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**Living Vicariously: Chaucer within Shakespeare**

***“If I were a professor, I should make all young people with a poetic talent, read Chaucer, Herrick, and Shakespeare.”[[1]](#footnote-1)—*Ralph Waldo Emerson**

Geoffrey Chaucer’s works have affected and influenced English writing from the fourteenth century to the twenty-first. Chaucer’s adept use of the English language almost five-hundred years ago amazed some writers and inspired others, leaving his footprints within their creations. Among these medieval-inspired authors was the peer of English Renaissance literature, William Shakespeare. From subtle nuances to literary themes, from occasional quotes to entire story lines, Chaucer can be found living in Shakespeare’s world. So tremendous was Chaucer’s influence upon Shakespeare that the argument can be easily made that the Bard proved the adage that ‘imitation is indeed the most sincere form of flattery’.

Chaucer’s creations marked a decisive moment in literary history. As Boccaccio had turned literature over to Italy’s common people by writing not in the exclusive language of Latin, but in the local Italian vernacular, so Chaucer did for Englishmen. The exclusivity of the Norman French language used by the English ruling class was ignored in favor of English vernacular; Chaucer’s works would be available to all. Thus…“began the evolution of English as we know it—[Chaucer] paved the way for all who followed creating a literature in English.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Looking back in a survey of the progression of humanity from the Goths to the American war, Reverend John Adams wrote in 1789, “Our language, inftead of improving, was more neglected than before. Langland and *Chaucer* had begun to polifh it, and enrich it

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with new and elegant conftructions…”[[3]](#footnote-3) But Chaucer’s influence went beyond the language itself, for his genius, written in English, “…gave stature to the language of the people of the British Isles.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Changes in the perception of Chaucer’s greatness, however, appeared over time. Caroline Spurgeon, in her masterful 1925 creation, traced his influence and explained the changes in attitude towards Chaucer, writing that “…the criticism Chaucer has received throughout these five centuries in reality forms a measure of judgment—not of him—but of his critics.” The difference, she argues is that …in looking at this ever-shifting procession of critics we can trace the development of the mind and spirit of the nation to which they belong. We know that as individuals our taste changes and fluctuates… Similarly, we can here watch the taste of a nation changing and fluctuating; Chaucer now liked for one quality, now for another…” And there were aspects of Chaucer’s writings that tempered appreciation for some. Spurgeon went on to say, “Chaucer undoubtedly suffered from change in language quite as much as change in taste…”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Joseph Addison’s comments regarding Chaucer reflect this evolution of language in 1726:

“*Since, deareft Harry [Sacheverell], you will needs requeft/ A fhort account of all the Mufe-poffeft/ That, down from* Chaucer’s *days to* Dryden’s *times/ Have fpent their noble rage in Britifh rhimes… Long had our dull fore-fathers flept fupine/ Nor felt the raptures of the tuneful Nine/ Till Chaucer firft a merry bard, arofe/ And many a ftory told in rhime, and profe/ But age has rufted what the Poet writ/ Worn out his language, and obfcur’d his wit/ In vain he jefts in his unpolifh’d ftrain/ And tries to make his readers laugh in vain.”*

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But while Addison perhaps saw challenges in appreciating Chaucer, William Seymar invoked the poet’s name to help inspire morality among the youth of his day (1700): “For Chaucer and the reft that he quotes, he knows (if he knows any thing) that obfervations of Vices, are not directions to commit them; Nay farther, the Poets by rallying them, diffuade men from committing them…”.[[6]](#footnote-6) Other authors were trying to imitate his genius, for example, Malton’s 1748 poem, *The Comic Gift*. Malton states at its opening “*Imitated from* Chaucer” and imitate he does, laying out what is, essentially, a newly-worded story of the friar from“Dan Chaucer’s merry tales”.[[7]](#footnote-7)

This appreciation and imitation was present from the initial publication of Chaucer’s works. Among the first enthusiasts was John Lydgate, a contemporary of Chaucer and another of England’s earliest celebrated bards. In fact, Lydgate was the first to coin the phrase, “Canterbury talys” in the prologue to his Siege of Thebes (c. 1421). Lydgate also refers directly to Chaucerian characters, listing by ‘name’ the Cook, the millere and the Reve; the pardowner (being “beerdlees al his Chyn”) and the frère; and he describes the tales as being, “Some of desport some of moralite/ Aome of knyghthode loue and gentillesse/ And some also of parfit holynesse/And some also in soth of Ribaudye.” Lydgate gives an expansive list of Chaucer’s other works in his Fall of Princes (1431-38), including *Troilus & Creddeide,*  “the deth eek of Blaunche the Duchesse”, the English verse translation of “the Romaunce off the Rose”, “Off Anneleyda and of fals Arcite” and numerous “souereyn balladys of Chauceer”. Lydgate also paid tribute to Chaucer’s talent in Flower of Courtesy, writing,

