

Not unfrequently a pleasant humour breathes through his verse; sometimes he seriously discourses upon his themes, and sometimes, with a sweet pathos, the old minstrel chants his gentle lay. Master of his art, he sang under the influence of a strong inspiration. Sometimes his harp quivered with subdued emotion—sometimes in overpowering strains, and in the wild notes that nature taught him, he poured forth in song his lofty thoughts.

But he had the skill of a true artist. Possessed of a deep insight into human character, of extensive observation, and a lively imagination, he describes with rare felicity the emotions and motives and principles of his characters; and with a peculiar grace exacts the sympathies of the reader, drawing from every source materials to adorn and beautify his verse. There is nothing overdrawn—nothing not in keeping with the spirit of his age. A true and elevated taste enables him to handle every theme with dignity and address.

Chaucer was undoubtedly the first true poet of whom England could boast. None who preceded him could with any degree of justice be compared to him. For over two hundred years no English poet arose to overleap the mark that he had set. The Bard of the Avon was the first to surpass him, and he owed much to this grand old master.

There are reasons why Chaucer's works are not much read and appreciated to-day. His spelling is very antiquated; the pronunciation of the language has since then greatly changed, while many words and idioms current in his day have become obsolete; hence it is sometimes quite difficult to discover the meaning of some of his finest passages. Moreover, his subjects were not those with which we of to-day have very much sympathy. But it is to be remembered that the English language was just then in the important stage of transition from a synthetic to an analytic tongue. The Norman-French, and the sturdy, vigorous Anglo-Saxon,