's clarity and naturalness
of language and his powers of vivid description through his
attention to details. The statements by Tuke and Ascham
seem to demonstrate the continuance of this taste for
verisimilitude in poetry. Arnold Hauser, at least, strongly
hints that this may be the case when he notes that: "The
interest in the individual object, the search for natural
law, the sense of fidelity to nature in art and

literature--these things do not by any means begin only with the Renaissance."[12] Rather, declares Hauser, the naturalism of the Renaissance "is merely the continuation of the naturalism of the Gothic period, in which the individual conception of individual things already begins to be clearly manifest."[13] Moreover, notes Hauser, "The remarkable thing about the Renaissance was, to put it briefly, not the fact that the artist became an observer of nature, but that the work of art became a 'study of nature.'"[14] For Tuke and Ascham, however, the distinction between the work of art as mere observation and a more penetrating examination had not yet codified itself. This would become more apparent with the increasing realism in the literature of the Elizabethan era, especially the drama. But the theme at this juncture is perhaps that the Gothic aesthetic remains to a degree a viable factor in shaping the creative and critical writings of sixteenth century English literature. Chaucer criticism, at least, seems continually to lend this hypothesis credibility.

Furthermore, the concept of rhetoric, as we said earlier, underwent a mutation when it yielded to the distaste for aureate terms and the decadence of Lydgate's stylized verse. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Thomas Wilson's The Arte of Rhetorique, 1553, which condemns "straunge ynkehorne termes," and urges men to "speake as is commonly receiued."[15] The intensity of the reaction against

the often artificial rhetorical poetry of the fifteenth

century and early sixteenth is demonstrated in Wilson's

argument that:

> Among all other lessons this should first be
> learned, that wee neuer affect any straunge ynkehorne
> termes, but we speake as is commonly receiued; neither
> seeking to be ouer fine, nor yet liuing ouer-carelesse
> using our speeche as most men doe, and ordering our
> wittes as the fewest haue done. Some seeke so far for
> outlandish English, that they forget altogether their
> mothers language. And I dare sweare this, if some of
> their mothers were aliue, thei were not able to tell
> what they say: and yet these fine English clerkes
> will say, they speake in their mother tongue, if a man
> should charge them for counterfeiting the Kings
> English. Some farre iourneyed gentlemen at their
> returne home, like as they loue to goe in forraine
> apparell, so thei wil pouder their talke with ouersea
> language. He that commeth lately out of Fraunce, will
> talke French English and neuer blush at the matter.
> An other chops in with English Italienated, and
> applieth the Italian to our English speaking, the
> which is, as if an Oratour that professeth to utter
> his mind in plaine Latine, would needes speake Poetrie,
> and farre fetched colours of straunge antiquitie. The
> Lawyer will store his stomacke with the prating of
> Pedlers. The Auditor in making his accompt and
> reckening, cometh in with "sise sould," and "cater
> denere," . . . . The fine courtier wil talke nothing
> but Chaucer. The misticall wiseman and Poeticall
> Clerkes, will speake nothing but quaint Prouerbes, and
> blinde Allegories, delighting much in their owne
> darkenesse, especially, when none can tell what they
> doe say. The unlearned or foolish phanaticall, that
> smelles but of learning (such fellowes as haue seen
> learned men in their daies) wil so Latin their tongues,
> that the simple can not but wonder at their talke, and
> thinke surely they speake by some reuelation. I know
> them that thinke Rhetorique to stande wholie upon
> darke wordes, and hee than can catche an ynke horne
> terme by the tail, him they coumpt to be a fine
> Englishman, and a good Rhetorician.[16]

We can see from Wilson's remarks that such qualities as

deliberate obscurity and ambiguity of language and content--

that is, "quaint Prouerbes and blinde Allegories"--which

Lydgate and Hawes espoused now draw down the wrath of a man who is writing, of all things, a treatise on rhetoric. What is unfortunate about Wilson's commentary is that Chaucer is viewed, by Wilson at least, as being in the aureate tradition, and thus is accused and faulted by Wilson for exhibiting the language of the affected courtier.

Two linguistic factors seem to be probable causes for Wilson's attitude towards Chaucer's poetry. The first is the radical change which had occurred both in the vocabulary and syntax of the English language in the century and a half since Chaucer composed his works. Thus, there had grown a considerable amount of ignorance and confusion over the precise meaning and pronunciation of Chaucer's English. Secondly, Wilson was a foremost and adamant member of that clique of sixteenth century English scholars known as purists, that is, those who wished to keep the English tongue free from foreign influences. Since Chaucer's poems seemed to contain for the purists many foreign words, especially French and Italian, his poetry suffered at their hands for reasons which were linguistic and nationalistic, but perhaps not altogether legitimately critical.

What had occurred in English culture by the time of Ascham and Wilson was the growing influence of the classics among English poets and scholars. The immediate effect, as George Saintsbury points out, was over zealous admiration and imitation of the classics.[17] However, simultaneously a

sense of nationalistic pride and identity was spreading among Englishmen of the period, and scholars like Ascham and Wilson, despite their worship of the classics, also felt that English ought to be made into a more respectable literary language. We noted in the previous chapter that the state of English in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as a poetic language was precarious indeed, and that this anxiety was strongest among the poets themselves. This situation was further heightened in the sixteenth century; and therefore, language purists like Ascham and Wilson abhorred inkhorn terms and other foreign borrowings, they feared that Chaucer's poetry, especially because of its eminence, threatened the current English tongue with archaism. As a result of this attitude, scholars like Ascham and Wilson are to no small degree blind to the heritage and continuity of their native literature. In their devotion to the classics they inadvertently blotted out a thousand years of English literary tradition; and one consequence of this was that in their deliberations over the proper diction and meters for English poetry, they failed to realize that Greek and Latin rhythms had to be adapted to English, and not English to classical metrics. But regrettably this epiphany was slow in coming; and therefore, these critics, and others like them, viewed English poetry, past and present, through a glass colored by the classics, with the result, as Saintsbury notes, that their own English past,

especially Chaucer, was in effect more foreign to them than

Homer, Virgil, and Ovid.[18]

One typical example of a poet and critic attempting to

understand and analyze Chaucer's rhythms via classical

principles is George Gascoigne in his Certayne Notes of

Instruction Concerning The Making of Verse or Ryme in

English, 1575. Gascoigne's essay is a case for using

classical meters in English poetry, and thus he falls in

line with Ascham and Wilson not only in his preference for

classical prosody, but in urging poets to use ordinary and

common diction, and to avoid polysyllabic words that "smell

of the Inkhorne,"[19] as well as strange, ambiguous, and

obscure terms. Regarding poetic language, then, Gascoigne

is clearly in the critical tradition of plain style which we

have witnessed becoming dominant in the sixteenth century.

What is notable about Gascoigne's treatise, however, is that

in his discussion of classical meters he cites Chaucer as a

precedent-setting English poet who has employed quantitative

tri-syllabic rhythms:

> Also our father Chaucer hath vsed the same libertie
> in feete and measures that the Latinists do vse: and
> who so euer do peruse and well consider his workes, he
> shall finde that although his lines are not alwayes of
> one selfe same number of Syllables, yet, beyng redde
> by one that hath vnderstanding, the longest verse, and
> that which hath most Syllables in it, will fall (to
> the eare) correspondent vnto that whiche hath fewest
> syllables in it: and like wise that whiche hathe in
> it fewest syllables shalbe founde yet to consist of
> woordes that haue such naturall sounde, as may seeme
> equall in length to a verse which hath many moe
> syllables of lighter accentes.[20]

Moreover, what seems still more interesting about this comment is that in the midst of an age which has lost the secret--if we may call it that--of Chaucer's versification, Gascoigne comes near the truth of comprehending the rhythms of Chaucer's lines, even though his theory is based upon the false hypothesis that Chaucer's metre was classical. We wonder, also, what Gascoigne might have suggested about Chaucer's metrics if he had considered pronouncing the final -e- in Chaucer's language. As it was, Gascoigne's remark drew little or no notice, and it would be precisely two centuries before the true nature of both Chaucer's language and his versification are correctly analyzed in Thomas Thyrwhitt's now famous introductory essay to his 1775 edition of The Canterbury Tales. With respect to our purpose in this paper, however, Gascoigne's thesis about Chaucer's meter is, at best, of dubious critical value since the working principles upon which it is constructed are erroneous. As such, it is perhaps best viewed as a clever, though intelligent, guess, which is primarily significant for revealing the perspective from which Chaucer's poetry was judged by the rhetorical-classical school. The contribution of this amorphous group to the development of Chaucer criticism is, then, a limited one. Ascham's comment about Chaucer's ability at character description and portrayal is by far the most innovative suggestion during these formative years of the English Renaissance.

The reasons why Chaucer criticism did not advance

markedly by these scholars and poets--for it is apparent

that they knew and were interested in his work--lies not so

much with them, but rather in the spirit of the age in which

they lived. Today all the fuss over classical rhythms, as

well as the argument over rime, seems quite absurd because

we enjoy the comfort and benefit of historical hindsight.

Thus, William K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Cleanth Brooks, in their

Literary Criticism: A Short History, state the obvious when

they mention that: "The reasons for the success and necessity

of English rhyme . . . lie in such practical differences

between the vernacular and the classical languages as that

between stress and quantity."[21] However, they offer a

plausible explanation as to why the controversy lasted as

long as it did, and remained as serious as it did:

> Yet an age which theorized with the classical part of
> its mind was bound to find fault with a difficult and
> often cramping technique which had indeed flourished
> first in the "monkish" ages, and to dream of a return
> to a supposed classic state of majesty--plain and
> regular, like the columns of the Greek temples.[22]

Chaucer and his work were part of those "monkish ages," and

so he seemed irregular in form, obscure in matter, and

incomprehensible in language to the humanists and classicists

because of the principles which predetermined what they

would look for in his poems, and how they would evaluate

what they found in them. The result, as we have seen, is

that Chaucer was often faulted for the wrong reasons, as

with Wilson, or analyzed on unapplicable principles, as with

Gascoigne. However, to point the finger at these few critics

is to overstate the case against them, for later sixteenth

century commentators, such as Sidney, Puttenham, Webbe, and

also Spenser, would likewise find themselves embroiled in

the polemics of classical influence and practice in English

poetry, but this issue would not be as influential a factor

in their judgments of Chaucer's poetry as it had been for

Englishmen a generation earlier.

Before we proceed to this next phase of sixteenth

century criticism of Chaucer, however, a passage by the

English historian, Raphael Holinshed, deserves our atten-

tion. Although admittedly not a critic, Holinshed con-

tributes a perceptive evaluation of Chaucer, along with

Gower, which is noteworthy both for its historical perspec-

tive and its accurate assessment of the place which the

poetry of these two men occupies in terms of their own

cultural epoch and their legacy to later English poets who

wished to employ the native language for their medium.

Holinshed is examining the reign of Henry IV in his

Chronicles, specifically _The Laste volume of the Chronicles_

of England, Scotlande, and Irelande, 1577, when he turns to

a discussion of the poets of the period:

> But nowe to rehearse what writers of oure English
> nation liued in the days of this Kyng. That renowmed
> Poete Geffreye Chaucer is worthily named as principall,
> a man so exquisitely learned inall sciences, that hys

matche was not lightly founde anye where in those
dayes, and for reducing our Englishe tong to perfect
conformitie, hee hath excelled therein all other. .
. . John Gower . . . studyed not only the common
lawes of this Realme, but also other kindes of
literature, and grew to greate knowledge in the same,
. . . applying his endeuor with Chaucer, to garnish
the Englishe tong, in bringing it from a rude
unperfectnesse, unto a more apt elegancie: for
whereas before those dayes, the learned vsed to write
onely in latine or Frenche, and not in Englishe, oure
tong remayned very barreyne, rude, and unperfect, but
now by the diligent industrie of Chaucer and Gower,
it was within a while greately amended, so as it grew
not only to be very riche and plentifull in wordes,
but also so proper and apt to expresse that which the
minde conceyued as any other usuall language.[23]

Clearly, Holinshed owes the main points of his tribute

of these two poets to the praise showered upon them by the

English Chaucerians, Lydgate in particular, and the Scottish

Chaucerians as well. Chaucer is once again lauded for his

erudition, that summa of medieval intellectual virtues, and

more importantly for regularizing and enriching, with Gower,

the English language as a poetic vehicle, that is, for

"bringing it from a rude unperfectnesse, unto a more apt

elegancie." What then follows is a comment which seemed

common enough in the fifteenth century, but which goes alto-

gether unvoiced during the sixteenth except for this lone

utterance by Holinshed, namely, the significance of the

poetry of Chaucer and Gower because their work was written

in their native English in the face of the dominance and

popularity of Latin and French. In their hands, claims

Holinshed, English became so "very riche and plentifull in

wordes" and "so proper and apt to expresse that which the

minde conceyued" that it became a poetic language as
respectable as any on the Continent. The omission of this
laurel, especially for Chaucer, throughout the sixteenth
century reveals, perhaps, the implications of the above
statement by Saintsbury that for most of the sixteenth
century Chaucer and the medieval English past were more
foreign to Englishmen than such remote authors as Homer,
Ovid, and Virgil. Given the preoccupations of the literary
critics of the period, however, it is perhaps appropriate--
though nonetheless ironical--that a historian should offer
such a sound judgment on the importance of the poetry of
Chaucer and Gower. Nevertheless, Holinshed's statement
rightly belongs in the category of literary history rather
than the history of criticism. Its significance for us
rests primarily in Holinshed's historical understanding of
Chaucer's achievement in his own time, for this perspective
on Chaucer's poetry would eventually lead critics centuries
later, particularly in the twentieth, to further appreciation
and insights into the nature of his genius and artistry in
relation to his own cultural milieu. We can turn our atten-
tion therefore to a more complex and fruitful period of
Chaucer criticism which finds itself struggling to cope with
and explain what seemed to be the perplexing moral vision in
some of Chaucer's poems.

In the 1580's English literary criticism--and by
logical extension criticism of Chaucer's poetry--underwent
an abrupt change in both its direction and nature. This is
not to say that the classical question was by any means
settled, for such poets as Spenser and Sidney would continue
to experiment with classical rhythms. However, external
events were unavoidably intruding into the arena of literary
theorizing in the late 1570's and the 1580's. Public
Puritan opposition to poetry, the theatre, and entertainment
in general, was intensifying rapidly and, it might be added,
vehemently. The poets and scholars felt it most acutely in
1579, when Stephen Gosson published his infamous School of
Abuse. The complete title of this tract is perhaps the
simplest method of setting forth its content and purpose, as
well as the specific objects of Gosson's wrath: "The School
of Abuse: Containing a pleasant invective against Poets,
Pipers, Players, Jesters, and such like Caterpillars of a
Commonwealth: Setting up the Flag of Defiance to their
Bulwarks, by Prophane Writers, Natural Reason, and common
experience: A Discourse as Pleasant for them that favor
learning, as profitable for all that will follow virtue."[24]
Gosson mentions in his "pleasant invective" that "I have been
matriculated myself in the school where so many abuses
flourish,"[25] that is, Gosson had been at one time a writer
for the theatre. Thus, what made his attack so stinging was

that the arrow came from a former dramatist-poet who some

believe had a promising future in the theatre until his

conversion, or defection, as the case may be. In addition,

for reasons still unknown, Gosson dedicated The School of

Abuse to Sir Philip Sidney, whose thoughtful response we

shall discuss in a moment.

The principle of Gosson's argument is simplistically

moral, for the essence of his thesis is that poetry and

drama lead their audience to a licentious, sensual, and

immoral life. As the following passage illustrates, Gosson

sees poets as arch-hypocrites and their works as veils of

deceit:

> But if you looke well to Epaeus horse, you shall
> find in his bowels the destruction of Troy: open the
> sepulchre of Semyramis, whose title promiseth suche
> wealth to the hynges of Persia, you shall see nothing
> but dead bones: rip up the golden ball that Nero
> consecrated to Jupiter Capitollinus, you shall find
> it stuffed with the shavinges of his bearde: pul off
> the visard that poets maske in, you shall disclose
> their reproch, bewray their vanitie, loth their
> wantonnesse, lament their folly, and perceive their
> sharpe sayinges to be placed as pearles in dunghils,
> fresh pictures on rotten walles, chaste matrons apparel
> on common curtesans. These are the cuppes of Circes,
> that turne reasonable creatures into brute beastes; the
> balles of Hippomenes, that hinder the course of
> Atalanta, and the blocks of the Devil, that are cast in
> our wayes to cut of the race of toward wittes. No
> marveyle though Plato shut them out of his schoole, and
> banished them quite from his common wealth, as
> effeminate writers, unprofitable members, and utter
> enemies to vertue.[26]

However, it should be noted that Gosson claims that he is

protesting the excesses and abuses of poetry and drama, and

not the arts themselves. Nevertheless, he finds the present

state of English poetry so deplorable and immoral that he
has absolutely nothing of redemptive value to say for it.
Professor G. Gregory Smith remarks that Gosson "rarely
ventures to touch on the art or theory of poetry and the
drama";[27] but instead he repeatedly hammers home his main
tenet that poetry and drama must serve a moral purpose. But
since he is so heavily weighted in favor of overt didac-
ticism, Gosson is unable to achieve any sane balance between
teaching and entertaining, that is, he is unwilling to
accept the necessity of the latter as perhaps a means to the
former. O. B. Hardison, Jr., therefore, seems correct when
he states that "Gosson is less important as a critic than a
representative of the attitudes against which Renaissance
poetry had to be defended."[28] Gosson's role, then, was to
act unwittingly as the occasion for some of the most
significant apologetic essays on the nature and purpose of
poetry in the history of literary criticism.

To challenge Gosson on his own terms, however, was
exceedingly difficult, and it is in this counterattack not
only against Gosson, but to growing Puritan dissent towards
literature, that Chaucer's poetry plays an integral role.
Yet Chaucer's importance was something of a paradox to those
who sought not only to defend him from such charges as
Gosson's, but to use him as an example of a moral poet as
well. He had been hailed for nearly two centuries as the
founder and refiner of English poetry; we noted that Ascham

even called him "our English Homer." He was in England the poet without a peer up to that time, and thus he had to serve as a model for those who sought to justify the continuing existence of English poetry. However, some of his poems, especially a few of The Canterbury Tales, proved acutely embarrassing for any critic who attempted to make a case for Chaucer as a purposeful moral poet. Despite the hostility towards poetry in general, and Chaucer's work in particular, a handful of dedicated critics not only are capable of praise for Chaucer's poems, but also offer reasons for their claims of his moral sincerity. What they finally achieve later in the century is, as we shall see, a fuller and more complete awareness of his moral vision, and more significantly of his artistic integrity both in form and theme, that is, an insight into how his statement upon the human condition is inseparably wedded to the dramatic presentation of his characters in action.

The first man to attempt a formal response to Gosson is Thomas Lodge in his Defence of Poetry, 1579. Lodge defends poetry by employing the traditional medieval thesis that it must be read allegorically. This argument, of course, dates from Augustine, and it formed the basis of medieval apologia for creative literature. Moreover, it became a standard of interpretation with the rhetorical school in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries in England. However, the most immediate source of this theory for the Elizabethans

is Boccaccio's defense of pagan literature in his _Genealogy_
_of_ _the_ _Gods_. Boccaccio's ideas became known to Englishmen
in the early sixteenth century, and Stephan Hawes in his
Pastime _of_ _Pleasure_ seems to have been the first English
poet to have incorporated Boccaccio's interpretation into
his discussion of rhetoric and poetry in that poem. Since
Hawes was a poet of considerable popularity in the sixteenth
century, it seems plausible that the _Pastime_ _of_ _Pleasure_
played no small role in disseminating Boccaccio's theories
among scholars and poets in this century. Thus, Lodge's
argument, although an ancient and venerable one, is also
topical and current in the sixteenth century.

In his _Defence_ Lodge points to the logical fallacy of
Gosson's _School_, for he charges Gosson with looking "only
vpon the refuse of the abuse, nether respecting the
importance of the matter nor the weighte of the wryter."[29]
He then lists a number of poets important in "matter" and
"weighte," that is, stature. Chaucer is among these, but
Lodge's comment is a brief: "Chaucer in pleasant vein can
rebuke sin vncontrold; and, though he be lauish in the
letter, his sence is serious."[30] Unfortunately, Lodge offers
no further discussion to this general statement about
Chaucer's poetry; for his purpose at this juncture in his
essay is merely a catalogue, and not an extended analysis of
any poet or group of poets. Nevertheless, in this instance
the omission of further discussion of Chaucer is regrettable,

for Lodge's remark is undeniably accurate in its overall assessment of Chaucer's poems. Once again we notice a mention of the mirthful tone of Chaucer's work coupled with an affirmation of his didactic purpose, when Lodge says that Chaucer "in pleasant vein can rebuke sin vncontrold." Then, like Wilson, Lodge slights Chaucer for being too "lauish in the letter," although he does insist upon the seriousness of Chaucer's "matter." What makes Lodge's remark perhaps so crucial, and in his time unique, is that it restates some of the conviction about Chaucer's poetry which fifteenth century commentators seemed so certain of, especially with regard to the moral integrity of his work.

For our purpose, therefore, Lodge's essay and passing reference to Chaucer are of significance for a couple of reasons. While Lodge's _Defence_ is, in the words of Professor Smith, "almost as uncritical as Gosson's, . . . it has superior historical importance in defining a special trend in the later development of Elizabethan criticism."[31] That is, the allegorical theory which Lodge uses will become the backbone of most of the major apologetic cases for poetry, with the notable exception of Sidney's. As such, Lodge is only the first of many literary critics who will seek to reclaim this theory from their medieval heritage. More specifically, Lodge's brief comment on Chaucer can serve as a thesis sentence for almost all subsequent Chaucer criticism in the sixteenth century; for other critics will

strive to answer just how Chaucer rebukes sin in a pleasant

vein while simultaneously presenting a morally serious vision

of man to his readers. Thus Lodge merits his niche in our

journal because he utters the all-important generalization

which others, in their turn, will labor to make specific

and concrete in their more extended criticism of Chaucer's

poetry.

We noted above, though only in passing, that Gosson

dedicated The School of Abuse to Sir Philip Sidney.

Apparently the dedication was unauthorized by Sidney, and

posterity is still wondering why Gosson chose to do so. At

any rate, Sidney seems to have felt compelled to respond, for

his Apologie for Poetry is almost a point by point refutation

of Gosson's charges. The central themes and importance of

Sidney's treatise should require little, if any, review or

elaboration, since it is perhaps the most widely read piece

of critical prose from the sixteenth century. What is

relevant for our purpose are the numerous instances in which

Sidney refers to Chaucer and his poetry, always in commenda-

tory terms and always as exemplary evidence in his case for

poetry. There never seems to be any doubt in Sidney's mind

about the moral integrity of Chaucer's poetry, or that

Chaucer rightfully deserves the praises awarded to him by

previous critics of his work.

Most of Sidney's comments on Chaucer are traditional

commonplaces; however, he does contribute a couple of

interesting suggestions about Chaucer's poetry which reveal
an emerging shift in critical taste and a dawning awareness
of still another quality in Chaucer's art. For example,
early in the _Apologie_ Sidney argues that since the dawn of
civilization poetry has been "the first lightgiuer to
ignorance, and first Nurse, whose milk by little and little
enabled them to feed afterwards of tougher knowledges."[32]
He then cites from ancient Greece to the present poets
notable for their learning, and Chaucer is among them.
Sidney's reference to Chaucer is by way of a comparison with
the three great Italian poets of the fourteenth century--Dante,
Boccaccio, and Petrarch:

> So in the Italian language the first that made it
> aspire to be a Treasure-house of Science were the
> Poets Dante, Boccace, and Petrarch. So in our
> English were Gower and Chawcer.
>   After whom, encouraged and delighted with theyr
> excellent fore-going, others haue followed, to
> beautifie our mother tongue, as wel in the same
> kinde as in other Arts.[33]

Besides being mentioned for his erudition, Chaucer is, along
with Gower, granted his time-worn laurels as one of the first
English poets to make the language into a workable and
dignified poetic vehicle. Although we have heard this
repeatedly before, two aspects of Sidney's comment are
noteworthy. The first is the continued grouping of Chaucer
with Gower, which we pointed to in the commentary of Hawes,
and which we have more recently seen in the passage from
Holinshed's _Chronicles_. The obvious omission, of course, is

Lydgate, who by this time is no longer regarded as the equal of Chaucer or Gower. The most probable reason for Lydgate's eclipse is the distaste for the stylized rhetorical mode of poetry which we have seen criticized by Wilson and Gascoigne, for example. What is ironical, however, is that the shift in taste leads to an implicit value judgment about Lydgate with which literary history has wholeheartedly concurred.

Moreover, despite the fact that Sidney's tribute to Chaucer is to some extent a century-old cliché, the total remark is quite significant--at least from the perspective of the development of English criticism--as being perhaps an initial, though embryonic, attempt at comparative criticism. That is, the achievement of Chaucer and Gower regarding their successful use of the vernacular in poetry is compared with a corresponding movement in Italy. We have noted in Holinshed's commentary on Chaucer, and especially among the English and Scottish Chaucerians, that Chaucer's poetry was cited as a landmark in both the employment of and the improvement of the native language in poetry. But Sidney's comment adds for the first time some all-important historical light on Chaucer's and Gower's work in terms of its relationship to Continental literature; that is, that the poetry of Chaucer and Gower--and by extension, other poems by their contemporaries--is part of a much larger cultural

movement, and not an isolated occurrence on an island off the coast of Europe in the fourteenth century.

Furthermore, although Sidney's comment reveals on his part an awareness of Italian literature contemporary with Chaucer and Gower, Sidney makes no attempt to suggest any possible influence by Dante, Boccaccio, or Petrarch upon either of them. Whether or not Sidney considered the possibility must remain a matter of pure speculation, and a regrettable omission from the Apologie. However, the accepted thesis of literary historians is that the Apologie is the document which brought Aristotle's Poetics into the mainstream of English literary criticism. Sidney, however, inherited Aristotle through the writings of Minturno, Scaliger, and Castelvetro, all of whom are known for their rigid theories regarding genres and form and the primacy of moral teaching in poetry. What these three critics did was to fuse Aristotle's ideas with their own long-standing belief in Horace's dictum about teaching and delighting in his Ars Poetica. The result was that an Horatian-Aristotelian principle emerged which was to influence and shape criticism for several generations of critics. Perhaps the two primary essentials in this theory, which are most pertinent to Chaucer criticism, are the emphasis on moral teaching and the notion of decorum in character and language. The first was the easier to assimilate, understand, and work with for critics such as Sidney. The second, the concept of

decorum, involves the dramatic propriety of the speech and actions of a character in conjunction with a corresponding style appropriate to the particular genre of the poem. During the 1580's this latter standard is neither employed nor discussed as much as the former, although this principle of decorum will become a popular critical term and norm in the 1590's. The concentration on the moral question is, of course, due to the current debate over literature started by Gosson and then taken up by others on both sides of the issue. The shift to decorum in the last decade of the century marks, as we shall see, a turning to more genuinely aesthetic and critical principles as sources for literary judgments.

For Sidney, therefore, the _Ars Poetica_ of Horace is still the cornerstone which underlies his concept and definition of poetry. One of the most oft-quoted passages in the _Apologie_ is Sidney's distinction between verse and true poetry on the basis of the moral purpose in the poet's work; for Sidney insists that:

> [I]t is not riming and versing that maketh a Poet, no more then a long gowne maketh an Aduocate, who though he pleaded in armor should be an Aduovate and no Souldier. But it is that fayning notable images of vertues, vices, or what els, with that delightfull teaching, which must be the right describing note to know a Poet by.34

Sidney then illustrates this assertion with examples of characters who have become archetypes symbolizing their

respective virtue or vice, and Chaucer's Pandarus is among

them:

> See whether wisdome and temperance in Vlisses and
> Diomedes, valure in Achilles, friendship in Nisus
> and Eurialus, euen to an ignoraunt man carry not an
> apparent shyning: and, contrarily, the remorse of
> conscience in Oedipus, the soone repenting pride of
> Agamemnon, the selfe-deuouring crueltie in his
> Father Atreus, the violence of ambition in the two
> Theban brothers, the sowre-sweetnes of reuenge in
> Medaea, and, to fall lower, the Terentian Gnato and
> our Chaucers Pandar so exprest that we now vse their
> names to signifie their trades; and finally, all
> vertues, vices, and passions so in their own naturall
> seates layd to the viewe, that we seem not to heare
> of them, but cleerely to see through them.35

If for no other reason, Sidney's reference to Pandarus

is memorable because Chaucer is the only English poet placed

in the esteemable company of these Greeks and Latins.

Moreover, Sidney's statement is far more than just a list of

moral exempla, for he points to the universal quality of

these particular characters, who have become such enduring

creations on the competitive stage of literature. Their

characters have become, as it were, their fate; and their

destiny is in turn a reflection upon the poet who gave them

their existence. Thus, "Chaucers Pandar" is praised as an

illustration of how a poet should and can teach delightfully

through his characters, and do so without overt moralizing.

Sidney's remark further reveals that he harbors no doubts

about Chaucer's moral integrity in Troilus and Criseyde, but

instead it demonstrates his belief that Chaucer has presented

his characters in action within an ethical framework.

Obviously, all of this is not explained by Sidney, but rather it is implied in the context of his remarks. What he seems to be hinting at essentially is that a poet's moral vision is somehow embodied in the dramatic interplay of his characters. Simple though it is, this implicit suggestion by Sidney is indeed a fresh and original one which will become a key idea for later sixteenth century critics in clearing away any remaining uncertainty about moral subversion in Chaucer's work.

In addition, Sidney's own preference for romance—and, it might be added, his skill in writing it—seems to help explain his great admiration for Chaucer's _Troilus and Criseyde_, for he mentions it several times in the _Apologie_. Perhaps the most noted reference to the _Troilus_ occurs during Sidney's examination of the heritage of English poetry, past and present. Sidney claims that: "Chaucer, vndoubtedly, did excellently in hys _Troylus and Cresseid_; of whom, truly, I know not whether to meruaile more, either that he in that mistie time could see so clearely, or that wee in this cleare age walke so stumblingly after him. Yet had he great wants, fitte to be forgiuen in so reuerent antiquity."[36] While this statement is by no means as critically significant as the preceding one on Pandarus, Sidney's adoption of the historical view links him with Tuke and Holinshed. Like them, Sidney too regards Chaucer's age as a "mistie time"—which only serves to substantiate further

Professor Saintsbury's notion of how far away Chaucer seemed to his sixteenth century readers and critics. Furthermore, like Tuke, Sidney believes that Chaucer wrote magificently considering the shortcomings of his culture; and, therefore, Chaucer's "great wants"--though Sidney never suggests what they might be--are to be forgiven him and the blame laid to the age in which he lived. Despite Sidney's and the general Elizabethan misconception of the Middle Ages, however, Sidney's own appreciation of medieval literature extends beyond Chaucer; for example, he has praise for the ballad of "Chevy Chace" just prior to his remarks on Chaucer. With respect to Sidney's attempt to offer a judicial perspective on the poetry of England, that is, what he knew of it, Wimsatt and Brooks insist that we should "look on these latter details of Sidney's _Defence_ as constituting an early landmark in the progess of English literary self-consciousness and literary history."[37] In other words, Sidney makes an all-important effort to discern the continuity and value of earlier English poetry in relation to the poetry of the classical periods in Greece and Rome.

