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Literary criticism in the English works of G Chaucer, J Wyclif, and J Gower

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Thesis

Literary Criticism in the English Works of G. Chaucer, J. Trulliol, and J. Gower

by

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INTRODUCTION

For well I wot that folk han here beforne
Of makyng ropen, and lai away the corn;
And I come after, gleynge here and there,
And am full glad if I may fynde an ere
Of any goodly word that they han left. (1)

For decades the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer have provided material for graduate theses and doctor’s dissertations. Scholars have studied the works word by word for the keys they hold to etymological, philological, grammatical, and literary developments. The stories from the single point of view of narrative are fascinating, but, in addition to this interest, they held for me a further challenge as they suggested a possible revelation of Chaucer’s literary standards. In reading the "Canterbury Tales," I noted that Chaucer included incidentally many critical ideas. I became interested in the problem of just how much literary criticism could be found here and there in his writings.

Every author, whether he writes critical essays about his literary standards or not, must have an artistic perspective. In an author of genius, this perspective will show through in his literary works. Many artistic ideas of a writer could be inferred through the style and content of his poetry and prose. Many more ideas would emerge in dialogue and narrative. In finding the criticism present in the writings of these

authors, I eliminated any inferred critical references. My problem for critical research has been to find in the complete works of Chaucer a body of quotations which, taken together, would form Chaucer's critical artistic perspective.

It was evident that many ideas expressed by characters in the dialogue might not be Chaucer's own, but expressions of popular or conventional standards transcribed from his sources. To get a true picture of the standards followed by important fourteenth century authors, it would be necessary to know some comparative critical values. As John Gower was considered by his contemporaries as an outstanding writer, it seemed a natural choice to select his literary standards for comparison with those of Chaucer.

These two, however, belonged to the aristocracy. Their education had been the fulfilling of courtly requirements. It was possible that their ideas were not representative of the general standards. It was also true that most of their writing had been in poetry. The majority of the prose works written in English during the fourteenth century were concerned with religion. It seemed entirely possible that a theologian might express in his writing comparative critical standards. Therefore, for my third object of study, I chose the English writings of John Wyclif.

The main problem has been to cull from the writings of these three a body of quotations which would reveal their literary standards and show the comparative value of the artis-
tic perspective of three fourteenth century writers whose names have lived to the present day: Geoffrey Chaucer, John Gower, and John Wyclif. As these three were among the first to champion the use of English, it is logical to assure that their critical standards would influence the later English writers. Geoffrey Chaucer wrote in English. John Gower was unwilling to let his fame depend upon his writings in an unformed literary language, and therefore, wrote in Latin and French also. John Wyclif wrote much in Latin but was one of the most ardent supporters of the use of English in written literature. His translation of the Bible, one of the great literary works of his day, and his work to allow the use of English in the ceremonies of the church furthered the use of English as a literary language. In collecting the material for this thesis I have read the English writings of the authors.

It is apparent that the incidental critical utterances of these men cannot be considered representative of all the authors who were writing during this period. It would be impossible in a paper of this size and in this limited time to discuss all the critical writing of the century. The choice of Gower, Chaucer, and Wyclif was made for the above-mentioned reasons. I realize the inadequacy of the thesis as a résumé or comparison of fourteenth century critical ideas. My aim has been to gather from the English writings of these three men a body of quotations which show their understanding of literary problems.
The authors have a common standard in their use of English as a literary language. Their justifications of this standard, together with other critical values incidentally stated in their English works, I shall attempt to clarify and compare in the following thesis. (1)

(1) The quotations from the works of Gower are found in the "Confessio Amantis".
I. FOURTEENTH CENTURY LITERARY SCENE

A. THE ORAL NATURE OF LITERATURE

Before one can truly understand the critical ideas of a group of authors it is essential to know the philosophy and ideology of the period. One should have a fairly complete picture of the literary scene before attempting to realize the critical perspective of the authors.

The fourteenth century was an age of scepticism and satire. The institutions of feudalism, which had held together the individual elements of society, were breaking up. The wars on the Continent, the Black Death, and the Peasant's Revolt lent notes of depression. The instability of society and the uneven distribution of wealth caused by the growth of commerce led to a worldly spirit which contrasted strangely with the theoretical other-worldliness of the age.

There was little writing with a literary critical purpose during the Middle Ages. The influence of the Church was great and both directly and indirectly it hindered the growth of literature. The Church had complete charge over the lives of the people. It regulated their minds. Thus, their point of view was of the other world. The thinkers of the period had the same spirit of "contemptus mundi" that Boethius expressed in his "De Consolatione Philosophia". They considered that this world was a vale of tears, a place of woe and sorrow, too temporary for joy. Man's objective was not to stay on earth
but to go to heaven. Boethius also wrote that the fine arts were worldly vanities and of no use to man in his final quest. Perhaps erroneously believing him to be a Christian philosopher and influenced by his writings, the Church tended to suppress "belles lettres".

Moreover, during the Middle Ages Latin was the only uniform language. The many dialects of the vernacular made the use of it difficult. Middle English, for example, was composed of many dialects. On the whole this problem existed until the introduction of printing by Caxton in 1476.

It was this situation which made most literature of the fourteenth century oral in nature. It was unfortunate that during the century few people had access to books. They became acquainted with most literature through the ear. Copying the texts in longhand was a long, tedious, and expensive process. Few libraries were available; private collections were even more scarce. Wyclif deplored the fact that the young priests could not study the texts of the theologians because books were so costly:

"Bot thei robben curatis of hor offis ani costly wor-ship, ani letten hom to knowe gods laws, by hollynge bokis fro hom, ani withdrawinge of vauntages, by whoche thei schulden have bokes and lerne." (1)

In all ages, however, it has been the custom of people to entertain, and to be entertained by, tales and stories. It was an important part of the training of both men and

women that they learn to recite and sing the old stories properly:

He tawte hir til sche was certain
Of Harpe, of Citole and of Rote. (1)

The clarity of the voice, correctness of pronunciation, and the importance of the expression of voice and of countenance were among the teachings of the rhetoricians:

He with manly voyes seith his message,
After the forme usea in his langage,
Withouten vice of silable or of lettre:
And for his tale sholie same the bettre,
According to his wories was his cheere,
As teacheth art of speche hem that it leere. (2)

Part of the technique of courtly love-making was that the lover should sing and recite to his lady:

And now I thenke, and now I tale,
And now I singe, and now i sike. (3)

In a later line of the same book Gower said:

And otherwise I singe a song,
Whiche Ovile in his bokes made. (4)

The young squire was expected to recite poetry to his lady and to write verses of his own as well. Chaucer's Squire was praised for this ability:

He koude songes make ani wel endite,
Juste and eek daunce, and weel purtreys ani write. (5)

(4) Idem, 11. 1210 f.
Literature of this type was generally for amusement. Recitations and songs were part of the entertainment at every kind of social gathering. People of wealth had as part of their entourage one who could read or recite the romances and lays which formed the popular literature of the day. Chaucer said:

These olde gentil Britouns in hir daves
Of diverse aventures maile layes,
Rymayed in hir firste Briton tonge;
Which layes with hir instrumentz theye songe,
Or elles readen hem for hir plesaunce. (1)

Sir Thopas called for the ministrals to tell tales in much the same way that a person today would take up a book to forget his troubles. Perhaps, Chaucer, the realist, was making fun of the fanciful tales for which he called:

"Do come," he sayde, "my mynstrales,
Ani geestours for to tellen tales,
Anon in myn armynge,
Of romances that been roiles,
Of popes ani of cariinales,
And eek of love-likynge". (2)

The tales told were very often in poetic form:

They murmureden as dooth a swarm of been,
And maile skiles aftir hir fantasies,
Rehersynge of thiese olde poetries. (3)

Music accompanied many of the tales. The harp, lute, and citole were the popular instruments of accompaniment:

olide men soundeth lowe,

(1) Chaucer, "The Franklin's Prologue," 11. 709-713.
With Harpe an Lute and with Citole,
The hovedance an the Carole. (1)

The harp and lute were mentioned in Chaucer:

For sorwe of which he brak his munstralcie,
Bothe harpe, and lute, an gyterne, an sautrie. (2)

As it is historical knowledge that written books were scarce we may safely assume that the main spread of literature was oral in nature. The people were accustomed to gather in groups where one person could read or sing to them. Most of the quotations are concerned with literature of entertaining content.

(2) Chaucer, "The Manciple's Tale," ll. 287 f.
Not only did the lack of written books hamper the spread of English literature, but also a disparaging literary attitude toward the vulgar languages greatly impaired the adoption of English for literary purposes. The language of the learned was still Latin. The court, and thus the writers connected with it, sanctioned the use of French. Very few were the writings of any nature made in English. Indeed, it was not until the thirteenth and fourteenth century writers demonstrated the possibility and the practicability of the vernacular that English made any headway at all as a literary language.

Chaucer reported the scarcity of English rhyme in the envoy of "The Complaint of Venus":

"And eke to me it ys a grete penaunce,
Syth rym in English hath such skarsete." (1)

This lack of example made the work of the poets more difficult. They were dealing with a language without rules for versification. The later discussions of the Neo-classicists concerning the relative values of Latin quantity and English accent in poetry show in some measure the problems of the early poets.

