A commentary on the poetry of Chaucer & Spenser

Jack Adolphus Alfred
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A COMMENTARY
ON THE POETRY OF
CHAUCER & SPENSER

BY
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TO
SIR A. W. WARD
Litt.D., LL.D., F.B.A.
MASTER OF PETERHOUSE, CAMBRIDGE

My dear Master,

It will not be thought, I hope, that in dedicating this book to you I am seeking, under the cover of your name, to advance a claim to learning for so merely modern a Commentary. You at any rate know me well enough to believe that it is only as a fellow-collegian, and not with any presumption of other fellowship, that I desire to associate with the work of a Peterhouse man the name of one who for nearly twenty years has been so much to Peterhouse.

Faithfully and gratefully yours,

A. A. JACK.

King's College,
Aberdeen.
PREFACE

This book has come together somewhat occasionally. Originally conceived as two of several essays designed to consider some of our older poets from the standpoint of modern interest, it has finally taken the shape of a detailed critical account of Chaucer and Spenser.

The explanation is that while the essays were still incomplete, I was asked to deliver, in the Session 1914-1915, the Clark Lectures in Trinity College, Cambridge, and, as I was then busy with those two poets, I chose them as my subject.

Literary essays and class-room comment are different things, and to turn my material into lectures during the stress of the National preoccupation was not easy. Nevertheless, doing what I could, I found myself as of course hastily altering, both by omission and addition, and in the upshot, I am afraid, deferring the interests of the general reader to those of the student. And now when later I have tried again to recast in more literary form, I am not sure that I have ended by satisfying either party.

But I have had two guiding considerations. The first was to preserve my original standpoint, and to keep
the poems constantly under review, not as documents in the history of literature, but as emotional compositions which may or may not have retained their power to please. What is the interest of this poem or that poem to the modern reader is practically the sole question with which I have continuously concerned myself. The second was to avoid encumbering my pages with information not strictly essential to the understanding of the poetry, and with this object I have avoided as far as possible reprinting what can be found in well-known books. Some commonly known facts have had to be re-stated, but on this head I have been as short as was consistent with an intelligible narrative. The result is a running commentary that is likely to be less serviceable to those who have not read the poets than to those who either already know them or are in process of making their acquaintance. Another purpose, perhaps more useful, these pages might have been intended to fulfil, but I should say at once that they had their own, and that it was not to serve as an Introduction preparatory to the study of the poems. That task has already been performed so often and so ably there was no need to re-attempt it.

In regard to my obligations I should be ungrateful if I did not acknowledge the help I have had from Morley and Skeat, from the writings of The Master of Peterhouse, Dr. Saintsbury, and Mr. Pollard, and especially from Mr. Ker’s essay which first opened my eyes to the greatness of Troilus and Cressida. Professor de Selincourt would not wish to be responsible for the
attitude I adopt towards Spenser, but I have made free use of his scholarship.

I should add that when I first wrote the Sixth Chapter I had not seen Mr. Phelps's book on the Romantic Revival, but the information which directed me to several of the more curious poems was doubtless derived from his volume, and I have since been indebted to it for some additions as well as corrections in detail.

My object has been always to speak at first hand, and if my knowledge had allowed me I would always have done so. As it is, I have to thank my brother, Dr. W. R. Jack, whose acquaintance with foreign literature is responsible for the substance of what is said of Boccaccio's dealing with the Troilus and Cressida story.

Miss A. M. Mackenzie, M.A., has very kindly prepared the full index, and I am further obliged to her for giving her attention to the proof.
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