Nature in Chaucer

by John Daniel Clear

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Master Thesis

Clear, J.D. 1887

Nature in Chaucer.
Nature in Chaucer.

Difference between the Anglo-Saxon nature description and the Chaucerian.
The Anglo-Saxon wrote of the sea, Chaucer spoke of the land.

The Canterbury Tales separately considered:
A Table of nature words in the several Tales:
Conclusions from a comparison of the various Tales.

The Tales considered as a whole:
An enumeration of the nature words in all the Tales:
Deductions from this enumeration.
Apparent variety of nature words, no proof of scarcity of nature in the Tales.
The fact that Chaucer used such words as tree oftener than words like flower does not prove that he preferred the former to the latter.
His figurative use of words shows that he appreciated the latter as much, or more than the former.
General observations regarding nature
in shaving.

His love of nature in all its phases, although he sets forth no definite
naturist theory, yet he may be con-
sidered the progenitor of Wordsworth.
His nature touches are
fresh and suggestive.
His landscape descriptions are
most excellent.

His writing and study in the pre-
paration of this paper were con-
lined to the Globe Edition of
Shakespeare's Poems, to which all
references are made.
J. B. Calcutt.
The Anglo-Saxons were
pre-eminently a warlike and a
sea-faring people. As much
indeed, did they enjoy war that
they conceived of mortal conflict
as merely a "play of words." Their
predilection to war, as well as
their adventurous spirit, often
brought them into contact with
the sea, which they dearly loved.

In Anglo-Saxon literature
there are many references to
sea and sky, and not a few most
beautiful descriptions of the
heaving waters, but the references
to land-scape scenes are very few.
Indeed, the most charming land-
scape description in all Anglo-
Saxon literature is the following
passage from Beowulf:

"[Fremelind his mother]..." across
inaccessible land, the retreat of
wolves, windly messenger dangerous
paths, where the mountain
stream leaps down under
the mist of the cliffs, the flood
under the ground. Not far
down...in the moisture of miles
lies the mere, over which..."
rustling branches hang, trees fast by their roots reaching the water. Here, each might one may see a startling sight, a fire on the flood. Of the children of men, no one now lives who is so wise that he knows the bottom of the mere. Although the stag pursued by dogs, the hart strong of horns and driven from afar, will seek the forest; yet he will give up his life on the shore rather than go into the mere to hide his head. It is a menacing place where the waves rushing, waters rise up to the melting, where the wind stirs up breathome weather to the extent that the skiers become obscure and the bays wreck.

When, however, we come to study Chaucer we no longer find a preponderance of water description, but we do find numerous references to external nature and a few very beautiful landscape scenes. Chaucer dearly loved his native land—its flowers, dales and woods—and hence his treatment of nature is largely confined to vegetable
life, reinforced and beautified by the "tittering of byrdes" and the delightful shimmering of the gorge some which half in the ran his halfe couse grove. To minutely record the results of an exhaustive study of nature in all of Chaucer's writings would require a volume, hence this paper merely attempts an exposition of nature in the Canterbury Tales, particularly that part of nature manifested in plant life.

The several Tales are quite as unlike in the amount of nature they contain as they are in subject matter. Nor is the inequality in the amount of nature more apparent than the difference in the words which give us our concepts of nature in the various Tales. The different words pertaining to nature as exhibited in plant life in the Tales are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plant Type</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dapple</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>garlike</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>root (metaphor)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>soft</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>biete</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trees</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Prelude continued.