In the Prologue of the "Confessio Amantis", Gower remarked upon the paucity of English writings:

"And for that fewe men enuite

(1) Chaucer, "The Complaint of Venus", envoy, ll. 7.
Ioure englissh, I thanke make
A bok for Engelonis sake. (1)

It was natural that authors should hesitate to give their work to the people in a language that had not been proved adequate. The learned scholars were not ready to accept work written in English. Furthermore, there were technical problems. The grammatical rules of Latin and French were stabilized by the time of the Middle Ages. English, however, was in the formative stage:

And for ther is so grety diversite
In englissh and in wriptynge of our tonge,
So prey I Goi that non myswrite the,
Ne the myometre for defaut of tonge,
And red wherso thow he, or elles songe,
That thow he understandis, Goi I bissche. (2)

There was a feeling that the language was not as musical as the classical languages were. This lack was felt then more than we realize now, for English did not lend itself readily to rules for Latin versification. Chaucer humorously expressed this thought in his description of the Friar of the Canterbury Pilgrims:

Somwhat he lisped, for his wantownesse,
To make his English sweete upon his tonge. (3)

Wyclif demonstrated a disadvantage in the use of English which has never been remedied. The case, gender, and number of English words cannot, in all cases, be distinguished by

the form of the word itself:

"Bot here may men betere say in Latin the sotilte of this maters, for articlis with case, gender, and noumibre helpen here for to speke." (1)

The English theological writings of John Wyclif were among the first examples of English prose. His purpose was to put the doctrines and laws of Christianity into English so that all the people could comprehend the true meaning of Christ's teachings. This work heightened the respect in which English was beginning to be held. He stated clearly in his sermons and in his treatises the reasons why he used English. He felt that the people had a right to know the words of God in their own language so that they could fully understand them. This understanding should lead to a stronger faith and thus, to a stronger church:

"Alle these questioouns be hard to telle hem trew-ly in Englische, but yet charite dryveth men to telle hem sumwhat in Englische, so that men may beste white by this Englische what is Solius wille." (2)

In the face of a disparaging attitude toward the vernacular Wyclif defended the use of the language of the people by declaring it worthy in the sight of God. This defense would have weight only if enough people could be persuaded to share the belief:

"And syththe the truthe of God stonieth nourt in one langage more than in another, but whoevers lyveth best, techeh best, pleseh most God, of

(1) Wyclif, Volume III, P. 75.
(2) Idem, P. 183.
what langage evere he be, theryfro this prayers, declarse in anglyysche, may siffy the lawede peple." (1)

"And thus bi autorite of the lawe of God men shulden speke hir woruus as Godis lawe spekith, and strange not in speche from undirstondinge of the puple." (2)

Myclif was not alone in his use of English in church matters. However, the important clergymen of the day continued to use Latin:

"And this movath sum men to telle in English e Poulis pistalis, for sum men may betere wite herbi what God meneth bi Poul." (3)

"But sith it is of evene auctorite with other gos- pels of Christ and of hed sentence and good, that were profitable to the Chirche, sum men wolde isie it in hir mouir langage as thei cunnen." (4)

His work was bitterly condemned by other priests of the church not only on the grounds of heresy, but also for his use of English. Myclif, in fact, was called before an ecclesiastical court on charges leading to excommunication:

"And herfore oo greet Bishop of Angeland, as men sien, is yvel paiel that Godis lawe is writhen in anglia, to lewde men; and he pursueth a preest, for he wriath to men this English, and somoneth him and travaillith him, that it is hard to him to rowte." (5)

Gower declared his intention in the use of English to

(1) Myclif, Volume III, P. 98.
(3) Myclif, Volume II, P. 221.
(4) Idem, P. 393.
(5) Myclif, Volume I, P. 207.
be the furthering of truth by making known the stories of the Romans. The stories told by the Romans and Greeks were read for the examples they offered of moral and worthwhile lives. Therefore a "moral" poet might well take as his purpose the writing of these stories in a tongue known to the people as a whole:

And thogh the clerk and the clerkesse
In latyn tongue it raie and singe,
Yet for the more knouelachinge
Of trouthe, which is good to wite,
I schal declare as it is write
In angleissh, for thus it began. (1)

Chaucer also wrote of telling in English the stories of the classical languages. In many cases Chaucer cited erroneous or fictitious sources. The announced intention of retelling the old stories may have become conventional among authors:

For myn entent is, or I fro you fars,
The naked text in English to declare
Of many a story, or elles of many a geste,
As autours seyn; leveth hem if you leste! (2)

It was no wonder that many stories were lost when there were only a few manuscripts:

For hit ful depe is sonken in my mynde
With pitous hert in Inghyssh to snlhte
This olde storie, in Latyn which I fynide
Of quene Anelida an fals Arcite.
That eller, which that al can frete and bite,
As hit hath freten mory a noble storie,
Hath nugh devoured out of oure memorie. (3)

Chaucer attributed the "Troilus" to an author whom he called "Lollius:

For whi to every lover e l me excuse,
That of no sentament I this endite,
But out of Latyn in my tongue it write. (1)

According to Professor Robinson no Lollius is known. Chaucer may have either created the name or used that of a writer whom we do not know. The main source of the "Troilus" was the "Filostrato".

If the example of these three writers can be considered representative the authors who wrote in the vernacular felt obliged to set down their reasons for doing so. This may have become a convention in writing in English.

(1) Chaucer, "Troilus and Criseyde," Book i1, 11. 12-14.
C. FAMILIAR TYPES OF WRITING

In order to evaluate the criticism of any period, it is essential to know just what types of writing were known to the writers. The critical problems of a century cannot be understood until one knows the works on which they are based. Critical views, which seem unbalanced in the light of modern learning, and particular stresses on subjects which are now taken for granted are explained when we know with what types of literature the authors were familiar. Judging, as all the statements in this thesis do, from the works of the authors, one finds that the great majority of the literary works of the fourteenth century were written in the poetic form. One would therefore expect to find many views based on poetical standards.

Moreover, we find that most of the poetry mentioned may be divided into two main groups: the lyric poems and the narrative poems. Among the types of lyric poetry mentioned are rondels, ballades, virelayes, complaints, songs, carols, and lays. The use of the ballades, rondel, and virelaye shows the strong influence of old French poetry on this lighter verse.

In his youth Chaucer wrote many lyrics. The theme of most of his songs was love. In the Prologue to "The Legend of Good Women", Chaucer presented a list of his poems praising the work of Venus:

"And many an ymple for your halylayes"
That highten balades, ronniels, virselayes. (1)

The lay was a popular medieval type of poetry. It is supposed that Marie de France was the originator of the form which became so well liked that many authors followed her example. The tale told by the Franklin was supposed to be a Breton lay. Chaucer described the lay as:

a maner song
Withoute noote, withoute song. (2)

Gower, too, mentioned the abundance of lyric poetry. The carols and songs were connected with thoughts of pleasure and joy:

And every lif which coude singe
Of lusti women in the route
A freissh carole hath sunge aboute. (3)

He referred to the pleasant custom of repeating the songs orally, perhaps to music:

That sche carole upon a song. (4)

Many lyric poets concerned themselves with the writing of complaints to their loved ones, or about them. So much was recorded in the works of Chaucer about the writing of complaints that it seemed advisable to discuss the subject more fully in a later section.

Throughout his writings we find such allusions to the

(4) Idem, Book vi, l. 866.
complaints as this:

And in a lettre wrooth he al his sorwe,
In maners of a compleynyt or a lay,
Unto his faire, fressehe lady lay. (1)

Wyclif, too, noted the popularity of the lyrics. He explored the worldly nature of the themes. The fact that he was so unequivocal in his denunciation suggests that the worldly song was a strong favorite:

Their lipes ben fouled ... in unhonest worlis, as worldly songis. (2)

Wyclif contended that the lyrics, being worldly songs, taught the pleasures of a worldly life. This was utterly opposed to the medieval attitude. Thus, to the serious clergyman that which was not concerned with ways of entering heaven was sinful:

summe techen novelries of songis, to stire men to jolite and harlotrie. (3)

Chronicles and romances formed a conspicuous and an eminent group of narrative poems. Again Wyclif opposed the favor with which these were received by the people:

But summe techen here children jestis of batailles,
And fals cronyclis not neiful to here soulis. (4)

He specifically contended with the telling of chronicles by the clergy. This was a prevalent custom and must have

(4) Idem.
enlivened many a sermon:

But thei schulden not preche chronyclys of the world, as the hantel of Troye, ne other myse fables. (1)

Gower often gave credit to a chronicle for the source of his story:

Wherof the wyie worldes fame
Writ in Chronique is yit withholde. (2)

The romance and the chronicle shared the popular fancy. The poetic form of the narrative served a similar function to that of the modern novel. Those fortunate enough to own or have access to a copy of a romance would read far into the night, utterly absorbed in the narrative:

Upon my bed I sat upright
And bad oon reche me a book,
A romaunce, and he it me tok
To rede, and drive the night away;
For me thoughte it beter play
Than play either at ches or tables.
And in this bok were written fables
That clerkes had in olde tyme,
And other poets, put in rime
To rede, and for to ke in minde
While men loved the lawe of kynge. (3)

Wyclif considered the absorption of the reader in the romance he was reading to be well enough known to serve as a simile:

And as man, redinge on a book, takith noon heedie to

(1) Wyclif, Volume III, P. 147.
(2) Gower, "Confessio Amantis," Prologue, ll. 100 f. Also: Prologue, l. 17; Book ii, ll. 2297 f; l. 2504: l. 2798; vi, l. 1159.
thing beside... (1)

Usually, however, the romance or the shorter ballad was read orally for the general entertainment of a group:

un are with a good pitance
Is feed of readinge of romance
Of Yeoine and of Amadas. (2)

The Friar of the Canterbury Pilgrims was noted for his ability to recite the ballads:

Of yeudynges he haer outrely the pris. (3)

The ability to read the romances entertainingly was one of the accomplishments of the courtly lover:

Or elles that hir list commaunle
To rede and here of Troilus,
Riht as sche wolde or so or thus
I am al reii to consente. (4)

Both Gower and Chaucer mentioned by name the romances concerned with the exploits of Lancelot of the Lake.

For if thou wolt therokes rede
Of Lancelot and o altre mo
Ther miht thou seyn hou it was tho
Of armes, for thei wolde atteigne
To love... (5)

In the following quotation and in another passage in the "Troilus", Chaucer noted that the romances were the delight

This storie is also trew, I undertake, 
As is the hock of Lancelot de Lake, 
That wommen holde in ful great reverence. (1)

Other typical subjects for romances were:

Of Horn child and of Ypotys,  
Of Beves and Sir Guy,  
Of Sir Lytceex and Playniamoor. (2)

Of this list there is some discussion among scholars.

Professor Robinson (646) mentions the two Horn romances of "Horn Horn" and "Horn Child and maiden Rimnili". The "Ypotys" is a legend which Professor Robinson suggests Chaucer might have added "for the purpose of burlesque".

A third type of poetry was coarse in content and often offensive to our modern taste. This included the tales of japes tolde in goliardaic poetry and in fabliaux. The goliardic verses were usually in Latin. They were convivial, worldly, and frequently sinful in theme. The fabliaux were of the same type, but were narrative in content and were often told in English.

Chaucer described the miller as one who told these stories:

and a goliaries 
And that was moost of synne and harcltries. (3)

Fabliaux were also told in prose, but the more customary subjects of prose writings pertained to theology and religion. Biblical stories, homilies, exempla, stories of the

(2) Chaucer, "Tale of Sir Thopas," 11. 697-999.  
lives of the saints, and arguments of the theological scholars were the main types of prose.

