

TWO BOOKS CONCERNING CHAUCER.*

The problem of constructing an aqueduct that should bring the living waters of Dan Chaucer's "well of English undefiled" within the reach of every thirsty soul, has long been a fascinating one. Dryden attempted to popularize Chaucer by reproducing his stories in the metrical language of the seventeenth century; and Wordsworth, about a hundred years later, made an experiment in the same direction. Each of these attempts suffers, however, from the inevitable limitations and defects of all translations. Dryden, having too little faith in his author, could not resist the temptation to embroider and improve upon his original. Even Wordsworth, with all his simplicity and immediateness, fails, as Matthew Arnold has remarked, to impart to his versions the "divine fluidity" of Chaucer's diction and movement. There is in the father of English poetry an exquisite combination of gifts and graces which is found in none of his modern imitators or translators. Whoever would taste his delicious flavor must master his dialect.

One of the most promising of recent at-

* CHAUCER'S CANTERBURY TALES, Annotated and Accented, with Illustrations of English Life in Chaucer's Time. Revised Edition, with Illustrations from the Ellesmere MS. By John Saunders. New York: Macmillan & Co.

CHAUCER: THE LEGEND OF GOOD WOMEN. Edited by the Rev. Walter W. Skeat, Litt. D. (Clarendon Press Series.) New York: Macmillan & Co.

tempts to induce readers to take this trouble is Mr. Saunders's "Canterbury Tales,"—a book which has been well-known in England for some years and which now lies before us in a revised form. The modernization of the language has been managed with skill and delicacy; beyond the introduction of a uniform standard of spelling and the use of marks of accentuation, there appear to be no alterations of the text. Archaic words are explained in convenient foot-notes.

In one respect the title is very misleading, implying as it does a new edition of Chaucer's great work. The following title would describe the book much better: "The Canterbury Tales retold in pleasant prose, with copious extracts from the originals, and with abundant notes and comments by J. S." In other words, the author selects such passages from the tales as seem to him the most original, and fills in the gaps himself. Some of the tales are greatly abridged or entirely suppressed. The prologue and its characters are made the text for chatty but instructive comments upon most of the phases of social life and manners alluded to by the poet. These chapters are evidently the fruit of wide and independent reading, and, extending as they do over 169 pages, constitute an important feature of the book. At the close of each of the tales the author indulges in a chapter of critical remarks, which are valuable to the general reader, and from which more special readers will be likely to cull some useful hints. Popular as his aim is, Mr. Saunders is evidently abreast of the most recent researches in Chaucer-lore; if not himself a specialist, he has carefully surveyed the results at which specialists have arrived. Without the slightest parade of erudition, the book is strewn with references to the publications of the Chaucer Society and to the investigations of Skeat, Ten Brink, Kittredge, and many others. It is to be regretted that these references have not been grouped in a convenient list, so as to give the purchaser of the book a bibliography into the bargain. The colorless reproductions of the quaint illustrations of the Ellesmere MS. add materially to the attractiveness of the book. There are some mistakes, or errors of judgment, of which but a single example can here be adduced. At page 366, the apothecary of the Pardoner's Tale is made to asseverate thus (though not in verse): "As wisely as may God save my soul." Possibly "wisely" is a misprint for Chaucer's "wisly"; if so, there should be a foot-note for the benefit of the

modern reader. But the word is not used by the apothecary in any of the six MSS. reprinted by Mr. Furnivall. Such errors do not appear to be frequent enough to seriously impair the value of the work, which seems, on the whole, well calculated to lure some minds back to the "perpetual fountain of good-sense" where it takes its rise.

The Reverend Professor Skeat's edition of "The Legend of Good Women" is marked by all the thoroughness of research, the patient attention to details, that students of Chaucer have learned to expect from this eminent specialist. The Legend is one of the poet's most delightful works, notable in many respects, especially as exemplifying his earliest use of the so-called heroic couplet, which was henceforth to be the medium of his best and most characteristic work. More than this, we study here not merely Chaucer's first use of a metrical form previously unfamiliar to him, but also the first use in English of what is, next to blank verse, our most sonorous and our most important metre. It is not too much to say that this is the first edition which fairly represents the poet's skill in the management of his new Pegasus. A comparison of Professor Skeat's text with the best ones previously accessible brings out clearly the incomparable superiority of the present edition. The editor's collation of all the principal MSS. has enabled him to make many emendations affecting the sense, and almost innumerable corrections in the metre. These authorized changes are so numerous as really to give a new complexion to the style and to necessitate a revision of critical judgments based upon the poet's apparently negligent management of the new metrical form.

Had Mr. Skeat given us nothing but this admirable text, he would have earned the gratitude of every student of the poet. But he gives much more than this. In the first place, he prints the earlier and the later text of the Prologue to the Legend in such a way as to make comparison easy, and the comparison is well worth making. He everywhere gives in foot-notes all the important variants of the best MSS. Moreover, in an Introduction extending to 54 pages there is much interesting matter relating to the two forms of the Prologue, to the date, subject, sources, and metre of the Legend, and to the improvements in the present edition. Finally, there is a profusion of instructive notes in this editor's well-known style, and the usual glossarial and other indexes. In size

the volume is uniform with the same editor's recently published edition of Chaucer's *Minor Poems* (see the September DIAL), so that it is handsomer and more considerable in appearance than his other school editions.

