John Dryden

PREFACE TO *THE FABLES*

(1700)

[Translations of Ovid and Chaucer]

[Dryden translates The Knight's Tale, the Nun's Priest's Tale, The Wife of Bath's Tale, and The Flower and The Leaf (then thought to be Chaucer's), and The character of a Good Parson, based on (rather than translated from) the portrait of the Parson in the General Prologue.]

Chaucer and Ovid Compared

I proceed to Ovid, and Chaucer; considering the former only in relation to the latter. With Ovid ended the Golden Age of the Roman Tongue: From Chaucer the Purity of the English Tongue began. The Manners of the Poets were not unlike: Both of them were well-bred, well-natur'd, amorous, and Libertine, at least in their Writings, it may be also in their Lives. Their Studies were the same, Philosophy, and Philology. Both of them were knowing in Astronomy; of which Ovid's Books of the Roman Feasts, and Chaucer's Treatise of the Astrolabe, are sufficient Witnesses. But Chaucer was likewise an Astrologer, as were Virgil, Horace, Persius, and Manilius. Both writ with wonderful Facility and Clearness; neither were great Inventors: For Ovid only copied the Grecian Fables; and most of Chaucer's Stories were taken from his Italian Contemporaries, or their Predecessors: Boccace his Decameron was first publish'd; and from thence our Englishman has borrow'd many of his Canterbury Tales:

Yet that of Palamon and Arcite was written in all probability by some Italian wit, in a former Age; as I shall prove hereafter: The tale of Grizild was the Invention of Petrarch; by him sent to Boccace; from whom it came to Chaucer: Troilus and Cressida was also written by a Lombard Author; but much amplified by our English Translatour, as well as beautified; the Genius of our Countrymen, in general, being rather to improve an Invention than to invent themselves; as is evident not only in our Poetry, but in many of our Manufactures. I find I have anticipated already, and taken up from Boccace before I come to him: But there is so much less behind; and I am of the Temper of most Kings, who love to be in Debt, are all for present Money, no matter how they pay it afterwards: Besides, the Nature of a Preface is rambling; never wholly out of the Way, nor in it. This I have learn'd from the Practice of honest Montaign, and return at my pleasure to Ovid and Chaucer, of whom I have little more to say.

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.

The Styles of Chaucer and Ovid

The Thoughts and Words remain to be considered, in the Comparison of the two Poets; and I have sav'd my self one half of that Labour, by owning that Ovid liv'd when the Roman Tongue was in its meridian; Chaucer, in the Dawning of our Language: Therefore that Part

of the Comparison stands not on an equal Foot, any more than the Diction of Ennius and Ovid; or of Chaucer and our present English. The Words are given up as a Post not to be defended in our Poet, because he wanted the Modern Art of Fortifying. The Thoughts remain to be consider'd: And they are to be measur'd only by their Propriety; that is, as they flow more or less naturally from the Persons describ'd, on such and such Occasions.

The Vulgar Judges, which are Nine Parts in Ten of all Nations, who call Conceits and Jingles Wit, who see Ovid full of them, and Chaucer altogether without them, will think me little less than mad for preferring the Englishman to the Roman: Yet, with their leave, I must presume to say, that the Things they admire are only glittering Trifles, and so far from being Witty, that in a serious Poem they are nauseous, because they are unnatural. 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? This is just John Littlewit, in Bartholomew Fair, who had a Conceit (as he tells you) left him in his Misery; a miserable Conceit.

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 what 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 complained he was further 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.

As for the Turn of Words, in which Ovid particularly excels all Poets; they are sometimes a Fault, and sometimes a Beauty, as they are us'd properly or improperly; but in strong Passions always to be shunn'd, because Passions are serious, and will admit no

Playing. The French have a high Value for them; and I confess, they are often what they call Delicate, when they are introduc'd with Judgment; but Chaucer writ with more Simplicity, and follow'd Nature more closely, than to use them. I have thus far, to the best of my Knowledge, been an upright Judge betwixt the Parties in Competition, not medling with the Design nor the Disposition of it; because the Design was not their own; and in the disposing of it they were equal. It remains that I say somewhat of Chaucer in particular.

Chaucer the Father of English Poetry

In the first place, 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; learn'd 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. One of our late great Poets is sunk in his Reputation, because he cou'd never forgive any Conceit which came in his way; but swept like a Dragnet, great and small. There was plenty enough, but the Dishes were ill sorted; whole Pyramids of Sweet-meats for Boys and Women; but little of solid Meat for Men: All this proceeded not from any want of Knowledge, but of Judgment; neither did he want that in discerning the Beauties and Faults of other Poets; but only indulg'd himself in the Luxury of Writing; and perhaps knew it was a Fault, but hoped the Reader would not find it. For this Reason. though he must always be thought a great Poet, he is no longer esteemed a good Writer: And for Ten Impressions, which his Works have had in so many successive Years, yet at present a hundred Books are scarcely purchased once a Twelvemonth: For, as my last Lord Rochester said, though somewhat profanely, Not being of God, he could not stand.

