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Characterization in English Poetry since Chaucer.

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UNIVERSITY  
OF NEBRASKA  
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Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of

The University of Nebraska

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts.

Lincoln

1907

UMI Number: EP32354

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PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

THESIS

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The gradual trend in the evolution of literature seems to have been the approximation of life. The principles which hold true in life have been found, little by little to hold true in literature. The diction of life has become more and more the diction of literature. The standards of life are slowly becoming the standards of literature. This principle holds true in the methods of characterization. The methods used in speech are the methods used in the making of literature. People are presented in books just as people are presented in life. The reader learns to know them on the printed page very much as he does when he meets them or hears of them in life.

There are several methods by which people are made known to each other. In the first place, they may be described. " Mary is kind, generous, unselfish, "The speaker, in this case is giving his interpretation of Mary. The hearer will hardly get a clear, individualized conception of the character described.

By a second method, the speaker may say " Mary is one of the most unselfish girls I know. Last winter she left school suddenly and began to teach . Every one was surprised for she was doing excellent work and seemed

very much interested in it. Afterwards we learned that either she or her sister had to leave and Mary left, so quietly that no one guessed the sacrifice." In this method of characterization, the speaker interprets the character, then offers facts to substantiate the interpretation. The 'effect' is given, showing what Mary did. But the speaker interprets this effect for the hearer. He also begins his presentation with an interpretation.

There is a third method of characterization. A student at the State Farm of the University of Nebraska was asked "you and Mr. Robertson are great friends aren't you Mr. Carpenter?" The boy answered, "Well - rather. Why do you know that boy comes here way from Georgia. His people have lots of land down there. He got a notion he wanted to learn how to farm right. He wrote every where for catalogues and when he got ours, he started. He didn't know a soul here - just struck off alone. He went home with me Christmas. We had a great time." This method gives "effect" only, tells what the character does, and leaves the hearer to interpret these "effects" for himself.

There are, then, these three methods of characterization. First, the character may be simply

interpreted by the speaker. Second, the character may be interpreted and "effects" given to prove the correctness of the interpretation. And third, the "effects" alone may be given and the hearer left to make ~~his~~ own interpretation. The first method commands little interest. The second arouses the hearer somewhat but not effectively. The last method stimulates interest. When a man sees another perform a deed, he naturally interprets to himself the character of the one who would do this thing. When a man hears another say anything, he interprets again the character or mood of the man who would say that thing. Since this is life, the same thing holds in literature. The reader is aroused by the necessity for making his own interpretations.

The greatest masters, in literature, of character presentation, because of their insight, choose such incidents by which to reveal their characters that the reader will interpret more truly than if he had seen the action. The writer will choose a significant moment in which to present his character, when the whole "consciousness" will stand revealed, not only a single characteristic. This is art. It is surprising how long the English poets were in learning the use of either the "effect" or "con-

sciousness" method of presentation. Many poets use interpretation only. Many combine interpretation and "effects", not seeming to realize when a character is clearly given, nor what particular touch has made this clearness. Not until the 19 th century is there adequate character presentation in poetry.

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the methods and effectiveness of the characterization to be found in the more prominent English poets from Chaucer to the present time.

## Poets of the 14th Century.

### The Age of Chaucer.

Chaucer introduces real characters to the reader. They are clearly and definitely drawn. In his first period of literary activity, when under French influence, he did not characterize. In presenting a woman, he says;

" The beste that might beare lyfe;"<sup>1</sup>  
and also;  
" She longed soe after the king,  
That certes, it were a pitous thing  
To tell her hertely sorowfull life  
That she had, this noble wife.  
For him alas, she loved alderbeste."<sup>2</sup>

Here the reader infers very little as to the character of the woman presented. She loved her husband " alderbeste" and longed for him piteously.

Later in Chaucer's life when, under Italian influence, he wrote *Troylus* and *Cryseyde* in which are the

- I. The Poetical Works of Geoffrey Chaucer. Boston Houghton, Mifflin and Co. Riverside Press. Cambridge. Vol. II p. 284.
2. Vol. II p. 285.



following lines.