Historians of literary criticism, like Wimsatt and Brooks, are unanimous in asserting the central importance of Sidney's _Apologie_ in the development of English criticism. While this is undeniably so, it is not correspondingly true of Sidney's role in the growth of Chaucer criticism. However, this is not to say that Sidney plays a negligible

or insignificant part in ever-increasing discussion and appreciation of Chaucer's poetry in the Elizabethan era, for his remarks on Chaucer's poetry in the _Apologie_ are relevant for several reasons. In spite of the fact that Sidney's conception of poetry is preconditioned by his own moral view of it, he never questions Chaucer's moral integrity as a poet. Rather, as we have seen, by way of his reference to Pandarus he cites Chaucer as an exemplar of the poet who is both capable of moral sincerity and affording insturction in a delightful, that is, pleasurable, manner. In addition, even though Sidney does not analyze how Chaucer teaches and delights, we have speculated that Sidney senses it is through the ethos of Chaucer's characters in action in his poems. Thus, like Lodge, Sidney too believes that Chaucer's sense is serious, that is, morally upright, and this is indeed significant at a time when many of Chaucer's poems are being criticized, even condemned, for their apparent immorality.

Finally, Sidney is perhaps the first English critic to employ the comparative method, for it is this principle which seems to be the basis for listing Chaucer and Gower with their approximate Italian contemporaries regarding their achievements in their respective native languages. Here again the reference to Pandarus is illustrative, for Sidney's courage in placing Chaucer in such select and revered company is a critical approach which we will not witness until

Dryden, who will dare to compare Chaucer with Ovid.

Moreover, Sidney's _Apologie_ is equally significant for our

purposes as a touchstone by which to observe and relate

other and more detailed Chaucer criticism in the Elizabethan

period, for the ideas and principles in the _Apologie_

reappear as functional maxims and norms among subsequent

critics, some of whom will discuss Chaucer's poetry at

greater length than Sidney. However, this is not to imply

that the critical standards are original with Sidney, but

rather that he is the earliest progeny in England of the

critical marriage between Horatian and Italian Aristotelian

criticism. The formalistic theories of the Italian critics

were slow to take hold in England, though, and it is not

until the seventeenth century that they become oft-used

critical tools and prejudices. In the meantime, the tradi-

tional Horatian response, upon which so many of Sidney's

arguments are based, continues to be the prevailing yard-

stick for judging the merits and defects of a poet's work.

That the primacy of the Horatian approach should endure

despite the introduction of Aristotle is understandable

because the moral clamor against poetry persists, and

Horace's dicta are more appropriate responses than the

structural or generic theories from the _Poetics_.

Sidney's _Apologie_, however, is not the only essay of its

type during this decade; in fact, the 1580's have been

characterized by Professor Joel E. Spingarn as a period of

apologetic criticism for poetry.[38] Two other treatises

stand out as deserving of our attention and discussion,

namely, George Puttenham's Arte of English Poesie,

c. 1584-88, and William Webbe's Discourse of English Poetrie,

1586. Like Sidney, both men attempt in the course of their

essays a critical survey of English poetry up to their time,

and both have considerable praise for Chaucer. However,

while Puttenham's examination is the more detailed and

accurate, Webbe's analysis of Chaucer's work is the better

of the two, for he clarifies a couple of suggestions which

Puttenham offers on Chaucer's poetic achievement. We shall,

therefore, initially discuss Puttenham's Arte, and then look

at Webbe's Discourse as both a complementary critical

response as well as a noticeable advancement, in some

respects, over Puttenham's comments.

Puttenham begins his critical survey with the observa-

tion: "It appeareth by sundry records of bookes both

printed & written that many of our countrymen haue painfully

trauelled in this part."[39] Then for all English poets as a

group he expresses his appreciation:

> [F]or hauing by their thankefull studies so much
> beautified our English tong as at this day it will be
> found our nation is nothing inferiour to the French
> or Italian for the copie of language, subtiltie of
> deuice, good method and proportion in any forme of
> poeme, but that they may compare with the most, and
> perchance passe a great many of them.[40]

The continuance of this tribute into the latter sixteenth

century seems to indicate a growing national consciousness

of a distinctly English literary tradition, rather than a

blind adherence by Puttenham to an outworn cliché. English

critics are becoming not only cognizant of the poetic

achievements in their past, but they are steadily becoming

more and more convinced of the quality and prestige of their

heritage. However, all these critics, such as Sidney,

Puttenham, and Webbe, refuse to discuss English poetry prior

to the late fourteenth century because, as Puttenham states:

> I will not reach aboue the time of king Edward the
> third and Richard the second for any that wrote in
> English meeter, because before their times, by
> reason of the late Normane conquest, which had
> brought into this Realme much alteration both of
> our langage and lawes, and there withall a certain
> martiall barbarousness, whereby the study of all
> good learning was so much decayd as long time after
> no man or very few entended to write in any laudable
> science: so as beyond that time there is little or
> nothing worth commendation to be founde written in
> this arte.[41]

Although Puttenham, like Tuke, Holinshed, and Sidney, also

views and portrays the Middle Ages as an underdeveloped and

even barbarous cultural epoch, he is the first to explain

why sixteenth century Englishmen saw it as such when he

points to the radical alteration in "langage and lawes"

wrought by "the late Normane conquest." Again, of course,

ignorance of twelfth and thirteenth century works is the

cause for this distorted picture, which is why "there is

little or nothing worth commendation to be founde" in these

two centuries. But more importantly, Puttenham is the first

to distinguish Chaucer's age, the late fourteenth century,

from the earlier Norman periods. The result is that
Puttenham's criticism of Chaucer is shaped by a different
historical perspective than, for example, Tuke's and
Sidney's, and thus, for Puttenham, Chaucer will seem closer
and more comprehensible than he has hitherto been when he
existed, in Sidney's words, "in that mistie time."

Puttenham next catalogues and discusses the gallery of
English poets, and Chaucer and Gower are among "those of the
First age,"[42] along with Lydgate, "& that nameles, who wrote
the Satyre called Piers Plowman."[43] The reference to Piers
Plowman as a "Satyre" is most significant at this point,
because this is one of the earliest uses of the term in
English criticism, and the understanding of the corrective
purpose of satire by late sixteenth century critics will
rapidly lead to some remarkable insights into Chaucer's
thematic and artistic intentions. Puttenham, however, does
not suggest that Chaucer is a satirist; but his application
of the term, "Satyre," to Piers Plowman is an essential
detail for later Chaucer criticism, since it establishes
evidence for a certain aesthetic awareness on the part of
audiences and critics alike in the late sixteenth century
which shall be discussed further in our remarks on Webbe's
Discourse.

Puttenham arrives at his critical evaluation of Chaucer's
poetry via a curious route; for he lists all the reputable
poets from Chaucer to those "in her Maiesties time,"[44] among

whom are "Sir Philip Sydney, Sir Walter Rawleigh, Master
Edward Dyar, Maister Fulke Greuell, Britton, Turberuille,
and a great many other learned Gentlemen, whose names I do
not omit for enuie, but to auoyde tediousnesse, and who
haue deserued no little commendation."[45] (The bewildering
omission, of course, is Spenser, who had already published
The Shepheardes Calender, which had been highly praised by
Sidney in his Apologie.) Following this enumeration of
poets, Puttenham then quite unexpectedly asserts: "But of
them all particularly, this is myne opinion, that Chaucer,
with Gower, Lidgat, and Harding, for their antiquitie ought
to haue the first place, and Chaucer, as the most renowned
of them all, for the much learning appeareth to be in him,
aboue any of the rest."[46] The foundation of Chaucer's
primacy is still the medieval notion of the poet's work as
the storehouse of wisdom and knowledge. However, Puttenham's
further remarks reveal a thorough acquaintance and true
appreciation of the nature and achievement of the diversity
of Chaucer's poems, for he continues:

> And though many of his bookes be but bare translations
> out of the Latin & French, yet are they wel handled,
> as his bookes of Troilus and Cresseid, and the Romant
> of the Rose, whereof he translated but one halfe,--the
> deuice was Iohn de Mehunes, a French Poet: the
> Canterbury tales were Chaucers owne inuention, as I
> suppose, and where he sheweth more the naturall of his
> pleasant wit then in any other of his workes; his
> similitudes, comparisons, and all other descriptions
> are such as can not be amended. His meetre Heroicall
> of Troilus and Cresseid is very graue and stately,
> keeping the staffe of seuen and the verse of ten; his

other verses of the <u>Canterbury Tales</u> be but riding
ryme, neuerthelesse very well becomming the matter
of that pleasaunt pilgrimage, in which euery mans
part is playd with much decency.[47]

Puttenham's comments in this passage exhibit a flexi-

bility in judgment which has been altogether uncharacteristic

of any preceding Chaucer critic with the possible exception

of Caxton. Although Puttenham is mistaken about the <u>Troilus</u>

being a direct translation, it is interesting to note his

knowledge of sources for Chaucer's poems, and his acknowl-

edgment of Chaucer's debt to the Continental tradition.

While his praise of Chaucer as a translator is important,

Puttenham's remarks on <u>The Canterbury Tales</u> are of primary

importance, as are the reasons why he says what he does

about them. In an age shadowed by the influence of the

classics, Puttenham points to the originality of Chaucer's

"inuention" in the <u>Tales</u>, and comments upon the naturalness

of Chaucer's "pleasant wit" in them, in addition to the

aptness, accuracy, and realism of the "similitudes, compari-

sons, and all other descriptions." The aesthetics of Gothic

naturalism still seem to be a possible influence in such

terminology as that employed by Puttenham, for present in

his statement are the preference for the mirthful and

pleasure-giving element in Chaucer's poems, along with the

response to the verisimilitude of Chaucer's descriptive

language. Moreover, Puttenham's reference to the "naturall"

appropriateness of Chaucer's similitudes and comparisons in

The Canterbury Tales indicate a fresh awareness of Chaucer's poetic technique and their function in his poems; that is, Puttenham seems to sense that Chaucer's figures of speech are the technical reasons for his "pleasant wit." What is perhaps emerging in this sort of critical comment is a dawning consciousness of the interplay between content and form, theme and technique, vision and tone in a literary work. As we noted, Aristotle's Poetics are in the air in Elizabethan England, and it is probable that even though critics like Puttenham are consciously working with traditional ideas and values, the formalistic principles of the Poetics are creeping into literary value judgments.

This is more clearly discernible when Puttenham labels the meter of Troilus and Criseyde as "Heroicall," and defines it as "very graue and stately, keeping the staffe of seuen and the verse of ten." He is, of course, describing rime royal, but his use of the term "Heroicall" seems to indicate that a metrical standard exists by which to measure and identify the various verse forms used by English poets. This same notion underlies his remarks on the meter of The Canterbury Tales, when he calls it "riding rime." The phrase was contributed to Elizabethan criticism by Gascoigne in his Certayn Notes of Instruction, when he erroneously tagged iambic pentameter couplets, such as those in some of the Tales, as "riding rime,"[48] that is, as a native English accentual free verse form which to Gascoigne seemed close to

classical rhythm. At any rate, Gascoigne's suggestion about

riding rime was generally accepted to be true and correct,

and the form was attributed to Gower, Lydgate, and others,

as well as to Chaucer.

However, Puttenham's misconception about the precise

metre of The Canterbury Tales is overshadowed by his insis-

tence upon the aptness of the verse form to "the matter of

that plesaunt pilgrimage," and his belief that "euery mans

part is playd with much decency." This comment is one of the

earliest direct uses of the idea of decorum as a critical

standard. We noted that the concept is present in Sidney's

Apologie; but since Sidney's essay is not published until

1595, its public influence--though it seems certain that the

Apologie circulated privately--is delayed a decade or more

after its composition. Yet Puttenham is certainly cognizant

of the principle, for in this passage "decency" seems clearly

to mean to Puttenham and his reader the quality of artistic

or dramatic decorum. Puttenham's comment, therefore, bears

striking similarity in its implications to Sidney's reference

to Pandarus as an example of moral teaching through

masterful characterization.

Thus, it seems probable that what the criticism of

these two men indicates at the moment is an awareness--albeit

a limited and undefined insight--that the world of the

characters in a poem is not the world of men who are indeed

living; but rather that these characters exist in a created
fiction, and as such the creations inhabiting that world
must be responded to within the framework of their creator's
vision, theme, style, and perhaps artistic and moral purpose.
Although this is by no means a clear distinction to Sidney
and Puttenham, their critical remarks seem at least to imply
it, and later sixteenth century criticism to some degree
seems to confirm and clarify this new critical attitude.
Since no historian of English literary criticism appears
to have offered this suggestion, it must remain at this
juncture a matter of personal speculation with the hope that
it can be substantiated further in this chapter. But if it
is true, then not only would this recognition of the dual
vision of the artist by the critic help account for the high
degree of lasting value judgments in Elizabethan criticism,
but it would also posit in its own way an explanation for
the unequalled creative literature of this period. For only
when reality and fiction are distinguishable by the artist
is he capable of portraying the former through his art--as
Chaucer did; and only when the critic perceives this
difference between illusion and reality regarding the literary
work is he able to comprehend and judge how well the artist
has succeeded. At any rate, it may be that Sidney and
Puttenham have perhaps unwittingly pointed the way to this
critical epiphany in their implicit realization that a

poet's vision and purpose are somehow rooted in his characters.

As a final note on Puttenham, it should be added that his praise for The Canterbury Tales is singularly unorthodox and uncommon at this time. Sidney's preference for Troilus and Criseyde, for example, is more typical of the age's taste for romance. The popularity of Sidney's Arcadia is a reflection of this, as well as Spenser's Faerie Queene, which was being composed at this time. Puttenham, therefore, is alone in the 1580's in his claims for the artistic merits of The Canterbury Tales, and his opinion comes in a period when the Tales were suffering from unprecedented attack-- though none of it genuinely critical or aesthetic--on moral grounds. The irony in Puttenham's tribute to the Tales, however, is that he cites them for reasons other than moralistic ones, although he seems quietly assured of their ethical certitude not only by insisting on their dramatic "decency," but by refraining from pointing an accusing finger at the poem at all. In addition, his remarks on the mirth and descriptive realism in the Tales are a further continuance of that native critical response begun by Caxton which has been steadily developed throughout the sixteenth century. What seems of lasting significance in Puttenham's evaluation of Chaucer's work, then, is his skillful fusion of a traditional response to Chaucer with the suggestions

being offered to literary criticism in the theories gleaned
from the _Poetics_ and passed to England through the Italian
Aristotelians. With Puttenham, therefore, yet another
shift--though again a cautious one--is made in the direction
of more formalistic criticism of Chaucer's poetry, which
will in time act as a counterbalance to the one-sided
emphasis on his role as a teacher and philosopher of moral
wisdom which has stubbornly lingered on since its inception
with the English Chaucerians. Chaucer the artist is
beginning to emerge to critics like Sidney and Puttenham,
and the initiative taken by these two men, and more so by
William Webbe, will see fruition in the late 1590's when
Chaucer critics are able to integrate the thematic and
formalistic approaches into a new synthesis regarding the
art of his poetry. Puttenham's place in the development of
Chaucer criticism is, therefore, a vital one, and on the
evidence of what he says of Chaucer alone his _Arte_ seems
worthy of the tribute by J. W. H. Atkins that "it is, next
to Sidney's, perhaps the most valuable contribution to
literary criticism at this date."[49]

William Webbe's _Discourse of English Poetrie_, 1586, on
the other hand, is both a complementary and supplementary
essay to Puttenham's in relation to their respective
criticism of Chaucer's work. Webbe does not mention
individual poems in Chaucer's canon, but instead he offers a

more generalized pronouncement than Puttenham's more
specific comments on various works. That is, Webbe posits
an evaluation of Chaucer's poetry which he seems to extend
to the total range of Chaucer's achievement. While the
primary theme of Webbe's criticism is within the framework
of the Horatian tradition, it nevertheless contains an
insight which is not only innovative, but also touches upon
the heart of Chaucer's satirical genius as a poet.

Like Puttenham and Sidney, Webbe too attempts a survey
of English poets, and like his two predecessors, Webbe
intends for his historical examination to be judicial as
well. Thus his discussion of Chaucer not only awards the
poet his time-honored laurels, but also includes the most
elaborate analysis to date of why and how Chaucer is the
exemplar of Horace's thesis that a poet must both teach and
delight. It is in the course of this explanation that Webbe
hints that the mirth and pleasure in Chaucer's poems are in
no small way the result of his comic intentions and
techniques:

> Chawcer, who for that excellent fame which hee
> obtayned in his Poetry, was alwayes accounted the
> God of English Poets (such a tytle for honours sake
> hath beene giuen him), was next after if not equall
> in time to Gower, and hath left many workes, both
> for delight and profitable knowledge, farre exceeding
> any other that as yet euer since hys time directed
> theyr studies that way. Though the manner of hys
> stile may seeme blunte and course to many fine
> English eares at these dayes, yet in trueth, if it be
> equally pondered, and with good judgment aduised, and
> confirmed with the time wherein he wrote, a man shall

perceiue thereby euen a true picture or perfect shape
of a right Poet. He by his delightsome vayne, so
gulled the eares of men with his deuises, that,
although corruption bare such sway in most matters,
that learning and truth might skant bee admitted to
shewe it selfe, yet without controllment, myght hee
gyrde at the vices and abuses of all states, and
gawle with very sharpe and eger inuentions, which he
did so learnedly and pleasantly, that none therefore
would call him into question. For such was his bold
spyrit, that what enormities he saw in any, he would
not spare to pay them home, eyther in playne words,
or els in some prety and pleasant couert, that the
simplest might espy him.[50]

Webb's assessment of Chaucer's poetry is without doubt

the richest critical storehouse thus far. His admission

that Chaucer "was alwayes accounted the God of English

Poets" is historically important, because it is the revival

of a tribute to Chaucer which has been dormant for over a

half century. Webbe's phrase, moreover, is most probably an

echo of the frequent references to Chaucer in the guise of

Tityrus, the god of shepherds, in Spenser's Shepheardes

Calender, which had been published in 1579, and which had

almost immediately become the most popular poem in

Elizabethan England. When we glance briefly at Spenser we

will note the zeal of his singular campaign for Chaucer and

his poetry, and what effect this seems to have on the

reception of Chaucer's poems in the late sixteenth century.

Thus, it would seem, especially for those interested in

Chaucer's reputation, that he is at last regaining his

throne as the monarch of English poets. Nevertheless,

Webbe perceives that the title is purely an appreciative and

honorary one when he comments parenthetically that the "tytle" has been given to Chaucer "for honours sake."

What is far more valuable in this passage is that Webbe supplies reasons for his judgment. First of all, he insists that Chaucer "hath left many workes, both for delight and profitable knowledge, far exceeding any other that as yet euer since hys time directed theyr studies that way." Horace is the critical norm which Webbe has chosen, then, upon which to base his evaluation of Chaucer's poetry. But before he explains just how Chaucer illustrates Horace's dictum, he confronts the main thrust of Chaucer criticism for the last half century, that is, the argument that Chaucer's language is incomprehensible and his metre irregular. In the face of this well-established opinion, Webbe asks his reader to consider the possibility that even though Chaucer's "stile may seeme blunte and course to many fine English eares at these dayes," perhaps we ought to acknowledge the changes in the language and culture which have taken place since Chaucer's time. If we do this, states Webbe, "a man shall perceiue thereby euen a true picture or perfect shape of a right Poet." Like Sir Brian Tuke and Sidney, Webbe seems confident about Chaucer's style in his own century; but Webbe seems as equally assured that Chaucer is not to blame for the confusion over his poetry two centuries later. Rather, he lays the fault not only to the

language, but to the refusal by Elizabethan critics to try and approach Chaucer's age with some sympathy and comprehension. Webbe ᴐuggests to his contemporaries that if they were willing to view Chaucer from the perspective of "the time wherein he wrote," then they might better be able to appreciate his qualities as a poet. While the suggestion in itself is of undeniable importance, a subsequent defense of it with illustrations would at this time have been invaluable. But instead Webbe turns his attention to the development of what is the main theme of his criticism of Chaucer, namely, that Chaucer is so successful as a moral teacher because of the imaginative and aesthetic pleasure which he affords his readers.

This hypothesis has been recently offered, as we have seen, by Sidney; but Webbe goes further by attempting an explanation of how Chaucer manages both to entertain his readers and also project a vision of moral integrity. The result is a critical statement which is both moralistic, that is, thematic, and formalistic. In the last two sentences of the above-quoted paragraph Webbe explains that Chaucer has "so gulled the eares of men with his deuices" that although it appears that corruption prevails in many of his narratives and that moral truth does not seem to be noticeable, Chaucer has, in fact, subjected the "vices and abuses of all states" to a scathing attack through his use of "sharpe and eger inuentions." And Chaucer has done this

"so learnedly and pleasantly, that none therefore would call
him into question," that is, impugn his moral rectitude. In
addition, Chaucer possessed such a "bolde spyrit" that no
matter "what enormities he saw in any," the poet would not
hesitate "to pay them home, eyther in playne words, or els
in some prety and pleasant couert." The final clause of
this sentence is also of interest, for Webbe feels that even
"the simplest might espy" Chaucer's moral intentions.

A two-fold critical significance emerges from Webbe's
suggestion. In the first place, Webbe acknowledges Chaucer's
skill as a poetic craftsman in his reference to the poet's
"deuices" and "inuention." Webbe no doubt has rhetorical
techniques in mind, but this is the first admission of
Chaucer's artistry in terms of his craftsmanship since the
late fifteenth century. Secondly, and more important, is
Webbe's remark about Chaucer as a morally corrective poet,
for it is his recognition that a moral norm is present and
at work in Chaucer's comic poems that makes this insight so
valuable. This, then, is the initial avowal both of Chaucer
as a comical poet, and also that his comedy is moralistic in
its intent.[51] The critical worth of Webbe's perception can
hardly be overstated, for it is a major step in the direc-
tion and development of genuinely formalistic and aesthetic
Chaucer criticism. Again, it is unfortunate that Webbe does
not expand upon his suggestion; but his thesis about the

moral framework of Chaucer's comedy becomes the cornerstone
of two memorable essays on Chaucer's poetry in the 1590's,
namely, Francis Beaumont's "Letter to Thomas Speght" and
Speght's own critical introduction to his 1598 edition of
Chaucer's works, both of which will be discussed at length
later in this paper.

Finally, the last sentence of Webbe's evaluation is
interesting in that Webbe mentions the diversity of
Chaucer's poetic style which exhibits language "in playne
words, or else in some prety and pleasant couert." Like
Caxton, Webbe does not see the variety within Chaucer's
poetic language as a problem; instead, he accepts the
presence of both the native English preference for the plain
and natural along with the sophistication of the courtly
romance tradition with its more ornate and artificial
conceits. Webbe's comment seems to indicate a striking
shift in taste in the quarter century since Thomas Wilson
faulted Chaucer's style for being too courtly. Wilson,
however, rendered his judgment before the publication in
England of Tottel's Miscellany in 1557, which introduced a
variety of Italian and French forms, themes, and modes to
the English reading public. Since then such poetic forms as
the sonnet and rondeau had become overwhelming popular
favorites both for the poet and his audience in Elizabethan
England, especially in the hands of such capable poets as

Wyatt and Surrey. Webbe's casual acceptance, therefore, of
the courtly style in Chaucer's poetry seems to reflect a
growing aesthetic tolerance, and even appreciation, of the
foreign, that is, Italian and French, traditions present in
Chaucer's poems. The effect of this new awareness of the
complex nature of Chaucer's style is that it helps erase the
two centuries of confusion over the rhetorical qualities in
his poetry, for it now begins to become apparent that
Chaucer's qualities as a "rethor poet" are an integral part
of his relationship and debt to the Continental inheritance
in his work. Ironically, then, the introduction of French
and Italian poetry into Elizabethan England resulted in an
increased comprehension of, and liking for, the stylistic
complexity of Chaucer's poetry.

We must not lose sight of the fact, however, that Webbe
rests his case for Chaucer--and, it should be added, for
poetry in general--on Horace's conception of the purpose and
end of poetry. Webbe directly mentions Horace and the Ars
Poetica several times in the Discourse, and in regard to the
Horatian dictum--that precarious scale which critical
theorists are forever weighting in favor of either pleasure
or moral teaching--Webbe himself leans perceptibly towards
the former, for he believes that the poet must first please
or he will fail to impart any moral truths to his readers.
It is, in fact, during a discussion of Horace's well-known

predication about the functions of the poet that Webbe again
alludes to Chaucer's poetry. Webbe cites two of Horace's
key couplets, translates them, and then proceeds to define
how a poet can hope to fulfill Horace's two-fold ideal:

> But once againe, least my discourse runne too farre
> awry, wyll I buckle my selfe more neerer to English
> Poetry: the vse wherof, because it is nothing
> different from any other, I thinke best to confirme
> by the testimony of Horace, a man worthy to beare
> authority in this matter, whose very opinion is this,
> that the perfect perfection of poetrie is this, to
> mingle delight with profitt in such wyse that a
> Reader might by his reading be partaker of bothe;
> which though I touched in the beginning, yet I
> thought good to alledge in this place, for more con-
> firmation thereof, some of hys owne wordes. In his
> treatise _de arte Poetica_, thus hee sayth:
>> Aut prodesse volunt, aut delectare poetae,
>> Aut simul et iucunda et idonea dicere vitae.
> As much to saie: All poets desire either by their
> works to profitt or delight men, or els to ioyne both
> profitable and pleasant lessons together for the
> instruction of life.
>> And againe:
>> Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci,
>> Lectorum delectando pariterque monendo.
> That is, He misseth nothing of his marke which ioyneth
> profitt with delight, as well delighting his Readers
> as profiting them with counsell. And that whole
> Epistle which hee wryt of his _Arte of Poetrie_, among all
> the parts thereof, runneth cheefelie vppon this, that
> whether the argument which the Poet handleth be of
> thinges doone or fained inuentions, yet that they
> should beare such an Image of trueth that as they
> delight they may likewise profitt. For these are his
> wordes: Ficta voluptatis causa sint proxima veris.
> Let thinges that are faigned for pleasures sake haue a
> neere resemblance of the truth. This precept may you
> perceiue to bee most duelie obserued of Chaucer: for
> who could with more delight prescribe such wholsome
> counsaile and sage aduise, where he seemeth onelie to
> respect the profitte of his lessons and instructions?
> or who coulde with greater wisedome, or more pithie
> skill, vnfold such pleasant and delightsome matters of
> mirth, as though they respected nothing but the telling
> of a merry tale? So that this is the very grounde of

right poetrie, to giue profitable counsaile, yet so
as it must be mingled with delight.[52]

Webbe's criticism is, therefore, rooted in a venerable

and century-old traditional mold, and the continued presence

of Horace as a critical guide and mediator is another

example of the unconscious continuity in literary theorizing

between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Webbe's

assertion for an equal, perhaps primary, status for pleasure

in the aesthetic experience of literature is yet a further

development of that critical response which we noted in

Caxton, The Booke of Curtesye, the Scottish Chaucerians,

Skelton, and Puttenham. Webbe's emphasis is also possibly a

reflection of the increasingly secular nature of Elizabethan

literature. But what is of dominant importance in Webbe's

above remarks is his insistence that those "thinges that are

faigned for pleasures sake haue a neere resemblance of the

truth"; and then his referral to Chaucer's poetry as a model.

Given what he says of Chaucer in the following sentences, it

seems that what Webbe interprets Horace to mean by "veris"

is moral truth; for Webbe is certain that even though Chaucer

may seem at times to care for "nothing but the telling of a

merry tale," moral wisdom and norms are inherent in his

poems. Webbe thus offers in this comment a further clarifica-

tion of Lodge's thesis about Chaucer that even "though he be

lauish in the letter, his sence is serious."[53] Sidney and

Puttenham concurred with this opinion regarding Chaucer's

moral integrity; and Webbe employs the judgment as a _de_
facto premise upon which he bases his evaluation and
discussion of Chaucer's merits as a poet, not a moralist--a
distinction which can be all too easily blurred when a
critic attempts to defend an artist's moral vision. For
not only does Webbe never confuse the two roles, he under-
stands and explains the relationship of the two when he
rhetorically questions what poet "with more delight"
contains more "wholesome counsaile and sage aduise" than
Chaucer. That is, Webbe values Chaucer as an artist who
consistently entertains his audience while he dramatizes his
moral vision of man. Thus, Webbe avoids the critical trap
of trying to deal with the issue of morality in Chaucer's
poems in irrelevant religious terms; and instead he
approaches Chaucer's work aesthetically with the result that
he judges Chaucer as a poet writing in a moral world and
projecting his view of the ethos of that world in the
delightful experience of his poems.

In Webbe's criticism of Chaucer, then, we possess what
is the fullest and most explicit statement on Chaucer's
achievement up to this point. Webbe displays no vacillation
in his claim that a moral norm is operative in Chaucer's
poems. Nor does he apologize for the culture of Chaucer's
age or the poet's difficult language; but instead he urges
scholars and critics to approach both on their own terms.

Moreover, Webbe touches upon the true nature of Chaucer's comical genius, which, as we have said, signals the dawn of a major advance in Chaucer criticism within a few short years. Related to this is Webbe's contention that a poet must please if he wishes to teach, and that at this Chaucer supremely succeeds. Finally, Webbe also seems to comprehend and even appreciate the diversity in Chaucer's poetic diction and style.

Webbe's critical commentary is, therefore, a high point in these early annals of Chaucer criticism. If we combine Puttenham and Webbe as counterparts, then they become a landmark of considerable importance; for they herald a drastic shift in Chaucer's critical reception in the ensuing decade of the 1590's. Since perhaps there is no more positive proof of a poet's popularity than a completely new edition of his work, it might be mentioned that Chaucer was to be reissued in 1598 by Thomas Speght. In addition, the finest tribute ever paid by one poet to another was forthcoming in Spenser's Faerie Queene in 1596. Three men—Sidney, Puttenham, and Webbe—are the precursors and to no small extent the initiators of this new direction in both Chaucer's reputation and the critical attitude towards his work. When we consider the nature of their criticism of Chaucer's poetry, we can appreciate the distance which Chaucer criticism has come in the few short years since the

uncertainty of Ascham, Wilson, and Gascoigne over Chaucer's language and metre, and especially his moral ambiguity. Such apologists as Sidney, Puttenham, and Webbe seem to sense the greatness in Chaucer's poems, but they are only able to illuminate it partially in their discussions of his work. They each touch upon qualities in Chaucer's poetry which later will come to be recognized as major attributes of his artistry; but it would be for other critics to explore in greater depth what these critics have discovered and suggested.

We might pause for a moment to ponder whether there is any cause and effect logic behind the sudden shift towards Chaucer after nearly three-fourths of a century of hesitancy over his poetry. We have implied that the vital catalyst was Gosson's _Schoole of Abuse_, which can be viewed as an example of the widespread moral indignation of the Counter Reformation in Europe. But since the _Schoole_ was aimed at literature, especially drama and poetry, Gosson's attack produced a backlash of defenses, which, though they were theoretical statements, sought to secure evidence for their cases from already extant poetry. These English apologists could point to any number of classical Greek and Roman poets as models, but when it came to their own native heritage, they confronted that traditional triumvirate of Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate. The latter two certainly posed no

glaring moral problem; however, the poet claimed to be the

best of the three did. Thus, it was only logical that

critical apologists like Sidney, Puttenham, and Webbe should

so determinedly seek to establish Chaucer's moral serious-

ness. The nature of their essays, therefore, reflects a

shift in aesthetics in England in the late sixteenth century.

We noted that Gothic naturalism seems to have continued to

shape both artistic creativity and critical responses well

into the century. In the later sixteenth century, though,

the introduction of Italian modes, themes, and forms into

English poetry brought with them the elements of an emerging

aesthetic development called mannerism, which is in many

respects a continuation of Gothic naturalism. Arnold Hauser

marks the widespread influence which mannerism exerted on

the culture of sixteenth century Europe when he compares it

to the role of Latin in the Middle Ages: "In the sixteenth

century the Italian language and Italian art attain universal

influence reminiscent of the authority of Latin in the

Middle Ages; mannerism is the particular form in which the

artistic achievements of the Italian Resnaissance are spread

abroad."[54] Then he points out the shift in creative and

critical ideology which resulted from this pervasive

influence of mannerism: "The conscious attention of the

[mannerist] artist is directed no longer merely to choosing

the means best adapted to his artistic purpose, but also to

defining the artistic purpose itself--the theoretical

program is no longer concerned merely with methods, but also

with aims."[55]   This is precisely what we have witnessed in

the apologetic essays by Sidney, Puttenham, and Webbe.

