

Chaucer and Morris as Narrative Poets

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Chaucer and Morris as Narrative Poets as Determined Chiefly
from The Canterbury Tales and The Earthly Paradise.

Plan and aim of this thesis.

The aim of this paper is to treat the most prominent points of similarity and difference in these two narrative poets. The study will be based almost entirely on the masterpieces of the two poets, the Canterbury Tales and the Earthly Paradise. These two works are of such nature and scope that they will illustrate the qualities of each writer fairly accurately.

Again, the relative ability and worth of the two poets will be arrived at in this study. Morris, living nearly five centuries after Chaucer deliberately took Chaucer as his literary model. Let us see how nearly the pupil measures up to the master.

Their Ages and Environment.

In order to appreciate and understand the works of a writer to the fullest extent one should be familiar with the time in which he lived and his environment, the social conditions, the trend of general thought, and the literary standard of his age.

Chaucer was born in 1340 and died in 1400. He clearly, then is of the Medieval Age, in which the seeds of the broadening and intellectualizing Renaissance were sown, a time when social conditions and social laws were changing, a time of ignorance, relative to the time of Morris (1834-1896), and an age of broken yet formative morality. The English language itself was changing at a great pace.

Chaucer was a man of affairs as well as a poet. He was valet,

soldier, courtier, diplomat, business man, traveller, translator, and poet,- all in one. As diplomat to nations of the Continent he became familiar with foreign literatures which were to influence him to a marked extent.

Morris, (1834-1856), in point of time, is a modern, and belongs to what is known as the Pre-Raphaelite School which included both artists of different kinds and poets.

Morris's age is one of great commercial expansion, having culminated in the powerful Industrial Revolution. His age, too, is somewhat materialistic. This materialism has its influence on the poet to the extent that he devotes his work to overcoming it. He, too, was a busy man and wrote voluminously, perhaps as much as Chaucer, yet more prose works. Morris was also a painter and artistic furnisher, printer and book-binder. His energy was exhaustless. Thus like Chaucer, he led a busy life - busy as a business man and as a poet.

External Plans of the Canterbury Tales and The Earthly Paradise.

The framework of the Canterbury Tales is not entirely original or new. Such collections had been made before, and Boccaccio's Decamerone, which preceded Chaucer's work, is similar in many points of design.

Chaucer represents himself as putting up at Tabord Inn in Southwark. There he finds a company going on a pilgrimage to the tomb of Thomas à Becket at Canterbury. The Host proposes that they tell some tales on the way down and back in order to make the trip more agreeable and pleasant. The distance one way is fifty six miles and takes four days. There are thirty-two pilgrims in all and each one

is to tell two tales each way, thus calling for one hundred and twenty-eight in all. Of course, it is not probable that Chaucer really intended to give us this number altho he did probably expect to write more than one-fifth of them as his revised plan called for.

In the Earthly Paradise we have a serviceable scheme. Morris has a band of Northmen sail westward "to that strange land I know not where" - the island of Atlantis. Here they find a people who a long time ago had come from Greece and Asia Minor. The Wanderers are well received by the natives and stay for one year. Morris has them tell stories of their homeland and the islanders tell stories concerning their mother country. They tell two each month, and the Prologue, The Wanderers, might also be called a tale. Thus we have twenty-five tales in all - one more than we have in The Canterbury Tales.

Thus in their outward plan both seem more or less mechanical in device and a trifle artificial. It could not be said that in this respect either is superior to the other.

Let us see now how they compare in their internal make-up.

Internal Development.

As stated in section one, Chaucer, in point of time belongs to the medieval period, Morris to the modern. But in reality the nature of their work is not at all suggested by this fact. Chaucer, it is true, draws his material from classical and medieval sources but in treatment is almost modern. Morris lives almost into the twentieth century and draws the most of his material from classical sources, but his atmosphere is distinctly medieval. His narratives are near-

ly all "huge cloudy symbols of high romance". In Chaucer we feel that we are among men and women - universal men and women, in Morris we feel that we are among gods and goddesses, and that we live in dreams and the romance of olden times.

