

advantage when MSS. were expensive and the professional *raconteur* was still a power in the land. About the time that rhyming chroniclers bade fair to exhaust the adventures of Roland and of Arthur, and to extend back their domain into the yet more mythical times of Brut, the revival of learning in Italy brought into notice the deathless tales of Greece and Troy, the story of the rivalries of Palamon and Arcite, of the checkered loves of Troilus and Creseid. The remoteness of time and place into which the poet was now carried by these old but ever new conceptions, stimulated his by-no-means usually quiet taste to an even richer and more fantastic ornamentation of detail. This detail was, of course, that of the singer's own age, the laws and language of chivalry were affected by Greek and Trojan alike on his pages; costumes, arms and social relations smack of feudal Europe; and the general effect, consequently, much resembles that of some picture by Tintoretto or Rubens, where another art has confounded time and country. Jewish priests, Florentine citizens or Dutch burghers, Spanish men-at-arms and Roman centurions in one strange mixture. It was well that Chaucer and his compeers followed in this respect the bent of their natural genius and the demands of their audience; it is far more desirable that we should have these lively contemporaneous pictures of the ideal chivalric existence rather than their necessarily imperfect ideas of Grecian customs and modes of life.

The same effect was not by any means produced by all the men who dug in Italian mines for the re-found stories of an expired civilization. Some moralized till we wonder how such mortal prolixity came to be preserved. Chaucer alone united the greatest tact and skill as a *raconteur* with a nameless freshness of style and language which left him unapproachable. He shook the dust of centuries from his antique subjects and dipped them in May-dew. His favourite daisy blossoms as persistently in his pages as ever it did in English spring-tide meadows. Later poets affected raptures over May mornings and copied his favourite opening verses that told how he was led out into some leafy place by the singing of birds, before the night had well-nigh ended; but they drew their inspiration from Chaucer, and not as he did, direct from nature herself. So far

was this imitation pushed that as good a poet as King James I. of Scotland did not scruple to adopt whole lines of his 'Maister Chaucer's' poems, and to follow long passages with an almost paraphrastic closeness.* Before quitting Chaucer, we would draw attention to what appears to us to be an error in the foot note on p. 54, to the lines in the description of the merchant in the *Canterbury tales*, in which we are told

'He wolde the sea were kept for eny thinge,
Betwixē Middleburgh and Orēwelle.'

Mr. Ward explains the phrase 'for eny thinge' to mean 'for fear of anything'; which appears to us meaningless. If the word 'fear' has to be imported into the sentence, the sense would require it to read 'from fear of anything.' But there is no need to bring in a word which the poet does not appear to have had in his mind at all. What the merchant wished was that 'before anything' the narrow seas across which his cloth trafficking was carried on should be kept free from pirates. We may also notice in passing a curious instance of the occurrence among our older writers of what is usually supposed to be a piece of purely modern and vulgar phraseology. We refer to the line in which Dorigen is said to have 'let her scrwe *styde*.' The expression may be traced down literature on its way to every-day use; but it passes by a descending scale for the next person we find using it is the drunken tinker, Christopher Sly, who expresses his disgust at things in general in the comprehensive phrase 'let the world slide.' Not to leave Chaucer with an idiom which appears to us somewhat slangy upon his lips, we will quote these lines on Spring, from the 'Romaunt of the Rose' (if it indeed be from his pen):

'Than yongē folke entenden ay
For to ben gay and amorous,
The tyme is then so savorous,'

and ask if they must not have been in Tennyson's mind when he sang

'In the spring a young man's fancy lightly
turns to thoughts of love.'

* See examples pointed out by Mr. Ward at p. 131, where we notice a double omission; a blank being left in two places for an intended reference to another page.