Specifically, this indicates the break from the medieval

preoccupation with rhetorical figures of speech to the

larger question of the aims of the poet--and this is why

Horace became so important to this kind of criticism, for he

offered a resolution to both the manneristic tendencies and

also the more pressing contemporary issue of morality in

literature.   Ironically, then, while some Englishmen resented

the presence of Italian characteristics in their literature,

the fusion led, as we have noted, to a more comprehensive

understanding of the nature and purpose of poetry, as well as

to insights into the moral complexity of Chaucer's work and

an appreciation for his own debt to Continental traditions

and conventions.   The mannerist concern for the artist's aims

may also have stimulated the discovery of Chaucer's satiric

intents and how essential they are to his artistry.

Criticism of Chaucer's poetry in the 1580's is,

therefore, the product of a fusion of such disparate factors

as the influx of Italian forms and theories enjoined with

the Puritan attacks on literature.   And once again, literary

critics have seized upon what was topically dominant at the

time for their main ideas and norms.   But as we have seen,

tradition was not without its effect as well, and the end result, as always, is that criticism of Chaucer continues to build upon itself both from the materials of the past and those of the present. Nowhere is this more evident than in the 1590's, where echoes of the fifteenth century are sung by Spenser in conjuction with, and contrast to, the criticism of Beaumont and Speght, both of whom seem inexplicably modern in their sound judgments and pronouncements upon Chaucer's achievement. It is with a feeling of justified excitement, then, that we turn to this climactic period of Chaucer criticism where we find both his reputation and his critical reception secure at the top of Fortune's wheel for a few brief years before both will plunge into a long night of neglect in the seventeenth century.

CHAPTER III

FOOTNOTES

[1]D. S. Brewer, "Images of Chaucer: 1386-1900," in Chaucer and Chaucerians, p. 248.

[2]See F. J. Furnivall, "Hindwords," in Francis Thynne's Animadversions upon Speght's first (A.D. 1598) Edition of Chaucer's Works (1865; rpt. New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. xxvi; and Thomas R. Lounsbury, Studies in Chaucer, I, 266.

[3]Caroline F. E. Sprugeon, ed., Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion: 1357-1900, I, 80.

[4]Sir Brian Tuke, "Dedication to Thynne's Chaucers Workes," in Francis Thynne's Animadversions, pp. xxiv-xxvi.

[5]John Skelton, The Boke of Phyllyp Sparowe, in John Skelton: Poems, ed. Robert S. Kinsman, p. 50.

[6]D. S. Brewer, "Images of Chaucer: 1386-1900," in Chaucer and Chaucerians, p. 249.

[7]Roger Ascham, Toxophilus, ed. E. Arber (Westminster: A. Constable and Co., Ltd., 1902), p. 54.

[8]Ascham.

[9]Ascham.

[10]Roger Ascham, _A Report and Discourse written by Roger Ascham, of the affaires and state of Germany and the Emperour Charles his court duryng certaine yeares while the sayd Roger was there._, in _The Whole Works of Roger Ascham_, ed. Rev. Dr. Giles (London: John Russell Smith, 1864), III, 6.

[11]J. W. H. Atkins, _English Literary Criticism: The Renascence_ (1948; rpt. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1968), p. 95.

[12]Arnold Hauser, _The Social History of Art_, II, 4.

[13]Hauser.

[14]Hauser.

[15]Thomas Wilson, _The Arte of Rhetorique_, in _English Literary Criticism: The Renaissance_, ed. O. B. Hardison, Jr. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1963), p. 38.

[16]Wilson, pp. 38-39.

[17]George Saintsbury, _A History of English Criticism_ (London: William Blackwood & Sons, Ltd., 1962), p. 98.

[18]Saintsbury, p. 99.

[19]George Gascoigne, _Certayne Notes of Instruction Concerning the Making of Verse or Rhyme in English_, in

English Literary Criticism: The Renaissance, ed. O. B.
Hardison, Jr., p. 78.

[20]Gascoigne, p. 77.

[21]William K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Cleanth Brooks, Literary
Criticism: A Short History, p. 159.

[22]Wimsatt and Brooks.

[23]Raphael Holinshed, The Chronicles of England,
Scotlande, and Irelande (London: John Harrison, 1808),
III, 58-59.

[24]Wimsatt and Brooks, Literary Criticism: A Short
History, p. 168.

[25]Wimsatt and Brooks.

[26]Stephen Gosson, The Schoole of Abuse, in English
Literary Criticism: The Renaissance, ed. O. B. Hardison, Jr.,
pp. 87-88.

[27]G. Gregory Smith, ed., Elizabethan Critical Essays
(Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1904), I, 63.

[28]O. B. Hardison, Jr., ed., English Literary Criticism:
The Renaissance, p. 85.

[29]Thomas Lodge, Defence of Poetry, in Elizabethan
Critical Essays, ed. G. Gregory Smith, I, 69.

[30]Lodge.

[31]G. Gregory Smith, ed., <u>Elizabethan Critical Essays</u>,
I, 63.

[32]Sir Philip Sidney, <u>An Apologie for Poetrie</u>, in
<u>English Literary Criticism</u>: <u>The Renaissance</u>, ed. O. B.
Hardison, Jr., p. 100.

[33]Sidney, pp. 100-101.

[34]Sidney, p. 107.

[35]Sidney, p. 112.

[36]Sidney, p. 137.

[37]Wimsatt and Brooks, <u>Literary Criticism</u>: <u>A Short
History</u>, p. 170.

[38]Joel E. Spingarn, <u>Literary Criticism in the
Renaissance</u> (1899; rpt. New York: Harcourt, Brace, &
World, Inc., 1963), p. 163.

[39]George Puttenham, <u>The Arte of English Poesie</u>, in
<u>Elizabethan Critical Essays</u>, ed. G. Gregory Smith, II, 61-62.

[40]Puttenham, p. 62.

[41]Puttenham.

[42]Puttenham.

[43]Puttenham.

[44]Puttenham.

[45]Puttenham, pp. 63-64.

[46]Puttenham. p. 64.

[47]Puttenham.

[48]Gascoigne, Certayne Notes of Instruction, in English Literary Criticism: The Renaissance, ed. O. B. Hardison, Jr., p. 82.

[49]Atkins, English Literary Criticism: The Renascence, p. 176.

[50]William Webbe, A Discourse of English Poetrie, in Elizabethan Critical Essays, ed. G. Gregory Smith, I, 241.

[51]A problem of terminology has obviously arisen in this chapter regarding what terms should be used to define, as precisely as possible, the meaning of certain remarks by critics. We noted Puttenham's use of the word, Satyre, with reference to Piers Plowman. Further confusion occurs with Webbe because he offers us no labels which we can use as generic or critical referents. Accordingly, the terms, comic, comical, and comedy are employed with reference to Webbe's comment for two reasons. The first is that they

have become accepted labels for several narratives in The Canterbury Tales; and secondly, Chaucer is consciously compared to the comic dramatists of Rome in Francis Beaumont's "Letter," which indicates an understanding of Chaucer's comic tales in relation to the nature of Roman comedy. The imprecision, however, is not resolved this easily, for Puttenham's identification of Piers Plowman as Satyre and the substance of Webbe's remarks imply at least a partial awareness of the purpose and function of certain qualities or techniques which we might call satirical. But to presuppose an understanding of the term satire, as we define it today--or, for that matter, as the Restoration and eighteenth century defined it--is, of course, invalid. However, a resolution may lie, especially for our purposes in this chapter, in some distinctions offered by Professor John Peter in his book, Complaint and Satire in Early English Literature (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1956). Professor Peter points to the prolific imitation of classical satire in England from 1577-97, but he notes that classical satire is fused by the Elizabethans with the medieval complaint, thus creating a hybrid form which defies precise definition. Peter, therefore, suggests the term satyre-- which Puttenham has used--as a label which is applicable to the Elizabethan notion of what satire was supposed to be. Peter explains and defends his choice by arguing that satyre:

sums up the whole field of Satire and Complaint as seen through Elizabethan eyes. Failing to make the distinction that has been offered between Complaint and Satire proper, the Elizabethans naturally thought of the whole tract of literature covered by these terms as a unity. They lumped together the pagan ferocity of Juvenal at his most bitter with the Christian gravity and indignation of Langland (does not Puttenham tell us that "He that wrote the Satyr of _Piers Ploughman_" was evidently "a malcontent of that time"?), and they imported into the classical satires that they read a didactic and reformative intention "more like to sermons or preachings than otherwise" which, though it is difficult to dismiss as irrelevant, puts the emphasis perceptibly awry. On the defects of their perceptions here, however, we need not dwell. What we should notice is that they tended inevitably, seeing the whole field together in this way, to assess the rediscovered satires of the older civilization as prototypes for their own country's earlier achievements, and to accept the Roman conception of Satire as the Platonic form or fixed mark from which their forefathers, regrettably, had departed more and more. (p. 109)

What is perhaps most relevant in Peter's hypothesis is that the Elizabethans "read a didactic and reformative intention" into Satyre, for it is this thematic intent in Chaucer's poetry which Webbe has alluded to, and which both Beaumont and Speght will discuss at greater length. We shall, therefore, in the remainder of this paper employ the term satyric, instead of satiric, when it is felt that the word is appropriate. In addition, the terms, comic and comedy, shall be used as well because an increasing understanding of the mode is evident in the late sixteenth century, due in part perhaps to the suggestions offered to English criticism by the generic analysis of literature in Aristotle's _Poetics_.

[52]Webbe, _A Discourse of English Poetrie_, in _Elizabethan Critical Essays_, I, 250-51.

[53]Thomas Lodge, _Defence of Poetry_, in _Elizabethan Critical Essays_, ed. G. Gregory Smith, I, 69.

[54]Arnold Hauser, _The Social History of Art_, II, 105-6.

[55]Hauser, p. 100.

CHAPTER IV

THE 1590's

The temptation to by-pass the bributes to Chaucer sung
by Edmund Spenser is not altogether unjustified. In the
first place his praises of Chaucer can hardly be said to
contribute to a deeper critical understanding of Chaucer's
poetry; and secondly, the substance of most of what Spenser
says is an echo of fifteenth--rather than sixteenth--century
response to Chaucer's work. However, Spenser's uninhibited
worship of Chaucer may serve as an indication of both the
love for, and appreciation of, Chaucer's poems in the late
sixteenth century. That is, while Spenser's commentary on
Chaucer may be for the most part acritical, others of
Chaucer's readers and critics, particularly Beaumont and
Speght, who share Spenser's enthusiasm will offer some
original and penetrating suggestions about the art of
Chaucer's poetry. Spenser's view of Chaucer serves, then,
primarily as a reflection of his age's attitude towards
Chaucer and his poems.

Spenser's indebtedness to--and even imitation of--
Chaucer's style is an established literary fact. His

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earliest public acknowledgment of this appears in <u>The</u>

<u>Shepheardes</u> <u>Calender</u>, 1579, wherein he presents Chaucer in

the guise of Tityrus, the god of shepherds. Perhaps the

most memorable of his eulogies to Chaucer is in "June":

> The God of shepheards Tityrus is dead,
> Who taught me homely, as I can, to make.
> He, whilst he lived, was the soueraigne head
> Of shepheards all, that bene with loue ytake:
> Well couth he wayle his Woes, and lightly slake
> The flames, which loue within his heart had bredd
> The while our sheepe about vs safely fedde.
>
> Noew dead he is, and lyeth wrapt in lead,
> (O why should death on hym such outrage showe?)
> And all hys passing skil with him is fledde,
> The fame whereof doth dayly greater growe.
> But if on me some little drops would flowe
> Of that the spring was in his learned hedde
> I soone would learne these woods, to wayle my woe
> And teache the trees, their trickling teares to shedde.[1]

And, of course, the final six lines of the "Enuoy" to the

poem:

> Goe lyttle Calender, thou hast a free passeporte,
> Goe but a lowly gate emongste the meaner sorte
> Dare not to match thy pype with Tityrus hys style
> Nor with the Pilgrim that the Ploughman playde awhyle,
> But followe them farre off, and their high steppes adore
> The better please, the worse despise, I aske no more.[2]

Spenser states that Chaucer is his poetic master and teacher,

lauds Chaucer for his ability as a lyrical love poet and a

teller of "mery tales," prays that "some little drops" of

Chaucer's creative spirit and genius might fall on him, and

then finally in the "Enuoy" humbles himself before so

renowned a deity.

We noted in the previous chapter that the 1580's marked

a rather radical change in both the nature and direction of

Chaucer criticism. It might be argued, therefore, that
Spenser's glorification of Chaucer in The Shepheardes
Calender may have in part inspired the remarks on Chaucer by
such critics as Sidney, Puttenham, and Webbe. While it
seems logical to concede that Spenser's attitude towards
Chaucer signals a forthcoming shift in taste for his poetry,
this argument rests upon the perspective and evidence
afforded by hindsight. Thus, it might be better if we
remember that The Shepheardes Calender is very much a poem
of the 1570's when the influence of the classics was still
primary, and that the obvious model for the poem is the
eclogue form, especially as it was practiced by Virgil. It
is for these latter reasons that the above passages did not
introduce the preceding chapter.

On the other hand, Spenser's tribute to Chaucer in The
Faerie Queene, particularly in Book Four, is a more accurate
reflection of the immediate contemporary critical attitude
towards Chaucer's poetry, for The Faerie Queene was being
composed in the latter 1580's and the early 1590's and was
published in two segments in 1590 and 1596. While Spenser's
evaluation of Chaucer remains unchanged from the time of The
Shepheardes Calender, the aesthetic tastes, and to some
degree the standards, of his countrymen have changed, and
this is why the eulogy to Chaucer in Book Four is a keynote
to the critical response to Chaucer's work in these years.

The passage on Chaucer forms a sort of prelude to Spenser's attempt at this juncture in the poem to write a continuation and conclusion to The Squire's Tale which Chaucer left unfinished in The Canterbury Tales. In Spenser's version the Squire has just returned to Sir Blandamour and Sir Paridell to inform them that the two knights and two ladies they have just encountered are: "Couragious Cambell, and stout Triamond, / With Canacee and Cambine linckt in louely bond."[3] The narrator then briefly digresses upon Chaucer in the following stanzas:

> Whylome as antique stories tellen vs
>> Those two were foes that fellonest on ground,
>> And battell made the dreddest daungerous,
>> That euer shrilling trumpet did resound;
>> Though now their acts be no where to be found,
>> As that renowmed Poet them compyled,
>> With warlike numbers and Heroicke sound,
>> Dan Chaucer, well of Englishe vndefyled,
> On Fames eternall beadroll worthie to be fyled.
>
> But wicked Time that all good thoughts doth waste,
>> And workes of noblest wits to nought out weare,
>> That famous moniment hath quite defaste,
>> And robd the world of threasure endlesse deare,
>> The which mote haue enriched all vs heare.
>> O cursed Eld the cankerworme of writs,
>> How may these rimes, so rude as doth appeare,
>> Hope to endure, sith workes of heauenly wits
> Are quite deuourd, and brought to nought by little bits?
>
> Then pardon, O most sacred happie spirit,
>> That I thy labours lost may thus reuiue,
>> And steale from thee the meede of thy due merit,
>> That none durst euer whilest thou wast aliue,
>> And being dead in vaine yet many striue:
>> Ne dare I like, but through infusion sweete
>> Of thine owne spirit, which doth in me surviue,
>> I follow here the footing of thy feete,
> That with thy meaning so I may the rather meete.[4]

Clearly enough, Chaucer's effect on Spenser is creative rather than critical, although a judicial opinion is certainly implied in his insistence that Chaucer is the best of English poets. But the nature of his remarks is antiquated from a critical point of view. His claim that Chaucer is the "well of Englishe vndefyled," and his protest against the ravages of Time are distinct echoes of Hoccleve and Lydgate, not Puttenham and Webbe. What is significant, however, is his decision to complete a tale of Chaucer's in the late sixteenth century; for it must attest to Spenser's confidence that such a story would find a willing and appreciative reading public. Just why Spenser would feel this way is revealing and important to our discussion, for what had occurred in England in the two decades since The Shepheardes Calender was a noticeable shift away from the servile imitation of the classics to a new national consciousness which sought its identity, especially in its literature, in its own history. Not that the classics were by any means ignored, but rather that they came to share--instead of control--the cultural milieu of Elizabethan England. This is recognizable even in The Shepheardes Calender which, though modelled on Virgil's Eclogues, is also fused with the qualities of Chaucer's language and style in so far as Spenser understood it. But The Faerie Queene is more evidently closer in spirit and form to medieval and continental

Renaissance romance than to the classical epic. The point,

however, is that Spenser's affinity for medieval literature

is not in any way unique or unusual. Emile Legouis explains

that Spenser's tribute to Chaucer in Book Four is indeed

symptomatic of what his contemporaries felt about Chaucer

and the English past:

> The different attitude of Spenser is to some
> extent explained by the antiquarian tastes so wide-
> spread in England at the time--I mean the love of
> all the memories of the national past. It was the
> age of the chroniclers Edward Hall and Holinshed,
> of the great antiquarian William Camden, of John
> Stow. The first deliberate attempt was being made
> to revive Anglo-Saxon. . . . Spenser, then lived
> in an atmosphere of heated patriotism favourable
> to the revival and glorification of all that
> pertained to the past of great Britain.
> This accounts for his Chaucer-worship better
> than any natural affinity between him and the
> older poet. . . .[5]

D. S. Brewer concurs in this opinion of Spenser's

judgment of Chaucer expressed in The Faerie Queene when he

calls the stanzas "an expression of political, patriotic,

and poetic self-confidence, which is projected back on

Chaucer."[6] Thus, Spenser's view of Chaucer is subject, to

some degree, to the current mood of nationalistic feeling

for England's literary and historical heritage. But

Spenser's hymn to Chaucer is also a poetic keynote for the

more analytical and evaluative statements about the achieve-

ments of Chaucer's poetry which are shortly to follow

Spenser's proclamations in Chaucer's favor. Spenser's

eulogy becomes, then, in the context of this perspective, a lyrical counterpoint to the genuine critical interest in Chaucer's poetry which existed in the 1590's in England, and which led to at least two of the most significant essays on his work in these early annals of Chaucer commentary.

Perhaps the single most valuable critique of Chaucer's poetry in this decade--and, for that matter, in the century-- is Francis Beaumont's "Letter to Thomas Speght," 1597, which Speght subsequently published in his 1598 edition of The Workes of Geffrey Chaucer. No one piece of Chaucer criticism up to this time displays as intense an appreciation or as deep an understanding of the nature, intentions, and artistry of Chaucer's poems, especially the polemic morality of The Canterbury Tales. (This Francis Beaumont is not the dramatist, but rather his father, a judge who died in 1598.) Beaumont's opening remarks indicate that he is writing to Speght to urge him to carry through his proposed publication of Chaucer's poems. Speght's unwillingness was apparently caused by the two major objections to Chaucer's work which had been repeatedly sounded over the preceding half century, namely, the protestations against the difficulty of Chaucer's language and the alleged immorality of the dialogue and the plots of some of Chaucer's poems, particularly in The Canterbury Tales. Chaucer's poetry and Speght's edition of it were evidently oft-discussed between Beaumont and Speght,

for Beaumont addresses himself to these two issues in a
manner which indicates prior conversation between the two
men on these topics. Beaumont's discussion of these two
questions is not only the fullest treatment Chaucer's work
has received on either subject, but also the most critically
defensible apologia for Chaucer's poetry which we have seen
offered to date. Because Beaumont's "Letter" is available
in full only in Speght's 1598 edition, and in part in
Caroline Spurgeon's Five Hundred Years, it seems practical
that it be reprinted here in more substantial form than it
now appears in Miss Spurgeon's collection, for she has
edited out some commentary on the matters of language and
morality, both essential to this critical survey, especially
the latter. Since it is a letter, Beaumont's tone is
familiar and somewhat personal as he suggests to Speght why
Chaucer's work deserves high praise and also a new edition.
The result is that the reader senses not only a close
friendship between Beaumont and Speght, but an intimate
acquaintance with and love for the poems of Chaucer which, it
would seem, have moved Beaumont to make his request of
Speght. Thus, Beaumont writes with the blend of humility
and confidence which characterizes the interest shared by
these two scholars in the work of Chaucer, as well as
Beaumont's own critical response and assessment of the
qualities and values which he believes are inherent in the
wide range of Chaucer's poetry:

I am sorrie that neither the worthinesses of Chaucers owne praise, nor the importunate praiers of diuerse your louing friends can yet mooue you to put into print those good obseruations and collections you haue written of him. For as for the obiections, that in our priuate talke you are wont to say are commonly alledged against him, as first that many of his wordes (as it were with ouerlong lying) are growne too hard and vnpleasant, and next that hee is somewhat too broad in some of his speeches, and that the worke therefore should be the lesse gratious: these are no causes, or no sufficient causes to withhold from Chaucer such desert of glorie, as at your pleasure you may bestow vpon him. For first to defend him against the first reproofe. It is well knowne to wise and learned men, that all languages be either such as are contained in learning, or such as be used amongst men in daily practice: and for the learned tongues, they having "Iure testamentario," their legacies set downe by them that be dead, wordes must bee kept and continued in them in sort as they were left without alteration of the Testators wils in any thing. But for usuall languages of common practice, which in choise of wordes are and euer will bee subject to chaunge, neuer standing at one stay, but sometimes casting away old wordes, sometimes renewing of them, and alwaies framing of new, no man can so write in them, as that all his wordes may remaine currant many yeares. Which thing Horace rightly noteth, where hee saieth, that wordes in common tongues, like unto fruites, must of necessitie haue their buddings, their blossomings, their ripenings, and their fallings; so that it was impossible that either Chaucer or any man living could keep them from falling after so long a time; And this happened amongst the Latin writers themselves, when the Latine tongue was a spoken tongue, as ours now is, for divers of Statius, Ennuis, and Plautus wordes have been long since by later Latinists rejected.

But yet so pure were Chaucers wordes in his owne daies, as Lidgate that learned man calleth him The Loadstarre of the English language: and so good they are in our daies, as Maister Spencer . . . hath adorned his owne stile with that beauty and grauitie, . . . and his much frequenting of Chaucers antient speeches causeth many to allow farre better of him then otherwise they would. . . .

Touching the inciuilitie Chaucer is charged withall: What Romane Poet hath lesse offended this way than hee? Virgil in his _Priapus_ is worse by a thousand degrees,

and Ovid in de Arte amandi, and Horace in manie places
beyond measure passes them all. Neither is Plautus
nor Terence free in this behalfe; but these two last
are excused above the rest by their due observation of
Decorum, in giving to their comicall persons such
manner of speeches as did best fit their dispositions.
And may not the same be saied for Chaucer? How much
had hee swarued from Decorum, if hee had made his
Miller, his Cooke, and his Carpenter, to haue told
such honest and good tales, as he made his Knight,
his Squire, his Lawyer, and Scholler tell? But
shewing the disposition of these meaner sort of men,
hee declareth, in their prologues and tales, that
their chief delight was in undecent speeches of their
owne, and in their false declamations of others, as
in these verses appeareth:

> Lat be thy leud dronken harlotry,
> It is a sinne and eke a great folly
> To apairen any man, or him defame,
> And eke to bring wives in such blame.

And a little after in excuse of himselfe for
uttering those broad speeches of theirs, he useth
these words:

> Demeth not for Gods love, that I say
> Of evill entent, but that I mote reherce
> Her tales all, ben they better or werce,
> Or els falsen some of my matere.

So that no man can imagine in that large compasse
of his, purposing to describe all men living in those
daies, how it had beene possible for him tohave left
untouched these filthie delights of the baser sort of
people.

And now to compare him with other Poets: His
Caunterbury tales containe in them almost the saime
kind of Argument, that is handled in Comedies; his
Stile for the most part is lowe and like unto theirs;
but herin they differ; Terence followeth Plautus,
Plautus Statius, Statius Menander, and Menander other
Grecians before him. The ring they beate is this, and
farther they goe not: to showethe wantonnesse of some
young women, the loosenesses of many young men; the
craftie schoole-poynts of olde bawdes; the fawning
flatterie of clawing Parasites; the miserie of divers
fonde fathers, who for saving their money keepe their
sonnes so long unmarried, till in the end they provide

some unfortunate matches for themselves; and their
notable follie in committing these children of
theirs, to the attendance of their lewdest and worst
disposed serving men.

Chaucers deuise of his <u>Canterburie Pilgrimage</u> is
merely his owne, without following the example of any
that euer writ before him. His drift is to touch all
sortes of men, and to discouer all vices of that Age,
and that he doth in such sort, as he neuer failes to
hit euery marke he leuels at.

In his five Bookes of Troylus and Creside, and
the Booke of the praise of good women, and of the
mercilesse Ladie, and that of Blaunch, and of his
Dreame (which is in your handes and was neuer yet
imprinted) hee soareth much higher then he did in the
other before; and in his Troylus is so sententious,
as there bee few staues in that Booke, which are not
concluded with some principall sentence; most
excellently imitating Homer and Virgil, and borrowing
often of them, and of Horace also, and other the
rarest both Oratours and Poets that have written. Of
whome, for the sweetnesse of his Poetrie may be saide,
that which is reported of Stesichorus, and as Cethegus
was tearmed Suada medulla, so may Chaucer bee rightly
called, The pith and sinewes of eloquence, and the
verie life it selfe of all mirth and pleasant writing:
besides one gifte hee hath aboue other Authours, and
that is, by the excellencie of his descriptions to
possesse his Readers with a stronger imagination of
seeing that done before their eyes, which they reade,
than any other that euer writ in any tongue. And here
I cannot forget to remember vnto you those ancient
learned men of our time in Cambridge, whose diligence
in reading of his workes them selues, and commending
them to others of the younger sorte, did first bring
you and me in loue with him: . . . .[7]

To the student who has been witnessing the growth of
Chaucer criticism what perhaps seems the most surprising
avowal by Beaumont is that he considers the two dominant
objections to Chaucer's poetry for nearly the entire century
not to be "sufficient causes to withhold from Chaucer such
desert of glorie." Regarding Chaucer's language Beaumont

offers an explanation which remains valid after three and a half centuries. Not since Caxton has any critic so lucidly discussed the problem of England's rapidly changing language. Beaumont establishes his argument by dividing languages into those "that be dead" and "languages of common practice," that is, currently spoken living tongues. A dead language, since it exists in a static form, may be learned by scholars without fear of "alteration of the Testators wils in any thing." However, the fate of a living language, such as English, states Beaumont, is that "choise of wordes are and euer will bee subject to chaunge, neuer standing at one stay, but sometimes casting away old wordes, sometimes renewing of them, and alwaies framing of new." Thus, "no man can so write in them, as that all his wordes may remaine currant many yeares." Beaumont then illustrates his thesis with an analogy to Latin when it was still a living language, and he refers to Horace's simile, in the _Ars Poetica_, which compares the life cycle of a language to the growth and decay of fruit. Since even the Roman writers were victims of a fluctuating Latin tongue, it was inevitable that "divers of Statius, Ennuis, and Plautus wordes have been long since by later Latinists rejected." Accordingly, concludes Beaumont, "it was impossible that either Chaucer or any man living could keep" his own vernacular alive for any extended duration. What seems clearly implicit in

Beaumont's argument is that since this is obviously the case
with every language, it is imperative that the student of
literature and language learn the idioms, phonetics, and
morphology of a language used by earlier writers, especially
those in their own native tongue. Beaumont offers,
therefore, a plausible explanation for the first time as to
why Chaucer's language seems incomprehensible to late
sixteenth century English readers, although he does not
suggest any specific examples or rules for reading or under-
standing Chaucer's English. Presumably, however, Beaumont
realizes this must of necessity be the task of Speght as the
editor of Chaucer's texts.

Granted this conclusion about the nature of language,
then, Beaumont feels free to sum up his case with an opinion
of Chaucer's poetic language which has been _de_ _facto_
accepted for two centuries, namely, that "so pure were
Chaucer's wordes in his owne daies, as Lidgate that learned
man calleth him The Loadstarre of the English language." An
old maxim, to be sure, but Beaumont has finally given it
critical substance with his preceding remarks. More
important, however, is Beaumont's following comment about
Spenser's imitation of Chaucer, for Beaumont insists that
Chaucer's words are "so good . . . in our daies, as Maister
Spencer . . . hath adorned his owne stile with that beauty
and grauitie," with the result that many of Spenser's readers

"allow farre better of him then otherwise they would."

Beaumont is thus the first critic to argue the immediate or

contemporary value of Chaucer's poetic vocabulary for late

sixteenth century English poetry. Moreover, he is even able

to point to a current example of the beneficial influence of

Chaucer's language in the poetry of Spenser--even though

Spenser critics in later centuries would debate the question

with far less enthusiasm and agreement. No Chaucer critic

in the century has dared to suggest what Beaumont does with

regards to the immediate relevance and quality of Chaucer's

language for contemporary poets and their own work. Yet,

in the light of what Beaumont says near the end of the

"Letter," his opinion is by no means a unique one among

Englishmen, at Cambridge in particular, who are acquainted

with Chaucer's poetry.

Beaumont's defense--and we must remember we are dealing

with a legal and judicial mind in the "Letter"--of "the

inciuilitie Chaucer is charged withall" is certainly the most

significant aspect of his argument, and it seems to be sub-

divided, logically at least, into two complementary sections.

However, Beaumont's method in both is similar in that he

defends Chaucer by comparing his poems with the works of

numerous classical writers. Although other critics, such as

Sidney, Puttenham, and Webbe, have used the comparative

argument, it has been to appraise Chaucer with other English

poets, usually of his own time. But Beaumont is the first critic of Chaucer to dare evaluate his achievement in the company of classical poets. It stands as a critical venture which will go unattempted until Dryden, whose extended comparison of Chaucer with Ovid is now a recognized landmark for the beginning of practical criticism. Nonetheless, in Beaumont's "Letter" we witness this same critical methodology being employed, albeit in a far less developed and briefer form.

Accordingly, Beaumont points to Virgil's _Priapus_, Ovid's _de Arte amandi_, and even Horace as examples of worse offenses of "inciuilitie" than the language of some of Chaucer's characters, particularly in _The Canterbury Tales_. Further, Beaumont adds Plautus and Terence to his list of offenders, but states that they have traditionally been "excused above the rest by their due observation of Decorum, in giving to their comicall persons such manner of speeches as did best fit their dispositions." And so, asks Beaumont, "may not the same be saied for Chaucer?" Beaumont's reference to decorum is all-important, for we have noted that Puttenham alluded to it with respect to Chaucer in his _Arte of English Poesie_, when he commented about _The Canterbury Tales_ that "euery mans part is played with much decency."[8] Beaumont, therefore, draws upon the concept of decorum as an aesthetic norm to absolve some of Chaucer's poetry from the acritical charge of immorality levelled against it for the past

century. Unlike Puttenham, however, Beaumont goes to the text of The Canterbury Tales and pinpoints such allegedly offensive characters as the Miller, Cook, and Carpenter, and then attempts to explain and justify why Chaucer gave to them the dialogue and tales he has. How much, wonders Beaumont, had Chaucer "swarued from Decorum, if hee had made his Miller, his Cooke, and his Carpenter, to haue told such honest and good tales, as he made his Knight, his Squire, his Lawyer, and Scholler tell?" Instead, asserts Beaumont, through their language and tales Chaucer has revealed "the disposition," that is, the inner character, "of these meaner sort of men." Beaumont next permits The Canterbury Tales to defend itself by quoting from the Prologue to The Miller's Tale. He first cites the Reeve's angry retort to the drunken Miller in which the Reeve contends--quite hypo-critically, as it turns out, in the light of his own tale-- that it is a sin to slander or "defame" another man. Beaumont seems clearly to sense that Chaucer is calling his reader's attention to the moral or, as the case may be, immoral nature and effect of what the Miller and later the Reeve are about to do. But more significant critically is that somehow Beaumont discerns that the moral question is rooted deeper in the paradox of literary realism or mimesis, although he conceives of it in the more limited terms of decorum, for he quotes from the narrator's apology for what he "mote reherce . . . Or els falsen some of my matere." In

view of what the narrator tells us, then, in conjunction with what Chaucer's intention seems to be in the Tales, namely, "to describe all men living in those daies," Beaumont concludes that it is impossible to think that Chaucer could "have left untouched these filthie delights of the baser sort of people."