Chaucer follow'd Nature every where, but was never so bold to go beyond her: And there is a great Difference of being Poeta and nimis Poeta, if we may believe Catullus, as much as betwixt a modest Behaviour and Affectation. The Verse of Chaucer, I confess, is not Harmonious to us; but 'tis like the Eloquence of one whom Tacitus comnends, it was

auribus istius temporis accommodate: 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.

Chaucer's Meter Defective

'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 everything 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. we must be Children before we grow Men. There was an Ennius, and in process of Time a Lucilius, and a Lucretius, before Virgil and Horace; even after Chaucer there was a Spencer, a Harrington, a Fairfax, before Waller and Denham were in being: And our Numbers were in their Nonage till these last appeared.

Chaucer's Poltical Connections

I need say little of his Parentage, Life, and Fortunes: They are to be found at large in all the Editions of his Works. He was employ'd abroad, and favoured by Edward the Third, Richard the Second, and Henry the Fourth, and was Poet, as I suppose, to all Three of them. In Richard's Time, I doubt, he was a little dipt in the Rebellion of the Commons; and being Brother-in-Law to John of Ghant, it was no wonder if he follow'd the Fortunes of that Family; and was well with Henry the Fourth when he depos'd his Predecessor. Neither is it

to be admir'd, that Henry, who was a wise as well as a valiant Prince, who claim'd by Succession, and was sensible that his Title was not sound, but was rightfully in Mortimer, who had married the Heir of York; it was not to be admir'd, I say, if that great Politician should be pleas'd to have the greatest Wit of those Times in his Interests, and to be the Trumpet of his Praises. Augustus had given him the Example, by the Advice of Mecaenas, who recommended Virgil and Horace to him; whose Praises helped to make him Popular while he was alive, and after his Death have made him Precious to Posterity.

Chaucer's Religion

As for the Religion of our Poet, he seems to have some little Byas towards the opinions of Wickliff, after John of Ghant his Patron; somewhat of which appears in the Tale of Piers Plowman: Yet I cannot blame him for inveighing so sharply against the Vices of the Clergy in his Age: Their Pride, their Ambition, their Pomp, their Avarice, their Worldly Interest, deserv'd the Lashes which he gave them, both in that, and in most of his Canterbury Tales: Neither has his Contemporary Boccace, spar'd them. Yet both those Poets liv'd in much esteem, with good and holy Men in Orders: For 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. . . .

I have followed Chaucer, in his Character of a Holy Man, and have enlarg'd on that Subject with some Pleasure, reserving to myself the Right, if I shall think fit hereafter, to describe another sort of Priests, such as are more easily to be found than the Good Parson; such as have given the last Blow to Christianity in this Age, by a Practice so contrary to their Doctrine. But this will keep cold till another time. In the mean while, I take up Chaucer where I left him.

Here is God's Plenty

He must have been a Man of a most wonderful comprehensive Nature, because, as it has been truly observ'd of him, he 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 distinguished 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 distinguished 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 are distinguished from each other, as much as the mincing Lady-Prioress, and the broad-speaking, gap-tooth'd 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 sufficient 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 every thing is alter'd.

Chaucer's Bawdry

May I have leave to do myself the Justice, (since my Enemies will do me none, and are so far from granting me to be a good Poet, that they will not allow me so much as to be a Christian, or a Moral Man), may I have leave, I say, to inform my Reader, that I have confin'd my Choice to such Tales of Chaucer as savour nothing of Immodesty. If I had desir'd

more to please than to instruct, the Reve, the Miller, the Shipman, the Merchant, the Sunmer, and above all, the Wife of Bathe, in the Prologue to her Tale, would have procur'd me as many Friends and Readers, as there are Beaux and Ladies of Pleasure in the Town. But I will no more offend against Good Manners: I am sensible as I ought to be of the Scandal I have given by my loose Writings; and make what Reparation I am able, by this Public Acknowledgment.

If anything of this Nature, or of Profaneness, be crept into these Poems, I am so far from defending it, that I disown it. Totum hoc indictum volo. Chaucer makes another manner of Apologie for his broad-speaking, and Boccace makes the like; but I will follow neither of them. Our Country-man, in the end of his Characters, before the Canterbury Tales, thus excuses the Ribaldry, which is very gross in many of his Novels.

But firste, I pray you of your courtesy,
That ye ne arrete it nought my villany,
Though that I plainly speak in this mattere, [etc.; goutes GP 725-42].