Chaucer succeeds in creating this vivid human atmosphere through several channels. First, is his originality. He is not a slave to his source. He takes the good, omits the mediocre, and originates what he deems will make better. To illustrate, in the Tale of the Man of Lawe Chaucer's own work makes up half of the whole tale. He is especially adept in his moralizings and general remarks on the characters of which he must write and of their actions. In lines 631 ff. he gives Custance the strength that comes from faith and trust in her Savior Christ:

"Allas! Custance! thou hast no champion,
 Ne fighte canstow naught, so weylawey!
 But he that starf for our redempcioun
 And bond Sathan (and yit lyth ther he lay)
 So be thy stronge champion this day!
 For, but - if Crist open miracle kythe,
 Withouten gilt thou shalt be slayn as swythe."

Morris, like Chaucer, never originates stories. Both borrow the main narrative. But Morris always enlarges on his source and is original in that respect. He adds rather than changes. Chaucer is the more original of the two.

Again, Chaucer surpasses Morris in selections; Chaucer's material is of great variety. Morris's is confined chiefly to the classical, always dealing with the supernatural, magic, gods

and goddesses. He does choose some Norweigan tales, it is true, and some Oriental, but they are all thrown into one mould, one cast, and come out with the same treatment and imbued with the same atmosphere. When one has read three or four selected at random there will be but few elements untouched in the whole Earthly Paradise. Always we are in an enchanted land of long ago, whether we are being let thru the magic house of Cupid, in Cupid and Pshche or in the "city-----nigh the Indian Sea," in the Man who Never Laughed Again.

He is always,

"Telling a tale not too importunate,

To those who in the sleepy region stay."

They are wonderful old stories that bring back the old time and hardly touch the modern age or lead us to believe that the people of the old time were real people - they are so intangible. His tales are most medieval of the medieval in manner of treatment, classic in source and modern in point of time of writing! Chaucer's tales are almost if not quite modern in manner of treatment (and being modern are for all time) classic and medieval (chiefly medieval) in source and medieval in point of time of writing.

Let us now consider the two series in respect to the variety of their subject matter. In this quality is brought forth the wonderful and human quality of Chaucer, in this he can match the great Shakespeare himself. As stated in section three, Chaucer has given us twenty-five tales in all - counting fragmentary as well as complete tales. It would be almost impossi-

ble to deal with a greater variety of subject-matter than we have in The Canterbury Tales. We have everything from the romantic and supernatural Palamon and Arcite in which gods and goddesses talk like men and whose lives are ruled by stars, to the absolute realistic and materialistic Wyf of Bathe who at "Churche door" has had "husbandes five" and is expecting to marry several more before she dies. The Tales give us an almost complete picture of the entire range of English society in the fourteenth century with the exception of the highest aristocracy and lowest order of vill~~ons~~ or serfs.

In the Knight's Tale of 2050 lines (most of which is Chaucer's own and not Boccaccio's) we get the picture of knight-hood and its nature. In the Squire's Tale left "half-told" as Milton says, our knowledge of such life is increased. Then coming to the Clerk's Tale, we are made familiar with the life of the "clerk" in those days. The tales of the lawyer and the franklin represent two more stages of English life. The tales of the five characters already mentioned deal with chivalry and nobility. It is from the prologues to the tales that we get our knowledge of the society the characters themselves represent.

The Prioress's Tale and the Second Nun's Tale give us the life of saints and the superstitions mould of medieval religion, in general. The Monk's Tale and its Prologue give us the the inconsistency in the life and the teaching of rascal monks of the age.

On coming further down into society we have the wife of Bath, the shipman, the merchant and ~~the~~ Maunciple, The prologue

to their tales shows us the life of English tradespeople, the humanity of the middle class and their feeling for a wide range of individual liberty. The wife's prologue is a matchless treatise on marriage versus celibacy, and the rights of women. This vulgar woman, far from wholly bad, throws innumerable sidelights on the state of society in the middle ages.

Then there are the common people such as the miller, the reeve the pardoner, the friar, the summoner, who tell us all about themselves, - their rascality and immorality, - and then the tales which the master Chaucer ascribes to himself. Sir Thopas shows us the "drasty riming" which Chaucer had seen was out of date, and likewise the tiresome and monotonous Tale of Melibeus, a lengthy prose work.

It is chiefly in the wonderful Prologue to the Canterbury Tales that we get our picture of life and society and social conditions of fourteenth century England, it is from the tales themselves that we get the ideals and the interests of the people of fourteenth century England, all of which gives us further data and sidelights on medieval thought and life.