The people, in general, accepted the words of the Bible as literal truth:

Whereof I finde in special
A tale written in the Bible,
Whiche moiste neede be creabhle. (1)

The religious homilies were often tedious and exceedingly boring. Yet, they were the preferred method of teaching in sermons:

Bot who that wolde ensample take,
Gregoire upon his Omelie
Aye in the Slouthe of Prelacie. (2)

The arguments of the clerks have become almost proverbial. One example of the absurdity to which they were led is the problem they discussed endlessly of how many angels could stand on the head of a pin. A knowledge of abstract logic is essential to an understanding of what they say. 

Jhaucer makes the Franklin say:

I woot wel clerkes wol seyn as hem leste,
by argumentz. (3)

Jhaucer again mentioned the great discussions of the clerks in "Troilus and Criseyde". One of the problems for argument was that of destiny:

But natheless, allas, whom shal I leave?

(2) Gower, "Confessio Amantis" Book v, 11. 1900-1902.
For ther han grate clarkes many son,
That destyne thorugh argumentes prove. (1)

Wyclif mentioned the tales of the saint's lives. These were often legen
was with little basis in truth; therefore, he condenned them as material for sermons. In one of his sermons he wrote:

To sum men it plesith for to telle the talis that thei
finaen in seintes lyves, or withouten holi writt: and
sich thing plesith ofte more the peple. (2)

These were the types of poetry and prose with which the fourteenth century author was familiar. One must expect the critical references, then, to be concerned only with such litera
erature. Their critical standarus were drawn mainly from poetry of French, Latin, Greek, or Italian origin.

(1) Chaucer, "Troilus and Criseyde," 11. 967-969.
(2) Wyclif, Volume I, P. 332.
D. CONTENT OF LITERATURE

It is, furthermore, important to know on what subjects these authors wrote, as one must judge their criticism in the light of medieval knowledge. What were the subjects of the books most prevalent during the Middle Ages?

Tragedy was an important element in medieval writing. An author could adapt the tragic tale so that a moralizing ending was compatible to the story. This made tragedy acceptable to the writer who strove to spread the ideals of the doctrines of medieval thought. Chaucer, in "The Monk's Tale," (1) closely followed the definition of tragedy found in Aristotle's "Poetics", which he knew in a Latin translation. In the "Troilus" he wrote:

So, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye,
Ther Goi thi makers yet, er that he live,
So sede myght to make in som comelye:
But litel book, no makyng thow n'envie,
But subgit he to alle possye;
And kis the steppes, whereas thow seest pace
Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace. (2)

Most medieval men who were sufficiently educated to read for themselves were aristocrats. As they understood and practiced the arts of chivalry, they were, naturally, interested in the heroic exploits and the lovely ladies famed

in chivalric lore.

Many of the romances told of the lives of kings, queens, and knights, relating their heroic exploits in following the laws of chivalry:

This bok ne spak but of such thinges,  
Of queenes lives, and of kinges,  
And many other thinges smale. (1)

There was a regular procedure which the young man in love must follow. At one time during the courtship the pretended scorn of the lady so affected the knight that he took to his bed. The stories dealing with love and courtship usually told of this type of chivalric love with its definite rules for behavior. All courtships followed the same pattern. This type of story was popular:

Of bataille and of chivalry,  
And of ladyes love-drury  
Anon I wol yow telle. (2)

The stories were usually collections of the exploits of a man of high birth, not tales of the doings of ordinary or lowly people. As is always true, the battlefield offered one of the best situations for these heroic deeds. Thus, stories of war found favor. Wyclif wrote:

men ben now reii to hieren of unpees, batailes, and strives. (3)

Closely connected with the tales of chivalry were

the tales of the wonderful exploits in classical ages. These were usually translated or retold from the Latin and the Greek originals:

Bot the Troian gestes, as they felle,  
In Omer, or in Dares, or in Dite,  
Whoso that kan may rese hem as they write. (1)

Also from the Greek tales came the myths which were told for amusement:

The day was merie and fair ynowh,  
Bonchon with othre pleise and lowh,  
And fallen into tales newe,  
How that the freisce floruses grewe,  
And how the grene leves spronge,  
And how that love among the yonge  
Began the hertes thanne awake. (2)

The most common theme of medieval poetry was love in its many aspects:

For whan I of here loves rede,  
Min are with the tale I felle. (3)

Chaucer and Gower selected the loyalty of women as an important aspect of love. Although the sincerity of Chaucer's statements concerning woman's fidelity is dubious, the subject was a popular one among medieval writers. The authors which they followed, or which they pretended to follow, set the example:

What sayth also the epistle of Ovyde

(1) Chaucer, "Troilus and Criseyde," ll. 145-147.  
Of trewe wyvea and of here labour?
What Vincent in his Estoryval Myour?
Ek all the world of auctors maystow here,
 Cristene and betene, trete of swich materes. (1)

many stories were told to illustrate the fidelity of
women. To introduce the tale of Constance which was told by the
man of Law Chaucer spoke of her goodness. In a tale of an
utterly different type told by the Franklin Chaucer wrote:

Lo than a thousandi stories, as I geese,
Houlde I now tell as touchynge this materes. (2)

Again, Chaucer referred to the authors of the past
who had used this theme:

Yis, God wot, sixty hokes ollie and newe
Mast thow thyself, alle ful of stories wroate,
That bothe Romayns an ek Grekes trete
Of sundry women, which luf that they ladde,
Ana evere an hunred good agayns oon badde
This knoweth God, an alle clerkes eke,
That usen swich materes for to seke,
What seith Valerye, Titus, or Clarlyan?
What seith Jerome agayns Jovynyan? (3)

many of the tales of love are retold from the "Meta-
morphoses" of Oviv:

Oviv wrote of many things,
Among the whiche in his wrytinges
He tolde a tale in Poesie,
Which toucheth unto Jelousie,
Upon a certain cas of love. (4)

Gower alieed alivers criticisms of the use of love as

a subject for poetry. He observed that an older poet could not
deal adequately with the subject of love as he did not ex-
perience the emotion as passionately as a young poet did. In
the "Confessio Amantis" he wrote:

Fro this day forth to take rest,
That I nomore of love make.
But he which hath of love his make
It sit him wel to singe and daunce,
And do to love his enteniance,
In songes both and in sayinges
After the lust of his playinges
For he hath that he wolde have.
But where a man shall love crave
And faille, it stant al otherwise. (1)

Gower stated that love is a subject more likely to
be adequately treated by a poet who cannot hope to explain the
greatness of God's world:

I may noght streicle up to the bevene
Lin hand, ne setten al in evene
This world, which everes is in balance:
It stant noght in my suffincance
So grete thinges to compass,
Bot I mot let it overpasse
And tretan upon othre thinges,
Forthi the Stile of my writings
Fro this day forth I thanke change
Ana speke of thing is noght so strange, ...
And that is love, of which I wene
To trete. (2)

In the works of authors imbued with the medieval
philosophy that man's time on earth is a punishment and a
preparation for the world to come, it is natural to expect a

(2) Idem, Book i, 11. 1-12.
stress on religion. The importance of religious thoughts is evident in many phases of medieval life and is necessarily reflected in its literature. Wyclif declared that the four ruling passions of a man's life, and hence those most suitably expressed by the poet, are:

joie ana sorwe, hope ana drede of thingis that shulden come. (1)

In the field of entertaining reading Chaucer referred to the popularity of the stories of the lives of the saints. He tells us that women were particularly fond of these tales and legends. They like:

To biue ana reie on holy seyntes lyves. (2)

When at the close of his life Chaucer wrote his famous "Retractation," he asked that his fame depend upon his moral works and that his other work be forgotten:

Bot of the translacion of Boece ie Consolacione, and otheres bookes of legenes of saintes, and omelies, and moralities, and devocioun, that thanke I our Lord and his Mooter. (3)

The Father Confessor of Amane advised Gower to write no more of worldly love, but to write of "vertu moral". Venus said to him:

Ani tarie thou mi Jourt nomore,
Bot go ther vertu moral iuelleth,

(2) Chaucer, "Troilus and Criseyde," Book ii, l. 112.
(3) Chaucer, "Retractation".
Chaucer, too, perceived the transitory nature of
worldly love. He noted the worthiness of the subject for use
in literature:

Goe woot that worldly joye is soon ago;
And if a rethor koude faire endite,
He in a cronycle saufly myghte it write
As for a sovereyn notabilitee. (2)

Other prose works, almost out of the realm of lit-
erature, and yet somewhat relate to it because of constant
reference to them in the works of fourteenth century writers,
dealt with astrology and with philosophy.

Astrology was one of the most important studies of
the day. The time of many of Chaucer's poems can be determined
by the astrological remarks. The medievalists placed great
weight on the findings of the study. In the tale told by the
Franklin Chaucer wrote:

He hym remembred that, upon a day,
At Orliens in studie a book he say
Of magyk, natureel, which his felawe,
That was that time a bacheler of lawe ... (3)

The position of the planets was understood to in-
fluence the life of man. The daily positions of the moon, or
the signs of the zodiac in which each planet exerted the most

influence, according to the popular notion, were called "mansions":

Which book spak muchel of the operaciouns Touchynge the eights and twenty mansiouns ... (1)

many manuscripts dealt with the subject of philosophy. The works of Aristotle in Latin epigrams were well known to the scholars:

For him was levers have at his beddes heed
Twenty bookes, clai in blak or reed,
Of Aristotle and his philosophie. (2)

The medieval writers did not strive for originality and novelty in their works. They were proud to aim their debt to classical and other authors. Their aim in writing was to tell somewhat better that which had been told before. Chaucer wrote:

Thanne mote we to bokes that we fynis,
Thorous whiche that olde thynge ben in mynie,
And to the doctryne of these olie wyse
Yeuen credence, in every skylful wyse
And trowen on these olie approved storves
Of holynesse, of ragnas, of victories
Of love, of hate, of other sondry thynge
Of which I may not make reherseynges.
And if that olie bokes were awaye
Ylorn were of remembrance the keys.
Wel oughte us thanne on olie bokes leve,
There as there is non other assay by preve. (3)

In many cases the author merely retold, or, if the

source was in another language, translated, keeping as closely as possible to the original words and meaning of the work which they were translating:

For bothe have I the worices and sentence
Of hym that at the saintes reverence
The storie wroot, and folwen hire legenye. (1)

Yet, when he translated the "Tale of Melibee" Chaucer freely added proverbs to the original.