“Caucer is deed, that had suche a name/ Of fayre making, that, withouten wene/ Fayrest in our tonge, as the laurer grene/ We may assay for to countrefete/ His gaye style, but it wyl not be.”

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Admiration for Chaucer was one link that helped bridge the divide between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Chaucer’s *Monk’s Tale* was the first English example of tragedy, based upon the fall of a great man from Fortune’s wheel. This new medieval tradition of tying tragedy to politics and historical events gave rise to both Lydgate’s Fall of Princes and the Elizabethan Mirror for Magistrates. Helen Cooper gives a detailed description of the many ties between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in her Inaugural lecture at the University of Cambridge, and explains how “…the dramaturgy of the cycle plays provided the core of Elizabethan dramatic practice, just as Old English provided the core of the language.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Ann Thompson effectively ties Chaucer and Elizabethan drama together when she writes, “…almost every Elizabethan or Jacobean writer we remember today referred to him at least once, and… a wide cross-section of the educated Elizabethan public at large either knew him first hand or knew enough about him to write as if they did.” Furthermore, his impact was so impressive that “At the beginning of the Elizabethan period, Chaucer was almost the *only* English poet of any stature in the whole of literary history, so that any writer in the native language who wished to buttress his position by reference to a ‘tradition’ was obliged to mention him.” (It should be noted, however, that Chaucer *sometimes* shared this honor with Lydgate and Gower!) Sidney reflected this opinion when he wrote, “Chaucer, undoubtedly, did excellently in hys Troylus and Cresseid; of whom, truly, I do not whether to mervaile more, either that he in that mistie time could see so clearely, or that wee in this cleare age walke so stumblingly after him.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

The tributes paid to Chaucer by Renaissance writers was not just ‘lip-service’, though—Chaucer was *the* poet read by Elizabethans and Jacobeans, as is reflected in the sheer number of references by authors to his works. His poems were used in many ways: as a brief reference or for a quotation, as a

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subsidiary source or for an entire dramatic plot. Additionally, one poem might be used for many things: its humor, romance, morality or imagery. Chaucer was viewed ambiguously in the sixteenth century--he was an intellectual, philosophical poet-- solemn, moral and ‘learned’. Chaucer was also seen as a serious romantic writer, and Elizabethans fully accepted and enjoyed the rather unnatural medieval romances he told. He was also still the teller of bawdy tales. Chaucer was seen by Elizabethans as the “perfector” of the English vernacular—a vernacular that no longer existed; still, despite the difficulties with style and vocabulary, the English people read and enjoyed his literary creations. Thompson reiterates his popularity and importance in the medieval-Early Modern link by saying, “Throughout the period, he was the only medieval poet to be widely read and thus played an important role in transmitting the narrative materials and styles of an earlier age.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Chaucer was England’s ‘Homer’.

And then there was Shakespeare. The links between England’s greatest bard and the medieval poet are numerous and varied. Caroline Spurgeon states, “… yet there are many indications that he knew Chaucer and was indebted to him.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Though she acknowledges that there is little verbal similarity between Shakespeare and Chaucer—and no direct quotations due to the change in linguistics—Ann Thompson states unequivocally that, “…Shakespeare not only read Chaucer, but knew his work unusually well and was influenced by it in several different ways.”[[12]](#footnote-12)Chaucer’s presence is found throughout the Bard’s works as obvious single-line allusions and images, and Shakespeare clearly uses Chaucerian poems as support material for numerous plays. “His [Shakespeare’s] ability to remember passages from Chaucer at unlikely times as well as obvious ones… gives us a valuable illustration of one of the ways in which his work is deeper and richer than that of other writers: his powers of association are more complex and daring.”[[13]](#footnote-13)Examples include finding Troilus in Taming of the Shrew, Henry V, Much Ado About Nothing, Twelfth Night, The Merry Wives of Windsor, All’s Well and The Merchant of Venice. *The Monk’s Prologue and Tale* is present in Julius Caesar, King Lear and Antony & Cleopatra. Elements of *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* are in Henry IV and The Winter’s Tale, while Romeo and Juliet and Measure for Measure show the influence of *The Parlement of Foules*. The Rape of Lucrece, written in Chaucerian rhyme, has the fingerprints of *The Legend of Good Women*, along with a ‘Triolus’ stanza and a long discussion of the siege of Troy, which seem to be a deliberate connection to Chaucer. Ironically, the longest and most precise quotation that Shakespeare took from Chaucer was not Chaucer’s work, but an extra passage printed as space-filler in the Caxton edition of Chaucer’s works: Shakespeare used *‘Merlin’s Prophecy’* in Act III of King Lear, where the Fool speaks a prophecy and Merlin is the prophet, Dan Chaucer.