Morris is distinctly lacking in this great range and humanity of Chaucer. His Paradise might exist anywhere except on our human earth. It has no race color. It has merely time - color - that of dreamy, romantic, alluring idealism. Morris does not portray the people of the island Atlantis. We know nothing of their life or actions. The tales only interest us and never the tellers! His theme is too much of a sameness, his narrators are all alike. Chaucer's England is living, breathing with life and diversity. Morris's strange land is "a nameless city in a distant sea" and we

feel it might have been dreamed into existence and might pass with the passing of the dream.

There is one other point under this head in which Chaucer is markedly superior to Morris - naturalness in developing from tale to tale. Morris's has no strong, device for connecting links. His method is this: Two "solemn feasts" are given monthly; a tale is told at each feast. The months are divided off into the seasons. The tales of each month have a prologue which describes the month very beautifully. But there is no connection between the month and its stories. The nature of the month does not indicate the nature of the tales. We see, then, that the scheme is highly artificial, weak and uninteresting. But Chaucer's ways of getting from one story to another are natural, interesting and extremely realistic. The tales are divided easily into nine groups. The stories within the group are closely connected together. A few illustrations will serve to bear out the above assertions.

In the Prologue the jovial and merry Host gets the negative assent to his proposition for story telling and to be perfectly fair he determines the order by "cut" and the shortest falls to the Knight. Nothing could be more realistic than such a method, and is much more interesting than merely to start the Knight telling his story. Then there are remarks by the Host in praise of the Knight's effort when he has finished and the Host calls on the Monk. But the Miller is now very drunk and boisterous and interrupts with,

" I can a noble tale for the nones". A heated argument follows the drunken miller has his way and tells his churlish tale. And since Chaucer must tell,

"Hir tales alle, be they bettre or wesse," he simply warns the reader that it is churlish and since "forewarned is forearmed" he may if he likes:

"Turn over the leef, and chese another tale"

The argument and its outcome are wonderfully realistic and skillfully done. And after the miller ends his tale, the Reeve's Tale follows logically. For the miller has told a tale which belittles the carpenter and his craft; therefore the reeve is grouchy and desires to make fun of the miller. This he does in fine style. Chaucer makes his characters comment on the tales and has them interrupt each other. At the conclusion of the reeve's tale, the cook slaps the reeve on the back for joy and draws the moral for us. Then he remarks that he has a "litel joke" that he would like to tell. The Host grants his request.

These devices are carried thruout the Tales. Their use manifests the greatest art in holding human interest and getting naturalness. There is absolutely nothing like this in the Earthly Paradise. Chaucer is both romantic and realistic. Morris is romantic only. Again the pupil falls far short of the master.

Humor of the Two Poets.

Almost any kind of literature except the tragic is improved and made more valuable by dashes of genuine humor here and there. A genuine person loves real, genuine humor and delights in a keen sense of humor in others whether he himself possesses it or not.

Now it is a rather remarkable fact that Morris's writings possess absolutely no humorous touches. Search thruout the Earthly and Life and Death Paradise of Jason and you will not find an example of genuine humor!

That which comes nearest it is only a shadow:

"So with the twain abode the ~~may~~,
 Waxing in beauty day by day,
 But ever as one tongue-tied was,
 What thing soever came to pass;
 And needs the hag must call her Crow:
 A name she said, 'full good enow
For thee - my mother bore it erst!'"

Chaucer, on the other hand, can not be excelled in his humor. It is one of the outstanding traits of Chaucer. It is that which gives such genuine delight and zest in reading him. What is more enjoyable than to have Chaucer himself tell the tale of Sir Thopas. He, the excellent poet begins a burlesque, on chivalry which is so bad that even the rough, uncultured Host can't stand his "drasty speche"! And in describing the would-be-knight, he says:

"Whyt was his face as payndemain (white-bread)
 His lippes red as rose".

Then the knight in all his valor rides thru the forest of wild beasts:

"Ye, bothe bukke and hare!"

And Sir Thopas soon becomes weary, "For pricking on the soffe grass." So brave is he that:

"-----in that countree was there noon
 That to him dorste ryde or goon,
 Neither wyf ne childe! ! "

Then being interrupted by the Host Chaucer follows up the tale of Sir Thopas with "a litel thing in prose," a ~~day~~ monotonous, ser-

monistic discourse of over three thousand lines.

Again the example already mentioned ^{serve} to illustrate a different point - that of Chaucer's slyly asserting that he knows the Miller's tale is immoral but that he must tell all,

"Or elles falsen my matere"

and that the reader may skip that tale. How many would follow his suggestion!