Both Chaucer and Gower prefaced almost every tale with a reference to the source of their material, although the source mentioned was not always exact. The authors which were most often declared to be the originators of the stories were Ovid, Seneca, and Virgil. Scholars are of the opinion that in many cases these allusions are false and were noted merely to give more dignity and prestige to the writing. The "Troilus and Criseyde" is a noteworthy example of this. Chaucer attributed the work to an author named "Lollius" although the source was clearly the "Filostrato" of Boccaccio. The subject of the "Confessio Amantis" suggests the reason for the preponderance of tales whose source can be found in the "Metamorphoses" of Ovid:

Ovide seide as I schal seie,
And in his methamor he tolde
A tale, which is good to holde. (2)

many tales begin with a statement similar to the following:

Ovide telleth in his sawes ... (1)

In the single tale of Melibee, Chaucer mentioned the name of Ovid, three times; of Seneca, sixteen times; of Tullius, ten times; of Cato, five times. In addition, he quoted at least once each from the writings of Piers Alfonse, of Jaasidoriis, of Cato, of Solomon, of Pope Innocent, and of Saints Paul, Jerome, James, and Austin.

Gower and Chaucer acknowledged several times their indebtedness to Seneca. Gower introduced a tale with the following reference:

Senec witnesseth openly. (2)

Chaucer mentioned Seneca in many places. In "The Monk's Tale" he wrote:

This Seneca, of which that I devyse
By cause Nero halle of hym swich drede. (3)

Among the other sources mentioned are Statius, Corinna, Petrarch, Cato, Constantine, and Virgil.

(1) Gower, "Confessio Amantis," Book iv, l. 3317-3318; i, l. 333; l. 386; l. 2274; Book ii, l. 106; and Book iii, l. 381.

(2) Gower, "Confessio Amantis," Book ii, l. 3095.

Many of the tales were taken from the popular chronicles of the day. A common introduction to a story was a statement similar to this:

I finde ensample in a Cronige. (1)

The author of the original material was not always mentioned. In many cases Chaucer and Gower gave "olie bokes" the credit for their tales. In the "Confessio Amantis" Gower wrote:

So as these olie bokes tale,
I schal thee telle a redi tale. (2)

The tale told by the Knight in "The Canterbury Tales" was actually taken from the "Teseide" of Boccaccio. However, the Knight attributed the story to old books:

as olie bokes seyn,
that al this storie tellen moore pleyn. (3)

That wise rascal of the Canterbury Pilgrims, the Pardonner, explained the common opinion regarding the use of the old tales. The people already knew and loved them; they found them more to their liking because they understood them:

Thanne telle I hem ensample manyoon
Of olie storie longe tyme agoon.

(1) Gower, "Confessio Amantis," Book i, l. 759; also: l. 1404.
(2) Idem, Book v, l. 5227.
For lewed peple loven tales olde; 
Swich thynges kan they wel reporte and holie. (1)

II. CRITICISM PROPER

A. CRITICISM OF AUTHORS

Because Chaucer and Gower were writing at the same time and for the same court, many scholars have sought to prove that they were on unfriendly terms. It seemed that two authors of such eminence might harbor mutual envy. No critic has been able to confirm the existence of such enmity. There are a few passages in which Gower criticized Chaucer and more in which Chaucer criticized Gower, but the main tenor of the passages is friendly.

There is no doubt that Chaucer was sincerely criticizing Gower for his stories of Janace and of Tyro Appollonius. Chaucer eschewed such themes in all his writings. In the introduction to his tale the man of Law said of Chaucer:

But certeiny no worne writeth he
Of thilke wikke ensample of Janace,
That loved hir owene brother synfully;
(Of swiche cursed stories I say fy!)
Or ellis of Tyro Appollonius,
How that the cursed kyng Antiochus
Birafte his loghter of hir maydenhede,
That is so horrible a tale for to rede,
When he hir threw upon the pavement.
And therefore he of ful aysement,
Nolde nevere write in none of his sermons
Of swiche unkinde arthomynaciouns. (1)

Nevertheless, Chaucer deemed Gower, as aii his con-

(1) Chaucer, "Introduction to the Man at Law's Tale," 11. 77-89.
temporaries to be a writer of good moral stories worthy of commendation in terms of medieval philosophy. He dedicated the "Troilus and Criseyde" to Gower and to Ralph Strode. According to Professor Robinson (951) the epithet "moral" was often used in connection with Gower's work. Strode was "an eminent Thomist philosopher and an authority on logic". Most of his work has been lost. The dedication follows:

"O moral Gower, this book I directe
To the anu to the, philosophical Strode,
To vouchen sauf, ther ne leis, to correcte,
Of youre benignites and zeles goodes. (1)

At the close of the "Confessio Amantis" Gower commented upon the excellence and number of the poems which Chaucer had written in his youth. These poems were chiefly concerned with love. Using Venus as his mouthpiece, he observed that Chaucer was too old for such writing, and should turn his attention to serious and moral themes. As she prepares to leave Amans Venus bids him:

Ana gret wel Chaucer whan ye mete,
As mi disciple and mi poete:
For in the floures of his youthe,
In sonuri wise, as he wel couthe,
Of bieteis and of songes glaile,
The which he for mi sake maile,
The loni fulfili is overal.
Wherof to him in special
Above alle other I am most holde. (2)

The following lines in the Prologue of "The Legeni of

Good Women" have usually been interpreted as a friendly fling at Gower because of his charge that Chaucer was too old for the service of love:

Although thou renayed hast my lay,  
As others olde foles many a day. (1)

Chaucer expressed his judgment of his own writing through the dialogue of the Canterbury Pilgrims. It is difficult to find his true meaning in all that he has written because of his tendency to write ironically. One receives the impression that such a statement as the one which precedes a list of his poems in the "Legend of Good Women" is merely conventional modesty. Chaucer is presented to the god of Love by Alceste with these words:

The man hath served you of his kunnynge  
And furthred well youre laws in his makynge  
Al be hit that he kan not wel endite  
Yet hath he maken lewed folk delyte  
To serve you in praysinge of your name.  
He made the book that hiteth the Hous of Fame,  
And eke the Deeth of Blaunche the Duchesse  
And the Parliament of Foules, as I gesse,  
And al the love of Palamon and Arcite  
Of Ihebes, thoghe the storye is knowen lyte. (2)

It is clear that both Gower and Chaucer deemed the subject of love, and its related themes, proper for literary treatment. Their preoccupation with this theme made the subject of the work their first point of criticism. Indeed, the primary

(2) Idem, 11. 410-419.
standard of their critical acceptance of an author seems to have been the subject of his writings; the second was his technique. The Man of Law says of Chaucer:

I kan right now no thrifty tale seyn
That Chaucer, thogh he kan but lewealY
On metres and on rhymying craftily,
Hath seyi hem in swich English as he kan
Of olde tyme, as knoweth many a man;
And if he have noght seyi hem, leve brother,
In o book, he hath seyi hem in another.
For he hath tooli of loveris up and doun
Mo than Ovide made of mencioun. (1)

This critical standard combined with the interest of the medieval authors in old stories made it impossible find many examples of contemporary criticism. It was entirely natural that one of the most quoted authors should be Ovid. The authors interpreted his poems as moral teachings, giving examples of the fortunate and unfortunate aspects of emotion. Gower wrote:

Among the whiche in Passe
To the lovers Ovide wrot
And tawhte. (2)

Gower and Chaucer accepted the medieval Virgil legend and regarded him as a perfect poet. In telling a storv set in ancient Rome, Gower said:

Whan Rome stod in noble plit,
Virgile, whiche was the parfit. (3)

(1) Chaucer, Introduction to the "Man at Law's Tale," ll. 46-54.
(3) Idem, Book v, ll. 2031 f.
Chaucer praised highly the author of the "Divine Comedy", being impressed by the genius of technique in the agreement of word and meaning. He appreciated the great care with which Dante selected his words from all the dialects of the Italian vernacular and from all stations of society so that he could have the exact word for the phrase. Chaucer advised:

\[
\text{Keelth the grete poete of Ytaille} \\
\text{That highte Jant, for he kan al devyse} \\
\text{Pro point to point, nat o word wol he faille. (1)}
\]

Again, in the tale told by the Wife of Bath Chaucer wrote:

\[
\text{Wel kan the wise poete of Florence} \\
\text{That highte Dante speke in this sentence} \\
\text{Lo in swich maner rym is Dantes tale. (2)}
\]

Francis Petrarch was another Italian poet who gained praise from Chaucer:

\[
\text{Frauncys Petrak, the lauriat poete,} \\
\text{Highte this clerk, whose rethorike sweete} \\
\text{Unlumyned al Ytaille of poetrie. (3)}
\]

It is possible that Chaucer did meet Petrarch on one of his Italian trips. However, there are no records or evidence to prove a meeting. At any rate, Chaucer was indebted to Petrarch.

Chaucer, too, approved the use of literature for theo-

(2) Chaucer, "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale", 11. 1125-27  
logical discussions. Several times he spoke with admiration of Saint Jerome's book:

   An sheek there was somtyme a clerk at Rome,
   A cardinal that highte Saint Jerome,
   That made a book again Jovinian. (1)

in "The Nun's Priest's Tale" Chaucer paid tribute to:

   Oon of the Gretteste auctour that men rede. (2)

This line might have applied to either Ciceron or Valerius Maximus. According to the explanatory notes in Professor Robinson's text, the preponderance of critical evidence points to Valerius as the author whom Chaucer was using as a source.

The authors of whom Gower made mention were, for the most part, classical authors. Chaucer, on the other hand, also intimated the influence of the French and Italian writers. Not only did he translate from the French, but he also used French poems and tales as source material. In "The Complaint of Venus" he referred to a medieval French poet, Sir Oton de Granson as:

   Graunson, flour of hem that make in Fraunce. (3)

most of the criticism was favorable. The authors named had gained a standard reputation; their work had passed

the test of time. However, Chaucer was often ironic. In the tale tolud by the merchant he wrote:

Hola thou thy pess, tho poete Marcian,
That writest us that ilke weeding murie
Of hire Philologie and hym Mercurie,
Ano of the songses that the Muses songe!
To smal is bothe thy penne and eek thy tonge,
For to descriven of this marriage. (1)

The meaning seems to be that although Martianus Capella was great, he, Chaucer, was greater.