" Nowe was this Ector pitous of nature,  
 And saugh that she was sorrowfully bygone,  
 And that she was so fayre a creature,  
 Of his godenesse he gladded hire anone,  
 And sayde, 'Lat youre faderes tresoun gone  
 To sory hap, and ye your-self in joye  
 Dwellyth with us while you goode list in Troye;

" And alle the honour that men may don you have,  
 As thogh your fader dwellede al here,  
 Ye shal han, and your body shalle men save,  
 As far as I may ought enquire or here. '  
 And she him thankked with ful humble chere,  
 And after wold, and it hadde ben his wille.  
 She toke hyre leve, went hoom, and held hir stille.

And in hire house she abode with Swich Meyne  
 As til hire honour nede was to holde,  
 And whil she was dwellynge in that cite,  
 Kepte hire estate, and bothe of yonge and olde  
 Ful wel byloved, and wel folk of hire tolde:

But whether that she children hadde or non,  
 I rede it noght, therefore I lete it gone."<sup>I</sup>

This passage is superior to his early work. There is a great deal of interpretation. Some 'effect' work is used in presenting both characters.

Chaucer's best work is done after his return to England in his Canterbury Tales. The following is his presentation of the "Knyght."

" A Knyght ther was and that a worthy man  
 That fro the tyme that he first began  
 To riden out, he loved chivalrie,  
 Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie.  
 Ful worthy was he in his lordes werre,  
 And thereto hadde he riden no man ferre,  
 As wel in cristendom as in hethenesse,  
 And evere honoured for his worthynesse.  
 At Alisaundre he was whan it was wonne;  
 Ful ofte tyme he hadde the lord big onne  
 Aboven alle nacions in Pruce.  
 In Lettow hadde he reysed and in Ruce,-  
 No cristen man so ofte of his degree.

In Gernade, at the seege eek hadde he be  
 Of Algezir, and riden in Belmarye.  
 At Lyeys was he, and at Satalye,  
 Whan they were wonne; and in the Grete See  
 Let many a noble armee <sup>I</sup> hadde he be."

etc.

Chaucer has given us a clear picture. He adds more of the same sort of work. But these lines are enough to show Chaucer's method of characterization. There is a good deal of interpretation combined with 'effect' work. Chaucer seems to have had his character clearly in mind and then to have written until he has him presented clearly. It seems probable that Chaucer did not know just what particular strokes were effective. His skill lies perhaps in clearness of vision. He did not see a general character, but a specific one. Therefore he draws for the reader a definite, individual character.

The presentation of the "Prioress" is also well done.

There was also a Nonne, a Prioressse,  
 That of hir smylyng was ful symple and coy;  
 Hire gretteste oath was but by Seint Soy,

At mete wel ytaught was she with alle,  
 She leet no morsel from hir lippes falle,  
 No wette hir fynGRES in hir sauce depe.

But for to speken of hire conscience,  
 She was so charitable and so pitous  
 She wolde wepe if that she saugh a mous  
 Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde.  
 Of smale houndes hadde she that she fedde  
 With rosted flesh, or mill and wasted breed;  
 But soore wepte she if any of hem were deed,  
 Or if men smoot it with a yerde smerte,  
 An al was conscience and tendre herte." 1

The 'effect work here is excellent. Chaucer again combines interpretation and 'effects'. He succeeds in giving us a clear conception.

1. Chaucer Vol. I. p. 5.

Another excellent picture from Chaucer is that  
 of the poor Parson, a portion of which runs as follows.

"Ful looth were hym to cursen for hise tithes,  
 And rathir wolde he geven, out of doute,  
 Un-to his povre parisshe aboute,  
 Of his offryng and eek of his substaunce.  
 Wyd was his parisshe, and houses fer a-sonder.  
 But he ne lafte nat for reyn ne thonder,  
 In siknesse nor in meschief to visite  
 The ferreste in his parisshe muche and lite  
 Up-on his feet and in his hand a staf.  
 This noble ensample to his sheepe he gaf  
 That firste he wrought and afterward he taughte.

He sette nat his benefice to hyre  
 And leet his sheepe encombred in the myre,  
 And ran to Londoun un-to Saint Poules  
 To seken hym a chauntrie for soules;  
 Or with a bretherhed to been withholde,  
 But dwelleth at hoom and kepeth wel his folde,"<sup>I</sup>

etc.

There is more of the same kind. The 'effects' given are well chosen. The picture is clear. Chaucer has given us real people, clearly drawn. While there is much that a 19th Century poet would leave unsaid, yet he is so superior to many other writers who come later, that only praise seems due him for his excellence of characterization.