Sometimes Chaucer's humor is rather coarse as in the Miller's Tale and the Prologue to the Wife of Bath. Of course it is in keeping with the narrator the miller, the Wife, etc., and is given merely for the fun and not to portray evil, but nevertheless after all explanations and apologies there are some things better not written.

We see Chaucer's sly humor in the Tale of the Man of Lawe.

"Housbondes been alle good and han been yoore,

That knowen wyves, I dar say yow na moore."!

And when the Soldaness pretends that she is becoming a Christian she says she will receive Holy Baptism, because,

"Cold water shall not greeve us but a lite."!

Often the humor is very delicate; often it can not be distinguished from satire; we can not tell whether our poet is in jest or earnest. Humor is mingled with irony in this line about the rascally, lazy friar:

"Unto his ordre he was a noble post,"

and likewise in:

"For unto a poure ordre for to yive

Is signe that a man is wel y shryve

For if he yaf, he dorste make avaunt,

He wiste that a man was repentaunt:
 For many a man so hard is of his herte
 He may not wepe, al thogh him soore smerte;
 Therefore in stead of wepyng and preyeres
 Men moot yive silver, to the poure freres."!

← Of the unsuccessful Lawyer he says:

"Nowher so busy a man as he there nas
 And yet he semed bisier than he was."

The Shipmen,

"If that he fought and hadde the hyer hond
 By water he sent hem hoom to every lond."

Such is the diversified and overflowing humor of Chaucer. In this Chaucer is the supreme master, in this Morris is supremely lacking.

Meter and Versification.

Both poets vary their poetical machinery. Chaucer uses to best advantage the heroic couplet, or the iambic pentameter riming couplet. It is he who fixes it as a useful and popular poetical medium. The Canterbury Tales are written chiefly in this verse. Practically all of The Earthly Paradise uses it too. If a general difference could be found it is this: Chaucer couplet is more like Pope's and Morris's more like Keats's. That is, the one thought is more often rounded out and completed with the couplet and there are few abrupt breaks in meaning within the couplet in Chaucer than in Morris. Compare Chaucer's:

"Sir man of lawe," quod he, so have ye blis,
 Tel us a tale anon, as forward is;
 Ye been submitted thurgh your free assent

To stand in this case at my judgement."

and

"But natheless, hir thoughte that she dyde,
That she so longe shold a conseil hyde:
Hir thoughte swal so sore aboute hir herte,
That nedely som word hir moste asterte;
And sith she dorste telle it to no man,
Down to a mareys faste bye she ran;

to Morris's:

"And such a storm of strange discordant cries,
As stilled the townsfolk 'mid their braveries,
For therewithal came the prisoner of the fight.

A dreadful dream! - with blood-stained hair and white
Clad in most strange habilement of war,
Sat an old woman on a brazen car;

and

"But he spake and said:

'Farewell, farewell, God grant thee hardihead,
And growing pleasure on from day to day!'
Then toward the open gate he took his way."

Notice the abrupt break in the thought at the end of fight and
and day.

The second lines of the couplets even introduce new stanzas.
But this difference can not be pushed too far.

Besides this couplet Chaucer uses the iambic tetrameter (which
alternates with the iambic trimeter in Sir Thopas) each of which
~~may~~ overflow one syllable. In all he uses about twelve distinct

rime schemes. The seven- line stanza (his favorite) riming ababbcc - the Rime - Royal --, the eight line stanza, riming ababb-cbc, the nine-line stanza, rining aab, aab, bcc, - all show his great diversity in verse composition.

Morris also uses the iambic tetrameter meter to advantage, as in

The Fostering of Aslang:

"A wondrous scent was wafted o'er
The space about the open door,
And all the birds drew near to sing,
And summer pushed on into spring,"

and in The Ring Given to Venus:

And fully know of time and place
And be well-armed thy foe to face."

The Rime- Royal is also a favorite with Morris:

"The lessening marble that he worked upon
A woman's form now imaged doubtfully,
And in such guise had he the work begun
Because when he the untouched block did see
In wondering veins that form there seem to be,
Whereon he cried out in a careless mood,

"O lady Venus, make this presage good!"

Chaucer is more skilled and varied in meter and verse - form but that which Morris used compares favorably with Chaucer's.