There is no personal criticism of authors in the sermons and treatises of John Wyclif. However, he did apply literary critical standards to the stories in the New Testament. His principle point of judgment was the "witt" or significance of the words:

This gospel of Joon tellith a story that conteyneth myche witt. Ech word of this storie is ful of witt, whoso takith heide. (2)

(2) Wyclif, Volume II, P. 85; also: P. 10.
B. HISTORICAL CRITICISM

Chaucer wrote very little about the historical beginnings of literature. His statement concerning the early Breton lays has led to much interesting discussion and research. No Breton or Celtic lays have been preserved. As far as modern critics know, Marie de France was the originator of the literary form. She cited as the source for her material older lays of Celtic origin. Chaucer may have had access to these unknown lays, or he may actually have followed one of Marie de France or of one of her successors. The Franklin introduced his story of Origen by saying:

Thisse olde gentil Britouns in hir dayes
Of diverse aventures maïen layes,
Rymeysd in hir firste Briton tongue;
whiche layes with hir instrumentz they re songe:
or elles readen hem for hir plesaunce. (1)

The only other contribution, which I found, made by Chaucer to this type of criticism concerned the origin of sound and rhythm:

For as hys brothres hamers ronge
Upon hys anvelt up and doun,
Therof he took the firste soun,-
But Grekes seyn Pictagoras,
That he the firste fynier was
Of the art, Aurora telleth so,-
But therof no fors, of hem tuo. (2)

(1) Chaucer, "The Franklin's Prologue," ll. 709-713.
In a passage in Book iv of the "Confessio Amantis," John Gower followed through the history, as he knew it, of a large section of early literature. He believed that the alphabet originated in the Hebrew language and wrote of:

\[\text{Charm, whose labour is yet in mind,}
\text{Was he which first the letters fond}
\text{And wrot in Hebreu with his hond.} \quad (1)\]

Later came the Greeks:

\[\text{Caimus the letters of Grecois}
\text{First made upon his owne chois.} \quad (2)\]

This he followed with a list of ancient writers of literature:

\[\text{Cladyne, Sauras and Sulpices,}
\text{Tarmegis, Panaulf, Frigiuilles,}
\text{Manander, Ephiloguorius,}
\text{Solins, Pandras and Josephus.}
\text{The firste were of Enditours}
\text{Of old Ironicue and ek auctours.} \quad (3)\]

He did not forget the Arabian and Chaldean contributions:

\[\text{Bot thei that witen the scripture}
\text{Of Grek, Arabe and of Jaldee,}
\text{Thei were of such Auctorite}
\text{That thei firste foumiere out the weie}
\text{Of al that thou hast hard me seie,}
\text{Wherof the Ironicue of her lore}
\text{Schal stonde in pris for everemore.} \quad (4)\]

(2) Idem, ll. 2401 f.
(3) Idem, ll. 2407-2412.
(4) Idem, ll. 2626-2632.
A discussion of Latin writers followed:

Bot toward oure Marches hire,
Of the Latins if thou wolt hire,
Of hem that whilom vertuous
Were and therto laborius,
Carmente made of hire engin
The ferste lettres of Latin,
Of which the tongue Romain cam,
Whereof that Aristarchus nam
Forthwith Donat and Dindimus
The ferste reule of Scolc, as thus,
How that Latin schal be sone,
That every word in his degre
Schal stonde upon congruite.
And thilke time at Rome also
Was Tullius with Oithero,
That written upon Aethorike,
Hou that men schal the worse pike
After the formes of eloquence,
Which is, men seyn, a gret prudence. (1)

The early translators of the Hebrew, Arabian, Chaldean,
and Greek books were considera next. Saint Jerome, of whom
Chaucer made mention so often, was particularly named by Gower
because of his work in translating the Bible. These lines show
the influence of medieval thought on the critical values placed
on literature:

Ana after that out of Hebrew
Jerom, which the langage kneu,
The Bible, in which the law is closai,
Into Latin he hath transposei;
Ana many another writers ak
Out of Caldee, Arabic and Greek
With gret labour the bokes wise
Translateaen. (2)

When we consider how difficult it was to obtain man-

(2) Idem, 11. 2653-2669.
uscripts for study, we can realize readily how remarkable this list is.
3. DEFINITIONS OF CRITICAL TERMS

Gower evidently did not find it necessary to define any critical terms which he used.

In "The Book of the Duchess," Chaucer described the lay as a form of lyric poetry. He wrote:

He sayd a lay, a maner song,
Withoute noote, withoute song. (1)

More important was his definition of tragedy. This followed so closely the definition given by Aristotle that it is clear that the "Poetics" in translation must have been his source. The monk said:

I wol hiwaille in manere of trageaie,
The harm of hem that stoole in heigh degree,
And fallen so that ther nas no remaile
To brynge hem out of hir adverstitee. (2)

Previously, he had defined tragedy in the prologue of the tale:

Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie,
As olde bookes maken us memorie,
Of hym that stoole in grete prosperitee,
And is yfallen out of heigh degree
Into myserie, and enieth wrecchedly.
And they ben versifie communely
Of six feet, which men clepen exametron.
In prose eek been eniitel many oon,
And eek in metra, in many a sonlywy wise. (3)

(3) Idem, Prologue, ll. +3163-3171.
Wyclif defined the meaning of allegory in explaining the significance of the New Testament:

It is seia comonely that holy writt hath f're unli-stonlingis. The first unli-stonlinge is playne, by letter of the storie. The seconde unli-stonlinge is olepi witt allegoric whan men unli-stonlen hi witt of the lettre what thing shal fall here before the aal of dome. (1)

In a later sermon he wrote:

This story seith thi seconde witt that God gyveth to holy writt. (2)

In three separate sermons he explained the meaning of the word parable:

A parable is a word of storie, that by that buloth a spiritual wit. (3)

(2) Idem, P. 52.
(3) Idem, P. 1; also: P. 285; P. 105.
D. GRAMMATICAL CRITICISM

Little grammatical criticism is found in the writings of Gower and Chaucer. They were writing too close to the beginning of the use of English as a literary language. Wyclif was the only one who had anything to report about the grammatical inadequacies of the language. He regretted the lack of case, gender, and number in English nouns. (1)

Chaucer made an interesting observation concerning the change in meaning which words undergo over a long period of time. Many words which he used have an entirely different connotation to our modern ears than the meaning which he intended. In the "Troilus and Criseyde" he wrote:

Ye knowe ek that in forme of speche is chaungene
Withinne a thousand yeer, and wordes tho
That hadden pres, now woniour nyce and straunge
Je thinketh hem, and yet thei spake hem so. (2)

Wyclif was scornful of the importance of grammatical criticism. To him, the thought was the significant part of writing. He reflected that grammarians were likely to lose sight of the significance of the words in their concern over the form. Their criticisms, thus, became trivial, if not actually misleading. He advised that one should:

(1) Wyclif, Volume III, P. 75.
(2) Chaucer, "Troilus and Criseyde," Book ii, ll. 22-25.
Leave, we grammariens dautis wher "quis putas" ne tuo worst or oo word. (1)

(1) Wyclif, Volume I, P. 398; also: P. 37a.
III. LITERARY TECHNIQUE

A. TECHNICAL PROBLEMS

Among the most important of the many technical problems encountered by these first serious users of English was the difficulty of selection of proper words. One of the technical devices followed was that of variety of phrase. As Pandarus cautioned Troilus:

And if thou write a goodly word al softe,
Though it be good, rehearse it nought to ofte. (1)

All three authors pointed out the necessity of suiting the word to the emotion or action expressed. Chaucer quoted the words of Plato apropos of this:

The wise Plato seith, as ye may rede,
The word moot made accordie with the deed.
If men shall telle proprely a thyng,
The word moot cosyn he to the werkynge. (2)

The author must also take care to suit the words to the personality of the character who is speaking them in his narrative. In the general prologue of "The Canterbury Tales" Chaucer was emphatic in his statements concerning this:

But first I pray yow, of oure curteisye,

That ye n'arette it nat my vileynye,
Thogh that I pleynly speke in this mateere,
To telle yow hir wories and hir cheere,
Ne thogh I speke hir wories proprely.
For this ye knowen as so wel as I,
Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
He moot rehearse as ny as evere he kan
evrych a word, if it he in hir charge,
Al spok he never so rudeleche and large.
Or elles he moot telle his tale untrawe,
Or fynne thynge, or fynne wories newe.
He may nat spare, although he were his brother;
He moot as wel seye o word as another.
Crist spak himself ful brode in hooly writ,
And wel ye woot no vileynye is it.
Lek Plato seith, whoso that kan hym reise,
The wories moot he cosyn to the daie. (1)

Wyclif quoted Aristotle:

And as Aristotle seith, contradicicoun is not oonly
in wordis but both in wordis and sentence of wordis. (2)

Closely connected with the expression of emotion is
the technique of writing the complaint, one of the favorite
fourteenth century literary forms. Chaucer and Gower asserted
that a poet writing a complaint must offer a serious cause for
his writing. A conventional utterance cannot reach the depths
of emotion or kinile emotion on the part of the reader. Chau-
cer wrote:

The orare of compleynt requireth skylfully
That if a wight shal playne vitously,
There mot be cause wherfore that men playne;
Or men may deem he playneth folly
And causeless. (3)

(2) Wyclif, Volume I, P. 79; also: Volume II, "Epistolae".
(3) Chaucer, "The Complaint of Mars," 11. 155-159; also: "Ane-
lida and Arcite," 1. 207; Gower, Book i, 1. 114; Book iv, 1. 355.
Because the complaint was a short lyric, it was particularly important that the words should be carefully chosen. The complaint was usually:

of rym ten vers or twelve. (1)

Again in the "Troilus and Criseyde" was written:

For which hym likei in his songes shewe
Sh'ancesoun of his wo, as he best myghte,
And made a song of worries but a fawe,
Somewhat his woful herte for to lighte. (2)

Chaucer, Wyclif, and Gower advocated the use of figures of speech as aids in expressing emotion. The Franklin remarked:

I lerned nevyr rethorik, certeyn;
Thyng that I speke, it must he bare and playn.
I sleep neuer on the monte of Pernaso,
Ne lerned Marcus Tullius Scithero.
Souldores me know I none, withouten drie. (3)

Gower judged an author on this point:

Rethorique, whos faconde
Above alle othre is eloquent:
To telle a tale in jugement
So wel can noonan speke as he. (4)

Figurative language is used in the Bible and so Wyclif approved of it:

And here he figuride his speche in his passion. (5)

(2) Chaucer, "Troilus and Criseyde," ll. 831-834.
(3) Chaucer, "The Franklin's Prologue," ll. 119-123.
Despite his sanction of the use of figures of speech, Gower advised the author to maintain simplicity of language. The words should be chosen carefully, but the effect should not be labored or artificial. He advised that:

ther a man mai pike
Hou that he schal lose, hou he schal knette,  
Ani in what wise he schal pronounce  
His tales plein withoute frownce. (1)

Later he wrote of the careful use of simple words in the study of Logic:

Logique hath eke in his age
Betwen the trouthe and the falshode
The pleine worles forto schole,
So that nothing schal go beside,
That he the riht ne schal lecile. (2)

It was with a certain amount of pride and not with disparagement that Gower asserted in the "Confessio Amantis":

Bot this y knowe ani this y wot,
That y have do my trewe payne
With rude wordis ani with pleyne,
In ai that evere y couthe ani myghte
This bok to write as y rehighte. (3)

He also recommended that an author should be careful in editing his writings:

In boke he schal be studious
Ani in writinge curious. (4)

Chaucer was concerned with the problems of translating.

