



An Array of Impressive Limned Portraits

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...life-like genuine beings, beyond any
artificiality, beyond any deceit...

Here is a show that applauds people of myriad métiers...of variegated social standings... of vibrant lifestyles...of discrete physiognomies...and of explicit virtues and vices. It's a phenomenal portrait gallery by none other than Geoffrey Chaucer... *'The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales'*... which reflects hueful attires, diverse tastes, miscellaneous contrastive elements and pleasing auras with a fine rhythmic mobility. Joseph Warton's a highly rich observation about Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, "Here all is in life and motion; here we behold the true Poet or Maker", seems to be echoing ambience of this masterpiece also.

Chaucer, the begetter of the splendid English poetry, a wordsmith of the rarest calibre, stands at the inception of portraiture and in the heyday of heraldry. His poetical expedition can be deemed as a kind of imbibed, yet sauntering journey from the ivory towers and elevated gardens of medieval French imagination into the warmth and humanism of the early Italian renaissance, and so home to the Tabard Inn, comfortably commonplace, as near the heart of English domestic life as Canterbury Cathedral in those days. A kindred sense may be discerned from the resplendent and exact taste of medieval miniature-painting, as in *Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* or the *Wilton Diptych*, the full-scale portrait of Richard-II in Westminster Abbey, or the tapestries of *La Dame a la Licorne*.

He sees as smoothly with the eye of an Uccello as of a Tintoretto. The gamut of his characterization is not limited like that of Jane Austen... rather wide like that of Dickens. The prolific life that everyone relishes in *The General Prologue*, is often found as nuggets of society with great panache. The dexterity with which Chaucer picks characters from his surroundings to create Prologue of his Tales

and presents them as life-like genuine beings, beyond any artificiality, beyond any deceit, is awfully marvelous. His Prologue is a picture-perfect relating a society not only of his time but of all ages. Excluding sovereignty and scums of society, he carves portraits of almost whole English crowd from materialistic people like Franklin, Merchant and Man of Law to people belonging to the party of Christ like Parson and Plowman. Dryden's perfect remark of appreciation for *The Canterbury Tales*: 'Here is God's plenty', is quite apt for *The Prologue*.

Chaucer, desiring distinct delineation, invented the method of contrastive callings to highlight the fanciful medley of eye catching colours and costumes, and to aid in succinctly describing a whole series of habits, manners and tendencies...only the generic features need to be marked to specify the identity. Some pictures of Chaucer are painted in modest colours in contrast to those full of dazzling motley. He shows polarity in colours in the same portrait as well. As Legouis remarks: "But there are duller tints for the eye to rest on which, by contrast help further to throw into relief the bright colours by their side." Forbye what is left, just to make each person speak befitting his destination and behavior.

Visual effects created by his colour scheme amaze the readers whosoever enters his picturesque portrait gallery. This being dominant feature of Chaucer's art, many a times barges into characterization just for the sake of attracting colour scheme on the faces or raiments into spotlight. Though his overuse of charming colours tries to elude him as an artisan at times yet he proves his fealty by heightened impressions and numerous other out of the track devices. Squire's gown full of white and red coloured fresh flowers, Yeoman's green coloured coat and hood showcase colourful side of their personalities. He exhibits great tolerance in portraiture. Like Dante, he observes aloofness of personas in a straightforward manner. He limns their sternness, their formidability, their gloominess in all possible perspectives. The Friar, a very devious and wicked villain, bespeaks about his debased and vicious personality from whatever angle we look at him. There is no attempt by the author to cast bright light on him, to make him appear nice or genial.

Realism is another prominent feature of Chaucer's paintings like Romantic Colour in Keats and studied brilliance in Milton. Lovely Keatsian expressions like "fair love's ripening breast" or "magic casements opening on the foam of a perilous seas" are missed in Chaucer. The very first glimpse of his picture gallery strikes the readers with modesty and humility radiated by his Knight who is not gaily robed, but embodies military prowess, loyalty, reverence, benevolence and courtesy. Chaucer, a primitive in portraiture, many times sounds like his ancestors, pays acute attention to sharpness of attributes, preciseness of emblems, yet sometimes unskilled and awkward in crafting images and provoking similes. He seems to be quite random in choosing particulars like costume or specific traits. He may exchange one for the other.

Acoustic effects make his word-portraits richer than paintings. He describes the jingling of the bridle sounding like the Chapel bells on the Monk's palfrey, intoning through the nose in Prioress, lispings in the Friar, goat like voice quality of the Pardoner, and deafening speech of the Summoner.

Chaucer uses utterly felicitous similes and metaphors to vivify his characters. He shows Friar's throat as white as a Lilly flower. He encapsulates cheerful disposition of the Squire in a single line by calling him as bright as the month of May.

Instillation of moral characteristics in figures goes hand in hand with colourization and dressing style. Carved with these unique features, Chaucer hangs on the wall thirty unique portraits one after the other just with recitations of certitude, with suggestive pieces of anecdotes, with individuality, with typicality, with sharp, strong, clear, sometimes a bit stiff, unforgettable outlines, and with charming lines of recapitulation.

Ten Brink quotes countless traits of Chaucer's characterization, "By what varied means does Chaucer round off his individual figures. Sometimes by seriousness, sometimes by waggishness, now by gentle irony, then by reckless satire, and yet he himself still remains the same. Nowhere does the poet renounce his wide human sympathies, his cheerful benevolence, his amiable good humour. And yet he has at his disposition ideas and means of expression which work with lightning speed."

Like Shakespeare, Chaucer presents three dimensional personalities of his characters, having length, breadth and depth. The best instance of this complexity are Wife of Bath and the Monk. Arnold says, 'He[Chaucer] has gained the power to survey the world from a central, a truly human point of view.'

He harmonizes typical and individual traits for perfect portrayal. One classification crosses the another to reinforce the features. While in sketching the Wife of Bath, Chaucer takes the high road to humour, it shows the essence of satire against women. Today she is analysed as an expression either of Chaucer's protofeminism or his misogyny. He bathes all his characters with humanity and ample amount of sympathy. He doesn't show any personal bias with any character whether the pious or the sinner. As A. C. Ward puts it, "Characters are types as well as individuals, nor mere phantoms of the brain, but real human and types true to the whole classes of men and women".

Such a boundless variety of characters give an enchanting impression when shown under four different coloured lights. Initial description of the characters in *The General Prologue* followed by their revelation of themselves in relation to various links and then their nature shown in the recitation of their tales makes us reach their final impressions given through the eyes of the Host, Harry Bailly, who, in a way, plays the role of Chorus which like in Greek drama helps in characterization through comments and observations.

A very concise account shows that Chaucer's portraits are the 'epitome of humanity'. His portraits in *The Prologue* are prodigious enough to make him shine out in the galaxy of outstanding painters. Eventually, it would be appropriate to cheer this grand procession with Shakespeare's famous lines in *Richard-II*: "This happy breed of men, this little world."

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