Chaucer, it will be seen, is more smooth and more regular than Morris. To appreciate this fully the poetry must be read aloud. It is extremely difficult to find false rimes in either poet, but

it is less difficult to find irregular meter in Morris than in Chaucer. Chaucer is more consistently smooth and musical altho in places no one can ever purpass Morris. It must be remembered, however, that due to the variance in form and prounciation of words in Chaucer's time it was easier for him than for Morris. For example, final -e could be unsounded within the line. Yet he could not rime salas with grace, or dighte with delit. When formerly the thought rough and harse it has been found that it was due to ignorance ~~as to~~^{of} prounciation of middle English or carelessness of editors. What could be more musical than the opening verses of The Book of the Duchesse:

"I have gret wonder, by this lighte,
 How that I live, for day nor nighte
 I may not slepe wel nigh noght;
 I have so many an ydel thought
 Purely for defaute of slepe,
 That, by my trouthe, I take kepe
 Of no - thing, how it cometh or goth
 Ne me nis no - thing leef nor loth.
 Al is y - liche good to me, -
 Joye or sorowe, whereso hit be -
 For I have feling in no - thing,
 But, as it were, a mased thing
 Alway in pant to fall a-down;
 For sory imaginacioun
 Is alway hooly in my minde."

In this selection there is no irregularity of meter. There is

shift of the stress to the first syllable in the fifth line. Such shift breaks the monotony but not the smoothness.

As a rule Morris, too, is very, very musical:
 Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time,
 Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?
 Let it suffice me that my murmuring rhyme,
 Beats with light wing against the ivory gate,
 Telling a tale not too importunate
 To those who in the sleepy region stay,
 Lulled by the singer of an empty day."

But Morris gives us here and there jerky and unrythmical lines as evidenced by the following:

"Or seeks't thou the transmuting stone?"

"A hut on a cleared space of ground."

"Towards a rude hermitage, he made ---"

"Weeping but shamefaced, - 'since here dead'."

"C Cross over a deep lowland stream"

"Junkets, and cream, and fresh honey"

"Then the King spoke again, 'Sir Rafe,' "

Splendid as Morris is, then, in meter and versification we must admit that Chaucer is many degrees above him.

Narrative Powers:

Chaucer is the supreme artist in handling the story element, the narrative element. He is simple, concise and always interesting. Narrative to be successful as narrative must hold the interest. In this Morris is inferior to Chaucer. His tales are drawn outemore and there ensues monotony which could be broken by Chaucer's

pithy and keen dialogue. We wonder how Morris can devote over ten thousand lines to The Life and Death of Jason. It becomes monotonous. But Chaucer's tales never drag - unless it be the Tale of Melibeus which is intentionally so.

Morris lacks the dramatic. He fails to create dramatic situations as well as Chaucer. His story developments are not strongly marked by climax and are not as logically woven in incident as are Chaucer's. But in some places Morris gets rapid narrative. But these are not common enough. Morris often becomes dull - due in part to sameness in material treated - Chaucer seldom so. The latter is direct in story telling and well supplemented with aids, such as little moralizings (which Morris never stops to do) philosophizing, keen humor and wonderful imagery and descriptions. These accessories are too conspicuous by their absence in Morris - all but description. Chaucer is more adept in adaptation. In borrowing he works over old material freely, revising for dramatic effect condensing here, expanding there, because he has the instinct for the elements of a good story. Morris writes more leisurely, as if he hated to bring his story to an end.

Characterization and Description.

The degree of accuracy obtained in description and portrayal of character always depends to a great degree on keenness in observation and to a greater extent on knowledge of human nature and the ways it manifests itself. Chaucer was both a close observer and a student of human nature. His descriptions, too, are not only exact but suggestive. On Chaucer's knowledge of men and things depends a great deal of his literary excellence as a narrative poet.

He is keen and shrewd in picking out the essentials and the distinguishing details. He knows that a certain kind of eye denotes certain traits of character. He says of the "Somnour":

"For sawcefleem (pimpled) he was, with eyen narwe (small)."

Of the Pardoner:

"Swiche glarynge eyen hadde he as an hare,"

And of the Host:

"A large man he was with eyen stepe."

Details do not escape him. He says of Chauncleer:

"And on his toon he rometh up and down"

His descriptions overflow with powerful and striking (tho often simple and homely) similes and metaphors: Of the Somonour.

"As hoot he was and lecherous ^{as a} sparwe

With scaled browes blake and piled beard."

And then the significant touch:

"Of his visage children were aferd"!