Beaumont's insight into the artistic integrity of Chaucer's purpose and achievement in The Canterbury Tales cannot be doubted, and it penetrates to the heart of the debate over the morality of some of Chaucer's poems, and resolves the issue aesthetically, not theologically. Beaumont accomplishes this by basing his argument on the principle of decorum which, as we have noted, appears as a popular critical norm in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries; and more shall be said about the probable source and influence of this critical principle in a moment. In addition, just how Beaumont structures his argument is in some respects equally as fascinating as what he says. Besides his use of the comparative technique, he is the first critic to illustrate and support his opinions with passages from the work under discussion; and thus, in a limited sense, Beaumont becomes the first textual critic--not scholar--of Chaucer.

However, Beaumont is not finished with his defense of Chaucer's "inciuilitie," for after dealing with the specific question of the dialogue and tales of some of the pilgrims,

he seems to feel that a complete discussion of the propriety--perhaps both moral and aesthetic--of The Canterbury Tales must take into consideration the purpose or nature of the poem as comedy. So, once again he turns to classical poets, in particular the comic dramatists of Rome, for his scale of reference for Chaucer. 'Beaumont states that the "Argument" of The Canterbury Tales is the same "that is handled in Comedies"; and, moreover, that the "Stile" of Chaucer's poem is "lowe and like unto theirs," that is, the comic dramatists. But here the similarity ends, asserts Beaumont, for the Roman comediens are all servile imitators of one another, and severely limited in their themes which revolve around the "wantonnesse of some young women, the loosenesse of many young men; the craftie schoolepoynts of olde bawdes; the fawning flatterie of clawing Parasites; [and] the miserie of divers fonde fathers . . . ." These topics form, says Beaumont, the "ring they beate," and farther than this "they goe not." What Beaumont seems to imply about the subject matter of Roman comedy, therefore, is that it demonstrates no evident moral purpose and that it is cramped by its imitation of former drama. In an age which structured its literary values on classical models Beaumont's comments strike a curious, and perhaps surprising, note, especially when weighed in conjunction with the following remark that "Chaucers deuise of his Canterburie

<u>Pilgrimage</u> is merely his owne, without following the example
of any that euer writ before him." Beaumont may be con-
sciously echoing Puttenham's assertion that "the Canterbury
Tales were Chaucers owne inuention,"[9] but whatever the case
may be, once again what is believed to be Chaucer's
originality is referred to as a praiseworthy asset in his
work. The nature of Beaumont's--and by extension
Puttenham's--references to originality is what is important,
not the fact that they are partially in error out of
ignorance of medieval Italian literature, particularly
Boccacio's <u>Decameron</u>. For Beaumont is not citing Chaucer
for radical and unprecedented innovation; instead he has, <u>a</u>
<u>priori</u>, established Chaucer's parallels with the comic
dramatists of Rome in "Argument" and "Stile" to a limited
degree. Thus, it is perhaps the framework of the pilgrimage
which Beaumont seems to be thinking of in the term "deuise,"
and it may be what Puttenham meant by "inuention." In other
words, Beaumont's notion of Chaucer's originality does not
spring from some inexplicable impulse of the moment, but
rather from a sense of Chaucer's debt to a tradition and
what appeared to be the creation of Chaucer's own native
genius. More and more as the stranglehold of the classics
is weakened towards the end of the sixteenth century, a new
awareness of, and respect for, the native elements in
English poems becomes apparent, and Beaumont's criticism of

Chaucer is a case and an example in point. Corresponding developments in the public drama show a similar response on the part of England's audiences and critics; but that is another matter. What we witness in Beaumont is the presence, perhaps subconsciously, of some of that emerging nationalism, which Emile Legouis noted in Spenser's view of Chaucer, coming into play in Beaumont's assessment of Chaucer's work. The result is a suggestion, at least partially correct, about the complexity of Chaucer's art as a product of tradition and the creativity of the individual poet.

Furthermore, in the same paragraph which includes his reference to Chaucer's "deuise" Beaumont notes what he believes to be the moral or corrective purpose of The Canterbury Tales, when he states that Chaucer's "drift is to touch all sortes of men, and to discouer all vices of that Age, and that he doth in such sort, as he neuer failes to hit euery marke he leuels at." This seems to be an extension of Beaumont's earlier remark on Chaucer's "large compasse," and a further clarification of the essential difference between Chaucer's comedy in The Canterbury Tales and the subject matter of the Roman dramatists which Beaumont listed in the preceding paragraph. So again we encounter a critical thesis which we have seen offered before, in this instance by William Webbe in his Discourse of English Poetrie.[10] In fact, Beaumont may owe to Webbe

the genesis of his criticism on this point; but whatever the case, the primal source for both critics is Horace's _Ars Poetica_, and we have discussed how Webbe synthesized his commentary with Horatian principles and theories. So too with Beaumont in his "Letter"; but unlike Webbe, Beaumont never mentions the Horatian dictum of "utile et dulce" in defense of Chaucer. Nevertheless, the _Ars Poetica_ is very much at work in Beaumont's criticism; for example, his concept of decorum, especially of character, is based upon Horace's, not Aristotle's, notion.[11] More significant, Beaumont's hypothesis about the nature and purpose of _The Canterbury Tales_ seems conceived of within the scope and spirit of Horatian satire, which bemusedly tolerates human folly and vice in contrast to the harsher invective of Juvenal. When we consider Horatian satire in conjunction with Horace's admonition in the _Ars Poetica_ about the poet's responsibility to teach and delight, then we also discern the grounds upon which Beaumont builds his case for Chaucer. What is unique about Beaumont's thesis is that he has hit upon the vital interrelationship between Chaucer's comic realism and his moral vision in a more complete way than either Puttenham or Webbe, because like them Beaumont too argues from aesthetic and textual, not moral, premises; and, therefore, as literary criticism, his conclusions possess still greater validity than the comments of the former two critics.

With his defense of the "inciuilitie" of <u>The</u> <u>Canterbury</u>
<u>Tales</u> apparently complete, Beaumont then offers some random
remarks on several other poems in the Chaucer canon. His
praise for <u>Troilus</u> <u>and</u> <u>Criseyde</u>, <u>The</u> <u>Legend</u> <u>of</u> <u>Good</u> <u>Women</u>,
<u>The</u> <u>Book</u> <u>of</u> <u>the</u> <u>Duchess</u>, and <u>The</u> <u>House</u> <u>of</u> <u>Fame</u> is in keeping
with Horatian principles, particularly of decorum, on which
Beaumont has constructed his case for Chaucer. Of these
other poems, states Beaumont, Chaucer "soareth much higher
then he did in the other before," which presumably refers to
<u>The</u> <u>Canterbury</u> <u>Tales</u> which were characterized, according to
Beaumont, by a "lowe" style. The <u>Troilus</u>, in particular, is
cited for its high seriousness, that is, for being "so
sententious, as there bee fewe staues in that Booke, which
are not concluded with some principall sentence." Thus, as
with <u>The</u> <u>Canterbury</u> <u>Tales</u>, Beaumont places these other poems
of Chaucer's in the stream of classical tradition; but it
seems most likely that he is speaking of the proverbial,
philosophical, and moral subject matter in these latter
works, and not their various formal structures which are
modelled on medieval Italian and French conventions with
which the Elizabethans were unfamiliar. Beaumont's tribute
to the "sentence" of Chaucer's poetry is, of course, within
the spirit of prior Elizabethan criticism of Chaucer,
especially Sidney's. These more general remarks of
Beaumont's, therefore, over a number of Chaucer's poems

function as still more evidence for the growing awareness of the moral seriousness in Chaucer's art.

The remainder of Beaumont's comments, however, are indebted to the rhetorical tradition, which we have pointed out is still viable in the late sixteenth century, though as a greatly diminished influence. Thus, because of the "sweetnesse of his Poetrie," says Beaumont, Chaucer may rightly be called "The pith and sinewes of eloquence, and the verie life it selfe of all mirth and pleasant writing"-- a cliché with two centuries of mimed acceptance behind it. In addition, Beaumont continues that claim for Chaucer initiated by Caxton, and repeated by such critics as Skelton and Ascham; namely, that "one gifte he hath aboue other Authours, and that is, by the excellencie of his descriptions to possesse his Readers with a stronger imagination of seeing that done before their eyes, which they reade, than any other that euer writ in any tongue." Despite the alleged difficulty of Chaucer's language in the late sixteenth century, Beaumont reiterates the tribute to vivid pictorialism in Chaucer's poems; and given all the polemics over Chaucer's language in the century, this seems a critical judgment of no small worth. In fact, Beaumont's reference to "those ancient learned men of our time in Cambridge" who taught students like Beaumont and Speght to love Chaucer's poetry, casts some doubt upon all the protestations

concerning Chaucer's language which we have encountered in this century since Skelton's first mention of the difficulty. However, Beaumont's gratitude to his teachers is also an interesting sidenote on one way in which the work of a poet is sustained and passed to succeeding generations, from among whom may come a critic like Beaumont who will make the poet's art more aesthetically comprehensible, or an editor like Speght who will devote his time and energies to make Chaucer's work available to a wider and more responsive audience.

Naturally enough, then, the criticism of Beaumont and Speght is to a degree complementary of the other's, although Speght's reveals a debt, in part at least, to Beaumont's. Speght's commentary is contained in his 1598 edition, The Workes of our Antient and lerned English Poet, Geffrey Chaucer, newly printed. However, his critical remarks are confined to his introduction, "To the Readers," and, more importantly, to "The Argument to the Prologues," which prefaces The Canterbury Tales. Speght's comments are neither as lengthy nor as detailed as Beaumont's, and two reasons seem probable for the difference. The first is that Speght seems to understand that his primary function is that of an editor, not a critic; and secondly, he prints Beaumont's "Letter" at the beginning of The Workes, and thus Beaumont's argument is able to speak for itself. Speght does

contribute, however, a further insight into the satyric nature of <u>The Canterbury Tales</u>, which will receive some discussion in a moment.

In his introductory remarks "To the Readers," Speght explains why he has compiled an edition of Chaucer, which means that the bulk of his comments are valuable both to students of Chaucer's reputation and especially to scholars investigating the history of editions and texts of Chaucer's poems. Speght states that he pursued his edition at the insistence of "certaine Gentlemen my neere friends, who loued Chaucer, as he well deserveth."[12] These friends, says Speght, requested him "to take a little pains in reuiuing the memorie of so rare a man, as also in doing some reparations of his works, which they iudged to be much decaied by iniurie of time, ignorance of writers, and negligence of Printers."[13] And so, continues Speght, for their "sakes thus much was then by me undertaken, although neuer as yet fully finished."[14] What Speght's remarks reveal is a genuine interest in, and concern for, the poetry of Chaucer, as well as the status and availability of the texts. We know that one of those "certaine Gentlemen" who urged Speght to publish his edition was Beaumont, and perhaps those "auncient learned men" at Cambridge--whom Beaumont spoke of--are also alluded to by Speght in his introduction. Speght's comments, therefore, provide additional evidence

for the existence of real scholarly and critical curiosity regarding Chaucer's poetry at this date.

Speght then concludes his preface with the conventional apology in which he asks that any failings be attributed to him as the editor and not to Chaucer:

> I earnestly entreat al to accept these my endeuours in best part, as wel in regard of mine owne well meaning, as for the desert of oure English Poet himselfe: who in most vnlearned times and greatest ignorance, being much esteemed, cannot in these our daies, wherein Learning and riper judgement so much flourisheth, but be had in great reuerence, vnlesse it bee of such as for want of wit and learning, were neuer yet able to iudge what wit or Learning meaneth.[15]

The praise of Chaucer in this passage is clearly an echo of such commentators as disparate as Tuke, Holinshed, and Sidney. The fourteenth century is still conceived of as an age which was "most vnlearned" and blighted by the "greatest ignorance," especially when compared to the late sixteenth century. So Speght is yet another exemplar of that faulty historical vision which characterizes Englishmen's cultural view of their past until the mid-eighteenth century. But what is of some importance in Speght's comment is that, like Webbe, he too suggests that those who find fault with Chaucer's poems "were neuer yet able to iudge what wit or Learning meaneth"; that is, the problem lies not with Chaucer, but with his readers who may have "want of wit and learning." However, nothing of lasting significance is contained in Speght's preface, and perhaps it is best viewed

as a convention and a courtesy demanded of Speght as an editor to both his readers and the poet whose work he is publishing.

Speght's primary relevance to our study, therefore, is found in "The Argument to the Prologues" of The Canterbury Tales, which is no more than a brief paragraph; and yet Speght sets forth at least three important suggestions about the nature and quality of Chaucer's art in his greatest poem. Writes Speght:

> The Authour in these Prologues to his Canterbury Tales, doth describe the reporters thereof for two causes: first, that the Reader seeing the qualities of the person, may iudge of his speech accordingly: wherein Chaucer hath most excellently kept that decorum, which Horace requireth in that behalfe. Secondly to shew, how that euen in our language, that may be perfourmed for descriptions, which the Greeke and Latine Poets in their tongues haue done at large. And surely this Poet in the iudgement of the best learned, is not inferiour to any of them in his descriptions, whether they be of persons, times, or places. Vnder the Pilgrimes, being a certaine number, and all of differing trades, he comprehendeth all the people of the land, and the nature and disposition of them in those daies; namely, giuen to deuotion rather of custome than of zeale. In the Tales is shewed the state of the Church, the Court, and Countrey, with such Arte and cunning, that although none could deny himself to be touched, yet none durst complaine that he was wronged. For the man being of greater learning then the most, and backed by the best in the land, was rather admired and feared, then any way disgraced. Whoso shall read these his works without preiudice, shall find that he was a man of rare conceit and of great reading.[16]

Speght's debt to Beaumont is evident in the passage, for like Beaumont, Speght too stresses the notion that the narrator is reporting what he has seen and heard. Most

likely Speght has in mind those lines near the end of the

"Prologue" in which the narrator claims:

> Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
> He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan
> Everich a word, if it be in his charge,
> Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,
> Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,
> Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe.[17]

Beaumont and Speght have, therefore, seemed to grasp the

distinction between the artist's obligation first to be true

to his art in order that his art may be true to life.

Again, the underlying critical principle is an aesthetic,

and not a moral, premise. These two critics contribute,

then, a new awareness into the nature of artistic mimesis in

The Canterbury Tales, and by extension into Chaucer's other

poems as well. Moreover, in some respects this insight by

Beaumont and Speght is a development of Sidney's suggestion

that certain characters in literature, such as Ulysses,

Oedipus, Agamemnon, and Pandarus are so true to their

nature--even if it is immoral--that, states Sidney, "we now

vse their names to signifie their trades."[18]

Speght next states that there are two "causes," or

reasons, for Chaucer's character descriptions in the

"Prologue." The first is so that the reader, after "seeing

the qualitie of the person, may iudge of his speech accord-

ingly." In this respect, argues Speght, "Chaucer hath most

excellently kept that decorum, which Horace requireth in

that behalfe." It is becoming superfluous to note the

frequent use which critics make of Horace in the late sixteenth century; but the fact is that Horace was the predominant influence in English literary criticism until the seventeenth century. We implied earlier in this chapter that Aristotle's <u>Poetics</u> entered English criticism through Sidney's <u>Apologie</u>. The problem, of course, lies in the lapse between the probable composition of the <u>Apologie</u>, 1581, and the date of its publication, 1595. While, in all likelihood, it circulated in private, the question still remains to what extent it did so. Thus, Aristotle cannot be considered a viable influence on English criticism until the late 1590's, and no clear echoes of Aristotle are sounded until the early seventeenth century. This does not mean, however, that Beaumont and Speght did not know the <u>Apologie</u>, nor that they could not have been influenced by its critical principles. Nevertheless, neither Beaumont nor Speght ever mentions Sidney or Aristotle; but Speght does cite Horace, and Beaumont certainly has the <u>Ars Poetica</u> in mind in his "Letter" to Speght. Furthermore, critical historians generally concede that Horace dominates English criticism until the seventeenth century.[19] For example, John D. Boyd, in his fine book, <u>The Function of Mimesis and Its Decline</u>, explains that: "Although most Renaissance critical treatises were fashioned on the framework of the <u>Poetics</u>, their spirit more often than not was Horatian.

This was especially true concerning the question of the function of poetry."[20] Boyd adds, however, that:

> Many of the qualities which Horace rightly and effectively demands of a successful poem--decorum, refinement, good form, urbanity--are ultimately relevant to the Aristotelian view of mimesis, yet we must always understand them as conceived of in this rhetorical context.[21]

Sidney's *Apologie* seems an apt illustration of Boyd's thesis, as does Webbe's *Discourse*. Thus, it seems most prudent to assume that Aristotle is, as yet, a negligible force in the shaping of Chaucer criticism, and that all the references to decorum are, as we predicated with Beaumont, based primarily upon Horace's comments in the *Ars Poetica*.

Speght's explanation of the second reason for the "Prologue" is, like the first, founded upon a long-standing tribute to Chaucer, namely, the realism of "his descriptions, whether they be of persons, times, or places." In addition, the quality of Chaucer's descriptions "is not inferiour," claims Speght, to any of "the Greeke and Latine Poets . . . ." The precedence for Speght's praise needs no further elaboration, for the brilliance of Chaucer's descriptive powers with language is, by the time of Speght's edition, an indisputable maxim. Moreover, in his comments Sepght, like Beaumont, compares Chaucer with classical poets and expresses no deference for his countryman, and the importance of this has been sufficiently pointed out in our discussions of Spenser and Beaumont. It is possible, however, that in this

remark Speght is echoing Gabriel Harvey, who apparently knew both Speght and Beaumont. References to Chaucer abound in Harvey's Manuscript Notes, and we shall examine his marginalia in Speght's edition in a moment. Prior to this, though, are some notes on Chaucer's descriptions made by Harvey in his copy of The Surveye of the World by Dionise Alexandrine. Among his marginal jottings are several allusions to descriptions by Chaucer in various works ranging from A Treatise on the Astrolabe to The Canterbury Tales. Specifically, Harvey mentions: "The Description of the Spring, in the beginning of the prologues of Chawcers Canterburie tales; In the beginning of the Complaint of the Black Knight; . . . The description of Winter, in the Frankleins tale; . . . The description of the hower of the day: in the Man of Lawes prologue, in the tale of the Nonnes priest, in the parsons prologue."[22] These passages and others, states Harvey, are "Notable descriptions, and not anie so artificial in Latin, or Greek."[23] It is this latter sentence which bears such strong resemblance to Speght's remark. However, Harvey's interest in Chaucer, at least in the above notes, is that of the scientist who is searching for accurate observation of the external world, while Speght's is that of the critic and editor who is suggesting why a poet is to be commended as an artist.

Thus far what Speght offers to Chaucer criticism is a twice-told tale. His subsequent comments, however, establish

the vital significance of the "Argument" to our study, for
in them he perceives further than either Webbe or Beaumont
the real nature and meaning of Chaucer's satyric purpose and
achievement in The Canterbury Tales. What Speght points to
is not only the artistic value of the Tales as literature,
but to their historical realism as well; for "vnder the
Pilgrimes," explains Speght, Chaucer "comprehendeth all the
people of the land, and the nature and disposition of them
in those daies." Then the satyric theme of the Tales is
stated--that the pilgrims are "giuen to deuotion rather of
custome than of zeale." Admittedly, both Webbe and Beaumont
have suggested that it was Chaucer's intent to portray the
vices and abuses of his age; but in further clarifying the
thematic vision of the poem Speght removes any taint of the
charge of immorality in the work. Instead he argues that
the immorality is in the world--in "the Church, the Court,
and Countrey"--and that Chaucer has merely revealed it for
all to see and condemn. Moreover, Speght seems to possess a
unique understanding of the essence of either the medieval
complaint or that particular mode we have categorized as
satyre, when he says that Chaucer has woven his attack with
"such Arte and cunning that although none could deny himself
to be touched, yet none durst complaine that he was
wronged." In his distinction between complaint, satyre, and
satire proper, Professor Peter states that the former two

are directed at institutions, and not at specific indi-
viduals, which is more characteristic of satire.[24] Further-
more, Peter commented, as we noted earlier, that satyre is
marked by a recognizable didactic and reformative intention,
that is, it is corrective humor. Speght obviously views
Chaucer in this light and tradition, and thus he contributes
a critical insight and judgment which not only permanently
removes the stain of immorality from The Canterbury Tales,
but which opens up the thematic range and depth of the poem.

Beaumont's "Letter" and Speght's brief "Argument"
represent, therefore, a crystallization of several themes
current in Chaucer criticism in the late sixteenth century.
First of all, Chaucer's language is commended for keeping
decorum, especially of character; and in conjunction with
this the quality of Chaucer's character portrayals is lauded.
In addition, Chaucer's descriptive language is once more
noted and praised, but now as being equal to that by any
classical poet. But most important, of course, is the
awareness by both Beaumont and Speght of the underlying
satyric vision and purpose in The Canterbury Tales, for with
this realization comes the cessation of all the polemics
over the morality of Chaucer's poetry. This predication
rests on the aesthetic principle that art is both a mirror
and a means of better understanding and viewing the real
world. This particular epiphany is, however, a logical and

critical outgrowth of such a popular Elizabethan work as
Thomas Drant's <u>A</u> <u>Medicinable</u> <u>Morall</u>, 1566--which even con-
tained a translation of two of Horace's satyres--and thus it
was inevitable that the satyric response would gradually be
related to earlier, as well as contemporary, native English
literature.

Before we continue to capsulize this chapter, however,
and discuss the shifts in Chaucer criticism which have
occurred in this century, perhaps we ought to discuss two
other Chaucer critics--if indeed we may be permitted to call
them that--namely, Gabriel Harvey and Francis Thynne. We
have just mentioned Harvey's remarks about the accuracy and
realism of Chaucer's descriptions in several poems. But
Harvey is also relevant to our survey of critical commentary
on Chaucer because he owned a copy of Speght's 1598 edition
and filled its margins with copious notes of his opinions
and reactions to its contents. What they reveal is yet more
evidence for conclusions we shall draw about critical tastes
and judgments made upon Chaucer's poetry in the late
sixteenth century.

At the conclusion of Speght's "The Life of our Learned
Poet, Geffray Chaucer," Harvey expresses his preference for
Chaucer "aboove all other"[25] English poets:

> Amongst the sonnes of the Inglish Muses; Gower,
> Lidgate, Heywood, Phaer, and a fewe other of famous
> memorie, ar meethinkes, good in manie kindes: but
> aboove all other, Chawcer in mie conceit, is

excellent in euerie veine, and humour: and none so
like him for gallant varietie, both in matter, and
forme, as Sir Philip Sidney.[26]

Then, in the margin next to Speght's "Argument to the

Prologues," Harvey has written:

Pleasant interteinement of Time, with sociable
intercourse of Tales, stories, discourses, and
merriments of all fashions, Gallant varietie of
notable veines, and humors in manie kinds, supra to
his loouing frend, concerning his obseruation of the
art of Decorum in his Tales. A fine descretion in
the autor: and a pithie note in the Censor . . . .[27]

Because of their similar content, these two passages

can be considered together, for both express an appreciation

for the "varietie, both in matter, and forme" in the canon

of Chaucer's works. This is a critical tribute which we

observed in Puttenham, Webbe, Beaumont, and Speght; and

Harvey's response indicates a still more widespread accep-

tance of originality and diversity in subject matter and

forms during these years. Secondly, Harvey refers to the

risible element in Chaucer's poems when he catalogues The

Canterbury Tales as "stories, discourses, and merriments of

all fashions." This awareness of the mirth in Chaucer's

poems has existed, as we know, for over a century; but

except for Webbe and, to a degree, Puttenham, allusions to

the comic merriment in Chaucer's poetry have all but ceased,

due no doubt in part to the Puritan equation of laughter with

sin. Thus, it was a quality in Chaucer's work which a

critic might better leave unmentioned, especially since a

surfeit of confusion already existed over the moral content of a number of Chaucer's poems. However, Harvey's acknowledgment of the comic humor in The Canterbury Tales is not based upon Harvey's use of the words, "humour" and "humors," in these two passages. No evidence exists with which to argue that any spelling of the word can mean anything other than certain dispositions of human character. Thus, what Harvey is additionally praising is the excellence of Chaucer's characters, that is, of the humours of the pilgrims; and in no way does Harvey seem to be suggesting that some characters are humorous in the modern sense of the term. Finally, Harvey too, like Beaumont and Speght, insists upon Chaucer's "obseruation of the art of Decorum"--still another indication of the hold which Horace continues to exert on English literary criticism.

Nevertheless, some of Harvey's brief phrases do point to the possible influence or presence of Aristotle's Poetics in Harvey's opinions. For example, he labels The Knight's Tale as "Heroical pageants," The Miller's Tale as "Comical tricks," The Squire's Tale as "Heroical and magical feates," The Merchant's Tale as "Comical," and The Legend of Good Women as "Heroical and Tragical Legends."[28] Harvey's classification is obviously generic, and despite Professor Boyd's thesis that often what appears Aristotelian in the late sixteenth century is in reality Horatian, it seems

safest to leave open the door for the possibility that a man
of Harvey's inquisitiveness may very well have been familiar
with the content of the _Poetics_ by some means or other.

At the back of Speght's edition Harvey passes judgment
over the entire canon of Chaucer, and the comment is an apt
summation of not only Harvey's response, but probably of the
age's as well. Chaucer's poems, says Harvey, are:

> All notable Legends in one respect or other:
> and worthie to be read, for theire particular
> invention, or elocution: and specially for the
> varietie both of matter, and manner, that delightes
> with proffit, and proffites with delight. Though I
> could haue wisshed better choice of sum arguments,
> and sum subjects of more importance.[29]

Chaucer's originality--"invention"--is again remarked upon,
along with his style, that is, "elocution." Thus Harvey,
like Beaumont and Speght, is cognizant that the theme--
"matter"--and form--"manner"--of Chaucer's poems are an
artistic unity which illustrates Horace's dictum of instruc-
tion with pleasure. While it may be possible that Aristotle
influenced some of Harvey's comments, it is certain that
Horace determined most others. We might also note that
Harvey in no way impugns Chaucer's moral or artistic
integrity, but rather confirms both in his allusion to
Horace. Thus, it seems that the question of morality in
Chaucer's work is--or perhaps even has become--a dead
critical issue by the end of the sixteenth century. Finally,
just what "arguments" and "subjects of more importance"

Harvey wished for he never reveals. But the comment remains
a noteworthy one, nevertheless, if for no other reason than
that it serves as a mirror for the critical responses which
have been developing in the last quarter of the century.

One other remark by Harvey perhaps needs mention, not
for any critical worth, but rather for the literary historian
interested in a topical judgment rendered upon contemporary
English literature. How curious that in an age which we
think of as the richest and greatest epoch of English
letters, Harvey should lament:

> Not manie Chawcers, or Lidgates, Gowers, or
> Occleues, Surries, or Heywoods, in those dayes: and
> how few Aschams or Phaers, Sidneys or Spensers,
> Warners or Daniels, Siluesters or Chapmans, in this
> pregnant age. But when shall we tast the preserued
> dainties of Sir Edward Dier, Sir Walter Raleigh,
> M. Secretarie Cecill, the new patron of Chawcer; the
> Earle of Essex, the King of Scotland, the soueraine
> of the diuine art; or a few such other refined wittes
> and surprising spirits?[30]

If anything, the passage is proof for Legouis' contention
that England's literary heritage is no longer a stranger to
readers in the late sixteenth century; for Harvey's remark
demonstrates a thorough acquaintance with English poets from
Chaucer to Surrey to King James. What further evidence
should a literary historian need for the claim that England
in these years was in truth experiencing a cultural renais-
sance? Harvey, however, does not confine his evaluation of
Chaucer to English poets alone, for he adds that: "now
translated Petrarch, Ariosto, Tasso, and Bartas himself

deserue curious comparison with Chaucer, Lidgate, and owre

best Inglish, auncient and moderne."[31]   The comparative

technique is now secure, and Englishmen show no temerity in

assessing their poets with the Continent's.   As for Harvey,

the man's intellectual and literary curiosity is, as these

last two comments reveal, simply staggering when we remember

that his interest in poetry is for him merely a diverting

avocation from his labors as a scientist.

While Gabriel Harvey's "Marginalia" reveals for us a

widespread love and respect for Chaucer's poems among the

Elizabethan audience, Francis Thynne's Animadversions, 1598,

illustrate a scholarly interest in Chaucer as great as

Speght's, and in some instances more knowledgeable.   Francis

Thynne is the son of the William Thynne who edited the 1532

edition of Chaucer; and because of this Francis inherited

not only his father's zealous love for Chaucer's poetry, but

also some twenty-five manuscripts.   Caroline Spurgeon states

that Thynne had, in fact:

> made preparations for a new edition of the poet, when,
> in 1598, his acquaintance, Thomas Speght, brought out
> his new edition of Chaucer's works, and in his preface
> insinuated that no editor before then had collated
> manuscripts for his text.   This, combined with the
> fact that he, the hereditary editor of Chaucer, had
> not been consulted, enraged Thynne, and he at once
> produced the Animadversions, in which he snubs Speght
> for his injustice to William Thynne, his lack of
> courtesy to himself, Francis Thynne, and his general
> ignorance, of which he gives detailed specimens.[32]

Thus, Thynne's Animadversions is a commentary upon an edition

of Chaucer's poems, and not directly upon Chaucer's poetry.

As such, it poses a problem for our discussion, since the
Animadversions is not, in truth, an essay of aesthetic
literary criticism. Rather it is a lengthy letter from one
scholar to another, the substance of which is devoted to
correcting what Thynne believes are errors in Speght's
"Life" of Chaucer, specifically regarding Chaucer's ancestry,
as well as suggesting either supplementary or different
definitions for many words which Speght had glossed. Thynne
also spends much time defending his father's edition and
explaining what happened to his father for including _The
Pilgrim's Tale_--an anonymous savage anti-papal satire
attributed to Chaucer--in his edition. Moreover, not only
does Thynne insist that _The Pilgrim's Tale_ is a legitimate
poem of Chaucer's, but he also argues that _The Plowman's
Tale_, that is, _Piers Plowman_, is Chaucer's. However, despite
Thynne's misjudgment about these two poems, most of his
other suggestions are accurate and bear up under the scrutiny
of modern scholarship. In fact, Caroline Spurgeon claims
that Thynne is actually wrong in only four of fifty
instances.[33]

The _Animadversions_ is, therefore, an all-important piece
in the development of the textual scholarship of Chaucer's
poems. Thynne's notes and definitions are both valuable and
significant in establishing the true Chaucer canon and text;
and the essay stands as a landmark in the history of Chaucer

textual scholarship. However, Thynne offers nothing with respect to the nature or achievement of Chaucer's art; and not only is this regrettable, but also the fact that he never, as he intended, brought out a subsequent edition of Chaucer's works. As Caroline Spurgeon discerns:

> Altogether it would seem as if Francis Thynne, of all the Chaucer scholars up to Tyrwhitt, had been the best equipped to bring out a really correct and critical edition of the poet's text, and we can only regret that he did not carry out his intention to re-edit Chaucer . . . and more especially to try to distinguish between his genuine and spurious works; for, with the help of those twenty-five manuscript copies . . . some invaluable evidence might have been supplied.34

Thus, because Thynne contributes no critical commentary relevant to our discussion, we must omit the Animadversions here, and hope that some other study of the history and development of the Chaucer texts and canon will give him his rightful due, which he so deserves.