The medieval element of an Arthurian character was not un-Shakespearean. William Shakespeare had grown up in a medieval town within easy reach of the Coventry cycle plays. He had moved to a London that was still enclosed in its medieval walls, where one crossed the Thames on a medieval bridge; Elizabethan London still contained old parish churches, the original St. Paul’s and had the same topographical layout of its city streets and landmarks as it had had in the Middle Ages. Shakespeare might have had Humanist ambitions, but he was always in touch with links to his medieval past. The influence of the Middle Ages—specifically Chaucer—became stronger than that of humanism in the 1590s. Now a “Giant on the shoulders of dwarfs”[[14]](#footnote-14) in comparison to his contemporaries, Shakespeare drew heavily on Chaucer for A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Antony & Cleopatra, The Winter’s Tale, Pericles (Apollonius Tyrius by Gower) and The Two Noble Kinsmen. Cooper states “…the Prologue to Pericles is fully self-conscious about its return to an old form, and it refuses to apologize for it. It is ‘a song of old was sung’, and value, it insists, increases with age: ‘bonum quo antiquius eo melius’ (line 10).” The Two Noble Kinsmen, she maintains, is even more a tribute to Chaucer, being “…still more explicit about the excellence of its source, as if it were giving Chaucer a renaissance of his own: ‘A poet never went/ More famous yet twixt Po and silver Trent’ (line 11-12), a formulation that sweeps into Chaucer’s shadow

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every writer from Petrarch to the new poets of the English midlands, Shakespeare and Spenser among them.” Cooper is emphatic in her judgment that Pericles and The Two Noble Kinsmen reinstated the value of the Middle Ages to Tudor England, reminding the English public of their medieval past and its importance. “They [Pericles and The Two Noble Kinsmen] generate the beginning of the movement towards medievalism, the attaching of value to the medieval past for its own sake; but it is a medievalism that recognizes its unbroken heritage- a resurrection, a renaissance, where there had never been a death.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

The Two Noble Kinsmen is one of Shakespeare’s plays in which the connection to Chaucer is most easily recognized. From beginning to end, the two tales contain parallel storylines and even similar word usage. Amanda Mabillard acknowledges this in her online article, *What Inspired Shakespeare?, writing,* “Shakespeare undoubtedly admired Chaucer works immensely, for he uses several of Chaucer’s poems as sources for his plays… It is apparent that *The Knight’s Tale* sparked Shakespeare to craft The Two Noble Kinsmen…”[[16]](#footnote-16) Apparent may be an understatement, since Shakespeare openly credits Chaucer in the prologue:

[Our play] has a noble breeder and a pure,/ A learned, and a poet never went/ More famous yet ‘twixt Po and silver Trent./ Chaucer, of all admir’d, the story gives,/ There constant to eternity it lives. (10-14)

Thompson takes a cynical view of this acknowledgment by the Bard, stating, “…the implication is that Chaucer’s name had considerable selling power”,[[17]](#footnote-17) but she could be correct; as previously discussed, it was common practice for English authors of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to mention Chaucer as a means to legitimize their own works. Shakespeare doing so, however, seems more of an open appreciation, since his own claim to fame was already very well established.