Notice the figures of speech in the following description of the Miller and the significant details.

"His berd as any sowe or fox war reed

And thereto brood, as though it were a spade.

Upon the cop right of his nose he hadde

A werthe, and thereon stood a tuft of herys

Reed as the brustles of a sowes erys

His nosethirles blake were and wide;

A swerd and a bokeler bar he by his syde,

His mouth as greet was as a greet forneys;

He was a Iangler and a gobardeys (teller of smutty stories)

And that was moost of sin and harlotries
 Wel coude he stelen corn and tollen thries
 And yet he hadde a thombe of gole, pardee!
 A whit cote and a blew hood wered he."

In a dozen lines we have the miller in our image as completely as had we known him for years. He sums up the Parson's character thus:

But Cristes loore and hise Apostles twelve
 He taughte; but first he folwed it hym selve,"
 and the Clerk's thus,
 Sawninge in (conducive to) moral vertu was his speche,
 And gladly wolde he learn and gladly teche."

Chaucer succeeds in high degree in individualizing his characters. Each character has a distinct personality, for Chaucer is a consummate artist in character creation. He can even make "perfect character" interesting! Such is Custance. It is not given to many men to create unique character like the Wife of Bath. All are intensely human and intensely interesting. They are alive - and will live. The Wife of Bath is a world creation, such is Chaucer's power to delineate character. We need only transpose the Wife of Bath to our age and we would have a wonderful rampant suffragette! - for she is the exponent of woman's rights, and probably the first.

Chaucer understands women as well as man as shown all thru his works.

Morris does not possess this power of characterization to such a great extent. His characters are not sharply drawn. They merely act for the sake of the story element. His gods and goddess are

not distinct but as much so as his men and both are far-off, intangible. They are not natural, true to life, full of emotion and desires. Most of them conform to types. But in some stories he does give us characters that we seem to know, that we can sympathize with. Such are Jason and Media in *The Life and Death of Jason*. Yet none is really human, it seems. They are dreams within his dreams. But Chaucer gives us a portrait gallery of interest and pleasure and of infinite variety. The Pilgrims themselves are drawn from all walks of life. He pictures for us the jovial, shrewd Host, the knight steeped in chivalry, the modest prioress, the rascally monk, the fraudulent, sinful pardoner, the lewd miller, the conscientious, wrapt student, the shrewd lawyer, the true and christianly parson, the deceiving physician, the vulgar yet human and interesting Wife of Bath, and others, - all live in the memory. We can scarcely with effort recall more than four or five of Morris's characters.

Now let us turn from discussion of character portrayal and description to suggestive description. In this we find Morris has wonderful genius, in this he at times matches the average of Chaucer. The following description of a plague-stricken city has all the definition and color that we could wish.

"It was a bright September afternoon,
 The parched-up beach-trees would be yellowing soon;
 The yellow flowers grown deeper by the sun
 Were letting fall their petals one by one,
 No wind there was, a haze was gathering o'er
 The furthest bound of the faint yellow shore;
 And in the oily waters of the bay

Scarce moving aught some fisher-cobbles lay,
 And all seemed peace; and had been peace indeed
 But that we young men of our life had need,
 And to our listening ears a sound was borne,
 That made the sunlight wretched and forlorn--
 The heavy tolling of the minster bell--
 And nigher yet a tinkling sound did tell
 That through the streets they bore our Saviour Christ
 By dying lips in anguish to be kissed"

Notice the truthfulness, realism, and the picture of desolation in the following:

"On straw the poor dead woman lay;
 The door alone let in the day,
 Showing the trodden earthen floor,
 A board of tresles weak and poor,
 Three stumps of trees for stool or chair,
 A half-glazed pipkin, nothing fair;
 A bowl of porridge by the wife
 Untouched by lips that locked for life,
 A platter and a bowl of wood;
 And in the further corner stood
 A bow cut from the wych- elm tree."

And then this sea-coast description:

For out to sea a certain isle doth lie:
 Men call Seriphas, craggy, steep and high;
 It rises up on every side but one,
 And mariners its ill-formed headlands shun;

But toward the south the meads slope soft adown,
 Until they meet the yellow sands and brown,
 That slope themselves so gently to the sea,
 The nymphs are bidden only to the knee,
 When half a mile of rippling water is
 Between the waves that their white limbs do kiss,
 And the last waves that washes shells ashore."