As we prepare to leave the sixteenth century, then, a backward glance reveals the great distance which Chaucer criticism has come since the rude commentaries of Skelton and Hawes. It has, as we have seen, by no means been a smooth road for Chaucer, but it has been a most interesting, often perplexing, and ultimately a salutory journey critically for the poetry of Chaucer. We noted in our con-cluding comments in the previous chapter that the 1580's were the crucial turning point in the progression towards true aesthetic criticism of Chaucer's poetry. What happened

in those years was simply that the stranglehold which the rhetorical tradition held for nearly two centuries was at long last broken, and critics such as Sidney, Puttenham, and Webbe began to deal with literary questions on different grounds, though not on totally new aesthetic principles. Horace, we pointed out, remained the primary authority; but free of the influence of the rhetoricians, his _Ars_ _Poetica_ became a more flexible, and thus a more valuable, critical referent. This is most clearly seen in the suggestions and judgments of Beaumont, Speght, and Harvey, which are a fusion of Horatian wisdom and the critical acumen of these three individuals. Moreover, as we hinted, the opinions of these three critics points to some significant shifts in aesthetic, or critical, taste in the late sixteenth century compared even to a quarter century before; that is, while a bridge of continuity exists between Ascham, Wilson, and Gascoigne, and Beaumont, Speght, and Harvey, the gap between them aesthetically is vast indeed. We must remember, of course, that the earlier critics, especially from the 1550's to the 1570's, were plagued with the pressures of classical imitation and influence, which led, for example, to the confusion over Chaucer's meter and language. But with the gradual subsiding of the debate over classical forms, in particular, critics were able to deal with other, and ultimately, more important considerations. And so the

question of the moral vision of Chaucer's poetry was
approached--as a reaction, at least in part, to Puritan
attacks on the morality of literature itself--and eventually
vindicated in the 1580's and finally in the 1590's.

But beyond this, several other critical responses have
been marked in our discussion in this final section of this
chapter. Most of them are outgrowths of critical reactions
already underway, but a couple of them are quite unexpectedly
original and fresh in the 1590's. First of all, Beaumont,
Speght, and Harvey all reiterate the realism, or verisimili-
tude, if you will, of descriptions in Chaucer's poems,
especially in his character creations. Admittedly, Chaucer's
descriptive language was a characteristic applauded as early
as the fifteenth century, but the sixteenth contributes the
insight into what Ascham first called "the inward disposi-
tion"[35] revealed in Chaucer's characters. But then the
suggestion went unnoticed, perhaps because it was to be
found only in an obscure historical document, that is,
Ascham's Report and Discourse on his visit to Germany. But
the critics in the 1580's and 1590's revived, or redis-
covered, the truth of Ascham's remark, and the brilliance of
Chaucer's portrayal of human character is a commonplace for
Beaumont and Speght. Appreciation for his characterization
may, in turn, have led critics to a deeper understanding of
his comic tales, and the thesis that in them Chaucer is

teaching as well as pleasing. With the awareness that comedy may project a moral vision of man suddenly comes the epiphany, initially from Webbe, that Chaucer's satyric purpose is indeed moral and corrective, and soon Beaumont and Speght set forth convincing arguments for the moral artistry of Chaucer's work based on a clear understanding of the function of decorum as an artistic principle and critical norm.

Part of the difficulty, however, in attempting to assign or account for any cause and effect rationale regarding shifts in critical prejudices and aesthetic taste lies in the unusually lively interaction among critical responses and ideas in the late Elizabethan period. Such a problem arises when we begin to notice in the 1580's and 90's the recognition of Chaucer's originality and diversity in subject matter and forms. The most probable reason for this new tolerance and respect for this aspect of Chaucer's art may be the rising spirit of national interest in those things which are English rather than classical; for it was in these two decades that the paralysis of the classics regarding creative and critical thinking began to weaken perceptibly. Certainly related to this new-found attitude towards the value of originality is the sudden critical appreciation for The Canterbury Tales. Nothing is perhaps more startling to the historian of Chaucer criticism than

the sudden appearance in the 1590's of the Tales as a source
of discussion and enthusiasm for Chaucer critics. Even as
late as Sidney, the early poems, the Troilus, and The Legend
of Good Women are more highly regarded for their high
seriousness, their frequent philosophical digressions, and,
of course, their more obvious didactic themes. But abruptly
with Puttenham and Webbe the emphasis shifts, and Beaumont,
Speght, and Harvey solidify in their remarks the new
eminence of the Tales. Speculation here could easily lead
to absurd hypotheses, but one of the most sensible seems to
be that the strong influence of classical satire, particu-
larly Roman, in the last quarter of the century played no
small role in gradually making critics aware of the satyric
genius of The Canterbury Tales. And we need only imagine
how delighted the intensely nationalistic critics of the
late Renaissance would have been to find a poet in their
native tongue whose work seemed so much in keeping with the
spirit of Roman satire, which, as Professor Peter notes,
"was, on the whole, conscious of its responsibilities, aware
of its obligation to maintain standards whenever they
appeared to be threatened."[36] This discovery would, in
turn, lead such critics as Beaumont and Speght to a deeper
comprehension of the organic artistry of theme, form, and
purpose in The Canterbury Tales.

This shift in critical focus is symptomatic, however, of
the spirit of the age. We should mention, perhaps, that by

the time of Speght's 1598 edition, the English reading
public had awarded its approval to Nashe's _Unfortunate_
Traveler, and that Falstaff had enjoyed unprecedented popu-
larity before audiences in three of Shakespeare's plays.
Ben Jonson's _Everyman in His Humour_ and John Marston's
Scourge of Villainy are both performed in 1598. Moreover,
in less than a decade Shakespeare, and Beaumont and Fletcher,
would break down the traditional rigid distinction between
tragedy and comedy and create a form of drama which tended
heavily toward an ironic vision of man's existence, namely,
tragicomedy, which might be said to share some thematic and
philosophical similarities with Chaucer's vision in the
Tales.

What we have arrived at in our study, therefore, is a
landmark in those ever-shifting perspectives in Chaucer
criticism. No one has ever sought to dispute C. S. Lewis's
thesis regarding the sterile influence of _The Canterbury_
Tales for nearly two centuries after its composition, and
our survey of Chaucer criticism bears further witness to
this, though with perhaps a minor qualification or two. We
have just pointed out how powerful the influence of
Chaucer's early poems and the _Troilus_ was up even to Sidney
and Lodge, and their respective prose romances, the _Arcadia_
and _Rosalynde_, attest to the continuing popularity and
demand for medieval romance into the 1580's. This is what

Professor Lewis means, then, when he states that the Chaucer who determined "the direction of English poetry for nearly two hundred years . . . was the Chaucer of dream and allegory, of love-romance and erotic debate, of high style and profitable doctrine. . . . Where we see a great comedian and a profound student of human character, they saw a master of noble sentiment and a source of poetic diction."[37] While Lewis's thesis is undeniably valid with respect to The Canterbury Tales as a creative force on poets, late sixteenth century criticism of the poem is, nevertheless, a response to the new directions and developments in English literary criticism. That is, the comments of Puttenham, Webbe, and especially Beaumont and Speght, mark the turning point towards that modern view of Chaucer wherein we see him, according to Lewis, as "a great comedian and a profound student of human character."

Previously in this chapter we commented on the nature and effect of mannerism in the late sixteenth century. In his Social History of Art, in a brilliant essay entitled "The Second Defeat of Chivalry," Arnold Hauser discusses the changes in aesthetic tastes which occurred through the interaction of the mannerist style and the established romantic, or chivalric, modes. What "is everywhere apparent," notes Hauser, is "that chivalry has outlived its day and that its creative force has become a fiction."[38] For example, Hauser

points to the evolution, or revolution, as the case may be,

in the conception of the hero in the late sixteenth century,

when he states:

> [T]he hero is saint and fool in one and the same
> person. If a sense of humour is the ability to see
> two opposite sides of a thing at the same time,
> then the discovery of this double-sidedness of a
> character signifies the discovery of humour in the
> world of literature--of the kind of humour that was
> unknown before the age of mannerism.[39]

Thus, it may be assumed that those audiences which had

accepted Jack Wilkes and Falstaff also found pleasure in and

applauded the spectrum of humanity which Chaucer presented

in The Canterbury Tales. One effect of mannerism, therefore,

is that audiences, and critics as well, came to a deeper

insight into human nature along with a genuine appreciation

and tolerance for the spectacle of that drama known as the

human comedy.

Moreover, Hauser's description of the stylistic

characteristics of manneristic literature may to some degree

help account for the changed opinions and judgments on The

Canterbury Tales by late sixteenth century critics, and also

provide us with some further evidence for the recent aware-

ness of the forms and styles employed in the Tales. States

Hauser:

> The mixture of the realistic and imaginative elements
> in the style, of the naturalism of the details and
> the unreality of the total conception, the uniting
> of the characteristics of the idealistic novel of
> chivalry and the vulgar picaresque novel, the combina-
> tion of dialogue based on everyday conversation, . . .
> all this is manneristic.[40]

Our purpose here is certainly not to suggest that The
Canterbury Tales is to be in any way construed as a
mannerist poem, but rather that once again the aesthetic and
critical tastes of later ages often lead to the recognition
of qualities already inherent in a work of art. That is,
the development of critical sensibilities is, in itself, a
creative process not altogether unlike the growth of
artistic creation. Thus, certain elements in Chaucer's
poems which, in the context of the late sixteenth century,
might be said to seem manneristic would over the centuries
undergo many metamorphoses until these same qualities were
claimed to be unmistakably modern. A better conclusion,
then, might be to see them as universal and timeless attri-
butes which retain, and in fact enrich, their meaning and
significance for centuries to come.

It may seem superfluous, therefore, to insist that
sixteenth century, particularly Elizabethan, criticism of
Chaucer is worthy of considerable merit; but yet the paradox
is that its significance has never been fully demonstrated.
Even J. W. H. Atkins, who is usually quite uncanny in his
knowledge of Chaucer's critical reputation, errs a bet in
his assessment of the critical response towards Chaucer's
poems in the Renaissance. Atkins admits that Chaucer's:
"Canterbury Tales and his Troilus were duly commended, and
his verse was declared to be less irregular than was

generally supposed; but it was as a moral reformer that he
was mainly admired, and it was left for a later age to see
in him the genial humorist."[41] It is hoped that these last
two chapters have shed some long overdue light on the
importance of the Chaucer criticism in the Elizabethan era,
and, of course, especially on those judgments and arguments
made in the last two decades of the century. One reason
they are so important is that Chaucer criticism will experi-
ence a lengthy drought throughout most of the seventeenth
century. Regrettably, it will be a complete century before
another critic takes up Chaucer's poetry with the enthusiasm
and acumen of Beaumont and Speght. Nevertheless, great
strides have been made since Caxton, Skelton, and the
Scottish Chaucerians; and the distance grows yet more
immense when conceived of in comparison to those earliest
tributes by Lydgate and Hoccleve. Thus, an effort which
began in shadows and incomprehension in the early years of
the sixteenth century emerges in a new-found faith and
critical awareness of the integrity and richness which is
the world of Chaucer's art.

Atkins closes his examination of Renaissance criticism
with a summary of the achievements of the critical contri-
butions as a whole, and what he says of Renaissance criticism
in general seems applicable to Chaucer criticism in
particular:

Altogether an auspicious start had thus been made in
the business of vitalizing critical activities in
England. Fresh light had incidentally been thrown on
the workings of the minds of Elizabethan men of
letters, and a chapter of sorts to the history of
contemporary thought; though it is also true to say
that this Renascence period closes with a sense of
mysteries yet to be revealed. In the varied pronounce-
ments of critics differing greatly in temperment and
genius alike, there are many passages that appeal with
special force to modern readers.[42]

And so, having remarked upon those critical suggestions about

Chaucer's poetry which will later "appeal with special force

to modern readers," let us then turn "with a sense of

mysteries yet to be revealed" to our final phase in these

initial developments in Chaucer criticism.

CHAPTER IV

FOOTNOTES

[1]Edmund Spenser, _The Shepheardes Calender_, in _The Works of Edmund Spenser: A Variorum Edition_, ed. Edwin Greenlaw, et al. (1943; rpt. Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1966), VII, 62.

[2]Spenser, _The Shepheardes Calender_, VII, 120.

[3]Spenser, _The Faerie Queene_, IV, 2, xxxi, in _The Works of Edmund Spenser: A Variorum Edition_, ed. Edwin Greenlaw, et al., IV, 24.

[4]Spenser, _The Faerie Queene_, IV, 25.

[5]Emile Legouis, _Spenser_, cited in _The Works of Edmund Spenser: A Variorum Edition_, ed. Edwin Greenlaw, et al., IV, 179.

[6]D. S. Brewer, "Images of Chaucer: 1386-1900," in _Chaucer and Chaucerians_, pp. 253-54.

[7]Francis Beaumont, "Letter to Thomas Speght," in _The Workes of our Antient and lerned English Poet, Geffrey Chaucer, newly printed_, ed. Thomas Speght (Londini: Impensis Geor. Bishop, anno 1598), n.p.

[8]George Puttenham, The Arte of English Poesie, in Elizabethan Critical Essays, ed. G. Gregory Smith, II, 64.

[9]Puttenham, II, 64.

[10]William Webbe, A Discourse of English Poetrie, in Elizabethan Critical Essays, ed. G. Gregory Smith, I, 241.

[11]See Horace, The Art of Poetry, in Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden, ed. Alan H. Gilbert, pp. 131-34.

[12]Thomas Speght, ed., "To the Readers," in The Workes of our Antient and lerned English Poet, Geffrey Chaucer, newly printed, n.p.

[13]Speght, n.p.

[14]Speght, n.p.

[15]Speght, n.p.

[16]Thomas Speght, "The Argument to the Prologues," in The Workes of . . . Geffrey Chaucer, newly printed, n.p.

[17]Geoffrey Chaucer, "Prologue" to The Canterbury Tales, in The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. F. N. Robinson, p. 24.

[18]Sir Philip Sidney, An Apologie for Poetrie, in English Literary Criticism: The Renaissance, ed. O. B. Hardison, p. 112.

[19]John D. Boyd, S.J., <u>The</u> <u>Function</u> <u>of</u> <u>Mimesis</u> <u>and</u> <u>Its</u>
<u>Decline</u> (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968),
p. 36.

[20]Boyd, p. 36.

[21]Boyd, p. 40.

[22]Gabriel Harvey, "Manuscript Notes," in <u>Gabriel</u>
<u>Harvey's</u> <u>Marginalia</u>, ed. G. C. Moore Smith (Stratford-upon-
Avon: Shakespeare Head Press, 1913), pp. 159-60.

[23]Harvey, p. 160.

[24]John Peter, <u>Complaint</u> <u>and</u> <u>Satire</u> <u>in</u> <u>Early</u> <u>English</u>
<u>Literature</u>, p. 118.

[25]Gabriel Harvey, "Marginalia in Speght's Chaucer," in
<u>Gabriel</u> <u>Harvey's</u> <u>Marginalia</u>, ed. G. C. Moore Smith, p. 226.

[26]Harvey, p. 226.

[27]Harvey, pp. 226-27.

[28]Harvey, pp. 227-28.

[29]Harvey, p. 229.

[30]Harvey, p. 231.

[31]Harvey, p. 232.

[32]Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, ed., _Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion: 1357-1900_, I, xxii-xxiii.

[33]Spurgeon, xxiii.

[34]Spurgeon, xxiii.

[35]Roger Ascham, _A Report and Discourse written by Roger Ascham, of the affaires and state of Germany and the Emperour Charles his court durying certaine yeares while the sayd Roger was there._, in _The Whole Works of Roger Ascham_, ed. Rev. Dr. Giles, III, 6.

[36]John Peter, _Complaint and Satire in Early English Literature_, p. 140.

[37]C. S. Lewis, _The Allegory of Love_ (1936; rpt. New York: The Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 161-62.

[38]Arnold Hauser, _The Social History of Art_, II, 144.

[39]Hauser, II, 147.

[40]Hauser, II, 148.

[41]J. W. H. Atkins, _English Literary Criticism: The Renascence_, p. 358.

[42]Atkins, p. 362.

CHAPTER V

THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

In his essay, "Images of Chaucer: 1386-1900," D. S.
Brewer summarizes Chaucer's critical reputation in the
seventeenth century with the following terse comment: "In
general references to Chaucer in the seventeenth century are
the least interesting of any period. The most representa-
tive poet of the seventeenth century is Cowley, and Cowley
found it impossible to read Chaucer."[1] Thus the only critic
of Chaucer's poetry to whom Brewer gives his attention is
Dryden. To a point, Brewer's generalized assessment is
valid, for next to Dryden's "Preface" to Fables: Ancient and
Modern any critical statement is doomed to seem pale, even
opaque, in comparison. Brewer, however, is guilty of
equating the entire spectrum of seventeenth century criticism
of Chaucer with the aesthetic and critical tastes of the
Restoration, and accordingly, of excluding some valuable
critical remarks during the first quarter or third of the
century. Most of this commentary in the early century is an
extension of late sixteenth century criticism of Chaucer.
However, signs of an emerging neo-classicism are apparent in

the early seventeenth century, and the result is a far more
qualified and skeptical view of Chaucer than that held by
the more romantic and exhuberant Renaissance critics.
Perhaps the most workable approach to this century's
critical response to Chaucer's work is to violate chronology--
though only slightly so--and to look first at the post-
Elizabethan, or late Renaissance, criticism of Chaucer, and
then turn to a brief survey of the developing evaluation or,
more accurately, devaluation of Chaucer's poetry by critics
with a definite neo-classic bent. This course will lead most
logically to Dryden--certainly the major turning point to
new and permanent directions in critical awareness and
appreciation of Chaucer's art for centuries to come.

We noted at the conclusion of the previous chapter the
height which both Chaucer's popularity and critical recep-
tion had reached by the end of the sixteenth century.
Apparently there was little immediate waning in demand for
Chaucer's poems, for Speght in 1602 reissued his edition of
The Workes of . . . Chaucer. However, it was an expanded
and reworked edition which Speght published, not simply a
reissuance of the 1598 impression. But the additions are
not primarily critical in nature; rather they constitute an
expansion of Chaucer's life, of the gloss--due in part, no
doubt, to suggestions received from Thynne--and the inclusion
of the spurious Jack Upland as part of Chaucer's canon.[2]

Speght's address "To the Readers" was revised, though, and
some new commentary added. Some of it is a rejoinder,
personal in nature, to Thynne's <u>Animadversions</u>; the rest is
editorial annotation and explanation of changes in the new
edition. The only portion of it pertinent to our discussion
is a paragraph in which Speght attempts to defend the metre
in Chaucer's poetic line as not being as irregular as it has
been believed to be:

> And for his verses, although in diuers places
> they may seeme to vs to stand of vnequall measures:
> yet a skilfull Reader, that can scan them in their
> nature, shall find it otherwise. And if a verse here
> and there fal out a sillable shorter or longer than
> another, I rather aret it to the negligence and rape
> of Adam Scriuener, that I may speake as Chaucer doth,
> than to any vnconning or ouersight in the Author: For
> how fearfull he was to haue his works miswritten, or
> his verse mismeasured, may appeare in the end of his
> fift booke of Troylus and Creseide, where he writeth
> thus:

> > "And for there is so great diuersitie
> > In English, and in writing of our tongue,
> > So pray I God, that none miswrite thee
> > Ne thee mismetre for defaut of tongue."[3]

Thus Speght, like William Webbe, reveals a strong suspicion
that the metre in Chaucer's poems is not as irregular and
rough as most readers and critics claim it to be. But
Speght offers no linguistic evidence for his hypothesis
other than suggesting that "if a verse here and there fal
out a sillable shorter or longer than another, I rather aret
it to the negligence and rape of Adam Scriuener . . . ." No
more light, therefore, has been shed on the mystery of

Chaucer's metrical line than that which existed in the reign

of Henry VIII--and Thomas Tyrwhitt's discussion of the final

-e- is still nearly 175 years away. The paradox of

Chaucer's growing critical acceptance persists into the

seventeenth century, despite the continuing ignorance about

the true rhythmical nature of his poetry.

However, we have observed repeatedly, especially among

the Elizabethan critics of Chaucer, that difficulty with

form could be, and often was, overlooked in favor of a poet's

subject matter. This, of course, is a well-established

traditional response dating back to the fifteenth century,

but it continued to be the resource of Chaucer critics in

the seventeenth century, as well as the preceding two

centuries. Accordingly, the perspective in which Chaucer's

poems are viewed in the early seventeenth century is an

extension of those attitudes most prevalent among Eliza-

bethans, especially those in the last two decades of the

century. Two examples of this continuing emphasis on

Chaucer's matter are Henry Peacham and Richard Brathwait,

the latter being the more original contributor to Chaucer

criticism.

Peacham expresses his opinion of the value of Chaucer's

poetry in his book, The Compleat Gentleman, 1622, a belated

exercise, it would seem, in the tradition of the Elizabethan

"courtesy book." One entire chapter is devoted to poetry;

but, as J. W. H. Atkins aptly notes, it is, in effect, "merely a compilation made up almost wholly of commonplaces relating to poetry drawn from Puttenham's Arte, together with judgments on poets, both ancient and modern . . . to provide a short and easy path to literary culture for leisured readers."[4] Peacham's assessment of Chaucer is, however, a valuable summary of those qualities in Chaucer's work for which he has been praised in the proceding two hundred years. Moreover, Peacham bases his judgment of Chaucer on four primary attributes which he believes all great poetry must possess. These are, in Peacham's terms: (1) prudence, that is, decorum, or an appropriate relationship between action and diction to time, place, and characterization; (2) efficacy, or a vivid and lively presentation of the material; (3) a variety of incidents and descriptions; and (4) sweetness, or a beauty which gives delight.[5] Given these prerequisites, Peacham then lauds Chaucer's poetry for the following reasons:

> Of English Poets of our owne Nation, esteeme
> Sir Geoffrey Chaucer the father; although the stile
> for the antiquitie may distast you, yet as vnder a
> bitter and rough rinde there lyeth a delicate kernell
> of conceit and sweete inuention. What Examples,
> Similitudes, Times, Places, and aboue all, Persons
> with their speeches and attributes, doe, as in his
> Canterburie-tales, like these threds of gold the rich
> Arras, beautifie his worke quite thorough! And
> albeit diuers of his workes are but meerely trans-
> lations out of Latine and French, yet he hath handled
> them so artificially that thereby he hath made them
> his owne, as his Troilus and Cresseid. The Romant of
> the Rose was the Inuention of Iehan de Mehunes, a

French Poet, whereof he translated but onely the one
halfe; his Canterburie-tales without question were
his owne inuention, all circumstances being wholly
English. Hee was a good Diuine, and saw in those
times without his spectacles, as may appeare by the
Plough-man and the Parsons tale; withall an excellent
Mathematician, as plainly appeareth by his discourse
of the Astrolabe to his little sonne Lewes. In
briefe, account him among the best of your English
bookes in your librarie.[6]

Again the insistence appears that "vnder a bitter and
rough rinde there lyeth a delicate kernell of conceit and
sweete inuention," that is, an avowal of Chaucer's
originality. In keeping with the recent critical apprecia-
tion of The Canterbury Tales, Peacham supports his claim for
the inherent beauty in Chaucer's poetry by referring to the
various qualities of the Tales, but especially the decorum of
character creation and dramatization which we have seen so
valued by the Elizabethan critics of Chaucer. The admission
that many of the sources of Chaucer's poems are borrowed is
also present, although, like most critics before him,
Peacham credits Chaucer with making the poems "his owne."
That pride in The Canterbury Tales as being both a product
and example of Chaucer's unique English genius is evident in
Peacham, as it was among the Elizabethans; and this
particular quality of the Tales seems more and more to please
Englishmen as they realize that much of Chaucer's earlier
work is in imitation of French poetry. National conscious-
ness as a viable factor in literary criticism is, therefore,
still very much a part of value judgments of Chaucer and

others. It is for this reason perhaps that Peacham urges

his readers to regard Chaucer "among the best of your

English bookes in your librarie." (While Peacham too

attributes Piers Plowman to Chaucer, primary responsibility

rests with Speght who, in both editions, includes the poem

in Chaucer's canon.)

Peacham's evaluation is, then, as Professor Atkins

points out, a collection of what had become by 1622 critical

commonplaces concerning the poems of Chaucer. Thus, the

chief importance of Peacham's opinion, as Atkins notes, "is

that it reflects views which persisted well into the 17th

century."[7] Among these are the late Elizabethan predilec-

tion for originality and diversity, for decorum, and a keen

response and appreciation for the delight which a poet

affords perhaps over and above the instruction he offers.

All of this is merely another way of saying that Chaucer's

poems, especially The Canterbury Tales, continue to strike

responsive chords among many early seventeenth century

readers and critics.

Further evidence of this intense interest in Chaucer is

found in a unique essay by Richard Brathwait, titled "A

Comment upon . . . the Miller's Tale and the Wife of Bath,"

which was published in 1665, although editors seem quite

certain it was completed by 1617.[8] Thus, it needs to be

discussed not as a specimen of Restoration criticism, but

rather, like Peacham's, as a post-Elizabethan judgment quite
free of those influences which would shape the next two
centuries of English poetry and criticism. What is so
unusual about Brathwait's "Comment" is that it is the
initial attempt at an "explication de texte" of any of
Chaucer's works. Prior to Brathwait's almost all the
critical remarks passed on Chaucer have been of a general
nature and were intended, for the most part, to apply to the
corpus of Chaucer's poetry. Brathwait, on the other hand,
has selected a tale and a pilgrim and indulges in a lengthy,
though discursive and rambling, personal reflection upon
them. Against the background of the complexity and sophis-
tication of modern criticism, Brathwait's technique seems
almost ludicrously sophomoric, for he quotes a few lines,
comments upon them, quotes a few more lines, another remark
or two, and so on until the tale and prologue are exhausted.
Moreover, most of the commentary is devoted to Brathwait's
own moralizing of the character or plot, instead of inferring
Chaucer's meaning or attempting any judicial opinions about
the artistic integrity of the poem or character portrayal
under analysis. Nevertheless, some of Brathwait's
digressions are fascinating and illuminating in their keen
awareness of the brilliance and subtlety of Chaucer's skill
with characterization. For example, Brathwait's remarks on
the Wife of Bath's "Prologue" are still among the best of

the innumerable character analyses done upon this most

intriguing and beguiling of women. In those memorable lines

where the Wife is reminiscing on her youth--and the pleasure

enjoyed in it--Brathwait senses her enduring vitality and

sensualness when she says:

> 'But, Lord Crist! whan that it remembreth me
> Upon my yowthe, and on my jolitee,
> It tikleth me aboute myn herte roote.
> Unto this day it dooth my herte boote
> That I have had my world as in my tyme."

> It delights her to remember the pranks of her youth;
> and no doubt it would highly content her to have a
> taste of Aeson's herb, and so become young again.
> For her desires continue strong, though her strength
> be weak; her thoughts green, though her hairs be
> grey.[9]

Brathwait thus recognizes the conflicting forces at war

within the Wife's temperament as she grows old, and he

senses that this realization by her is the cause for her

narrative about her five husbands.

Brathwait also marks the unflinching vindictive nature

of the Wife when she is telling about her fourth husband--

the most wanton and unfaithful of her men. After the Wife

shamelessly confesses: "But he was quit, by God and by

Seint Joce! / I made hym of the same wode a croce; / Nat of

my body, in no foul manere," Brathwait explains that:

> Truth was, he could not for his heart be more jealous
> of me than I was of him. Neither, indeed, had he any
> just cause to suspect me of wantonness. Here she
> excuseth herself that she never consorted with any
> good fellows for her own bodily pleasure in all this
> husband's time. Only she invited them to good cheer,
> being now turned professed gossiper. And all this,

perchance, (so perverse was her disposition) rather to nettle and sting her husband than any singular delight she took, either in respect of her comrades, or delicacy of tooth: as may be probably gathered by those verses immediately following:

> "But certainly, I made folk swich cheere
> That in his owene grece I made hym frye
> For angre, and for verray jalousye."[10]

While most of Brathwait's commentary in such a passage is prose paraphrase, his analysis of the meaning of the Wife's story also exposes the bold frankness of her character which Chaucer dramatically reveals through her confession, as it were. But Brathwait's parenthetical "(so perverse was her disposition)" also shows his cognizance of the vindictive hypocrisy which belies much of what she says.

Brathwait further points out the Wife's hypocrisy in her public adherence to the proper form of response to her husband's death, when, after the Wife states, "He deyde whan I cam fro Jerusalem, / And lith ygrave under the roode beem," Brathwait injects:

> This good-wife, belike, had taken her pilgrimage to Jerusalem, either voluntarily or by injunction. No doubt, had she played pilgrim all her time her husband had a lighter heart. But now, coming home, she finds her husband drawing near his last home; whom she sees no sooner departed than she takes course to prevent his revival, to have him no less suddenly than solemnly buried. Under the rood-loft (a place of especial reverence in former times) she causeth his grave to be made; albeit in no sumptuous manner, as ancient heroes have been interred . . . .[11]

This remark by Brathwait reveals--seemingly for the first time--an acknowledgment of the humor and irony contained in

the Wife's "Prologue," particularly when Brathwait notes
that the husband is "no sooner departed that she takes
course to prevent his revival . . . ." That is, Brathwait
is aware of Chaucer's comic intention contained in the
Wife's narrative. While such critics as Webbe, Beaumont,
and Harvey have mentioned Chaucer's humor, this is the first
example of a specific instance cited from his work.
Brathwait's entire "Comment," in fact, implies a sensitive
response to the underlying comic intent and meaning running
throughout the Wife's "Prologue."

Finally, Brathwait captures the Wife's philosophy of
living only for the present moment and her amoral lack of
remorse for her past life. When she says of her fourth
husband, "Lat hym fare wel, God yeve his soul reste! / He is
now in his grave and in his cheste," Brathwait concludes:

> He is now laid in earth, and his soul, I hope, at
> rest. He had my leave to be gone before he went.
> To grieve for that which cannot be remedied is
> bootless. I will spare then to shed any tears,
> seeing they are no less foolish than fruitless.
> And so goodnight to my fourth husband.[12]

The foregoing quotations should provide ample illustra-
tion both of Brathwait's technique and of the essential
substance of his textual criticism. However, despite his
pains to illustrate the genius and complexity of Chaucer's
powers of character creation, Brathwait seems to have
anticipated an objection to Chaucer's poetry--that same
objection which has been plaguing it for a century and a

half, namely, the roughness and difficulty of Chaucer's
language. And so Brathwait includes an Appendix to his
"Comment" in which:

> A Critick . . . said "that he could allow well
> of Chaucer, if his Language were Better." Whereto
> the Author of these Commentaries return'd him this
> Answer: "Sir, it appears, you prefer Speech before
> the Head piece; Language before Invention; Whereas
> Weight of Judgment has ever given Invention
> Priority before Language. And not to leave you
> dissatisfied, As the Time wherein these Tales were
> writ, rendered him incapable of the one; so his
> Pregnancy of Fancy approv'd him incomparable for
> the other."[13]

Brathwait's final defense of Chaucer's poetry rests,
therefore, on Chaucer's "Invention," "Weight of Judgment,"
and, in a memorable phrase, his "Pregnancy of Fancy"--all
qualities which the Elizabethans prized him for. Moreover,
such an apologia places Brathwait in the curious critical
position of implying, as Caroline Spurgeon suggests, "that
the substance of what Chaucer says is so good that the
manner of saying it matters comparatively little."[14] So
once again those defective elements in Chaucer's poetry--the
language and metrics--are blamed on "the Time wherein these
Tales were writ." The persistence of this misconception does
not, however, eradicate or diminish the basic strength of
Brathwait's insight into the incomparable dramatic portrayal
of one of Chaucer's characters. In this respect, Brathwait
stands virtually alone as the vital critical link between
Beaumont and Dryden, both of whom sensed that the essence of

Chaucer's genius was to be found in the persons who live in his poems.