The other writers of the fourteenth century are inferior to Chaucer. While they use something of his method, seem to have caught the trick of 'effect' work, their instincts do not seem as true, their characters are not as vivid. The master's hand is not present.

William Langland presents *Piers Plowman* to the reader as follows.

" I fonde there Freris alle the foure orders,  
 Preched the peple for profit of hem-seluen,  
 Glosed the gospel as hem good lyked,  
 For coneitise of copis construed it as thei wolde.  
 Many of this maistres Freris mowe clothen hem at  
 lykyng,

For here money and merchandise marchen togideres."<sup>I</sup>

This is class characterization, not individual, but "effect" work is used. Another example is:

"There preched a Pardonere as he a presch were,  
Broughte forth a bulle with bishopes seles,  
And seide that hym-self myghte assoilen hem alle  
Of falshed of fastyng of vowes ybroken.

Lewed men leued hym wel and lyked his wordes,  
Comen vp knelyng to kissen his bulles;  
He bonched hem with his breuet and blurred here eyes,  
And raughte with his ragman rynges and broches;  
Thus they geuen here golde glotones to kepe."<sup>2</sup>

Langland has drawn an individual picture in this case. He interprets and tells what particular thing the man did. Langland shows that he can use the 'effect' method. The difference between this and Chaucer's method is that Langland shows one trait, Chaucer, the whole man. Consequently Langland's characters lack the reality

<sup>I</sup> Piers the Plowman, by William Langland. Edited by W.W. Skeat. Oxford- Clarendon Press 1893

<sup>2</sup> p.3

p.3

of Chaucer's.

A third important writer of the fourteenth century, is John Gower. In his *Confessio Amantis* is the following.

" There was, whilom by daies olde  
 A worthy knight and as men tolde  
 He was neveu to themperour  
 And of his court a courteour.  
 Wifeles he was, Florent he hight,  
 He was a man, that mochel might.  
 Of armes he was desirous,  
 Chivalerous and amorous,  
 And for the fame of worldes speche  
 Straunge adventures for to seche  
 He rode the marches all aboute."<sup>I</sup>

Gower, in this example, has used only interpretation. The picture, in consequence, is vague.

The following is more effective.

<sup>I</sup> *Confessio Amantis* of John Gower- Edited by Dr. Reinhold Pauli London. 1857 Vol.i. p. 89 Bell and Daldy Fleet Street.



" For now a-day is many one  
 Which speketh of Peter and of John  
 And thinketh Judas in his herte,  
 There shall no worldes good asterte  
 His honde, and yet he yeveth almesse  
 And fasteth ofte and hereth messe  
 With mea culpa, whiche he faith,  
 Upon his brest ful ofte he leith  
 His hond and cast upward his eye,  
 As though he Cristes face seie,  
 So that it semeth ate fight,  
 As he alone al other might  
 Rescue with his holy bede.  
 But yet his herte in other stede  
 Among his bedes most devoute  
 Goth in the worldes cause aboute,  
 How that he might his warison  
 Encrese, and in comparison."<sup>I</sup>

Gower has used the "effect" method in this case.

I. Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. Vol. I. p. 64.

The picture is clear, though it is class characterization, a type merely. Had he realized the power of such a method he would surely have used it in the first example.

To sum up, for the fourteenth century, Chaucer does the best work in characterization that is done. He characterizes by a combination of interpretation and 'effect' work. Gower and Langland do the same, but neither of these writers present characters with the vividness of which Chaucer is master; probably because they did not see as Chaucer. Their point-of-view was more prejudiced. They were both writing with a serious purpose. They used such characteristics as contributed to that purpose. Chaucer was rather the spectator, setting forth what he saw, not seeing only what he wished. Whatever the reason, Chaucer is the master of the fourteenth century.

### The 15th Century Poets.

The expectation of meeting real people in books, roused in the reader by Chaucer, was not fulfilled by the other writers of his century. In the following century there is the same disappointment.

Among the immediate successors of Chaucer is Thomas Occleve. In his De Regimine Principum is the following:

" Allas! my worthy maister honorable,  
 This londes verray tresour and richesse  
 Dethe by thy dethe hath harme irreperable  
 Unto us done: hir vengeable duresse  
 Dispoiled hath this londe of the swetnesse  
 Of rethoryk, for unto Tullius  
 Was never man so like amonges us." I

Such interpretation gives an impossible presentation. There is nothing clear or definite.