(2) Idem, Book vii, ll. 1532-1536.
(3) Idem, Book viii, ll. 3120-3124.
(4) Idem, Book vii, ll. 657 f.
it is apparent that he was acquainted with the difficulties of the work for the "Romaunt of the Rose" and the "Boece", were translations. He wrote, whether he believed it or not is difficult to say, that the author must follow the original work so closely that the initial meaning remain clear. The Second Nun remarked:

I have heer doon my feithful hisynnesse
After the legende, in translacon. (1)

The words were not to be changed any more than was necessary to express the thought in English. Although it is known that the Troilus was not a translation from Lollius as Chaucer pretended, perhaps we may safely assume that the rules of translation which he pretended to follow are sincere. At any rate it seems wise to quote what he has to say with the understanding that the words may be insincere. In the "Troilus and Criseyde" Chaucer says:

Ani of his song naught only the sentence,
As writ myn auctor called Lollius,
But pleynly, save ourse tonges difference,
I dar wel seyn, in al that Troilus
Seyde in his song, loo! every word right thus
As I shall seyn; and whose so list it here,
Loo, next this verse he may it funien here. (2)

Chaucer also emphasized the difficulty of expressing the thought of the author faithfully even though the words are carefully translated. The connotations of the words and the

(2) Chaucer, "Troilus and Criseyde," 11. 1324-1330.
Foreign idiom make exact translation impossible. In the same work Chaucer says:

But soth is, though I kan nat tellen al,
As kan myn auctour, of his excellence. (1)

Again he criticized his translation of the "Romant of the rose," by saying:

That he that wroote the Romance of the Rose
Ne koule of it the beautee wel devse. (2)

In the prologue to the "Tale of Melibee" Chaucer explained that the deviations in translations of the same work may be ascribed to the differences of the translators, for one attaches more importance to one part and one to another. This natural difference may be found in simultaneous reports of the same event. Chaucer cited the gospels as an example:

But natheless hir sentence is al sooth,
And alle acorien as in hirs sentence,
Al be ther in hir tellyng difference.
For somme of hem seyn moore and some
seyn lesse,
When they his pitous passion expresse-
I mene of Mark, Mathew, Luc, and John. (3)

Chaucer, however, did add many proverbs to the source of the tale.

Chaucer averred that the translator should have neither censure nor praise for the material he translated. Thus

(1) Chaucer, "Troilus and Criseyde," ll. 1324 f.
(3) Chaucer, Prologue to "The Tale of Melibee," ll. 946-951: also: #2138.
the fact that the work was a translation or pretended to be one exonerated him of any blame for the words or the situations in the works:

He may translate a thynge in ni malvice,
But for he useth tokes for to make,
And taketh non he of what mater he take,
Therefore he wrot the Rose and ek Criseyde
Of innocence, and nyste what he seyde. (1)

Again, in the "Trollus and Criseyde" he took no blame for any faulty wording or any false expressions of emotion by pretending that the work was a translation:

Forwhi to every lovere I me excuse,
That of no sentement I this eniite,
But out of Latyn in my tonge it write. (2)

John Gower, however, noted the enormous amount of labor necessary in translating when he commended Saint Jerome for his work. He concluded his list of the development of literature with the following lines:

And after that out of Hebrew
Jerome, which that the langage kneu,
The Bible, in whiche the laws is closed,
Into Latin he hath transposeid;
And many another writere ek
Out of Seldes, Arabe and Greke
With grete labour the tokes wise
Translateid. (3)

Yet Chaucer showde that he understood more of the

technique and the technical problems of the translator. The passages quoted from his writings reveal a man who had translated and who understood the difficulties of the work. Although he gave such writers no blame for any sentiments expressed in the original work, it is clear that he thought the labor worthwhile. The tone of his writing indicates that he felt that the authors were unanimous in their sanction and that no excuse was necessary.

Disregarding any natural interest of authors in technique, Nyclif dogmatically set forth the primary importance of the thought:

He synneth grevousli whanne seere the song liketh him more than dooth the witt of the song. (1)

Again he wrote:

As oft as the song delitith me more than that is songen, so oft I knowlche that I trespasse grevously. (2)

These authors have little to say in relation to the unity of time which Aristotle mentioned and which was stressed by the French poets and critics. Nevertheless, it is clear that they had read Aristotle in translation and, on the whole, agreed with his tenets.

Nor iii they have anything to say concerning the later addition to the Unities - the Unity of Place. Clearly, they thought it neither practical nor advisible, for the

(1) Nyclif, Volume III, P. 56.
(2) Idem, P. 228.
classical stories which they followed paid little attention to this as a standard.

Both Chaucer and Gower, however, made clear their observance of the unity of subject. Wyclif applied the standard to a gospel story. In the "Legend of Good Women" Chaucer advised that a story be written as briefly as possible:

Of which as now me lesteth nat to ryme,
It neeeth nat, it were but los of tyme. (1)

In the story of Medea he wrote:

Wel can Owde hir letter in versa anlyte,
Which were as now to long for me to write. (2)

These words are in the prologue of the same work:

It were to long to reisen and to here
Suffiseth me thou make in this manere
That thou rehearse of al hir lyf the greste
After thys olde auctours lysten for to trete.
For whoso shal so many a storye telle,
Say shortly, or he shal to longe dwelle.

The author should include such material as is actually concerned with the subject at hand. Chaucer wrote of the time Aeneas spent with Dido:

But of his aventures in the se
Nis nat to purpos for to speke of here
For it accordeth nat to my mateere. (4)

In the prologue of the tale told by the Clerk is

(2) Idem, Medea, 11. 1677 f.
(3) Idem, Prologue, 11. 572-577.
(4) Idem, iii, 11. 953-955.
another example:

The which a long thyng were to devyse,
And trewely, as to my judgement,
I e thynketh it a thyng impertinent. (1)

The author must not only leave out any irrelevant matter, but must also carefully select the important in his material. The unimportant must not be given in detail. As Chaucer phrased it so well in figurative language:

He list nat of the chaf me of the stree,
Maken so long a tale as of the corn. (2)

Chaucer explained why he was leaving out parts of the original stories so that they would conform to unity of subject:

And if I hadde ytaken for to write
The armes of this ilke worthi man,
Than wolis ich of his batailles enlente;
But for that I to wrieten first higan
Of his love, I have sayd as I kan,-
His worthi leedes, whose list hem here,
Rele daires, he kan telle hem alle ifere. (3)

The Man of Law kept to his original story:

But I lette al his storie passen by;
Of Custance is my tale specially. (4)

Wyclif accepted unity of subject as such a definite standard that he used it as the basis for his reasoning. Supporting his belief that the two miracle chapters in the Gospel

(1) Chaucer, "The Clerk's Tale," Prologue, ll. 52-54.
(2) Chaucer, "The Man of Law's Tale," ll. 701 f.
(3) Chaucer, "Troilus and Criseyde," ll. 1765-1771.
according to Mark contained diverse teachings, he cited the fact that had they been truly similar Mark would have combined them:

We shall suppose of this miracle that it is diverse from another; for unless Mark would not have told these miracles so diversely and in diverse places. (1)

(1) Wyclif, Volume 1, P. 62.
5. DISCIPLINE OF TECHNIQUE

The fourteenth century authors complained as vigorously as do the modern writers of the discipline imposed upon them by their technique. The most skillful phrasing cannot quite duplicate the emotion or beauty of the thought. The reader, or hearer, must be ready and competent to do his part.

Chaucer admitted that his attempt to describe the sorrow of Troilus would make it appear less grievous than the reader could imagine from the depths of his experience:

but, as for me, my litel tonge,
If I discriyen wolle hire heynesse,
It sholde make hire sorwe lesse
Than that it was, and childishly deface
Hire heigh compleynete, and therefore ich
it pace. (1)

Chaucer did not impute this inability to lack of talent. No writer could describe sorrow adequately. As he remarked, perhaps ironically:

Who koude telle aright or ful descreyve
His woe, his playnt, his labour, and his pune?
Naught alle the men that han or hen on lyve.
Thow, readere, maist thyself ful wel devyne
That swich a woe my wit kan nat difyne,
On yel for to write it shoulde I swinke. (2)

The frequency of Chaucer's plaint suggests that it was a device to stimulate the imagination of the reader. Such a

(1) Chaucer, "Troilus ane Criseyde," ll. 601-605.
(2) Idem, ll. 267-272.
statement as the following has the appearance of studied technique:

For whom, as olie hokes tellen us,  
was ma swich wo, that tonge it may nat tells. (1)

Beauty, too, cannot be adequately described by the poet. Chaucer explored his inability to describe aright in English the beauty of nature:

Alias that I ne had ngllyssh, ryme or prose,  
Suffisant this flour to praysse aryght. (2)

In "The Squire's Tale" he acknowledged that figures of speech so much to help the poet in his descriptions of beauty:

Myn ngllysh s rek is insnfficient  
It moste been a rathor excellent,  
That koude his coulours longynse for that art,  
if he sholde hire discryven every part. (3)

The use of rhyme imposes an additional discipline. The selection of words is so limited that it is difficult to express thoughts. Chaucer wrote:

Who koude ryme in ngllyssh proprely  
His martirdom? for soths it am nat I. (4)

He intimated the difficulty of expressing thoughts in rhyme:

His reasons, as I may rymes holie,

(1) Chaucer, "Troilus and Criseyde," ll. 1582-f.
(4) Chaucer, "The Knight's Tale," ll. 1459 f.
I wol yow telle, as tchen hokes oll.e. (1)

(1) Chaucer, "Troilus and Criseyde," Book iii, l. 90 f.
IV. LITERARY CRITICAL THEORY

A. LITERARY AIDS

Taketh the moralite, good men,
For Saint Paul seith that al that written is,
To our doctrine it is ywrite, ywis. (1)

This quotation expresses the common literary opinion concerning the aims of literature in the fourteenth century. The theoretical aim supported by the most important, as well as the lesser, writers was that all writing should further the Christian doctrines. The theory behind this conviction that the function of poetry was to teach was that delight in worldly affairs would lead to corruption; therefore, no delight must be allowed in this world. The belief was that one must suffer to get to heaven. This led to the acceptance of the "contemptus mundi" attitude. Literature, especially poetry, which was written for amusement, was looked at askance. The whole idea was that poetry and prose, if existing at all, should teach the doctrines of the church.