A note on the rendering of the characters in the Tales.
<p>| Willkommen nale,                           | Marchanter nale continued,               |
|Lewis                          |mede                        |
|sowale                         |tree                         |
|Lethe                          |fruit                         |
|APPLES                          |lars                         |
|Linnanate tree                |herbes                        |
|Blume                         |lunes                         |
|Bush                          |laren                         |
|rose                          |lare                          |
|Herbes                        |Total number of different words (literal) | 10 |
|Total number of different words (metrical) | 1 |
|Ghenes nale                   |Total number of words (metrical) | 1 |
|tree                          |Total nd. of words (lit.) | 16 |
|bery                          |                        |
|Name of James nale,           |Ohe                          |
|tree                          |Grene (substantive) | 1 |
|Chief of Rather nale,         |Frankkleiner nale,          |
|tree                          |Flowers                      |
|Bush                          |Flowers                      |
|Brownowes nale,              |Flowers (metrical)          |
|asten beef                    |made                         |
|                              |grefer                        |
|                              |herb                          |
|                              |Plante                        |
|                              |Vine                          |
|                              |Grene (substantive) | 2 |
|                              |forest                        |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Literal</th>
<th>Metaphorical</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Second Sonnet Tale</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lines</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rose</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>roses</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>words (Literal)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of different</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>words (Metaphorical)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Chimney green&quot;er&quot; Tale</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>apple</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Maneiple&quot;er Tale</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>forest</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>flour (metaphor)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pegsomes Tale</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>vaneche (metaphor)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rate (metaphor)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flour</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leves (metaphor)</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>white</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tree (metaphor)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>string (metaphor)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>words (Literal)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of different</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>words (Metaphorical)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>
The preceding table shows that the Knight's Tale contains forty-three different words used in a literal sense, a little more than one half of such words in all the Tales including the Prologue. Then follow the Prologue with fourteen different nature words, Five Little Fowls with twelve, Clerk of Oxford and Friar with nine, Mynheere with seven, Second Nun's Priest with five, Friar with four, Parson with three each; Cook Chief of Bathers, Proctor with two each; and the Priest, Parson of Sowers, Courtier and Summoner and Chaucer's Gem generally with one each. Now, keeping in mind the subject matter of the several Tales, we may formulate a few rules, which though not true in the absolute, are approximately correct. Beginning with the Knight's Tale, the most romantic and chivalric of all the Tales, it will be seen that the number of nature words decreases as the romance and chivalry become less.
Furthermore, we note that the more poetic a tale is, the more nature words does it contain, while the more didactic it is, the less does it contain. The Knight's Tale and the Percy's Tale respectively stand at these two extremes. The latter, however, is a slight exception to this rule, since it has three nature words used in a literal sense instead of one or two, as some of the tales have. Again, the indecisely told, the Merchant and the Miller's Men being excepted, contain very few or no nature words.

In all the tales including the P共同体's Camelot uses in a literal sense the word 'tree' sixteen times; 'grove', nine; 'bloom' and 'lilic' seven each; 'flower' and 'bush' each six each; 'rose', 'leaves', 'green' (substantive) and 'oakening', five each; 'wood', 'heathes' and 'lily' four each; 'hethes', 'nade', 'trees', 'green', 'rose' and forest, three each; 'flowers', 'white and red', 'lilies', 'boughes', 'wooden', 'berr', 'fruit', 'trees', 'berr', 'gray', 'lilic', and 'oakening', two each; while each of the following words occurs but once: 'rose', 'thor', 'oaffes', ...
Garlike, onions, lilies, shall, brownish,
though, hop-tree, wood-bird, hawthorn,
woods, pierce tree, blomme, 
ashen leaf, herb, great plants, 
vine, viney greater, tremble-look, daisy, 
love, winter-flower, ephes, 
olive, oak, apple, apples white, 
lime, birch, asa, alder, holm, poplar, 
willow, elm, plane, as, hop, chestnut, 
kind, maple, thorn, beech, hazel, 
ew and understones.

It will be observed that, 
on of the eighty-three different nature words in the Tales, but thirty-one are used more than once, while 
only seven are used more than five times. Let it not be supposed, however, that these eighty-three different nature words accurately measure the amount 
of nature to be found in the Tales, for such is not the case. 
If, instead of counting each word 
but once, we count it every time 
it occurs, we shall increase the 
number of words from eighty-three to one hundred and sixty-three. 
Furthermore, if we would form 
a correct idea of the amount of 
nature in the Tales, we must 
not only count each word every
line it seems, but we must also remember that the effect and quantity of nature descriptions are greatly augmented by the attending circumstances and by other words than nouns, which alone have been given in this paper.

The word tree occurs sixteen times, while flowers are found only seven times. The ratio of sixteen to seven quite closely expresses the ratio of such words as tree, grove, forest,ake and branches to words like flowers, lily, rose and daisy. By

The enumeration of some twenty different kinds of trees used for the funeral bier of


twenty, the ratio of the former class of words to the latter becomes much less. Although this exception is evidently justified inasmuch as in the enumeration no attempt is made at nature portrayal, yet it does not equalize the two classes of words, hence we may reasonably conclude that nature as exhibited in the first class of words is either more pleasing or more familiar to beholders than nature as
manifested by the second class. The alternative which assumes that Chancee loved trees more than flowers is untenable, since he speaks even more familiarly of flowers than of trees. For an apostrophe to flowers which he always associated with flowers, he says:

"O vine, with all thy flowers and thy green:
Right welcome be thou faire, fresh May,
I hope that I, some green where gether may.
Again he says of the garden in which Emily went to walk:
"The odors of flowers, and the fresh sight,
Cold than unmarked any holt light."

Another evidence that Chancee appreciated flowers as much, or more than trees is found in his many figurative uses of flowers. With the exception of the Perseus Tale, which may be excluded on account of its didacticism, by far the larger number of similes and metaphors pertaining either to flowers or trees, have to do with the former.
The solution of the question lies not in the difference of Shakespeare's love for trees and flowers, but in the difference of his knowledge regarding these two manifestations of nature. Indeed, we should be surprised had he not said more at least in quantity of trees than of flowers, for they have ever been better understood.