John Lydgate, another of Chaucer's immediate successors is as vague in his presentations of people. His nearest approach to characterization is done in his

attempt to describe himself.

" To my bettre did no reverence,  
 Of my sovereigns gafe no fors at al,  
 Wex obstinat by inobedience,  
 Ran into gardyns, applys ther I stal.'  
  
 Loth to ryse, lother to bedde at eve,  
 With unwash handys reedy to dyneer,  
 My Pater-noster, my crede, or my beleeve,  
 Cast at the cok; loo! this was my manere.'  
  
 Of religioun I weryd a blak habite,  
 Oonly outward as by apparence.'"<sup>I</sup>

This is real character work, a combination of interpretations and 'effects'. Yet this is a real person. In this case he presented himself. In presenting other characters, he is not successful.

There were four Scotch poets in the fifteenth century of considerable prominence, none of whom, however,

characterizes effectively.

The first of these, King James I in his The King's Quair gives the following presentation.

" In hir was youth, beautee, with humble sport,  
Bountee, richesse, and womanly faiture,  
God better wote than my pen can report:  
Wisdomme, largesse, estate, and conyng sure  
In every point, so guydit hir mesure,  
In word, in dede, in schap, in contenance  
That nature myght no more hir childe avance.'"<sup>I</sup>

This is not characterization. It is interpretation, an innumeration of qualities. Yet this is his only method of character presentation.

Robert Henryson, the second of the Scotch poets of this time, does nothing in characterization.

" The Lord was ancean and old,  
And sixty yeiris cowth ring;  
He had a dochter fair to fald,

<sup>I</sup> The King's Quair, James, King of Scott. Edited by Ebenezer Thomson, 1824 p.20  
<sup>2</sup> Quiller Couch, Oxford Book of Verse 1904 p.21

A lusty Lady ying.

Off all fairheid she bur the flour

And eik hir faderis air;

Off lusty lait is and he honour

Meik, bot and debonair:"<sup>2</sup>

This is interpretation, what there is of it .  
This is not character drawing, the mere telling that the daughter was fair, lusty and her father's heir.

William Dunbar, third of the Scotch poets, adds nothing in the way of characterization. The following is written " To a Lady."

" Sweet rois of vertew and of gentilness,  
Delytsum lily of everie lustynes,  
Richest in bontie and in bewtie clear,  
And everie vertew that is wenit dear,  
Except onlie that ye are mercyless."<sup>I</sup>

This of course is not characterization. It does not picture to us a woman's character, personality.

Gavin Douglas, the last of the Scotch group,

gives description of places, but not of people. In King Hart, and allegorical poem, is the following presentation of the title character.

" King Hart, into his cumlie castell strang  
 Closit about with craft and meikill vre,  
 So semlie wes he set his folk amang,  
 That he no dout had of misaventure.  
 So proudlie wes he polish, plane and pure,  
 With youthheid and his lustie levis grene,  
 So fair, so freshe, so liklie to endure  
 And als so blyth as bird in symmer shene,  
 Onlie to love, and verrie gentilnes  
 He wes inclynit cleinlie to remane,  
 And wonn under the wyng of wantownnes."

This is interpretation; yet is rather clearer, more individual than the other poets who have just been considered.

With John Skelton, an English writer, the fifteenth century poetry ends. He writes,

I Quiller-Couch, Oxford Book of Verse 1904 p. 158

" So noble a man, so valiaunt lord and knyght  
 Fulfilled with honor, as all the world doth ken;"<sup>I</sup>  
 The " Erle of Northumberlande is thus interpreted.  
 Again,-

" Unkyndly they slew him, that help them oft at neede;  
 He was their bulwark, their paues, and their wall,  
 Yet shamfully they slew hym; that shame not them<sup>2</sup>  
 befall !"

In the first line an 'effect' is used that is  
 really characterizing.

" And, lyke marciall Hector, he fought them agayne,  
 Vygorously upon them with might and with maine,  
 Trustyng in noble men that were with him there;  
 But al they fled from hym for falshode or fere.  
 Barons, knyghtes, squiers, one and all,  
 Together with seruauntes of his family  
 Turned their backis, and let their master fal

I Works of John Skelton. Rev. Alexander Dyce. Boston 1871  
 Vol. 1 p. 9.  
 2 " " " " Vol. I. p. 10.