The writers did not always bear this theory in mind—witness Chaucer's fabliaux—but they professed it whenever they did write of their literary aims.

As one would expect, Wyclif was particularly dogmatic.

about this single function of literature:

Poul as a good doctour feyneth no fable by mannyss witt, but he seith that it is writun in the lawe of oure bileeve. (1)

In another sermon he wrote:

For wordis of Poul techen us that what kyn thingis ben writun ben writun to oure lore, and to confort of us. (2)

He declaimed against the prevalence of worldli tales:

He biddith not stable hem in worldli woriis, as ben fahlis ana feynsa lesingis, but in treuthe of Jesus Crist, which thei shulden trowe and teche. (3)

There is a similarity between the following statement and the belief which prompted Chaucer's "Retractations":

If any man prove this fals or ayens Goddis law that I have seiu now here, Y wol revoken it mekeli. (4)

Gower, called by Chaucer, "moral Gower," believed that his fame would depend upon his moral stories. In the "Confessio Amantis" he spoke of the power of literature to teach the doctrines of Christ:

In boke as it is comprehendei, Wherof thou mistest ben amenied. (5)

(1) Wyclif, Volume II, P. 278.
(2) Wyclif, Volume I, P. 392.
(3) laem, P. 46.
(4) laem, P. 46.
The words of the Host to Chaucer in "The Canterbury Tales" are evidence that even the common people believed in the worth of moral themes:

Or teilde in prose somewhat, at the leeste,
In which there be some murthe or some doctrine. (1)

A few lines later Chaucer praised his "Tale of Meli-thee" by saying:

It is a moral tale vertuous. (2)

One might expect a nun's tale to be virtuous and moralizing:

Wherfore in laude, as I best kan or may,
Of thee and of the white lylye flour
Which that the bar, as is a mayde alway,
To telle a storie I wol do my labour;
Nat that I say encreessen hir honour. (3)

One unacquainted with this aspect of medieval thought would not be prepared for the almost speechless admiration which the tale evoked.

It was usual to start such tales as that of the Prioresse with a prayer for the help in the telling and to conclude with a prayer for mercy. It is but another example of medieval inconsistency that such tales could be included in the same work with tales of dubious morality. The reader quite evidently received them with equal favor.

(1) Chaucer, Host to Chaucer, ll. +2124 f.
(2) Idem, l. +2123.
(3) Chaucer, Prologue to the "Prioresse's Tale," ll. 1650-1654.
Chaucer's famous "Retraction" expressed the thoughts common to medieval writers. All the work which was not directly a teaching of Christianity was disowned. He revoked not only the tales in which we can see the immoral element, but also those in which we can see no harm; for example, he revoked "The Death of the Duchess," which is in reality an elegy. Part of the "Retraction" follows:

Now preye I to hem alle that kerke this litel trewe or rede, that if ther be any thyng in it that liketh hem, that therof they thanken our Lord Jesus Crist, of whom proceedeth all wit and al provnessse. And if ther be any thyng that displease hem, I preye hem also that they arratte it to the defaute of myn unkonnynge, and not to my wil that wolde ful pyn have saye bettre if I hade haue konnynge... For oure book seith, "Al that is writun is writun for oure doctrine," and that is myn entente. Wherfore I hisseke yow makely - that ye preve... and forsyve me my giltes; and namely of my translaconus and enuiynges of worllyy vanites, the whiche I revoke in my retracciouns: as is the book of Troilus: the book also of Fame; the book of the XIX Ladies; the book of the Duchesse; the book of St. Valentynes day of the Parlement of Bridges; the tales of Cauenterbury thilke that sownen into synne; the book of the Leoun; and many another book, if they were in my remembrance, and many a song and many a lecherous lay: that Crist forysye me. (1)

The writings adhered to the Christian doctrines and taught the moral virtues. Chaucer, in "The Legend of Good Women," professed that his intention in writing the "Troilus" was to teach the advantages of truthful relationships with others:

what so myn auctour mente.
Algate, God woot, yt was myn entente.

(1) Chaucer, "Retraction".
To forthren trouthe in love and it cheryce, 
And to ben ware fro falsnesse and fro vice 
By swich ensample; this was my meaning. (1)

In the prologue to his "Confessio Amantis," Gower asserted that the function of his writing was to teach:

Thus I, which am a burel clerk, 
Purpose forto wryte a bok... 
That in som part, so as I gesse, 
The wyse man mai ben avised. (2)

This critical standard was so deeply intrenched that the older classics were judged by the worth of what they taught. This, however, was not as incongruous as judging the classics by romantic standards of value, for in the great literary ages of Greece and Rome the function of poetry and prose alike was to teach and to inform. The right of literature to delight was not accorded until the Roman Horace gave that function an equal value with the former.

Gower wrote that we are taught by the books of the past:

Of hem that writen ous tofore 
The bokes ouelles, and we therefore 
Ben tawht of that was write tho. (3)

The usual method of instruction through literature was by means of tales and stories which taught by example:

As I fiue in a bok compiled

(2) Gower, "Confessio Amantis," Prologue, ll. 52-64. 
(3) Idem, ll. 1-3.
To this matière an olde histoire,
The which comth nou to mi memoire,
And is of grete ensamplarie
Ayen the vice of Sorcerie. (1)

There are many such examples in Gower:

A tale of grete entenienment
I thanke telle for thi sake,
Wherof thou miht ensample take. (2)

He suggested:

But who that wolde ensample take,
Gregoire upon his Omelie
Ayen the Slouthe of Prelacie. (3)

Gower followed the thought to a logical conclusion. If

men of today are taught by perusing the examples of the good

deeds of earlier ages, the men of tomorrow must learn the good

exploits of today, for if they are not written down they will

be forgotten. He wrote in the prologue:

And natheless he dais olie,
When that the hokes weren levere,
Srytinge was beloved evers
Of hem that weren vertuous;
For hire in erthe amonge ous,
If noman write hou that it stoes,
The pris of hem that weren gooie
Schole, as who seith, a grete partie
Be lost. (4)

In this connection Gower made the only statement dis-

covered which sanctioned the use of original material. This,

(2) Idem, Book ii, ll. 584-586.
(3) Idem, Book v, ll. 1900-1902.
(4) Idem, Prologue, ll. 36-44.
however, he limited by advising that the author carefully follow the footsteps of the old writers in selection and in technique:

Forthi good is that we also
In our tyme among ous hire
Do wryte of news som matieres,
Assamled of these olde wyse.
So that it myhte in such a wyse
When we ben leae and elswhere,
Belowe to the worlles eare
In tyme comende after this. (1)

Wyclif, naturally, opposed any literature written merely for the sake of amusement. However, it is evident from the number of such tales that the author very often ignored the theoretical serious purpose of all writing and lent his hand to composing poems and stories which had no purpose other than to entertain. Chaucer placed the blame for such tales in "The Canterbury Tales" on the characters. Too steady a diet of the serious tales made the Host request "murye" tales as he did in his remarks to Chaucer:

Or telle in prose somewhat, at the leeste,
In which there bee som myrth. (2)

Again in the prologue to "The Clerk's Tale" the Host asked for some entertaining story and after one has read some of the approved moral tales one can really sympathize with him.

It is no tyme for to studien here
Tell us some myrle tale, by voure fey!
For what man that is entrea in a play.

(1) Gower, "Confessio Amantis," Prologue, 11. 4-11.
(2) Chaucer, Host to Chaucer, 1. +2124 f.
He needs moot unto the play assente.
But preacheth nat', as freres idon in Lente,
To make us for oure olde synnes wepe,
Sd that thy tale wake us nat to slepe.
Telle us som murie thyng of aventures. (1)

Gower in his Prologue wisely combined the two types
of writing, taking a double aim - sometimes seriously teaching,
sometimes consciously entertaining:

Bot for men sein and soth it is,
That who that al of wisdom writ
it dulleth ofte a mannes wit
To him that scal alai reie,
For thilke cause, if that ye reie,
I wolde go the mideel weie.
And wryte a bok betwen the tweie,
Somwhat of lust, somewhat of lore,
That of the lasse or of the more
Som man mai lyke of that I wryte. (2)

Nearer the close he repeated this aim:

So as I made my beheste,
To make a bok after his heste,
And write in such a maner wise,
Which may be wisdom to the wise
And play to hem that lust to play. (3)

Thus, although on the whole, literature did become the
handmaiden of Theology during the Middle Ages, those authors of
genuine talent broke through the taboo, and wrote as they
wanted to, unrestricted by the limits of theoretical criticism.

(3) Iadem, 11. 81-85.
B. INSPIRATION

Little is written of the importance of inspiration to the author. Chaucer was the only one of the three studied here who gave even lip service to this traditional view of the source of genius, important though it is from the romantic point of view. He did refer to the author as an "instrument," a term played upon by some supernatural assistant:

Theesiphone, thow help me for t'ensile...
Help me, that am thi sorowful instrument. (1)

Also in the "Legena" he wrote:

my word, my werk ys knyt so in youre boni
That, as a hape obeith to the honi
And maketh it some after his fyngeynge
Right so move ye oute of myn herte fringe
Swich vois, righ as vou lyst, to laughe or pleyne. (2)

These examples, however, appear conventional in nature, as if the writer was following the practices and technique of some older author. As we know that this is just what Chaucer did, it is entirely logical to suspect the seriousness of the passages in regard to their critical value.