Not only did Shakespeare appreciate the tree and the flower as individual manifestations of nature, but he even more enjoyed the effect produced by the harmonious combination of all its parts. He dearly loved to take a stroll over the meads "full of fresh flowers white and red," to lie down upon the "gauge green" and listen to the "melodie of the Nightingall," as they did their "observeance to faire freshe Cabbage," and to enjoy the "mellow ways of the "gauge come," which "rath in the Ram his halfe comes growing".

One of the best examples of his appreciation of all the phaases of nature is the following passage from the Prologue:

"Shall we appear that April will"
his shonner note

The droughte of Cwarch hath spaced
to the rote
And bathed every vne in swiche
liams,
Of whiche vertue engendered is the
Elong
Whan Zepfous she with his
sone brethe
Inspired hath in every hale and
brethe.

The tendre empper, and the gyngge
grune
Hath in the Ram his halfe
cours ground,
And smale fowler maken melodie,
That sleyen alle night with openye.
To thinketh hem nature in his
avangers;
Then token folk to go on pilgrmage.

The holy, blissful merte for tis sake.

There is nothing studied or assuming
about this description. It is a
natural outburst of a soul over-
flowing with the love of nature.
It is so simple,orden and appert-
aynse that it transports us
back to the period of development
in the history of the human
race, which corresponds to Dorel-
worths early childhood, of which
he says:

"There was a time when meeting
The earth, and every common sight
To me did seem
Appeared in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.

Venali like Wordsworth, Shelley
does not give us a well formulated
theory of Nature and her various
attributes. He does not, however,
leave us wholly in the dark on
this point. For several different
passages in the \textit{Vales}, very clearly
show that he is not only the
"Father of English poetry," but like-
wise the progenitor of Wordsworth's
nature theory. In proof of this
statement, two passages may
be quoted, the first from the
\textit{Knights} and the second from the
\textit{Doctor's Tale}:

\begin{quote}
For nature hath not taken
his beginning
Of me quarte, me courted y a thing,
But of a thing that artebre and
shable."
\end{quote}

"This maid age twelf were
was and twaw
In which that nature hadde
smicks delit."
The patient half this noble nature.

Even a casual reading of these passages can not fail to show that they embody the germ of Wordsworth's nature theory. The first ascribes to nature the characteristics of universal, perfectability and stability, while the second personifies Nature and invests her with the distinctively human quality of sensations of pleasure or, as Chaucer puts it, of "Delit."

Although it is interesting and beneficial to study the attributes which Chaucer ascribes to nature, yet it is even more important to know something of his love for and treatment of external nature, much of which is embodied in his simple, though masterly, touches. Such phrases as "the yonge grene," "the silver upon his stalk grene," and "the mede all ful of flowers, partie white and red," are very simple, beautiful and suggestive.
To me they seem very like the spontaneous effusions of the city child who, for the first time, carefully picks his way through the ditches and glensies of the meadows, learning that even the sound of his footsteps may disturb the delicate flowers. Indeed, Chaucer was just such a child roaming at leisure in just such a meadow, for before him no English poet had ever wandered up the dale, admiring the white crocus flower and reverenceing the daisies.

Although Chaucer does not often describe landscape scenes, yet when he does he invests them with a distinctness, interest and charm which were never attained to by his predecessors or successors. All of his landscape descriptions are masterpieces, considering the age in which they were written, while a couple of them would not dishonor Wordsworth, Shelley or Tennyson. The best nature description in all the Tales, and it certainly is graphic and very pretty, is the following passage from the Knight's Tale:

"The very Clarke, the messenger
of day

Esteluth in hire song the
morwe gray
And sung Phebus riseth up so
bright:
That all the orient langueth
of the sight.
And with his streneus shenet
in the grees
The silver droupes, hanging
on the trees.

That Chaucer's treatment
of nature is perfect no one will
declare, that it is equal to
Tennyson's no one will maintain,
but that it is rivaled by no
other English poet before Chaucer
and surpassed by few before
the romantic school of poetry
came into existence, will be
denied by no student of English
literature. His treatment of
nature, as well as his poetry
in general, forms a transition
from Middle English to Modern
English. Saxon and earlier
Middle English writers say
very little of external nature,
while even Langland, Chaucer's
own contemporary, does not
depart from the customs of
his predecessors, Chaucer alone, as a mature poet, stands out as the sole shimmering star in the literary heavens of the first sixteen centuries of the history of English literature.
Nature im Eden
J. A. C. Larson
English Lit
1877