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 he heard; I know not what Answer they could have made: For that Reason, such Tales shall be left untold by me.

Chaucer's Language and the Need for Translation

You have here a Specimen of Chaucer's Language, which is so obsolete, that his Sense is scarce to be understood; and you have likewise more than one Example of his unequal Numbers, which were mention'd before. Yet many of his Verses consist of Ten Syllables, and the Words not much behind our present English: as for Example, these two Lines, in the Description of the Carpenter's Young Wife:

Wincing she was, as is a jolly Colt,
Long as a Mast, and upright as a Bolt.

I have almost done with Chaucer, when I have answer'd some Objections relating to my

present Work. I find some People are offended that I have turn'd these Tales into modern English; because they think them unworthy of my Pains, and look on Chaucer as a dry, old-fashioned Wit, not worth receiving. I have often heard the late Earl of Leicester say, that Mr. Cowley himself was of that opinion; who, having read him over at my Lord's Request, declared he had no Taste of him. I dare not advance my Opinion against the Judgment of so great an Author: But I think it fair, however, to leave the Decision to the Publick: Mr. Cowley, was too modest to set up for a Dictatour; and, being shock'd perhaps with his old Style, never examin'd into the depth of his good Sense.

Chaucer, I confess, is a rough Diamond, and must first be polish'd, e'er he shines. I deny not likewise, that, living in our early Days of Poetry, he writes not always of a piece; but sometimes mingles trivial Things with those of greater Moment. Sometimes also, though not often, he runs riot, like Ovid, and knows not when he has said enough. But there are more great Wits beside Chaucer, whose Fault is their Excess of Conceits, and those ill sorted. An Author is not to write all he can, but only all he ought. Having observ'd this Redundancy in Chaucer, (as it is an easie Matter for a Man of ordinary Parts to find a Fault in one of greater,) I have not ty'd myself to a Literal Translation; but have often omitted what I judg'd unnecessary, or not of Dignity enough to appear in the Company of better Thoughts. I have presum'd farther in some Places, and added somewhat of my own where I thought my Author was deficient, and had not given his Thoughts their true Lustre, for want of Words in the Beginning of our Language. And to this I was the more emboldened, because, (if I may be permitted to say it of my self) I found I had a Soul congenial to his, and that I had been conversant in the same Studies. Another Poet, in another Age, may take the same Liberty with my Writings; if at least they live long enough to deserve Correction.

It was also necessary sometimes to restore the Sense of Chaucer, which was lost or mangled in the Errors of the Press: Let this Example suffice at present in the Story of Palamon and Arcite, where the temple of Diana is describ'd, you find these Verses in all the Editions of our Author:

There saw I Dane turned unto a Tree,
I mean not the goddess Diane,

But Venus Daughter, which that hight Dane.

Which, after a little Consideration, I knew was to be reform'd into this Sense, that Daphne, the daughter of Peneus, was turn'd into a Tree. I durst not make thus bold with Ovid, lest some future Milbourn should arise, and say, I varied from my Author, because I understood him not.

But there are other Judges, who think I ought not to have translated Chaucer into English, out of a quite contrary Notion: They suppose there is a certain Veneration due to his old Language; and that it is little less than Profanation and Sacrilege to alter it. They are farther of opinion, that somewhat of his good Sense will suffer in this Transfusion, and much of the Beauty of his Thoughts will infallibly be lost, which appear with more Grace in their old Habit. Of this Opinion was that excellent Person, whom I mention'd, the late Earl of Leicester, who valued Chaucer as much as Mr. Cowley despis'd him. My Lord dissuaded me from this Attempt, (for I was thinking of it some Years before his Death,) and his Authority prevail'd so far with me, as to defer my Undertaking while he liv'd, in deference to him: Yet my Reason was not convinc'd with what he urg'd against it. If the first End of a Writer be to be understood, then, as his Language grows obsolete, his Thoughts must grow obscure, multa renascuntur, quae nunc cecidere; cadentque quae nunc sunt in honore vocabula, si volet usus, quem penes arbitrium est et jus et norma loquendi. When an ancient Word for its Sound and Significancy, deserves to be reviv'd, I have that reasonable Veneration for Antiquity, to restore it. All beyond this is Superstition. Words are not like Land-marks, so sacred as never to be remov'd: Customs are chang'd, and even Statutes are silently repeal'd, when the Reason ceases for which they were enacted. 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, when they are no longer understood, which is the present Case. I grant, that something must be lost in all Transfusion, that is, in all Translations; but the Sense will remain, which would otherwise be lost, or at least be maim'd, when it is scarce intelligible; and that but to a few. How few are there who can read Chaucer, so as to understand him perfectly? And if imperfectly, then with less Profit, and no Pleasure.