For, alas! this is also a *school* edition. Like its predecessors, it has been prepared for the benefit of Mr. Skeat's ideal, or rather, let us hope, *imaginary* schoolboy, who is such a pitiful creature in every respect save in erudition. We all know Macaulay's schoolboy, and we are sure that, despite his frequent tribulations, he is of a much robuster type. Mr. Skeat's schoolboy is so tender that he is not supposed to know that it is (or was in Chaucer's time) quite customary for husband and wife to occupy the same bed; accordingly Chaucer's innocent allusions to that social circumstance are vigilantly suppressed, and some [bracketed] false statement, duly rined and metred, is foisted upon the student. For this metrical mendacity, *virginibus puerisque*, the reverend expurgator probably excuses himself by virtue of that time-honored ethical principle that one may tell lies to children. For the not indecorous phrase "and gooth with her to beddē," Mr. Skeat substitutes "[and leith his feith to weddē]," which is surely quite another matter. In the legend of Lucretia, instead of the words "blindē lust," Mr. Skeat carefully inserts "[sinful thought]" for "she shal my lemman be," he substitutes "[I wol again her see]." As to Tarquin's threat to slay the stable-boy and lay him in Lucretia's bed in order to give color to an accusation of adultery, Mr. Skeat simply omits it and inserts a row of dots. Apparently he has never paused from his delightful researches to consider how fearful the responsibility he is incurring in encouraging this phenomenally tender youth, ticklish of virtue, to read an author so ribald as old Chaucer is upon occasion. Does the Rev. Mr. Skeat suppose that, in these days of sixpenny books, this erudite babe will be so pitifully stupid as not to think to buy an unexpurgated copy of the author so insistently brought to his notice? Does he expect teachers to collude with him in fibbing to this "sely child" by explaining the bracketed passages as conjectural emendations? And how does he imagine that an innocent, who must not know there is such a thing as "blind lust," is to comprehend such a tale as that of the rape of Lucrece, especially when the *nodus* of the story is omitted?

From another point of view this prudishness is still more unfortunate. Mr. Skeat's editions

are presumed by him, or by the Delegates of the Clarendon Press, or by both parties, to be edited for the nursery; in fact, however, they are edited for mature students, and are of great use even to the most learned Chaucerians. The value of the present edition consists, as we have seen, very largely in the fact that it gives us for the first time the results of a critical comparison of all the MSS. It is edited for students who are interested in the minutest variations of the MSS. For example, in line 1816 of the present text occurs the verb "wex." In the foot-note are printed the following six variants, with the names of the MSS. where they severally appear: "wex, wexe, wax, waxed, wox, woxe." On the same page three entire lines, containing twenty-four words, are omitted, and are treated in the notes and glossary as if they existed not. Such is the system. Of course, the careful student is likely to be as much interested in some of these twenty-four omitted words, as in the verb "wex" which is treated with so much consideration. But unless he be the happy possessor of Mr. Furnivall's six-text reprint, with plenty of time to use it, he must make shift with the popular editions for such passages as offend against the "reverence due to [very small] boys." At such points Mr. Skeat grimly claps the book to, places it on a high shelf with its back to the wall, and observes with Master Chaucer: "Ye get namore of me."

While this extreme prudishness must be emphatically condemned, yet we should not allow it to prejudice us against the solid merits of the work before us. It is to be distinctly borne in mind that this is the first edition in which it has been possible to read this famous poem with full appreciation and enjoyment. In conclusion, I cannot forbear to advert, in the briefest way, to the remarkable misuse which Professor Skeat has been making in his editions of Chaucer for the past ten years, and which he repeats here, of that strain in Tennyson's "Vision of Sin" beginning:

"Then methought I heard a hollow sound
Gathering up from all the lower ground."

It will be noted that these lines present, metrically considered, a kind of anacrusis; they depart from the pentameter type by the defect of a syllable in the first foot. That such lines occur, singly and sporadically, in Chaucer, Professor Skeat adduces a good deal of evidence to prove. But it is strange that he should persist in thinking Tennyson's use of this peculiar metre analogous with Chaucer's. It does

not appear that the elder poet made use of this metrical device, or irregularity, in any two successive lines of the heroic pentameter. Tennyson, on the other hand, in the passage so triumphantly adduced by Professor Skeat in support of his contention (which I am not prepared to dispute), departs from the normal pentameter in a dozen successive lines, and shortly afterward plunges into far wilder metrical irregularities. All this he does, as every attentive reader must surely feel, deliberately and with definite artistic purpose. In the normal pentameter couplet the dance of sin could never have become so "fast and furious." There is a world of difference between such artistic irregularities as these and Chaucer's occasional and apparently aimless anacrusis. That a scholar whose life is devoted to subjects of this sort should seem impervious to a distinction so obvious, is very strange. It is perhaps still stranger that the lynx-eyed reviewers of two hemispheres should, for ten years, have allowed such a nugget of criticism to slip through their sieves.

MELVILLE B. ANDERSON.