However, Brathwait's criticism, like Peacham's, is essentially "a survival--far into the seventeenth century--of the Elizabethan attitude towards Chaucer."[15] Both Peacham and Brathwait seem unaffected by the new spirit and critical tenets of neo-classicism which--in the hands of Ben Jonson and Joseph Addison, for example--will find Chaucer's poetry grossly irregular and faulty. As Miss Spurgeon points out, Brathwait's "opinions and literary tastes were quite behind the times, thoroughly old-fashioned and obsolete."[16] She is referring, though, to the publication of Brathwait's "Comment" in 1665, and not to 1617, the supposed date of its composition. What happened in England between these dates, as every student of English history knows, was quite dramatic; and the effects of the political upheaval were felt in a marked shift in the aesthetics and literary taste in the Restoration era. The seeds of neo-classicism had, however, been engendered and were growing long before Charles II reclaimed his throne in 1660. For a reaction to the exhuberant romanticism of the Elizabethan era had begun by the end of the sixteenth century. The Italian critics--Castelvetro, Scaliger, Minturno--are no doubt the primum mobile of this shift in their demand for more restrained and controlled form through adherence to such technicalities as regularity of metre and observance of the unities.

In the development of English literary criticism it is
generally agreed that Ben Jonson is the foremost exponent
in the early seventeenth century of this emerging neo-
classicism. It can be conceded, as Professor Joel E.
Spingarn states, that "English criticism . . . may be said
to exhibit classical tendencies from its very beginning.
But it is none the less true that before Ben Jonson there
was no systematic attempt to force, as it were, the classic
ideal on English literature."[17] The reason for presenting
Jonson in this perspective is simply that in his _Timber, or
Discoveries_, published in 1641, Jonson hands down an
infamous indictment of Chaucer, and we need to relate what
Jonson says to the principles upon which he has based his
judgment. In form, _Timber_ "appears to be a series of notes
for a projected essay or series of essays, probably made
between 1620 and 1625."[18] Critically, as Wimsatt and Brooks
explain, "the emphasis of _Timber_ is on epistolary and
oratorical style, on the manly virtues of brevity, per-
spicuity, vigor, discretion . . . ."[19] Given these
prejudices, then, Jonson finds little of value in medieval
literature, and is far more skeptical of Elizabethan
literature than most of his contemporaries. His reservations
about medieval and Elizabethan literature are perhaps best
revealed in one of Jonson's most oft-quoted comments from
Timber. He is suggesting a reading list for the beginning
student of literature, and he advises him that:

[A]s it is fit to reade the best Authors to youth
first, so let them be of the openest and clearest:
As Livy before Sàlust, Sidney before Donne; and
beware of letting them taste Gower or Chaucer at
first, lest falling too much in love with Antiquity,
and not apprehending the weight, they grow rough and
barren in language onely. When their judgements are
firme and out of danger, let them reade both the old
and the new; but no lesse take heed that their new
flowers and sweetnesse doe not as much corrupt as
the others drinesse and squallor, if they choose not
carefully. Spencer, in affecting the Ancients, writ
no Language: Yet I would have him read for his
matter, but as Virgil read Ennuis.[20]

The above passage has generally been read and inter-
preted as a sweeping condemnation, or at least dismissal, of
Chaucer and Gower, and particularly Spenser, primarily
because of what Jonson seems to be saying about the anti-
quated quality of their poetic language. While Jonson does
indeed fault all three poets on precisely this point, he is
not altogether dismissing them from the annals of literary
history. With regards to the traditional reading of
Jonson's remark, J. W. H. Atkins suggests that "read in its
proper setting Jonson's comment has clearly a different
meaning. He was considering at the time what writers were
likely to be helpful to youthful readers in forming an
effective style, and he advises the neglect at first of those
whose styles presented difficulties or involved departures
from normal usage."[21] Atkin's thesis forces us to look
again at Jonson's advice, especially the sentence: "When
their judgements are firm and out of danger, let them reade
both the old and the new." Moreover, Jonson may be

expressing some justifiable contempt for the decadence of the rhetorical mode in the remark: "but no lesse take heed that their new flowers and sweetnesse doe not as much corrupt as the others drinesse and squallor, if they choose not carefully." Even Spenser, though he "writ no Language," should be "read for his matter," which is a curious and similar echo to critical arguments for the value of Chaucer's poetry from Puttenham and Webbe to Brathwait. The consequence, therefore, of reading Jonson's comment in this light is to reveal more generosity of spirit on the part of Jonson towards these three poets than has hitherto been admitted; for he does, at least, grant the three poets some redemptive value for what they had to say, if not for how they said it.

Such a conclusion, however, cannot alter the fact that for Jonson roughness in language and irregularity in metre are two weighty faults in a poet's work. In the same section from which Jonson's above remark is taken he again refers to Chaucer's language, this time as an example of an idiom now obsolete. The reference to Chaucer occurs after Jonson has been discussing what vintage of language is most proper for the poet. He prefaces his advice with a premise as to what particular quality in language is most valuable:

> [T]he chiefe vertue of a style is perspicuitie, and nothing so vitious in it as to need an Interpreter. Words borrow'd of Antiquity doe lend a kind of Majesty to style, and are not without their delight sometimes. For they have the Authority of yeares, and out of their intermission doe win to themselves a kind of

grace-like newnesse. But the eldest of the present,
and newest of the past Language, is the best. . . .
Virgill was most loving of Antiquity; yet how rarely
doth hee insert "aquai" and "pictai"! Lucretius is
scabrous and rough in these; hee seekes 'hem: As
some doe Chaucerismes with us, which were better
expung'd and banish'd. Some words are to be cull'd
out for ornament and colour, as wee gather flowers
to straw houses or make Garlands; but they are better
when they grow to our style, as in a Meadow, where,
though the meere grasse and greennesse delights, yet
the variety of flowers doth heighten and beautifie.[22]

This comment too has most often been viewed as a

rejection of Chaucer's poetry because of the difficulty of

his language and the time when it was written. But we must

note that in this passage Jonson emphasizes that for him

clarity is the primary goal a poetic idiom should exhibit.

This is why he selects "the eldest of the present, and

newest of the past Language" as the most ideal for poetry.

More significantly, he understands that in their time both

Virgil and Chaucer did this, but that their usefulness as

models to poets writing in the early seventeenth century has

been eclipsed by changes in the respective language which

each poet wrote in. Jonson is merely being pragmatic

because, in his opinion, neither poet is able to serve as a

working model--due to their antiquated language--for contem-

porary poets, though Jonson does not withhold other merits

from them worthy of respect or imitation. Finally, we must

keep in mind that Jonson's judgments are at all times

weighed in rigid accordance with those neo-classical tenets

which he has adopted as his scale of aesthetic values; and

that with this framework--because of the ignorance of the true nature of Chaucer's language and metre--his poetry is subjected to a critical devaluation which it has never before encountered.

Jonson is thus at the center or beginning of this critical eclipse of Chaucer's work in the seventeenth century, and we have labored his comments not because they contribute any new insight into his poems, but rather because through or in Jonson we have represented the prevailing neo-classical assessment of Chaucer for the remainder of the century. For neo-classical critics and poets there will simply be no deviation from the judgment of Chaucer which Jonson has handed down. In fact, in the Restoration, due to the influence of French neo-classicism, this pejorative view of Chaucer's poetry will be further limited and devalued. In summing up Jonson's importance in the course of English literary criticism Wimsatt and Brooks make a statement which could be applied as well to Jonson's relation to Dryden in terms of their respective opinions of Chaucer. Jonson is, conclude Wimsatt and Brooks, "the first English man of letters to exhibit a nearly complete and consistent neo-classicism. His historical importance is that he throws out a vigorous announcement of the rule from which in the next generation Dryden is to be engaged in politely rationalized recessions."[23] One of those recessions

in which Dryden will be politely engaged will be a
revaluation of Chaucer's poetry.

Certainly the most consistent and overriding objection
to Chaucer's poems in the seventeenth century is the
obscurity and, therefore, difficulty of his language. In
the face of this obstacle most literary critics blamed
their incomprehension of Chaucer's vocabulary on the poet
himself, Adam Scrivener, or even the age in which he lived.
Chaucer's poetic language becomes, then, the escape valve
for most any critic forced to say something about his poetry.
We might note, however, that the same problem confronted the
Elizabethans, but that their response to it was quite
different, with contrasting critical opinions as a result.
We observed that Brathwait urged his readers to overlook
Chaucer's poetic language in favor of his "Invention,"
"Weight of Judgment," and his "Pregnancy of Fancy."[24] But
Brathwait's remark, like Peacham's, predates Jonson's
opinion in Timber. The only critic between Jonson and
Dryden who dared suggest that Chaucer's English was not the
impediment it seemed was Edward Phillips, Milton's nephew,
who, in his Theatrum Poetarum, or a Compleat Collection of
the Poets, published in 1675, argues that antiquity and
difficulty in comprehending a poet's language do not make
the poet's idiom faulty. Phillip's statement occurs in the
"Preface" to the Theatrum Poetarum, and this "Preface" is

significant because it attempts an unusual effort in the midst of the Restoration to evaluate literature from Chaucer to Shakespeare. Phillips readily admits that particular difficulty exists with literature before the reign of Henry VIII, but that the language will be rough and unpleasing only to those who are strangers to it. Chaucer is then cited as the best among poets prior to the mid-sixteenth century. Phillips leads into his case for medieval poetry with what was for him and his contemporary critics an important question--but one which was apparently seldom asked:

> Is Antiquity then a crime? no, certainly, it ought to be rather had in veneration; but nothing, it seems, relishes so well as what is written in the smooth style of our present Language, taken to be of late so much refined. True it is that the style of Poetry till Henry the 8th's time, and partly also within his Reign, may very well appear uncouth, strange, and unpleasant to those that are affected only with what is familiar and accustom'd to them, not but there were even before those times some that had their Poetical excellencies, if well examin'd, and chiefly among the rest Chaucer, who through all the neglect of former ag'd Poets still keeps a name, being by some few admir'd for his real worth, to others not unpleasing for his facetious way, which joyn'd with his old English intertains them with a kind of Drollery; however, from Qu. Elizabeth's Reign the Language hath been not so unpolisht as to render the Poetry of that time ungratefull to such as at this day will take the paines to examin it well; besides, if no Poetry should Pleas but what is calculated to every refinement of a Language, of how ill consequence this would be for the future let him consider and make it his own case, who, being now in fair repute & promising to himself a lasting Fame, shall two or three Ages hence, when the Language comes to be double refin'd, understand (if Souls have any intelligence, after their

departure hence, what is done on Earth) that his
Works are become obsolete and thrown aside.[25]

Phillips' comment reveals an uncommon awareness at this
time of the nature of literary language, and how changes in
the language often doom a poet's work to obscurity. In
addition, he raises the spectre, near the conclusion of the
above passage, of this process happening to the poets
writing in his own day. But most important, Phillips does
not equate antiquity with defectiveness; instead he insists
that older poetry "ought to be rather had in veneration."
So it is with Chaucer's poetry, explains Phillips, which,
despite the language problem, possesses its excellencies."
Just what Chaucer's "real worth" is, however, Phillips does
not say, although he does make an infrequent--if not
singular--allusion to the humor in Chaucer's poems when he
states that to some Chaucer is "not unpleasing for his
facetious way." Still, the effect of Chaucer's language and
humor is "a kind of Drollery," which obviously lessens
Phillips' appreciation for this quality in Chaucer's poetry.
Thus, the essence of Phillips' criticism of Chaucer is a
restatement primarily of Beaumont and Speght, whose comments
on language and Chaucer's English are really more impressive
critically than Phillips'. The argument which Phillips
makes, though, regarding not only Chaucer but medieval
literature as well, stands as the lone response to Jonson's
dictum regarding the clarity of poetic language, and his

belief that there is nothing "so vitious" in a poet's work
"as to need an Interpreter."[26] The latter seventeenth
century, however, paid far greater heed to Ben Jonson than
it did to Edward Phillips; and thus, Phillips' plea for
greater tolerance and understanding towards earlier English
literature fell mostly on deaf ears. Perhaps the best that
can be said for Phillips is offered by J. W. H. Atkins who
acknowledges that "while for him no great claim as a critic
can be made, yet his Preface . . . gives evidence at least
of some independent thinking."[27] This in itself is no small
tribute when considered against the background of an age
bowed in worship of the French neo-classical critics.

It is in the Restoration, then, that critical apprecia-
tion, or lack of it, of Chaucer's artistry plummets to its
lowest point in the three centuries that Chaucer's poetry
has been eliciting critical commentary. Nowhere is this
better exemplified than in the numerous pejorative references
to Chaucer throughout this period. For our purposes,
however, two will suffice, namely, from Thomas Rymer and
Joseph Addison. These two critics have not been selected
for any reason other than as spokesmen for the prevailing
response to Chaucer's work which characterizes the late
seventeenth century; and each provides us with a slightly
different perspective of this attitude towards Chaucer.
Moreover, the remarks of Rymer and Addison form a startling

backdrop and contrast to Dryden's "Preface" to the <u>Fables</u>,
for all three criticisms of Chaucer occur within a span of
eight years, that is, from 1692 to 1700.

Rymer's <u>Short View of Tragedy</u>, 1692, reveals the
disdain which the late seventeenth century had developed for
most literature written prior to 1660, and to works which
violated or ignored what had come to be the universal and
timeless principles of neo-classicism. Rymer's approach,
however, is linguistic, and he presents the growth of
literary English as a gradual movement beginning with
Chaucer and leading ultimately to poetic perfection in the
verses of Edmund Waller. Surprisingly, Rymer acknowledges
the role and importance of Chaucer in refining the English
language as a poetic medium, and he even mentions the
foreign borrowings in Chaucer's poetry which helped enrich
English. In brief, then, this is how Rymer explains how
English poetry flowered from Chaucer to Waller:

> But they who attempted verse in English, down till
> Chaucer's time, made an heavy pudder, and are always
> miserably put to't for a word to clink: which
> commonly fall so awkward, and unexpectedly as
> dropping from the Clouds by some Machine or Miracle.
>   Chaucer found an Herculean labour on his Hands;
> and did perform to Admiration. He seizes all
> Provencal, French, or Latin that came in his way,
> gives them a new garb and livery, and mingles them
> amongst our English: turns out English, gowty, or
> superanuated, to place in their room the foreigners,
> fit for service, train'd and accustomed to Poetical
> Discipline.
>   But tho' the Italian reformation was begun and
> finished well nigh at the same time by Boccace,
> Dante, and Petrarch. Our language retain'd something

of the churl; something of the Stiff and Gothish
did stick upon it, till long after Chaucer.
        Chaucer threw in Latin, French, Provencial,
and other Languages, like new Stum to raise a
Fermentation; In Queen Elizabeth's time it grew fine,
but came not to an Head and Spirit, did not shine
and sparkle till Mr. Waller set it a running.[28]

Oddly enough, Rymer's tribute to Chaucer sounds a

curiously distant echo of Lydgate and Hoccleve and the whole

gallery of fifteenth century commentators on Chaucer, though

it is most doubtful if they would have agreed with Rymer's

final estimation of Chaucer in relation to Waller. What is

interesting about Rymer's comment is his knowledge of

Chaucer's literary and linguistic borrowings and his

comparison of Chaucer's age with the Italian Renaissance.

This information was, of course, commonplace in the

seventeenth century, but Rymer is the only Chaucer critic in

the period to resurrect this particular perspective of

Chaucer's contribution to English poetry. Nevertheless,

Rymer's opinion of the language in the fourteenth and

fifteenth centuries is expressed in his remark that: "Our

language retain'd something of the churl; something of the

Stiff and Gothish did stick upon it, till long after

Chaucer." This incomprehension of middle English in turn

was the cause for the lack of critical recognition of the

literature of that time, including Chaucer's. In addition,

it is interesting to note that Rymer omits any argument

whatsoever to the effect that Chaucer's poetry deserves some

praise, at least, for its matter. For Rymer and other neo-
classical critics the clarity of language and the regularity
of metre were overriding factors in the face of any counter-
argument which attempted to redeem a poet's work on the
basis of its content. This, then, is a drastic restriction
even from the stringent Ben Jonson who conceded that Chaucer,
Gower, and Spenser ought to be read for their subject
matter. But we must remember that Waller's poetry is
Rymer's poetic ideal and critical yardstick for judging
other poets. More surprising still, perhaps, is the fact
that Rymer was by no means alone in this opinion, for
Professor Atkins reluctantly admits that Rymer's Short View
is significant, if for no other reason, for "reflecting what
men were thinking about literature in his day."[29] This,
however, as Atkins hastens to add, is all that can be said
for the essay; and subsequent critics, beginning with Dryden,
soon saw that many, if not most, of Rymer's critical judg-
ments were tentative at best, and blatantly foolish at worst.
Not the least of Rymer's critical blunders is his ignorance
of the historical and literary worth of Chaucer's poetry in
the treasury of English letters.

Yet another view of Chaucer similar to Rymer's is set
forth in the young Joseph Addison's versified Account of the
Greatest English Poets, 1694. The very fact that Chaucer is
included among the "Greatest" of English poets is noteworthy

at this juncture. Like Rymer, Addison exhibits a wary

caution about the destructive effect which linguistic

changes affect upon a poet's work and reputation. Thus,

while Chaucer, for example, was perhaps the best poet of his

time, he has, according to Addison, been muted by the English

language itself:

> Long had our dull forefathers slept supine,
> Nor felt the raptures of the tuneful nine;
> Till Chaucer first, a merry bard, arose,
> And many a story told in rhyme and prose.
> But age has rusted what the poet writ,
> Worn out his language, and obscur'd his wit.
> In vain he jests in his unpolish'd strain
> And tries to make his readers laugh in vain.[30]

Addison too accepts Chaucer, as did Rymer, as the

founding father of English poetry and implies that he was

without a peer in his age. But now his poetic language is

"Rusted" and "Worn out," and his wit is "obscur'd." The

result is that now: "In vain he jests in his unpolish'd

strain / And tries to make his readers laugh in vain." The

only curious aspect about Addison's remark is his mention of

Chaucer as a comic poet, that is, "a merry Bard" who, in his

time, was a source of mirthful entertainment for his audience.

But unlike Phillips, Addison does not show even limited

appreciation for the humor in Chaucer's poetry. In all

fairness to Addison, however, two facts must be offered in

qualification, if not defense, of the above passage. First,

Addison wrote the <u>Account</u> when he was only twenty-one, and

secondly, he had the critical good sense never to publish

it. As Atkins notes, it is "a youthful and immature
production . . . not to be taken too seriously."[31]

We have cited Rymer and Addison, therefore, only as
spokesmen for the prevailing neo-classical perspective of
Chaucer's poetry in the late century. Critically speaking,
the value of their comments on Chaucer are negligible, for
their prejudices prevented them, and their contemporaries,
from seeing beyond the difficulty of Chaucer's language and
metre--which somehow Brathwait, Peacham, Phillips, and even,
to an extent, Jonson had done--to his creation of characters.
In the annals of Chaucer criticism no period is as lacking
in sympathy and understanding of Chaucer's poetry as the
late seventeenth century. It can be argued, though somewhat
shakily, that the fault does not lie entirely with the
sensibilities of the critics, for in truth middle English,
or "old English" as Phillips termed it, was a more foreign
tongue to the Restoration than either Latin or French. Even
so, this cannot fully explain the widespread critical
intolerance for Chaucer's poetry in an age which literary
history reveres for its critical self-consciousness. Nor
does it account for the totally unprecedented and unexpected
praise of Chaucer in Dryden's "Preface" to the Fables in
1700, unless it is simply that the more encompassing critical
tolerance and genius of Dryden enabled him to see and value
what most of his contemporary critics could not, or perhaps
would not.

In a sense, most everything in this paper, with a few notable exceptions, is prefatory to Dryden's "Preface," for in this single piece of criticism lies the end and the beginning of two marked developments in Chaucer criticism, that is, the death of Chaucer the medieval poet and the birth of the modern Chaucer whom Dryden views as a poet for all seasons. The "Preface" is, of course, for students of literary criticism, as well as of Chaucer, one of the most remarked upon critical essays in the language. For us, as Professor J. A. Burrow states, it is "the first time Chaucer's poetry [is] submitted to the considered judgment of a man who is not predisposed only to praise it";[32] or, we might add, only to condemn it. Since the "Preface" has been so frequently anthologized and numerous passages become almost legendary, we need not examine the essay in the detail with which we did Caxton or Beaumont, for example. But it is imperative that we discuss the "Preface" because it is often cited and praised as the beginning of modern criticism of Chaucer--which is certainly undeniable. But this view presents the "Preface" in a historical vacuum which either fails to acknowledge, or is ignorant of, Dryden's debt to Chaucer critics before him, especially Beaumont and Speght to whom Dryden owes far more than has ever been admitted. Our purpose, then, is to offer the "Preface" as the vital link which it is between two perspectives of Chaucer's work-- one fading into a well-deserved eclipse, the other emerging

and lighting the way to some remarkable new insights into Chaucer's art in the centuries ahead.

Dryden's ostensible purpose in the "Preface" is to introduce his readers to the poets he has translated--Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Boccaccio, Chaucer. But Dryden is not through the second paragraph when his attention becomes fixed on Chaucer, where it largely remains throughout the rest of the essay. Pragmatically, Dryden's chief legacy in the "Preface" is his technique, that is, the comparative method, for Chaucer is not discussed in isolation, but usually related to another poet or poets. The main comparison is between Ovid and Chaucer; and it is in this evaluation of these two poets that Dryden's debt to traditional criticism wedded to his own critical acumen is most evident. Both poets are praised for their respective contribution to the poetic language of their native tongue, although, adds Dryden, "With Ovid ended the Golden Age of the Roman Tongue: From Chaucer the Purity of the English Tongue began."[33] Implied, it seems, is the notion that Chaucer's achievement in poetic diction was the more difficult, though not necessarily the greater of the two, for Chaucer's English lacked the more refined polish of Ovid's Latin. Dryden, however, omits any extended comment on the poetic language of either poet, and brushes aside all references to the deficiency and incomprehensibility of Chaucer's vocabulary with the statement:

"Therefore that part of the Comparison stands not on an
equal Foot, any more than the Diction of Ennuis and Ovid; or
of Chaucer, and our present English. The Words are given up
as a Post not to be defended, because he wanted the modern
art of Fortifying."[34] Just how and why Dryden is able to
play down this aspect of Chaucer's poetry in the face of
late seventeenth century opinion of Chaucer's language may
be related to an earlier comment in the "Preface" on Homer
and Virgil where Dryden was confronted with the paradox of
insisting that Homer is a greater poet than Virgil, while
conceding that Homer's language is rougher than Virgil's.
Despite his awareness of the neo-classical dictum which
demands that poetic language be, above all, clear and
smooth, Dryden argues that:

> Words are the Colouring of the Work, which in the
> Order of Nature is last to be consider'd. The
> Design, the Disposition, the Manners, and the
> Thoughts, are all before it: Where any of those
> are wanting or imperfect, so much wants or is
> imperfect in the Imitation of Humane Life; which
> is in the very Definition of a Poem. Words indeed,
> like glaring Colours, are the first Beauties that
> arise, and strike the Sight; but if the Draught be
> false or lame, the Figures ill dispos'd, the Manners
> obscure or inconsistent, or the Thoughts unnatural,
> then the finest Colours are but Dawbing, and the
> Piece is a beautiful Monster at the best.[35]

The comment is a vital one in the "Preface," for it estab-
lishes Dryden's critical and aesthetic priorities; and it is
this sense of the primary value of such qualities as "The
Design, the Disposition, the Manners, and the Thoughts"

which underlies his generous appreciation of Chaucer's
poetry over and above whatever linguistic and metrical
handicaps he encounters in it. Further, the remark explains
why Dryden tersely dismisses a century and a half of
vociferous protestation against the obscurity of Chaucer's
English.

When Dryden notes that neither Ovid nor Chaucer "were
great Inventors,"[36] he is merely restating another critical
commonplace regarding Chaucer in particular. Yet it is
Dryden's judgment that Chaucer's borrowings exhibit more
originality than Ovid's, for even though:

> Both of them built on the Inventions of other Men;
> yet since Chaucer had something of his own, as The
> Wife of Baths Tale, The Cock and the Fox, which I
> have translated, and some others, I may justly give
> our Countryman the Precedence in that Part; since I
> can remember nothing of Ovid which was wholly his.
> Both of them understood the Manners; under which
> Name I comprehend the Passions, and, in a larger
> sense, the Descriptions of Persons, and their very
> Habits: For an Example, I see Baucis and Philemon
> as perfectly before me, as if some ancient Painter
> had drawn them; and all the Pilgrims in the Canterbury
> Tales, their Humours, their Features, and the very
> Dress, as distinctly as if I had supp'd with them at
> the Tabard in Southwark. Yet even there too the
> Figures of Chaucer are much more lively, and set in a
> better Light: Which though I have not time to prove;
> yet I appeal to the Reader, and am sure he will clear
> me from Partiality.[37]

This passage is a curious distillation of Chaucer commentary
going as far back as the fifteenth century. The Eliza-
bethans, such as Puttenham, for example, were insistent in
emphasizing Chaucer's native genius and originality,

especially in The Canterbury Tales, in spite of his use of foreign source material. Thus, on this point Dryden is reinforcing a well-established attitude towards Chaucer's artistry. What makes it unprecedented, however, is that Dryden is the first critic of Chaucer to so boldly suggest that Chaucer is superior in this quality to one of antiquity's greatest and most popular poets. Moreover, the remainder of the comment is a rebirth of that perspective of Chaucer's poetry so remarked upon during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, namely, the tribute to the vividness of descriptions, particularly of persons, in Chaucer's poems. It was a quality stressed in The Book of Curtesye, by Caxton, the Scottish Chaucerians, and throughout the sixteenth century even to Beaumont, who dared to assert that "the excellencie of his [Chaucer's] descriptions" were equal to "any other that ever writ in any tongue."[38] But then the claim fell on deaf ears for a century, and Dryden is the first to remind Chaucer's readers of the poet's effect on their visual imaginations.

Other illustrations of Dryden's debt to traditional criticism of Chaucer occur throughout the "Preface." For example, the following passage is far closer in spirit and meaning to Caxton than it is to Addison or Rymer:

> As he is the Father of English Poetry, so I hold him
> in the same Degree of Veneration as the Grecians held
> Homer, or the Romans Virgil: He is a perpetual
> Fountain of good Sense; learned in all Sciences; and

> therefore speaks properly on all Subjects: As he
> knew what to say, so he knows also when to leave
> off; a Continence which is practis'd by few
> Writers, and scarcely by any of the Ancients,
> excepting Virgil and Horace.[39]

In such a comment Dryden is telling us nothing we have not

heard before, though the unique quality of Dryden as a

critic is revealed in such a metaphorical phrase as "a

perpetual Fountain of good Sense."

In addition, though he questioned the skepticism

directed at Chaucer's language, Dryden falls into line with

the majority who have been faulting Chaucer's metre for

nearly two centuries, although we know for Dryden it is not

the barrier to the heart of Chaucer's poetry that it has

been for so many other critics. States Dryden:

> The verse of Chaucer, I confess, is not Harmonious
> to us; but 'tis like the Eloquence of one whom Tacitus
> commends, it was "auribus istius temporis accommodata":
> [accomodated to the ears of that time]: They who
> liv'd with him, and some time after him, thought it
> Musical; and it continues so even in our Judgment, if
> compar'd with the Numbers of Lidgate and Gower his
> Contemporaries: There is the rude Sweetness of a
> Scotch Tune in it, which is natural and pleasing,
> though not perfect. 'Tis true, I cannot go so far as
> he who publish'd the last Edition of him; for he
> would make us believe the Fault is in our Ears, and
> that there were really Ten Syllables in a Verse where
> we find but Nine: But this Opinion is not worth
> confuting; 'tis so gross and obvious an Errour, that
> Common Sense (which is a Rule in every thing but
> Matters of Faith and Revelation) must convince the
> Reader, that Equality of Numbers in every Verse which
> we call Heroick, was either not known, or not always
> practis'd in Chaucer's Age. It were an easie Matter
> to produce some thousands of his Verses, which are
> lame for want of half a Foot, and sometimes a whole
> one, and which no Pronunciation can make otherwise.

> We can only say, that he liv'd in the Infancy of our
> Poetry, and that nothing is brought to Perfection
> at the first.[40]

Thus, the only notable aspect of the comment is Dryden's

open questioning of Speght's suggestion about Chaucer's

metre in the "Preface" to his 1602 edition of Chaucer.

Dryden's response is significant because at the time we dis-

cussed Speght's remark, we inferred that his hypothesis

appears to have gone either unnoticed or unchallenged, or

both, despite the widespread popularity of Speght's edition.

Dryden's negation of Speght's idea, then, is the first

instance we possess as to whether Speght's proposal received

any serious consideration. Apparently it did not; and when

it finally did, it was rejected.

However, the above comment is most relevant to our

discussion of Dryden's "Preface," for it is clear that Dryden

used Speght's edition for his modernizations of Chaucer;

and, more importantly, Dryden's remark reveals that he was

acquainted not only with Chaucer's poems, but with the

editorial commentary in the edition as well. Therefore, it

seems inevitable that he would have read both Speght's

"Preface" and Beaumont's "Letter to Speght," for our exami-

nation of Dryden's "Preface" indicates that he was substan-

tially influenced by both of these critics in his judgments

about various qualities in Chaucer's poetry.

Yet another example of Dryden's use of previous Chaucer

criticism lies in his misconception of Chaucer's religious

beliefs, because, like so many others before him, Dryden too accepts <u>Piers</u> <u>Plowman</u> as Chaucer's. Thus, concludes Dryden, Chaucer "seems to have some little Byas towards the Opinions of Wickliff."[41] However, this error, along with Dryden's failure with Chaucer's metre, are the only two major weaknesses which subsequent Chaucer scholarship has found it necessary to rectify in Dryden's lengthy critique of Chaucer's poetry. More significantly, neither mistake in any way impairs or damages the positive contributions--to which we now turn--which Dryden offers about the lasting artistic merits of Chaucer's poetry.