It is in the "Troilus", which Chaucer asserted was a translation and for which the sources are known, that we find most of the references to the need for supernatural aid. In book ii he wrote:

(1) Chaucer, "Troilus and Criseyde," ll. 6-19.
O laiy min, that calleth art Jleo,
Thow be my spee to this forth, and my Muse,
To ryme wel this book til I have do. (1)

Book iii opens with:

Caliopa, thi vois be now present
For now is nee. (2)

Such passages, and particularly the following, have all the appearance of mere acceptance of the invocations of the original work:

Thow laiy bryght, the doughter to Jwone,
Thy hlynge an wyngel sone ek, daun Cupide,
Yu sustren nyne ek, that hy alicone
In hil Pernaso listen for t'ahide,
That ye thus fer han deyned me to syde,
I kan namore but syn that ye wol wenie,
Ye heresa ben for ay withouten ende! (3)

(1) Jhaucer, "Troilus an Chrissye," Book ii, ll. 8-10.
(2) Idem, Book iii, ll. 45 f.
(3) Idem, ll. 1807-1813.
III. CREATIVE ART

However, when we consider the creative function of art we find the two great poets in accord. It is manifest that they would never have agreed with any school of writing which contended that inspiration was the basis of literature. These men believed in hard work as the best means of producing results worthy to be read and passed on to the next generation.

The word "make," influenced by the Platonic definition of poet, came into critical use near the end of the fourteenth century. Both Gower and Chaucer made use of the word, for it implies the idea of actual creation which they associated with the writing of poetry.

Chaucer wrote:

But after my makyng thou wryte more trewe. (1)

Gower promised:

That I nomore of love make. (2)

Gower made it explicit in his resume of great literary men that each had labored to attain his result. He knew that one could not depend upon taking pen in hand and letting fluid words write themselves. Apropos of this he wrote:

And er the wisdom cam aboute

(2) Gower, "Confessio Amantis," Book viii, 1. 4307c.
Of hem that first the bokes write,
This mai wel every wys man wite,
Ther was gret labour ek also ...
That other tok to studiie and muse
As he which wolde noght refuse
The labour of his wittes alle.
And in this wise it is befalle,
Of labour which that thai begynne
We re now tawht of that we kunne. (1)

Chaucer wrote of the special difficulty and the consequent labor necessary in writing poetry. Even when he had formulated the material for the story in his mind, he needed more time to work over the terminology and to put it into final shape. In the "Legend" he wrote:

That shal I seyn, whanne that I see my tyme
I may not al at-once spoke in ryme. (2)

The same idea was expressed in "The Book of the Duchesse":

Thoghte I, "This ys so queynt a sweven
That a wol, he processe of tyme,
Fonie to put this sweven in ryme
As I kan best. (3)

He reported the difficulty of rhyming in English because of the lack of worthy examples for study:

Ane sone to me it ys a gret penaunce,
Syth rym in english hath such skarsete. (4)

In the "Legend" he intimated that writers should

study the best authors and pattern their style and technique after the best:

Glorye and honour, Virgil mantoan,
Be to thy name! and I shall, as I can,
Folwe thy lanterne, as thow most hylforn. (1)

In the fourteenth century most of the writing, which, in the strict sense of the word, can be called literature, was in the form of poetry. The theological writings of John Wyclif were the first to set the standards for satisfactory literary prose. However, Chaucer had written some prose and the foundation was laid.

There was beginning to be less minstrelsy and balladry. These lines from the prologue of the tale told by the Parson indicate that the tales told among the common people were usually in prose:

I kan nat geaste 'rum, ram, ruf' by lettre,
Ne, Goa woot, rym holie I but litel bettre,
And theryfore, if yow list - I wol nat close -
I wol yow telle a myrie tale in prose
To knette up al this feeste, and make an ende. (1)

The Host suggested the prevalence of prosaic stories, although he implied that he preferred poetry:

Let se wher thou kanst tellen aught in geeste
Or telle in prose somwhat at the leeste. (2)

Poetry needed something more than rhyme to support it. The Host disapproved of the "Tale of Sir Thopas":

so wery of thy verray lewenesse,
That, also wisly Goa my soule blessse,

(2) Chaucer, Host to Chaucer, ll. 42123 f.
Ayn  aken of thy irasty speches
Now swich a rym the davel I ritesche!
This may well be rym sorel, quod he. (1)

A few lines later he remarked:

Thy irasty rymying is nat worth a toori! (2)

As poetry was the accepted form of literature, the young writers usually wrote lyrics:

But for to kepe me fro yielnesse,  
Frely I rie my besynesse  
To make songes, as I beste koude,  
And ofte tyme I song hem loue;  
And male songes thus a gret iel,  
Although I koude not make so wel  
Songes. (3)

Gower, too, wrote:

Ani also I have ofte assaied  
Ronseal, balaie and virelai  
For hire on whom myn herte lai  
To make, an ao fortto peinte  
Caroles with my worles quinte,  
To sette my purpos alofte,  
And thus I sang hem forth fulofte  
In halle an ek in chambre aboute,  
And male merie among the route. (4)

Again he said:

Ani ek he can carolles make,  
Ronseals, balaie, and virelai. (5)

These passages indicate that short lyric poems were

(1) Chaucer, Host to Chaucer, ll. 2111-2115.
(2) Idem, l. 2120.
(5) Idem, ll. 2703 f.
numerous. Most of them have been lost, but perhaps the majority 
would have been of no great service to literature. Chaucer 
noted that most contemporary writing passes on to oblivion, 
causing only a momentary flurry of interest:

but al shal passe that men prose or ryme; 
Take every man his turn, as for his tyme. (1)

Both Chaucer and Gower alluded to the special appeal 
of poetry. Gower remarked:

When wordes mealen with the song, 
it dooth plesance wel the more. (2)

Chaucer took example:

Lo here, the forme of olde clerkis speche 
In poetrie, if ye hire hokes seche. (3)

By his protestations, Wyclif virtually acknowledged
the added pleasure in rhyme:

for thei aocken Goudis worl, and tateren it by thir 
rimes... These are pleasynge to the peple. (4)

(1) Chaucer, "Lenvoy a Scogan," ll. 42 f.
(2) Gower, "Confessio Amantis," ll. 1550 f.
(3) Chaucer, "Troilus and Criseyde," ll. 1850 f.
The poets of the fourteenth century based their critical opinions on the standards of Greek, Latin, and French poets. They were familiar with classical works and with such contemporary forms of literature as lyric poetry, chronicles, romances, and theological prose. Chaucer and Gower noted the most suitable subjects for literary development. They followed the example of the best poets of the classical age in writing tragedy. Many tales were concerned with acts of chivalry, heroic deeds and exploits, myths, and love in all its aspects. Unlike the classical poets they wrote that moral virtues and religious doctrines should form the mainstay of literature. These were, in fact, the only acceptable subjects of literature in the Middle Ages. Yolif deplored the popularity of the worldly tales in his sermons and treatises. Chaucer contented himself with a last minute retraction. Gower compromised by combining in his one great English work the subjects of amusement and doctrine.

As might be expected when the philosophy of an age looked back to a glorious past and forward to a hopeful future, and renounced the present, the authors made use of old tales in their works. They made no attempt at originality or novelty, but believed that the use of such tales added to the dignity and prestige of their writings.
Chaucer, as a good technician, knew the practical value of using stories familiar to the people. In literature of oral tradition, repetition was necessary for comprehension. Although on the whole he agreed with medieval men, Gower arrived at a logical conclusion. He advised authors to write something original based on the exploits of the great men of the Middle Ages so that future generations would become familiar with its greatness.

The great contribution of these writers was the demonstration of the practicability of using English as a literary language. They were hampered by the lack of example; there was no best usage to follow. The language was not stable; it was far from its final form. Despite these obvious disadvantages the authors felt that the people had a right to a literature in their own tongue. Moreover, it was more in keeping with their pedagogical aim to write in a language which the people could understand than to continue the use of Latin. Their defense of the use of English remains a most important section of historical criticism.

In defining terms the authors followed the teachings of the classics. Chaucer's definition of tragedy closely followed that of Aristotle. His definition of a lay as a song without music intimated all later definitions of lyric poetry. It wasyclif who made most definite contributions to the critical dictionary. He explained allegory, an important element of literature.
In using the vulgar tongue for a literary language, the authors were vitally concerned with technical problems. Chaucer was most concerned with the difficulties. He advised careful selection of word, variety of phrase, suitting the words to the act, and using figures of speech. Gower, with customary serious logic, urged the poet to use technical devices and yet keep his work free from ostentation; he urged simplicity of language.

Chaucer, due to his translation, expressed such cardinal rules as the necessity of strict adherence to the original work in word and meaning. He admitted that the personality - the modern term is not his - of the translator caused divergence from the original.

Despite the interest in technical problems the writers did not lose sight of the fact that the thought is of primary importance. It was Yclif who most vehemently opposed the practice of working for beauty of sound rather than profundity of thought. Chaucer and Gower agreed that the thought was the most important element in literary work.

The theoretical aim of the writers was to teach Christian doctrines. Gower followed the example of Horace by giving an equal emphasis to the two functions of literature - to teach and to delight - in the "Confessio Amantis". However, in his other works his emphasis was on moral pedagogy. Chaucer theoretically followed the moral function of literature, but much of his work was solely of worldly pleasures. These works
he professed to renounce at the close of his life.

Chaucer and Gower knew that hard work was necessary in literary creation. They place little real emphasis on the powers of inspiration, alluding to it only in conventional invocations. Both authors made use of the word "make" to express the creative work of the poet, and emphasized the labor and time necessary for a complete product.

There was little discussion of the relative merits of prose and poetry. Poetry was the accepted form and the authors who wished their fame to rest on literary accomplishments wrote in that form.

From their writing, then, we have found few critical differences in the works of Chaucer, Gower, and Wolif. They followed the examples and the stories of the classical writers. They were somewhat influenced by the French. The medieval philosophy of "contemptus mundi" limited the scope of their writings to religious and moral subjects. The two literary lights of the period, however, had sufficient insight to transcend this narrow aim and to accede the right of literature to delight.

Their critical remarks are of importance mainly as they reveal the technical problems of early users of English. The way in which they settled their problems set many critical standards for the future generations of English writers. It is to them that we owe, in large measure, the stability and the form of our present language.

This is a fairly complete selection of Wyclif's works. Two of the volumes give his sermons; the third gives his treatises.


Volume I was concerned with his French works.


This is an accredited text.