The beauty and suggestiveness of the above descriptions need not be pointed out, they are evident in reading. And no description is more poetical than that in The Love of Alcestis which describes the disappearance of the god. Notice well the epithets:

"He ceased, but ere the golden tongue was still
 An odorous mist had stolen up the hill,
 And to Admetus first the god grew dim
 And then was but a lovely voice to him,
 And then at last the sun had sunk to rest,
 And a fresh wind blew lightly from the west,
 Over the hill-top, and no soul was there,
 But the sad dying autumn field - flowers fair,
 Rustled dry leaves about the windy place."

Yet we feel that Chaucer is a little better in some of his landscape-pictures - because of grander sweep and motion perhaps. See this bird's eye view of the earth as given in the House of Fame;

" 'Now see,' quod he, . . .
 By thy trouthe yond adoun,
 Wher that thou knowest any toun,
 Of any thing, of any thing."

Or hous, or any other thing.
 And whan thou hast of aught knowing,
 Loke that thou warne me,
 And I anoon shal telle thee
 How fer that thou are now therefro
 And I adoun gan loken tho,
 And beheld feldes and plaines,
 And now hilles, and now mountaines,
 Now valeys, and now forestes,
 And now, unethes, grete bestes:
 Now riveres, now citees,
 Now tounes, and now grete trees,
 Now shippes sailing in the see.

But thus sone in a whyle he
 Was flowen fro the grounde so hye
 That al the world, as to myn ye,
 No more semed thou a prikke;
 Or elles was the air so thikke
 That I ne mighte not discerne."

And let us compare Chaucer's description of April with
 Morris.

"Whan that Aprille with his shoures sote
 The droghte of Marche hath perced to the rote,
 And bathed every vein in swich licour
 Of which ~~virtu~~ engendred is the flour,
 Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
 Inspired hath in every holt and heeth

The tender croppes, and the youge sonne
 Hath in the Ram his halfe cours y - ronne,
 And smale fowles maken melodye"
 That slegen al the night with open yē,
 (So priketh hem nature in hir corages):
 Than longen folk to goon on pilgrimages
 (And palmers for to seken straunge strondes)
 To ferne halwes, couthe in sondry landes;
 And specially from every shires ende
 Of Engelond, to Caunterbury they wende,
 The holy blisful ~~martyr~~ for to seke
 That hem hath helpen, whan that they were seke.

And Morris's description of April:

"O fair mid-spring, besung so oft and oft,
 How can I praise thy loveliness enow?
 The sun that burns not, and thy breezes soft,
 That o'er the blossoms of the orchard blow,
 The thousand things that 'neath the young leaves grow,
 The hopes and chances of the growing year,
 Winter forgotten long, and summer near."

We find Chaucer's description a little more realistic, fresher and invigorating. It makes us see returning life and hear it too.

Morris is at his best in the beautiful description of the meeting between Jason and the charming sorceress, Medea:

"Media turned to Jason and she said
 'O love, turn round, and note the goodlihead
 My father's palace shows beneath the stars.

Bethink thee of the men grown old in wars
 Who do my bidding; what delights I have
 How many ladies lie in wait to save
 My life from toil and carefulness, and think
 How sweet a cup I have been used to drink
 And how I cast it to the ground for thee.
 Upon the day thou weariest of me
 I wish that thou may sometimes think of this,
 And 'twixt thy new-found kisses and the bliss
 Of something sweeter than thine old delight,
 Remember thee a little of this night
 Of marvels, and this starlit, silent place,
 And these two lovers, standing face to face."

Such scenes stick in the memory, they are the very essence of poetry. It is in his wonderful power of imagery and suggestive beauty that William Morris most nearly approaches the master Chaucer; it is by this he must be most remembered.

Conclusion.

In our study which has led us thru various comparisons and contrasts, we have seen that the works of both poets are of great truth and beauty, that they give us pleasure. This is one of the chief ends of the poetical art. But we are inevitably forced to the conclusion that Chaucer is far superior to Morris - superior in almost every comparison. The master Chaucer must still remain the master and Morris the learning pupil. But because Morris can with dignity be favorably compared to Chaucer gives him the stamp of

poetical excellence. He is far more than,

"The idle singer of an empty day,"

which he so modestly professes to be. And we will never cease to delight in going with him in his "shadowy isle of bliss", which he has built,

"Midmost the beating of a steely sea."

W. O. Burtner

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