It is Dryden's--not neo-classicism's--preferences and judgments which prevail throughout the "Preface," especially when he is assessing Chaucer. For example, in his faulting of Ovid for being too witty and preferring the "Propriety"[42] of Chaucer, Dryden boldly reacts to his age's obsession with wit and valuing it as the most necessary and highest virtue of a literary work. In one of the more forceful passages in the essay, Dryden admits that most critics "will think me little less than mad, for preferring the Englishman to the Roman."[43] To which Dryden counters with a series of rhetorical questions:

> Wou'd any Man who is ready to die for Love, describe
> his Passion like Narcissus? Wou'd he think of
> "inopem me copia fecit," and a Dozen more of such
> Expressions, pour'd on the Neck of one another, and
> signifying all the same Thing? If this were Wit,
> was this a Time to be witty, when the poor Wretch

was in the Agony of Death? . . . On these Occasions
the Poet shou'd endeavour to raise Pity: But instead
of this, Ovid is tickling you to laugh. Virgil never
made use of such Machines, when he was moving you to
commiserate the Death of Dido: He would not destroy
when he was building. Chaucer makes Arcite violent
in his Love, and unjust in the Pursuit of it: Yet
when he came to die, he made him think more
reasonably: He repents not of his Love, for that had
alter'd his Character; but acknowledges the Injustice
of his Proceedings, and resigns Emilia to Palamon.
What would Ovid have done on this Occasion? He would
certainly have made Arcite witty on his Death-bed.
He had complain'd he was farther off from Possession,
by being so near, and a thousand such Boyisms, which
Chaucer rejected as below the Dignity of the Subject.
They who think otherwise, would by the same Reason
prefer Lucan and Ovid to Homer and Virgil, and
Martial to all Four of them.[44]

With the possible exception of Beaumont and Brathwait, no

previous critic of Chaucer has grounded his theoretical

assertion about a quality in Chaucer's poems so specif-

ically--and, we might add, convincingly--as Dryden does

here. He mutes any objection to his thesis because of the

examples he has chosen from each poet. Anyone acquainted

with Chaucer's poetry will readily accede that his handling

of Arcite's death is one of the most delicate and subtlely

moving scenes in all his works. It is Dryden's keen insight

into the reader's or critic's response, along with his sense

of what is best in Chaucer, which makes his argument so

utterly persuasive on this matter of wit in Chaucer and

Ovid.

Likewise, Dryden's comprehension of the complex nature

and purpose of satire enables him to perceive and explain

the satyric--as we have been calling it--intent in some of

Chaucer's poem's, especially in The Canterbury Tales. For

instance, in defending Chaucer's portrayal of the clergy

in the Tales Dryden argues that:

> the Scandal which is given by particular Priests,
> reflects not on the Sacred Function. Chaucer's
> Monk, his Chanon, and his Fryar, took not from the
> Character of his Good Parson. A Satyrical Poet is
> the Check of the Laymen, on bad Priests. We are
> only to take care, that we involve not the Innocent
> with the Guilty in the same Condemnation. The Good
> cannot be too much honour'd, nor the Bad too
> coursly us'd: For the Corruption of the Best,
> becomes the Worst. When a Clergy-man is whipp'd,
> his Gown is first taken off, by which the Dignity of
> his Order is secur'd: If he be wrongfully accus'd,
> he has his Action of Slander; and 'tis at the Poet's
> Peril, if he transgress the Law. But they will tell
> us, that all kind of Satire, though never so well
> deserv'd by particular Priests, yet brings the whole
> Order into Contempt. . . . They who use this Kind
> of Argument, seem to be conscious to themselves of
> somewhat which has deserv'd the Poet's Lash; and are
> less concern'd for their Publick Capacity, then for
> their Private: At least, there is Pride at the
> bottom of their Reasoning. If the Faults of Men in
> Orders are only to be judg'd among themselves, they
> are all in some sort Parties: For, since they say
> the Honour of their Order is concern'd in every
> Member of it, how can we be sure, that they will be
> impartial Judges?[45]

Dryden, therefore, like Webbe, Beaumont, and Speght, asserts

an ethical and reformative, rather than a libelous or

vindictive, intention in certain of Chaucer's poems.

Dryden's debt to Beaumont and Speght in this regard is

undeniable, but his explanation is uniquely his own; for

again Dryden illustrates his critical reasoning through a

metaphorical argument, such as his sidenote that before a

clergyman is whipped, "his Gown is first taken off, by which the Dignity of his Order is secur'd." Dryden's point is simply that Chaucer's dramatization of the Monk, Canon, and Friar strips them of their robes and offices and shows them to be morally naked individuals. While both Beaumont and Speght stressed Chaucer's attacks on the vices of his age and the abuses of certain institutions, Dryden is the initial critic to perceive of Chaucer's work as satire in the modern sense of the word. (It is interesting that in the above quote Dryden uses both spellings, calling Chaucer a "Satyrical Poet," and then referring to a genre--"all kind of Satire"--which seems to indicate a lingering confusion not only in the spelling, but the meaning of the terms as late as 1700.) What Dryden senses is that some universal quality in human nature is being revealed in the individual character, as well as the character's misuse of the privileges of his office, which, in fact, is a result of the character's personal ethos rather than the social, religious, or professional position he occupies. Dryden, therefore, marks the shift in Chaucer criticism from that perspective we have been terming satyric to the more common and modern response to the satiric artistry in many of his poems, where the exposing of human nature, of showing man as the fool he is, supercedes the importance of, as Professor Peter stated, "a didactic and reformative

intention"[46] directed at certain institutions and social
classes.

However, as Professor Atkins points out, all other of
Dryden's critical insights into Chaucer's poetry are "over-
shadowed by Dryden's acute and illuminating appreciation of
Chaucer's character-drawing."[47] In what is probably the
most famous and oft-quoted passage in the "Preface" Dryden
eulogizes the universality of human nature which the
pilgrims of The Canterbury Tales possess, for Chaucer:

> has taken into the Compass of his Canterbury Tales
> the various Manners and Humours (as we now call
> them) of the whole English Nation, in his Age. Not
> a single Character has escap'd him. All his
> Pilgrims are severally distinguish'd from each
> other; and not only in their Inclinations, but in
> their very Phisiognomies and Persons. Baptista
> Porta could not have describ'd their Natures better,
> than by the Marks which the Poet gives them. The
> Matter and Manner of their Tales, and of their
> Telling, are so suited to their different Educations,
> Humours, and Callings, that each of them would be
> improper in any other Mouth. Even the grave and
> serious characters are distinguish'd by their
> several sorts of Gravity. Their Discourses are such
> as belong to their Age, their Calling, and their
> Breeding; such as are becoming of them, and of them
> only. Some of his Persons are Vicious, and some
> Vertuous; some are unlearn'd, or (as Chaucer calls
> them) Lewd, and some are Learn'd. Even the Ribaldry
> of the Low Characters is different: The Reeve, the
> Miller, and the Cook, are several Men, and distin-
> guish'd from each other, as much as the mincing
> Lady Prioress, and the broad-speaking Wife of Bathe.
> But enough of this: There is such a Variety of Game
> springing up before me, that I am distracted in my
> Choice, and know not which to follow. 'Tis suffi-
> cient to say according to the Proverb, that here is
> God's Plenty. We have our Fore-fathers and Great
> Grand-dames all before us, as they were in Chaucer's
> Days; their general Characters are still remaining in
> Mankind, and even in England, though they are call'd

> by other Names than those of Moncks, and Fryars,
> and Chanons, and Lady Abbesses, and Nuns: For
> Mankind is ever the same, and nothing lost out of
> Nature, though everything is alter'd.[48]

The comment is a fusion of the critical suggestions of

Beaumont and Speght, especially on decorum of character, and

of the neo-classical doctrine of universality. For example,

in response to objections about the tales of lower charac-

ters in the Tales, Beaumont asked: "How much had hee

swarued from Decorum, if hee had made his Miller, his Cooke,

and his Carpenter, to haue told such honest and good tales,

as he made his Knight, his Squire, his Lawyer, and Scholler

tell?"[49] To which Beaumont himself responded: "So that no

man can imagine in that large compasse of his, purposing to

describe all men living in those daies, how it had beene

possible for him to have left untouched these filthie

delights of the baser sort of people."[50] Finally, with

specific reference to The Canterbury Tales, Beaumont stated

that Chaucer's "drift is to touch all sortes of men, and to

discouer all vices of that Age, and that he doth in such

sort, as he neuer failes to hit euery marke he leuels at."[51]

But it was Speght who seems to have provided the essential

germ of Dryden's awareness of Chaucer's achievement in

character creation. Besides noting that "Chaucer hath most

excellently kept that decorum, which Horace requireth in that

behalfe,"[52] Speght delineated the panorama of English

society which is contained in the Canterbury pilgrims:
"vnder the Pilgrimes, being a certaine number, and all of
differing trades, he comprehendeth all the people of the
land, and the nature and disposition of them in those daies;
namely, giuen to deuotion rather of custome than of
zeale."[53] But Dryden is the first critic to see beyond the
socio-historic importance of the characters in the Tales
and suggest that they, and thus the work which contains
them, display universal and timeless characteristics of
human nature, and that it is this quality which is at the
heart of the poem's lasting appeal and greatness. Dryden
reaches this conclusion as a result of his belief that
"Mankind is ever the same, and nothing lost out of Nature,
though everything is alter'd." Thus, knows Dryden, once
human nature is portrayed truthfully it is done so forever--
and he recognizes that Chaucer has done so in The Canterbury
Tales. The contribution which Dryden's insight makes to the
development of Chaucer criticism and to the understanding of
Chaucer's artistry can hardly be over-estimated. In fact,
notes Professor Atkins: "To Dryden's generation this
masterly analysis of Chaucer's character-drawing must have
come as a revelation of some of the mysteries of art; and to
it later ages have added little or nothing that is
essential."[54]

Unfortunately, Dryden is not as successful in resolving
the problem which is created by praising a poet on the one

hand for portraying humanity in many of its faces, but in so
doing showing some individuals to be, in Dryden's words,
"Vicious" and "Lewd." Faced with the dilemma of Chaucer's
moral vision, Dryden, like so many critics before him,
retreats to his editorial prerogative and announces that in
the _Fables_, "I have confin'd my Choice to such _Tales_ of
Chaucer, as savour nothing of Immodesty."[55] Then, as
Beaumont did, Dryden too quotes Chaucer's apologia for
artistic verisimilitude at the end of the _Prologue_ to _The
Canterbury Tales_. But Beaumont understood the validity of
Chaucer's argument, both on grounds of decorum of character,
and, more importantly, as a principle of poetic truth which
Beaumont knew must take priority over moral objections.
Thus, Beaumont could conclude that Chaucer, by "shewing the
disposition of these meaner sort of men, hee declareth, in
their prologues and tales, that their chiefe delight was in
undecent speeches of their owne, and in their false
declamations of others."[56] Not so, however, with Dryden who
ignores both Chaucer's and Beaumont's suggestions, and
instead decides to omit objectionable tales:

> Yet if a Man should have enquir'd of Boccace or
> of Chaucer, what need they had of introducing such
> Characters, where obscene Words were proper in their
> Mouths, but very undecent to be heard; I know not
> what Answer they could have made: For that Reason,
> such Tales shall be left untold by me.[57]

What is regrettable about Dryden's comment is that he
apparently forgot that earlier in the "Preface" he defined a

poem as "the Imitation of Humane Life,"[58] but has not
thought through the implications of this definition with
respect to moral vision in a work of art. It is seemingly
this same nearsightedness which is responsible for Dryden's
translation of The Wife of Bath's Tale, but not her Prologue
"because 'tis too licentious."[59] How striking a contrast is
struck here towards the Wife is seen when we consider the
delight which Brathwait found both in her character and even
the motives for her actions, along with his appreciation of
what Chaucer had exhibited in human nature in this ageing,
lusty woman. In fairness to Dryden, however, we must
remember that the "Preface" is the product of an old man
who, among other things, has experienced a serious and
lasting religious conversion, despite social and political
prejudices, and an artist who, like Chaucer,--if we accept
the sincerity of his Retraction--views with a certain
cautious moral skepticism some of the poems and plays of his
more youthful career.

At this point in the "Preface," therefore, Dryden says,
"I have almost done with Chaucer, when I have answer'd some
Objections relating to my present Work."[60] But, of course,
he is not finished, for he has yet to pass judgment on the
respective merits of Chaucer and Boccaccio. First, however,
Dryden tackles the opposition to his modernization of
Chaucer's English; and it is in these remarks that Dryden's

neo-classicism is most evident. That Dryden shares his age's conception of pre-Restoration English as something less than refined is clear in his admission that: "Chaucer, I confess, is a rough Diamond, and must first be polish'd e'er he shines,"[61] which is perhaps an echo of Addison's reference to Chaucer's "unpolish'd strain."[62] Dryden, though, knows what he is about, and perfecting Chaucer's English is not his primary purpose, but rather "to restore the sense of Chaucer."[63] Because, continues Dryden, "If the first End of a Writer be to be understood, then as his Language grows obsolete, his Thoughts must grow obscure . . . . ."[64] Responding to the linguistic purists who voiced their abhorrence at Dryden's profanation of Chaucer's English, Dryden reasons:

> As for the other Part of the Argument, that his
> Thoughts will lose of their original Beauty, by the
> innovation of Words; in the first place, not only
> their Beauty, but their Being is lost, where they
> are no longer understood, which is the present Case.[65]

Dryden's principles are obviously pragmatic in this matter of language; yet it is curious that in his argument for the priority of Chaucer's "Sense" Dryden is developing a critical perspective closely akin to Peacham and especially Brathwait, who argued in the Appendix to his Comment on Two Tales of Chaucer that "Weight of Judgment has ever given Invention Priority before Language."[66] Dryden's pragmatism in this matter is further revealed in his final rejoinder to

his critics when he openly accuses them of being selfish

with Chaucer's poetry:

> Yet I think I have just Occasion to complain of them,
> who because they understand Chaucer, would deprive
> the greater part of their Countrymen of the same
> Advantage, and hoord him up, as Misers do their
> Grandam Gold, only to look on it themselves, and
> hinder others from making use of it. In sum, I
> seriously protest, that no Man ever had, or can
> have, a greater Veneration for Chaucer, than my self.
> I have translated some part of his Works, only that
> I might perpetuate his Memory, or at least refresh
> it, amongst my Countrymen.[67]

Once again, then, Dryden's critical instincts transcend

his neo-classical bent to assert the validity of what he is

doing with Chaucer's language and why he has done so. Given

his age's misconceptions and confusion about Middle English,

we can hardly fault Dryden for the rationale of his deci-

sion; and even if we concede that he is blameworthy for his

view of Chaucer's language, his sin is venial when set

against the background of Sir Francis Kynaston's translation,

published in 1635, of the first two books of _Troilus and_

Criseyde into rymed Latin verse. Anyone who doubts the

popularity and approval of what Kynaston did need only to

page through the numerous tributes—mostly in Latin—written

to Kynaston for his translation.[68] Kynaston's motives,

moreover, were perfectly justifiable to both himself and his

contemporaries. Latin was the sole universal language; it

was dead, and, therefore, unchanging, unlike the fluidity of

English. Compared with Kynaston's attempt to make Chaucer

readable, Dryden's, then, is eminently more practical and noteworthy, and thus a legitimate contribution to the early eighteenth century's desire for and appreciation of Chaucer's poetry. It is one of literary history's little ironies—which both Chaucer and Dryden would have enjoyed and approved—that Dryden's modernizations appear a brief seventy-five years before Thomas Thyrwhitt's essay which finally dispells after almost three centuries the mystery from Chaucer's metre, thereby equivocating much of Dryden's effort and critical hypotheses about Chaucer's language and rhythm.

But such matters are again dwarfed by Dryden's comparison of Chaucer and Boccaccio, which ranks with his evaluation of Chaucer and Ovid, and his awareness of Chaucer's artistry in character creation as the three out-standing legacies of the "Preface" to the critical apprecia-tion of Chaucer's poetry. In his discussion of these two poets, all of Dryden's preference goes to Chaucer, even though the two are similar in that:

> Both writ Novels, and each of them cultivated his
> Mother-Tongue: But the greatest Resemblance of our
> two Modern Authors being in their familiar Style,
> and pleasing way of relating Comical Adventures, I
> may pass it over, because I have translated nothing
> from Boccace of that Nature.[69]

This remark, which Dryden passes off without further expan-sion—as he himself notes—contains two startling and unprecedented insights about Chaucer and Boccaccio. It is

the initial use in English criticism of the word "Novels"
with reference to poems; and, secondly, it is a surprising
recognition of those poems as "Comical Adventures." How
unfortunate it is that--for Chaucer critics and English
criticism as well--Dryden chose not to develop these two
ideas; but Wimsatt and Brooks contend that "Dryden was
inclined to take the aim of comedy not very seriously."[70]
This may be due in part to Dryden's rather strict adherence
to the theory of genres, about which more shall be said in
a moment when Dryden eulogizes The Knight's Tale. It is the
notion that Chaucer's poems are novels which becomes the
seed of an entirely new approach and perspective of Chaucer's
art in the centuries to come, when critics will fasten their
attention on Chaucer's narrative techniques and discover a
storyteller of the first rank. As D. S. Brewer points out
in his "Images of Chaucer: 1386-1900":

> By "novels" Dryden himself of course meant short
> stories, but it was a prophetic use of the word. .
> . . In the eighteenth century Chaucer's poems begin
> to be read as novels, the tendency increases in the
> nineteenth century and in the early twentieth
> century, and it is only recently that some of us have
> tried to get out of the habit.[71]

Dryden, however, does distinguish between the two poets
"In the serious Part of Poetry,"[72] and decidedly prefers
Chaucer for several reasons. Though both poets used borrowed
material--Chaucer even borrowing from Boccaccio--"Chaucer
has refin'd on Boccace, and has mended the Stories which he

has borrow'd, in his way of telling."[73] In addition, even though Boccaccio possessed greater freedom because "Prose allows more Liberty of Thought, and the Expression is more easie,"[74] Dryden values Chaucer's tales as the better because "Our Countryman carries Weight, and yet wins the Race at disadvantage."[75] In this last remark Dryden remains in keeping with his belief that Chaucer's "Sense," as he has been calling it, takes precedence over any formalistic considerations. Moreover, we noted that the most convincing attribute of Dryden's critique of Chaucer in the "Preface" is his use of specific examples to illustrate and support his judgments. Thus, after stating his case for Chaucer over Boccaccio, Dryden refers his reader to _The Wife of Bath's Tale_ and Boccaccio's _Sigismonda_. Certain of his evaluation, Dryden simply challenges "the Reader [to] weigh them both; and if he thinks me partial to Chaucer, 'tis in him to right Boccace."[76]

Dryden's parting tribute to Chaucer's poetry is a eulogy to _The Knight's Tale_ which Dryden holds "far above all his other Stories,"[77] for it:

> is of the Epique kind, and perhaps not much inferiour to the _Ilias_ or the _Aeneis_: the Story is more pleasing than either of them, the Manners as perfect, the Diction as poetical, the Learning as deep and various; and the Disposition full as artful.[78]

Dryden's partiality for _The Knight's Tale_ is accountable, of course, to his critical predilection for the theory of

genres as a normative standard for the various kinds of
poetry. Wimsatt and Brooks point out the dominating
influence which the heroic epic exerted for both poets and
critics in the late seventeenth century: "As tragedy was
the norm of Aristotle's theory, and epistolary satire
implicitly that of Horace's best insights, so the heroic
epic was the more or less explicit norm of poetry in the
latter part of the seventeenth century (and was a rather
unhappily dilated focus for critical theory)."[79] Dryden's
final judgment on Chaucer's poetry reveals him, then, as
very much a man of his time; but the reasons, or terms, he
employs to explain his choice are a fusion of many critical
threads which were first offered to critics in the late
sixteenth century in the wake of the discovery of
Aristotle's Poetics. It was Dryden, however, who was the
first critic to see the full relevance of those suggestions
to the poetry of Chaucer, and who, in applying them, dis-
covered some lasting insights into the artistry which informs
so many of Chaucer's poems.

It is hoped, therefore, that we have shown Dryden's
"Preface" to be both a product and a synthesis of tradition
and individual genius. But one of the most trite and worn
tributes to Dryden is the insistence upon his own critical
acumen. Pinpointing the essence of it is quite another
matter. Perhaps T. S. Eliot, though, comes nearest the

truth of that uniqueness which is Dryden the critic when he claims: "The great work of Dryden in criticism is that at the right moment he became conscious of the necessity of affirming the native element in literature."[80] If this is so, the "Preface" to the <u>Fables</u> is certainly the best proof we have for combining the "right moment" with the "necessity of affirming the native element . . .," for Chaucer's critical stock was greatly in need of such a coincidence in 1700. From a different point of view, however, the essay suggests a broader range of importance. Thus, in Dryden's criticism of Chaucer, contend Wimsatt and Brooks:

> Here we have both a milestone in one kind of
> Augustanism, the superior notion that the rudeness
> of the past ought to be translated into the
> elegance of the present, and at the same time a
> very sympathetic reading of an archaic idiom, an
> outstanding exercise of what today is likely to be
> called the "historic sense."[81]

Moreover, it is this sort of comment which leads readers both of Chaucer and of Dryden to agree with Professor Atkins' belief that the "Preface" is Dryden's "finest piece of judicial criticism."[82]

Finally, for Chaucer's poetry the "Preface" functions as a cathartic stimulus coming as it does in the midst of the nadir of critical appreciation for Chaucer. It sounds the death knell for the old Chaucer, who, as D. S. Brewer explains, "is the medieval and Renaissance poet, learned, noble, artistically sophisticated."[83] But more important,

it heralds the beginning of numerous developments in Chaucer criticism in the centuries ahead. Brewer even suggests that: "Dryden's bold preference of Chaucer to Ovid clearly encouraged several later writers in the eighteenth century to stand by their natural enjoyment of Chaucer in the face of indifference or contempt."[84] Brewer further admits that the full-scale effect of Dryden's essay can only be weighed from the vantage point which hindsight provides; for "unassumingly and almost as it were unconsciously Dryden also set out the lines along which the understanding of Chaucer was to proceed for the next two centuries."[85] Some of these perspectives are Dryden's recognition of the dramatic realism of Chaucer's characters, of the universality of these creations, of Chaucer's satiric purpose and achievement, and the innovative suggestion that Chaucer wrote comic novels. If we accept the traditional view that these qualities are distinctly "modern," as it were, then Dryden can indeed be called the father of modern criticism of Chaucer. But any such claim must include the reminder that in his discussion of Chaucer's poetry Dryden knew and used previous criticism of Chaucer, especially that by Beaumont and Speght, and in working with it fashioned through his own critical judgments a synthesis of the past, present, and future in Chaucer criticism which will not be accomplished again until the early twentieth century in,

for example, the essays of such critical giants as Kittredge
and Lowes.

We concluded our discussion of Chaucer criticism in the
sixteenth century by noting the distance critically from
Hawes and Skelton to Beaumont and Speght. Curiously, the
seventeenth century forms some interesting parallels to the
progress of Chaucer criticism in the previous century.
Skepticism, indifference, and confusion eventually give way
in each century to some genuine critical accomplishments.
For instance, whereas the decadent rhetorical tradition
maintained a stranglehold on literary critics until approxi-
mately the last quarter of the sixteenth century, the neo-
classic aesthetic, especially under the restricting
influence of French neo-classicism in the Restoration,
prejudiced critical judgments for nearly the course of the
century until Dryden began to qualify the arbitrary absolu-
tism of many of neo-classicism's basic tenets. This chapter
has demonstrated how critics from Ben Jonson to Rymer and
Addison faulted Chaucer's poetry for his roughness of metre.
Yet perhaps more significant is the lack of responsiveness
throughout the seventeenth century towards Chaucer's humor,
which we noted was a commonplace among sixteenth century
critics. The reasons for this void are many, but probably
the single most dominant deterrant to critical awareness of
humor in Chaucer's poetry was French classicism's conception

of the comic as an intellectual recognition of the folly of
man and his existence. However, just as the Elizabethans
finally pledged themselves to their native heritage, so too
with the critics and audiences in the late seventeenth
century. Wimsatt and Brooks contend, in fact, that English-
men's instinctive fondness for risible humor was irrepress-
ible despite French classicism's seeming insistence that
comedy was no laughing matter, so that: "Toward the end of
the century this very indigenous form of the laughable
settled into a national institution, a phenomenon of actual
English life, a supposedly superior source of comedy, and a
matter of national pride."[86] Support for this thesis can be
found early in the Restoration itself, beginning with the
publication of Part I of Samuel Butler's Hudibras in 1663.
Buckingham's The Rehearsal follows in 1671, and Dryden
himself contributes to the departure from the tight-lipped
seriousness of French satire in imitation of Moliere when he
publishes MacFlecknoe in 1682. Common to all three of these
works is a strong tendency toward the burlesque while still
preserving the facade of satire; and it seems this quality
which most undermined French neo-classicism's claims for
comedy and satire, and which in turn would gradually lead
English critics to an appreciation for the satiric and
burlesque humor in Chaucer's poetry. Thus, even Rymer and
Addison admit to a humorous element in Chaucer's poetry,

although critics throughout the Restoration era never respond to Chaucerian humor with the intensity of the Elizabethans. It would be the eighteenth century which would most benefit critically from this reaction to intellectual comedy.

Yet another omission by seventeenth century Chaucer critics is the inability either to see or accept the moral artistry of Chaucer's poetry, particularly in The Canterbury Tales. But unlike so many sixteenth century commentators, Chaucer's poetry is never damned as immoral during the seventeenth century. Rather the issue is ignored, except for Dryden, who defends those poems which are clearly didactic, but who seems hesitant to proffer anything like Beaumont's suggestions a century earlier. However, this seems, as we inferred, more the result of Dryden's own moral seriousness rather than any single critical principle. In fact, a critic such as Brathwait seemed altogether oblivious or unconscious about the moral contradictions which surrounded Chaucer's works as he relished in the portrayal of the Wife of Bath and her prologue.

From a more positive and developing perspective, the critical predilection for The Canterbury Tales, which began in the late sixteenth century, persists and grows during the following century. Moreover, this increasing critical respect for the Tales seems to be the catalyst for two

further insights into Chaucer's vision and artistry--both in

Dryden--namely, his comprehension of Chaucer as a satirist

of the foibles and weaknesses in human nature, and secondly,

his recognition of Chaucer's ability and accomplishments in

character creation. It is these contributions which we have

postulated as Dryden's, and thus the age's, major bequests

to Chaucer criticism. But the legacy belongs not to Dryden

alone, for it is something which has been transmitted from

Beaumont and Speght through Brathwait a 1 finally to Dryden

who saw and worked out some of the implications in his

predecessors' remarks. Ironically, it was Dryden's

application of the neo-classical notion that the universal

in human nature is best revealed in the specific and

concrete which led to his realization of Chaucer's achieve-

ment in the dramatic verisimilitude and decorum of his

descriptions, and in the speech and actions of his pilgrims

on their way to Canterbury.

We have, therefore, arrived at a terminus, or perhaps

more correctly a pause, in our progression through the

annals of Chaucer criticism. Thus, we close this chapter--

and, we might add, this paper--with a beginning of that

modern view of Chaucer wherein we value him, according to

C. S. Lewis, as "a great comedien and a profound student of

human character."[87] Initial appreciation of these two

qualities in Chaucer's poetry begins, certainly, with

Beaumont and Speght in the late sixteenth century, but Dryden is the true progenitor of this transition in critical perspectives, for it is the latter portion of Lewis' remark which owes the greatest debt to Dryden. Regrettably, it will not be until the twentieth century that the full import of Chaucer as a comic poet will be perceived and critically explained. But the foundation for the succeeding two and a half centuries has been laid, and the following short chapter will, then, briefly summarize those developments in Chaucer criticism which this paper has discussed, and attempt to assess the significance of these critical suggestions both to Chaucer's poetry and to the body of criticism devoted to it.

CHAPTER V

FOOTNOTES

[1]D. S. Brewer, "Images of Chaucer: 1386-1900," in Chaucer and Chaucerians, p. 255.

[2]Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, ed., Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion: 1357-1900, I, 168.

[3]Thomas Speght, "To the Readers," in The Works of . . . Geffrey Chaucer, newly printed, in Five Hundred Years, ed. Spurgeon, I, 169.

[4]J. W. H. Atkins, English Literary Criticism: The Renascence, pp. 278-79.

[5]Atkins, p. 293.

[6]Henry Peacham, "Of Poetry," in The Compleat Gentleman, ed. Virgil B. Heltzel (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1962), p. 106.

[7]Atkins, English Literary Criticism: The Renascence, p. 294.

[8]Spurgeon, ed., Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion: 1357-1900, I, xxxvi.

[9]Richard Brathwait, "A Comment upon . . . The Miller's Tale and the Wife of Bath," in Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. J. A. Burrow (Baltimore: Penguin Books, Inc., 1969), p. 55.

[10]Brathwait, p. 56.

[11]Brathwait, p. 57.

[12]Brathwait, p. 58.

[13]Brathwait, Appendix to "A Comment," in _Five Hundred Years_, ed. Spurgeon, I, 242.

[14]Spurgeon, ed., _Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion_: _1357-1900_, I, xxxv.

[15]Spurgeon, xxxvi.

[16]Spurgeon, xxxvi.

[17]Joel E. Spingarn, _Literary Criticism in the Renaissance_, p. 194.

[18]O. B. Hardison, Jr., ed., _English Literary Criticism_: _The Renaissance_, p. 269.

[19]William K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Cleanth Brooks, _Literary Criticism_: _A Short History_, p. 177.

[20]Ben Jonson, _Timber, or Discoveries_, in _Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century_, ed. Joel E. Spingarn (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1908), I, 34.

[21]Atkins, _English Literary Criticism_: _The Renascence_, p. 309.

[22]Ben Jonson, _Timber_, in _Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century_, ed. Spingarn, I, 38.

[23]Wimsatt and Brooks, _Literary Criticism: A Short History_, p. 181.

[24]Brathwait, Appendix to "A Comment," in _Five Hundred Years_, ed. Spurgeon, I, 242.

[25]Edward Phillips, Preface to _Theatrum Poetarum_, in _Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century_, ed. Spingarn, II, 263-64.

[26]Jonson, _Timber_, in _Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century_, ed. Spingarn, I, 38.

[27]J. W. H. Atkins, _English Literary Criticism: 17th & 18th Centuries_ (1951; rpt. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1966), p. 95.

[28]Thomas Rymer, _A Short View of Tragedy_, in _The Critical Works of Thomas Rymer_, ed. C. A. Zimansky (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), pp. 126-27.

[29]Atkins, _English Literary Criticism: 17th & 18th Centuries_, p. 77.

[30]Joseph Addison, _An Account of the Greatest English Poets_, in _Addison's Works_, ed. Richard Hurd (London: H. G. Bohn, 1854-56), I, 23.

[31]Atkins, English Literary Criticism: 17th & 18th Centuries, p. 156.

[32]J. A. Burrow, ed., Geoffrey Chaucer, p. 36.

[33]John Dryden, "Preface" to Fables: Ancient and Modern, in English Literary Criticism: Restoration and 18th Century, ed. Samuel Hynes (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1963), p. 69.

[34]Dryden, pp. 70-71.

[35]Dryden, p. 68.

[36]Dryden, p. 69.

[37]Dryden, p. 70.

[38]Francis Beaumont, "Letter to Thomas Speght," in The Workes of . . . Geffrey Chaucer, newly printed, ed. Speght, n.p.

[39]Dryden, "Preface" to Fables, in English Literary Criticism: Restoration and 18th Century, ed. Hynes, p. 72.

[40]Dryden, pp. 72-73.

[41]Dryden, p. 74.

[42]Dryden, p. 71.

[43]Dryden, p. 71.

[44]Dryden, p. 71.

[45]Dryden, p. 74.

[46]John Peter, _Complaint_ _and_ _Satire_ _in_ _Early_ _English_
Literature, p. 109.

[47]Atkins, _English Literary Criticism:_ _17th_ _&_ _18th_
Centuries, p. 317.

[48]Dryden, "Preface" to _Fables_, in _English_ _Literary_
Criticism: _Restoration_ _and_ _18th_ _Century_, ed. Hynes,
pp. 75-76.

[49]Beaumont, "Letter to Thomas Speght," in _The_ _Workes_
_of_ . . . _Geffray_ _Chaucer_, _newly_ _printed_, ed. Speght, n.p.

[50]Beaumont, n.p.

[51]Beaumont, n.p.

[52]Thomas Speght, ed., "The Argument to the Prologues,"
in _The_ _Workes_ _of_ . . . _Geffray_ _Chaucer_, _newly_ _printed_, n.p.

[53]Speght, n.p.

[54]Atkins, _English Literary Criticism:_ _17th_ _&_ _18th_
Centuries, p. 138.