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The writing of The Two Noble Kinsmen was a joint affair, with the experienced Shakespeare authoring the prologue and Acts I & V, while a young Fletcher wrote most of Acts II-IV. The tone differs between the two: Fletcher’s had more of a “tragi-comedy” note while Shakespeare’s segments were more purely tragic. The delineation between their writing is evident in that Fletcher more closely followed Chaucer’s tale, step-by-step, where Shakespeare was so familiar with Chaucer’s work that he felt comfortable stepping off the path a bit now and then. (Shakespeare’s thorough knowledge of *The Knight’s Tale* was also shown in his ability to lightly lift pieces from different places in the poem and combine them in one scene.) The tale Shakespeare and Fletcher told was of the typical sort that Shakespeare liked—old, familiar stories, and *The Knight’s Tale* was second only to *Troilus and Cressida* in popularity among Elizabethans. Shakespeare’s tone in retelling Chaucer’s tale is also different from the original; Chaucer had a humorous undertone more akin to Fletcher’s than the serious one Shakespeare takes.

In bringing the story of Palamon and Arcite to the stage, Shakespeare does walk Chaucer’s path, if not his actual steps. Shakespeare’s Hippolyta and Theseus are not yet married when they are approached by three queens (not simply a ‘compaignye of ladies’) but Theseus is still a strong character. The play opens with the idea of “…war (Theseus) overcoming love (the Amazons) as the male overcomes the female…” Both Theseus’ ponder the “irrational motives by which men can be ruled”[[18]](#footnote-18) and both show a dark side of their personality in their willingness to imprison the young knights in perpetuity. Act III scene vi finds Theseus giving a speech after he finds Palamon and Arcite fighting that is very much like that of Chaucer’s character. Palamon’s following confession and exposure of Arcite is equally familiar. The reaction by Theseus to sentence both to immediate death and the women’s pleas are also the same; the role Shakespeare assigns Emily, however, is not.

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Emily is given a choice in the Renaissance world—she is forced to choose between the two knights, reiterating her role in showing the importance of intent—another of Chaucer’s favorite elements. Act I scene iii introduces a much more animated Emily and in Act IV scene ii we find Emily comparing pictures of the two knights. The latter scene shows the differences between all three authors and is the dividing moment between Shakespeare and Fletcher’s parts of The Two Nobel Kinsmen. Fletcher lets Emily desire both men, while Shakespeare’s Emilia reflects Chaucer’s character in wanting to remain a virgin. (Shakespeare’s does differ from the Chaucerian model in that she plays a legitimate role in both the play and in her life within it.)

Act V finds Shakespeare taking back the reins from Fletcher, and steering the play’s action back to more closely shadow Chaucer’s tale. The gods are prayed to in the same order, with the requests by Arcite, Palamon and Emilia all being the same. Scene iv finds the same accidental fatality with its descriptive details being essentially the same as in *The Knight’s Tale*. The mood at the play’s end is similar as well: “We witen nat what thing we preyen here” (1260) reflects the presence of Chaucerian Fortune and man’s lack of understanding and control.

The presence of Chaucer within Shakespeare’s works is shown not only in parallel storylines, but also in dialogue that is too similar to be coincidence. Examples are too numerous to include them all, but take as an example Shakespeare’s ‘They are not dead?—Nor in a state of life’ (Act I scene iv l.24-25) and Chaucer’s ‘Nat fully quycke, ne fully dede they were’ (1015). Or the closing lines of Act I scene v: ‘This world’s a city full of straying streets,/ And death’s the marketplace where each one meets.’ (15-16) vs. ‘This world nys but a thurghfare ful of wo/ And we been pilgrymes, passynge to and fro/ Deeth is an ende of every worldly soore.’ (2847-9)

The theme of reason versus will and the friction between love and war are constant undercurrents throughout the play. Both Chaucer and Shakespeare contrast the wise, sedate love of Theseus and

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Hippolyta with the hot-headed young passion found in Palamon and Arcite, and the reason/will battle is voiced in Act I scene i. lines 231-233: “As we are men, Thus should we do; being sensually subdued, We lose our human title.” This line also serves to tie in the love/war friction; Shakespeare shows how complicated the relationship is between the two, with love being the stronger in the end, yet needing to be kept under control (as illustrated by the jailer’s daughter).