'Tis not for the Use of some old Saxon Friends, that I have taken these Pains with him:

Let them neglect my Version, because they have no need of it. I made it for their sakes who understand Sense and Poetry, as well as they; when that Poetry and Sense is put into Words which they understand. I will go farther, and dare to add, that what Beauties I lose in some Places, I give to others which had them not originally: But in this I may be partial to my self; let the Reader judge, and I submit to his Decision. 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. If I have alter'd him any where for the better, I must at the same time acknowledge, that I could have done nothing without him: Facile est inventis addere, is no great Commendation; but I am not so vain to think I have deserv'd a greater.

I will conclude what I have to say of him singly, with this one Remark: A Lady of my Acquaintance, who keeps a kind of Correspondence with some Authors of the Fair Sex in France, has been inform'd by them, that Mademoiselle de Scudery, who is as old as Sibyl, and inspir'd like her by the same God of Poetry, is at this time translating Chaucer into modern French. From which I gather, that he has been formerly translated into the old Provencall; (for, how she should come to understand Old English, I know not). But the Matter of Fact being true, it makes me think, that there is something in it like Fatality; that after certain Periods of Time, the Fame and Memory of Great Wits should be renew'd, as Chaucer is both in France and England. If this be wholly Chance, 'tis extraordinary; and I dare not call it more, for fear of being tax'd with Superstition.

Chaucer and Boccaccio Compared

Boccace comes last to be considered, who, living in the same Age with Chaucer, had the same Genius, and followed the same Studies: 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. In the serious part of Poetry, the Advantage is wholly on Chaucer's Side; for though the Englishman has borrow'd many Tales from the Italian, yet it appears, that those of Boccace were not generally of his own making, but taken from Authors of former ages, and by him only modell'd: So that what there was of Invention, in either of them, may be judg'd equal. But Chaucer has refin'd on Boccace, and has mended the Stories which he has borrow'd, in his way of telling; though Prose allows more Liberty of Thought, and the Expression is more easie, when unconfined by Numbers. Our Countryman carries Weight, and yet wins the Race at disadvantage. I desire not the Reader should take my Word; and, therefore, I will set two of their Discourses on the same Subject, in the same Light, for every Man to judge betwixt them.

The Wife of Bath's Tale

I translated Chaucer first, and amongst the rest, pitch'd on The Wife of Bath's Tale; not daring, as I have said, to adventure on her Prologue, because 'tis too licentious: There Chaucer introduces an old Woman of mean Parentage, whom a youthful Knight of Noble Blood, was forc'd to marry, and consequently loath'd her: The Crone being in bed with him on the wedding Night, and finding his Aversion, endeavours to win his Affection by Reason, and speaks a good Word for herself, (as who could blame her?) in hope to mollifie the sullen Bridegroom. She takes her Topiques from the Benefits of Poverty, the Advantages of old Age and Ugliness, the Vanity of Youth, and the silly Pride of Ancestry and Titles, without inherent Vertue, which is the true Nobility.

When I had clos'd Chaucer; I return'd to Ovid, and translated some more of his Fables; and, by this time, had so far forgotten The Wife of Bath's Tale, that when I took up Boccace, unawares I fell on the same Argument of preferring Virtue to Nobility of Blood, and Titles, in the Story of Sigismonda; which I had certainly avoided for the Resemblance of the two Discourses, if my Memory had not fail'd me. Let the Reader weigh both; and if he thinks me

partial to Chaucer, 'tis in him to right Boccace.

The Knight's Tale

I prefer in our Countryman, far above all his other Stories, the Noble Poem of Palamon and Arcite, which 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: only it includes a greater length of time; as taking up seven years at least; but Aristotle has left undecided the Duration of the Action; which yet is easily reduc'd into the Compass of a year, by a Narration of what preceded the Return of Palamon to Athens.

I had thought for the Honour of our Nation, and more particularly for his, whose Laurel, tho' unworthy, I have worn after him, that this Story was of English Growth, and Chaucer's own: But I was undeceiv'd by Boccace; for casually looking on the End of his seventh Giornata, I found Dioneo, (under which name he shadows himself,) and Fiametta, (who represents his Mistress, the natural Daughter of Robert, King of Naples) of whom these Words are spoken. Dioneo e Fiametta gran pezza cantarono insieme d'Arcita, e di Palemone: by which it appears, that this Story was written before the time of Boccace; but the Name of its Author being wholly lost, Chaucer is now become an Original; and I question not but the Poem has receiv'd many Beauties, by passing through his Noble Hands.

Besides this Tale, there is another of his own Invention, after the manner of the Provencalls, call'd The Flower and the Leaf; with which I was so particularly pleas'd, both for the Invention and the moral; that I cannot hinder myself from recommending it to the Reader.

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