[55]Dryden, "Preface" to _Fables_, in _English_ _Literary_
Criticism: _Restoration_ _and_ _18th_ _Century_, ed. Hynes, p. 76.

[56]Beaumont, "Letter to Thomas Speght," in <u>The Workes</u> <u>of</u> . . . <u>Geffray Chaucer</u>, <u>newly printed</u>, ed. Speght, n.p.

[57]Dryden, "Preface" to <u>Fables</u>, in <u>English Literary Criticism</u>: <u>Restoration and 18th Century</u>, ed. Hynes, p. 77.

[58]Dryden, p. 68.

[59]Dryden, p. 81.

[60]Dryden, p. 77.

[61]Dryden, p. 78.

[62]Addison, <u>An Account of the Greatest English Poets</u>, in <u>Addison's Works</u>, ed. Richard Hurd, I, 23.

[63]Dryden, "Preface" to <u>Fables</u>, in <u>English Literary Criticism</u>: <u>Restoration and 18th Century</u>, ed. Hynes, p. 78.

[64]Dryden, p. 79.

[65]Dryden, p. 79.

[66]Brathwait, Appendix to "A Comment," in <u>Five Hundred Years</u>, ed. Spurgeon, I, 242.

[67]Dryden, "Preface" to <u>Fables</u>, in <u>English Literary Criticism</u>: <u>Restoration and 18th Century</u>, ed. Hynes, p. 80.

[68]Spurgeon, ed., _Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion: 1357-1900_, I, 207-215.

[69]Dryden, "Preface" to _Fables_, in _English Literary Criticism: Restoration and 18th Century_, ed. Hynes, p. 81.

[70]Wimsatt and Brooks, _Literary Criticism: A Short History_, p. 204.

[71]D. S. Brewer, "Images of Chaucer: 1386-1900," in _Chaucer and Chaucerians_, pp. 257-58.

[72]Dryden, "Preface" to _Fables_, in _English Literary Criticism: Restoration and 18th Century_, ed. Hynes, p. 81.

[73]Dryden, p. 81.

[74]Dryden, p. 81.

[75]Dryden, p. 81.

[76]Dryden, p. 82.

[77]Dryden, p. 82.

[78]Dryden, p. 82.

[79]Wimsatt and Brooks, _Literary Criticism: A Short History_, pp. 197-98.

[80]T. S. Eliot, _The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism_ (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1933), p. 14.

[81]Wimsatt and Brooks, _Literary Criticism: A Short History_, p. 214.

[82]Atkins, _English Literary Criticism: 17th & 18th Centuries_, p. 134.

[83]D. S. Brewer, "Images of Chaucer: 1386-1900," in _Chaucer and Chaucerians_, p. 257.

[84]Brewer, p. 257.

[85]Brewer, p. 257.

[86]Wimsatt and Brooks, _Literary Criticism: A Short History_, p. 210.

[87]C. S. Lewis, _The Allegory of Love_, p. 162.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Since an effort has been made to capsulize each chapter
as this paper proceeded, a summary statement seems superflu-
ous in some respects. Yet it does appear worth while to
attempt briefly to recapitulate the patterns in Chaucer
criticism which have emerged in the course of our discus-
sion, and to assess what significance all this early
commentary and criticism has in relationship to what lies
ahead in critical appreciation of Chaucer's artistry and
vision. In other words, what is the critical legacy which
the numerous voices in these three centuries bequest to
critics and readers who will come to Chaucer's poetry in the
centuries ahead?

We predicated at the inception of our discussion that
in almost every case the critical opinions offered on
Chaucer's work were conditioned by aesthetic and critical
tastes and standards contemporary with the critic. Our
survey has aptly illustrated this thesis, and at times we
found ourselves digressing into remarks about the validity
of the respective criticism on the basis of the principles

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or prejudices upon which it was founded. What we discovered
was that in most instances the criticism, and thus the new
awareness of some aspect of Chaucer's achievement, was indeed
legitimate--though with certain suggestions it was later
scholarship which verified it, such as the rhetorical
response--and, therefore, a lasting contribution had been
made which further expanded the critical awareness and
appreciation of Chaucer's poetry.

Such was the case with the rhetorical criticism
throughout the fifteenth century which valued Chaucer's
poetry for its ornamental and didactic excellencies accord-
ing to the rules and standards of medieval rhetoric, and
secondly, for Chaucer being the first poet to make the
English tongue a poetic medium as respectable as any
language on the Continent--and so was Chaucer proclaimed as
the father of English poetry. We have seen that the former
tribute was based on an age-old theory which insisted that
literature be noble, or serious, in its content and moral in
its teaching. Thus did Lydgate, Hoccleve, the Scottish
Chaucerians Dunbar and Douglas, and even Stephen Hawes
praise Chaucer for exhibiting such qualities in his poetry,
especially his early poems--The Book of the Duchess, The
House of Fame, The Parliament of Fowls--and The Legend of
Good Women. So exemplary was Chaucer that he was given such
laurels as "the flour of eloquence" and "The firste fyndere

of our faire langage"[1] by Hoccleve, and hailed as the "rose
of rethoris all"[2] by Dunbar. Finally, we pointed out that
recent scholarship in the twentieth century--Robert O.
Payne's The Key of Remembrance, for example--has shown the
substance of such poetic tributes to be critically more
accurate and significant than was generally believed for
three centuries or so; that is, that Chaucer was very much a
man of his age in, for example, his respect for, and imita-
tion of, continental traditions and literary fashions, just
as he would be seen to be very much an Englishman in his
displeasure towards the excesses of the stylized and pompous
poetic diction of the rhetorical school.

However, concurrent with this rhetorical response was
an appreciation, initially by Usk and later by Caxton, of a
certain naturalness in Chaucer's style which was free of
rhetorical affectedness. This trait was characterized by
the brevity, clarity, appropriateness in speech and action
of the characters, by the vividness and accuracy of descrip-
tions, and finally, by the pleasure of the experience of
Chaucer's poems. Such a perspective obviously opened
Chaucer's work to a far deeper critical awareness of his
artistry and achievement than the previous response, for it
was these qualities which became the cornerstone for the
fuller realizations of the Elizabethans and eventually
Dryden regarding the literary value inherent in Chaucer's

poetry. Thus, Caxton's praise of Chaucer's succinctness--
"For he wrytteth no voyde wordes"--and for the liveliness,
yet seriousness, of his content--"alle hys mater is ful of
hye and quycke sentence"[3]--was an early recognition of those
same attributes for which Dryden would commend Chaucer's
work. Moreover, Caxton was the first critic to suggest the
historical and social realism of The Canterbury Tales when
he stated that in them: "I fynde many a noble hystorye of
euery astate and degre / Fyrstrehercyng the condicions / and
tharraye of eche of them as properly as possyble is to be
sayd."[4] Here we would seem to have the source and perhaps
the inspiration of the criticism of Beaumont and Speght, as
well as Dryden's sense of the universality of Chaucer's
pilgrims.

Finally, the insistence on the vividness and accuracy
of descriptions in Chaucer's poems appeared in the late
fifteenth century, most explicitly in The Book of Curtesye
where the author-poet asserted that: "His langage was so
fayr and pertynente / It semeth vnto mannys heerynge / Not
only the worde / but verely the thynge."[5] This too was the
beginning of a critical claim for Chaucer repeated most
emphatically by the Elizabethans, especially Beaumont, and
again Dryden in his "Preface" to the Fables.

However, Chaucer's critical reception had no sooner
reached this early crest than we noticed signals of troubled

waters ahead. Skelton randomly mentioned in _Phyllyp_
Sparowe, c. 1507, that Chaucer's language was causing
incomprehension for his readers, so much so that "now men
wold haue amended / his english, where at they barke, / And
marre all they warke."[6] Such a remark foreshadowed the
difficulty with Chaucer's language in the centuries ahead,
particularly since by the time of Skelton's comment the
final -e-, the genitive singular -es-, and the past tense
-ed- were no longer being stressed. The result of these
inflexional changes would in turn wreak havoc with critical
analyses of Chaucer's metre.

In addition, not only would Chaucer's language and
metre encounter confusion, but so would the moral vision in
his poems which no fifteenth century critic ever bothered to
question. Stephen Hawes in his _Pastime of Pleasure_ was the
first to imply a moral enigma present at least in _The
Canterbury Tales_. The doubt would grow throughout the
sixteenth century until such critics as Sidney, Puttenham,
Webbe, Beaumont and Speght would put an end to the polemics
with some sensible critical suggestions about the intentions
in Chaucer's comic tales.

In the meantime, other more constructive developments
were occurring in the century. Sir Brian Tuke in his
Preface for William Thynne's 1532 edition of Chaucer reaf-
firmed such traits in Chaucer's poetry as his "swete and

plesaunt sentences," the "perfectyon in metre," the "freshnesse of inuencion," the "sensyble and open style," and the increasing awareness of decorum in Chaucer's poetry wherein the words are "wel accordynge to the mater and purpose."[7] Even Ascham, who faulted The Canterbury Tales for being immoral in places, was able to see The Pardoner's Tale as a moral exemplum against gaming, thereby at least granting Chaucer some concession as a moral artist. But more important, Ascham touched upon Chaucer's power of character portrayal and the revelation of specific foibles and traits in his recommendation of Chaucer as a historian who, like Homer and Thucidides, was notable for showing "not onely . . . the outward shape of the body; but also . . . the inward disposition of the mynde."[8] This certainly was the germ of that subsequent recognition by Beaumont, and especially Dryden, of Chaucer's achievement in characterization.

Yet another insight was offered by Raphael Holinshed when he assessed the significance of Chaucer writing poetry in English in the face of the dominant popularity of French and Latin in the fourteenth century. Not only that Chaucer wrote in the vernacular, but Holinshed also pointed to the fact that in Chaucer's poetry alone English became an admired poetic medium. Here we have the source of that eventual comparison of Chaucer with such Italian poets as

Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch by Sidney, and later Dryden, who try to evaluate the respective contributions made by these poets to their native tongues.

However, the period from the 1550's to the 1570's we noticed was a low point in criticism of Chaucer because of the debate over classical metres in English poetry and the polemics over a more purified tongue or still further borrowings for the sake of enrichment. Chaucer's poetry was embroiled in all of this, but nothing salutary critically resulted from it. Thomas Wilson, a Purist, faulted Chaucer's language for being too courtly, and George Gascoigne even went so far as to speculate that Chaucer's metre was, after all, classical--an hypothesis which came remarkably close, albeit accidentally, to the true stress of Chaucer's rhythms.

But Stephen Gosson's School of Abuse in 1579 suddenly changed the focus and direction of literary criticism, and Chaucer's poetry rode with the tide. Thus, critics in the 1580's found themselves engaged in apologetic arguments for the value of poetry, and it was from these that Chaucer's poems derived the most benefit they had yet experienced. Sir Philip Sidney, for example, in the most famous of all the apologetic treatises, his Apologie for Poetry, repeatedly cited Chaucer as an exemplary poet on several counts, but especially significant was Sidney's confidence in

Chaucer's moral integrity as an artist, and his lasting accomplishment in character creation. This was the import of his reference to Pandarus whom Sidney did not disavow as a perverted pimp, but rather accepted as an indelible mark on the landscape of human nature, whom Chaucer had so memorably drawn that "we now vse their names to signifie their trades."[9] In addition, following his reference to Pandarus, Sidney stated the reason for, and the effect of, portraying such a character: "[A]nd finally, all vertues, vices, and passions so in their own naturall seates layd to the viewe, that we seem not to heare of them, but cleerely to see through them."[10] This comprehension of the moral vision inherent in such an apparently immoral character as Pandarus was the beginning of the major legacy of sixteenth century Chaucer criticism, namely, its explanation of the moral, or for them corrective, purpose at work in some of Chaucer's poems, especially the comic tales in The Canterbury Tales.

It was George Puttenham and particularly William Webbe who continued to develop this notion that Chaucer's drama-tization of vice was for the end of instructing his audience while he simultaneously pleased them with his story. Thus, stated Webbe, Chaucer had:

> [B]y his delightsome vayne, so gulled the eares of
> men with his deuises, that, although corruption bare
> such sway in most matters, that learning and truth
> might skant bee admitted to shewe it selfe, yet

> without controllment, myght hee gyrde at the vices
> and abuses of all states, and gawle with very sharpe
> and eger inuentions, which he did so learnedly and
> pleasantly, that none therefore would call him into
> question.[11]

Chaucer was, therefore, above moral reproach, concluded

Webbe, "For such was his bold spyrit, that what enormities

he saw in any, he would not spare to pay them home . . . ."[12]

Two seeds were contained in Webbe's remark; the first would

be expanded by Beaumont in defense of Chaucer's moral intent

in his inclusion of certain 'low characters in the Tales; and

the second was Speght's notion of the socio-historic impor-

tance of the Tales coupled with Chaucer's satyric motif at

work in them. What Puttenham and Webbe suggested, then, was

that Chaucer was the quintessence of Horace's ideal poet

who, according to Webbe, gave "profitable counsaile . . .

mingled with delight."[13]

Besides this awareness of the moral norms operative in

Chaucer's poetry without sacrificing the pleasure of the

experience of his poems, Puttenham and Webbe also marked the

growing appreciation for other qualities in Chaucer's work,

such as the variety exhibited in the canon of his works, the

originality of the conception and technique in The Canter-

bury Tales, and Chaucer's observance of decorum, of dramatic

"decency,"[14] as Puttenham termed it. Moreover, Puttenham

noted Chaucer's debt to continental poetry without any sense

of deference to Chaucer for having borrowed some of his

material, though Puttenham clearly preferred the "pleasant wit"[15] of the _Tales_ over any other of Chaucer's poems. This rather sudden predilection for _The Canterbury Tales_ signaled a new perspective on Chaucer's artistry, for his early poems and the _Troilus_ and _The Legend of Good Women_ had been his most esteemed works for two centuries, primarily for their frequent philosophical digressions. But the fresh response to the _Tales_ would open a whole new facet of Chaucer's art, that is, the comic poet who, though he showed man at his most perverse, base, and lewd, revealed something of lasting moral significance about the depth and complexity of human nature and experience.

It was Francis Beaumont and Thomas Speght who most expanded on the limited suggestions set forth by Puttenham and Webbe. In addition, Beaumont and Speght rooted their criticism on the principle of artistic verisimilitude, which Beaumont was the first to employ knowingly as an aesthetic norm relevant to evaluating a poet's moral vision of man. Beaumont did not, of course, call it verisimilitude, but instead decorum; for it was his belief that the artist must above all be true to reality which determined Beaumont's judgment of Chaucer's purpose and achievement. Thus, he claimed that Virgil, Ovid, and even Horace were in places more uncivil than Chaucer--an opinion important for its comparative method as well as for its content. Beaumont

asked, then, how much Chaucer had "swarued from Decorum, if hee had made his Miller, his Cooke, and his Carpenter, to haue told such honest and good tales, as he made his Knight, his Squire, his Lawyer, and Scholler tell?"[16] Also, argued Beaumont, since Chaucer's purpose was "to describe all men living in those daies," it was, therefore, impossible "for him to have left untouched these filthie delights of the baser sort of people."[17] Yet what was so surprisingly innovative regarding Chaucer's intent was, in fact, a distant development of Caxton's idea that the Tales were "a noble hystorye of euery astate and degre."[18] A clearer echo of Caxton, as well as Ascham's reference to "the inward disposition of the mynde,"[19] was Speght's comment that: "Vnder the Pilgrimes, being a certaine number, and all of differing trades, he comprehendeth all the people of the land, and the nature and disposition of them in those daies; namely, giuen to deuotion rather of custome than of zeale."[20] It was in the concluding phrase of this remark that Speght touched upon what we have termed the discovery in the late sixteenth century of the satyric motif at work in The Canterbury Tales, for it was this insight which was the major contribution of Elizabethan criticism on Chaucer. But Speght's thesis was the result of the theorizing which Beaumont did on the aim of comedy in his "Letter to Speght," where Beaumont compared the "Argument"[21] in Roman comedies

to that in Chaucer, and judged Chaucer the more corrective and morally instructive, for: "His drift is to touch all sortes of men, and to discouer all vices of that Age, and that he doth in such sort, as he neuer failes to hit euery marke he leuels at."[22]

In addition, both Beaumont and Speght reaffirmed the tribute to the vivid realism of Chaucer's descriptions, with Beaumont claiming that this is "one gifte hee [Chaucer] hath aboue other Authours."[23] Even Gabriel Harvey noted the detailed accuracy of descriptions in Chaucer's poems. Finally, all three men, like Puttenham and Webbe, valued the variety in form, style, and tone found in Chaucer's canon.

What emerged, then, from this vigorous Elizabethan criticism of the 1580's and 90's was a drastic and permanent shift in critical perspectives of Chaucer's poetry which are still being developed today. Chaucer was perceived to be a creator of universal and timeless characters, and a poet with a humane and moral vision of man's nature and existence. Moreover, the intense response to The Canterbury Tales in the late century signaled the beginning of that shift in focus from Chaucer "the noble rethor Poete"[24] to the comic and satiric poet who has so brilliantly rendered man for the vain and pompous fool he is--a theme with particular appeal to audiences from the eighteenth century to the present. While it is generally conceded that Dryden's "Preface" was

the dominant landmark in these changing critical perspec-
tives, this paper has demonstrated that in many ways Dryden
was resurrecting several critical breakthroughs made in the
late sixteenth century which had lain dormant for a century
due to the neglect Chaucer's poetry received throughout the
seventeenth century.

Although most modern editors and critics have tended to
dismiss seventeenth century criticism of Chaucer's poetry,
with the exception of Dryden, our discussion has tried to be
more generous towards the short-sightedness of most literary
critics in this period, for it was a century of political,
religious, and social turmoil, and matters of literary
criticism were simply dwarfed by the compelling magnitude of
public events. Also we pointed to the inhibiting influence
of neo-classicism in this century, and particularly of French
neo-classicism during the Restoration in England. However,
we postulated that the fault did not lie entirely with neo-
classical doctrine, for Chaucer's English had become still
more bewildering, and no one had as yet--with the exception
of Speght's unheeded suggestion--come to the rescue of
Chaucer's metrical patterns. Therefore, we did not argue
that a poetic which prized clarity of diction and regularity
of metre should have accepted on faith what no number of
literary critics had been able to substantiate, despite all
their claims for Chaucer's perfection in these two aspects

of his poetry. But the critics of the period did possess the wisdom to value and recommend Chaucer for his matter, if not for his manner. Thus, even Ben Jonson would have students of literature read Chaucer, Gower, and Spenser for their content, though he warned of their roughness in language and rhychm. Other critics, such as Henry Peacham and Richard Brathwait, were more generous with Chaucer's poetry, although they readily admitted to the language handicap. For example, Peacham contended that "vnder a bitter and rough rinde there lyeth a delicate kernell of conceit and sweete inuention."[25] In addition, Peacham pointed to the originality of The Canterbury Tales which "without question were his owne inuention, all circumstances being wholly English."[26]

However, we noted that most of this early seventeenth century criticism, such as Peacham's, was a shallow echo of the far more impressive Elizabethan tributes to Chaucer's poetry. The lone piece of criticism which expanded on the Elizabethan awareness of Chaucer's brilliance in character creation was Brathwait's "A Comment . . . upon The Miller's Tale and the Wife of Bath." The essay was a fusion of Brathwait's fascination with the subtlety of characterization, particularly of the Wife of Bath, and Brathwait's own moral or proverbial comments upon the significance of the Wife's "Prologue." But the "Comment" was important both for

its technique of working closely with the text and moreso

for being the link between Beaumont's and Speght's apprecia-

tion of Chaucer's accomplishment in character portrayal and

Dryden's. Brathwait's essay was thus evidence that Beaumont

and Speght were speaking for a much larger response than

their own; and Brathwait's "Comment" implied too that

Chaucer's audience continued to marvel at the persons who

inhabited his poems, especially the pilgrims in The Canter-

bury Tales--which was yet another indication of the

prevailing critical eminence of the Tales before Dryden's

extended eulogy to the poem in his "Preface."

The nadir of Chaucer's critical reception occurred,

however, in the Restoration where we found the admiration

for the unalleviated regularity of Waller and Denham

obstructed any attempt to understand Chaucer's language or

metre. The only effort in Chaucer's behalf was Edward

Phillips who, in his Theatrum Poetarum, remarked in passing

that Chaucer was the best of poets up to the reign of

Henry VIII because of Chaucer's "facetious way, which joyn'd

with his old English intertains . . . with a kind of

Drollery."[27] But Phillips was countered by voices more

notable than his own, such as Thomas Rymer who stated that:

"Our language retain'd something of the churl; something of

the Stiff and Gothish did stick upon it, till long after

Chaucer."[28] In fact, incomprehension of Chaucer's language

was such that for Addison he now "tries to make his readers laugh in vain."[29] However, we pointed out that for readers and critics in the Restoration Middle English, as we call it--old English for them--was a more foreign tongue than either French or Latin; and it was not that Chaucer's poetry was disliked, but rather that it was so incomprehensible, and accordingly, Restoration opinion of Chaucer was largely a product of ignorance, not aesthetics.

None of this apologia, though, can account for the insights into Chaucer's achievement contributed by Dryden in his "Preface" to the Fables. Since we dwelled on it for the latter half of the previous chapter, further commentary on the "Preface" is superfluous. Rather it seems best to view Dryden as the prism through which many previous critical suggestions, chiefly from Caxton, Beaumont, and Speght, were filtered, along with his importance in initiating some fresh developments which later centuries would build on. Most notable perhaps was the socio-historic-artistic realism of the Canterbury pilgrims--a recognition which begun with Caxton, was better comprehended by Beaumont and Speght, and finally best explained by Dryden. In conjunction with this was the realization of Chaucer's revelation of the totality and complexity of human nature--for Dryden, the universality-- of these characters. Moreover, when, for example, Dryden praised Chaucer for his delicacy of Wit in handling the death

of Arcite in <u>The</u> <u>Knight's</u> <u>Tale</u>, Dryden was merely employing
the vocabulary of the neo-classic poetic; but, in effect, he
was pointing to what was for Beaumont and Speght Chaucer's
observance of decorum in speech and action. Dryden too
deepened the already appreciable knowledge about Chaucer's
comic vision, and was the transition between that view of
Chaucer's p rpose as satyric, or corrective, to that per-
spective of Chaucer's art as satiric which synthesized his
moral vision with his comic artistry—and it was Dryden who
sensed and explained the organic relationship of the two,
that is, of form and theme in the <u>Tales</u>. Certainly Dryden's
most innovative and original suggestion was the thesis that
Chaucer and Boccaccio "Both writ Novels,"[30] which would
eventually spark the twentieth century response to Chaucer's
brilliance with narrative technique.

What then is the significance of these early Chaucer
critics; that is, have they left their critical successors
with any permanent truths and insights about the artistry
and achievement of Chaucer's poetry? And if so, what is
left for succeeding generations and centuries either to
build on or to discover? Quite simply, this paper has
demonstrated that post-Dryden Chaucer criticism has been
woefully prejudicial and hesitant towards the critical con-
tributions made to Chaucer's poetry prior to Dryden.
Because pre-eighteenth century critics lacked the precise

vocabulary and the codified theories and principles of later
and more sophisticated literary criticism, their critical
appreciation of Chaucer's work has been dismissed as super-
ficial, generalized, and fashionable--that is, as being
acriticial--and as such a product of contemporary tastes.
But this discussion has shown that those periodic prejudices
have most often been the inspiration of various and
interesting reactions and epiphanies into the world of
Chaucer's art. Such men as Lydgate, Caxton, Tuke, Beaumont,
Speght, or Brathwait, for examples, did not possess the
critical jargon we have inherited from nearly three
centuries of theorizing; instead some expressed their
opinions metaphorically, others pragmatically; a few, like
Dryden, in both ways. But common to all of them was a
feeling, a sense, and a deep conviction in the greatness and
permanence of Chaucer's poetic achievement. Not all were
quite explicit about just what constituted Chaucer's
accomplishment, but they were certain his work contained
elements ensuring continued fame. However, the end product
of their combined suggestions was that the critical legacy
bequeathed by these men contained within it the seeds of
almost every later development in Chaucer criticism. They
understood and saw the value of his style, his clarity, his
brevity, his vision--moral and comic--and of his genius as a
comic poet, though the twentieth century would work out the

ironic and satiric implications of these early insights.
They were sure that The Canterbury Tales was Chaucer's major
opus, or at least his one poem which would command the most
critical respect and attention for its originality, variety
of forms, themes, characters, and ultimately for its humane
and tolerant vision of man's nature and condition. In some
cases these early critics worked out fairly completely a
quality of Chaucer's art, such as his brilliance in
character creation; while in others, such as the notion that
Chaucer wrote novels, they merely planted the germ of a new
perspective upon his art.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, has been two-
fold: to show that critical appreciation of no small worth
of the artistry of Chaucer's poetry began with his contem-
poraries and continually grew and intensified over the next
three centuries, until Dryden ensured its recognition for
the remaining life of English literature; and secondly, to
point out, explain, and weigh the myriad critical sugges-
tions and contributions made by critics in these three
centuries, and to assess the significance of this criticism
for succeeding critics of Chaucer's poems. The end result
of it all, it is hoped, has been to reveal that many of those
qualities in Chaucer's poetry which we term modern and take
for granted as the basis of his achievement were perceived
and appreciated by critics and readers who felt that Chaucer

was as modern and relevant to them as he is to us--which is
only another way of illuminating the unceasing appeal of
Chaucer's poetry to the past, the present, and, certainly,
to the future.

CHAPTER VI

FOOTNOTES

[1]Thomas Hoccleve, _The Regement of Princes_, in _Early English Text Society Publications_, ed. F. J. Furnivall, LXXII, 71, 179.

[2]William Dunbar, _The Golden Targe_, in _The Poems of William Dunbar_, ed. W. MacKay MacKenzie, p. 119.

[3]William Caxton, Epilogue to Chaucer's _The Book of Fame_, in _William Caxton: England's First Printer_, by William Blades, II, 165.

[4]Caxton, Prohemye to Chaucer's _The Canterbury Tales_, in _William Caxton: England's First Printer_, I, 173.

[5]_The Book of Curtesye_, in _Early English Text Society Publications_, ed. F. J. Furnivall, III, 35.

[6]John Skelton, _The Boke of Phyllyp Sparowe_, in _John Skelton: Poems_, ed. Robert S. Kinsman, p. 50.

[7]Sir Brian Tuke, "Dedication to Thynne's Chaucers Workes," in Francis Thynne's _Animadversions_, pp. xxiv-xxvi.

[8]Roger Ascham, _A Report and Discourse_ . . . , in _The Whole Works of Roger Ascham_, ed. Rev. Dr. Giles, III, 6.

[9] Sir Philip Sidney, _An Apologie for Poetrie_, in _English Literary Criticism: The Renaissance_, ed. O. B. Hardison, Jr., p. 112.

[10] Sidney, p. 112.

[11] William Webbe, _A Discourse of English Poetrie_, in _Elizabethan Critical Essays_, ed. G. Gregory Smith, I, 241.

[12] Webbe, I, 241.

[13] Webbe, I, 250-51.

[14] George Puttenham, _The Arte of English Poesie_, in _Elizabethan Critical Essays_, ed. G. Gregory Smith, II, 64.

[15] Puttenham, II, 64.

[16] Francis Beaumont, "Letter to Thomas Speght," in _The Workes of . . . Geffrey Chaucer, newly printed_, ed. Thomas Speght, n.p.
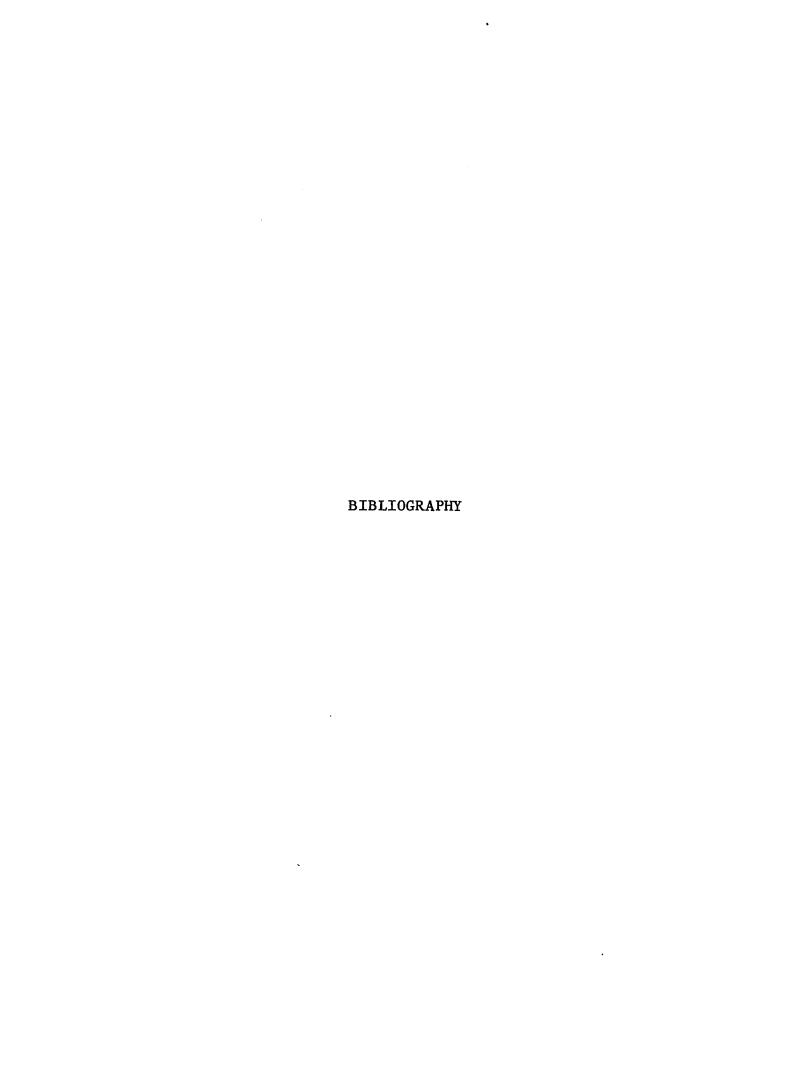
[17] Beaumont, n.p.

[18] Caxton, Prohemye to Chaucer's _The Canterbury Tales_, in _William Caxton: England's First Printer_, I, 173.

[19] Ascham, _A Report and Discourse . . ._ , in _The Whole Works of Roger Ascham_, ed. Rev. Dr. Giles, III, 6.

[20] Thomas Speght, "The Argument to the Prologues," in _The Workes of . . . Geffrey Chaucer, newly printed_, n.p.

[21]Beaumont, "Letter to Thomas Speght," in _The Workes of_ . . . _Geffrey Chaucer, newly printed_, ed. Thomas Speght, n.p.

[22]Beaumont, n.p.

[23]Beaumont, n.p.

[24]John Lydgate, _The Life of Our Lady_, in _Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion_: _1357-1900_, ed. Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, I, 19.

[25]Henry Peacham, "Of Poetry," in _The Compleat Gentleman_, ed. Virgil B. Heltzel, p. 106.

[26]Peacham, p. 106.

[27]Edward Phillips, Preface to _Theatrum Poetarum_, in _Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century_, ed. Joel E. Spingarn, II, 263-64.

[28]Thomas Rymer, _A Short View of Tragedy_, in _The Critical Works of Thomas Rymer_, ed. C. A. Zimansky, p. 127.

[29]Joseph Addison, _An Account of the Greatest English Poets_, in _Addison's Works_, ed. Richard Hurd, I, 23.

[30]John Dryden, "Preface" to _Fables_, in _English Literary Criticism_: _Restoration and Eighteenth Century_, ed. Samuel Hynes, p. 81.

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