The friction between love and war is personified in Palamon and Arcite, evidenced not only by their actions, but also in their words. The explicit distinction is shown in Act IV scene iii, lines 282-287 when Palamon states: “If I fall from that mouth, I fall with favour,/ And *lovers* yet unborn shall bless my ashes.” Arcite responds with: “If she refuse me, yet my grave will wed me,/ And *soldiers* sing my epitaph.” The roles they play are reinforced by their prayers in Act V scene I; Arcite prays to be “styl’d the lord o’ th’ day’ (60) (as a soldier, he wants to win the fight) while Palamon does not care about the battle, only about having Emelia (he is, simply, the lover) V.l.127-8

The high cost of love and the destructiveness of passion are Chaucerian themes that Shakespeare often brings to play in his dramas. In The Two Noble Kinsmen, Shakespeare is more consistent in using these ideas than Fletcher, and in Act V scene iii he brings them full force. Shakespeare shows “…the dark side of love, its irrational indignity, its cruelty, and above all its cost….”[[19]](#footnote-19) After he ‘wins’, Arcite voices his awareness of the price, saying to Emilia, “To buy you I have lost what’s dearest to me,/ Save what is bought” (scene iii-13) and Emilia later asks, “Is this winning?” (138).This line of thought continues throughout the scene (lines 142-143, 144-146), culminating with lines 110-112 in scene iv: “That we should things desirewhich do cost us / The loss of our desire! That naught could buy/ Dear love but the loss of dear love!” (Which also are eerily similar to Chaucer’s “And God, that al this wyde world hath wrought, / Sende hym his love that hath it deere aboght.” (3099-3100))

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Thompson’s statement “In the Shakespearian parts of the play, there is considerable evidence for a thoughtful reading of the poem and an attempt to express and elaborate Chaucer’s complex attitude and philosophy”[[20]](#footnote-20)reflects only one side of the Two Noble Kinsmen coin; the other side is equally serious, but much darker. Contained within the play is the idea of external forces subordinating the individual, and an awareness of a controlling power; both are ingredients of tragedy that the Renaissance inherited from the Middle Ages. Chaucer never achieved the true tragedy because he was always aware of other possibilities, where Shakespeare refrained from offering options and was accordingly much more serious.\* In The Two Noble Kinsmen, Shakespeare had no narrator and therefore no ability to distance his audience from the action, which made the story darker, more uneasy in the telling. The Two Noble Kinsman becomes not comic but frightening. Thompson quotes Phillip Edwards and states: “The Two Noble Kinsmen ‘gives the most cynical assessment of the progress of life since the writing of *Troilus and Cressida* and one is lead to wonder whether the comparison is significant. Undoubtedly Shakespeare saw behind the Chaucerian humour to the dark vision of men blindly pursuing happiness at the instigation of their own lower instincts, and the arbitrary and incomprehensible decrees of the indifferent gods.”[[21]](#footnote-21) A dark side, indeed.

A study of the Chaucer-Shakespeare connection leaves one in awe. Awe at the greatness of the medieval poet whose writing had such a wide-spread and enduring impact on those who would follow. Awe at the amazing talent of the Renaissance Bard who would lift English literature to an unparalleled height. And awe at the influence that the one had on the other, leading to stories of such richness, fullness and depth that they captivate us centuries later. William Basse wrote an epitaph for Shakespeare not long after his death; in it he asks Spencer, Chaucer and Spenser to make room in their tomb so that Shakespeare may join them. Centuries later, Ralph Waldo Emerson paid homage to the greatness of

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Chaucer and Shakespeare, including them with other creative giants: “The rich poets, as Homer, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Raphael, have obviously no limits to their works, except the limits of their lifetime, and resemble a mirror carried through the street, ready to render an image of every created thing.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

The mirror Shakespeare carried was, in fact, crafted by Chaucer in the Middle Ages. Images that Shakespeare saw in the mirror and used in his plays were influenced, if not created, by his predecessor. John D. Mitchell wrote of how “…women and men are standing on the shoulders of those who have preceded them.” He expresses the belief that we are all dependent upon what has been achieved before us in the arena of Civilization, and uses the Shakespeare-Chaucer-Boccaccio relationship to illustrate his point. “Boccaccio, Chaucer and Shakespeare are uniquely great, each contributed much to the civilization of the West. The fact that each proved to be a catalyst to the one who followed in no way diminished his stature.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Shakespeare used Chaucer throughout his career, sometimes just a sprinkle and at other times in full measure. Thompson reiterated this fact, writing that “The sheer quantity of the material involved implies that Shakespeare did not merely use Chaucer for a plot or two (as he did some authors) but knew him so well that he recalled his work (often unconsciously, one would imagine) in virtually every play.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Emerson was mistaken in writing that Chaucer and Shakespeare were limited by their lifetimes—neither was. Chaucer and Shakespeare live on today, vicariously, just as Chaucer did in Shakespeare’s world.

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