

BOOK REVIEWS

CHAUCER. By G. K. Chesterton. (Faber & Faber, Ltd.; 12/6.)

The dust-jacket of the book is a special joy. On the back is Chaucer in his Gothic niche. On each side is Chesterton, ensconced in a ruined Gothic arch, through which is seen a church-spire behind a battlemented gate. From this gate come, presumably, the Canterbury Pilgrims, some on foot and some on horseback. The expression on Mr. Chesterton's face is much more serious than we have been led to expect, and is heightened by the glare of his eyeglasses. He is not writing, but he holds a quill pen poised, evidently to pin down the *mot juste*, which in one case seems to have escaped him, for on page 26 he quotes Shakespeare as saying :

'We are such stuff as dreams are made of.'

On page 79 is a misprint, sufficiently misleading to need immediate correction. On the top line, 'he must deal with the abstractions *and* the materials of the trade' should be, 'not the materials of the trade.'

The dust-jacket represents Mr. Chesterton as wearing his singing-robe, with his crown beside him on the ground. This is as it should be, for, though the book is but of 293 pages, there are many of them which might easily be priced at 12/6 each, for nearly all through he is at his best. Indeed, the only portion of the book which seems below his accustomed form is the chapter entitled 'The Garden of Romance,' but this is natural, as it deals with the duller side of Chaucer, in his imitation of the overdone conventions inherited from Troubadours and fugitive minstrels, singing everlastingly of that love which is not everlasting. Moreover, such a brilliant survey of Chaucer and his times is none the worse for proving that the author has taken, not a bird's-eye view of this luxuriant undergrowth, but has gone about in it and looked into it more narrowly for our sake. This painful labour was indispensable, were it only to obviate in advance the dreary disparagements of that dry-as-dust school, which would smother in the rubble of their excavations, not only the Bible, but Chaucer, Shakespeare, Homer, and innumerable others. As an instance of how this nuisance still smells, we quote from the current number of *The Occult Review*, page 344 :

VOILE D'ISIS.

René Guénon traces a secret language in the works of Dante, and proclaims the great Florentine to be an initiate.

Chesterton has discovered no secret language in Chaucer, but, being himself one of the greatest English poets of our time, has some highly judicious recommendations about the moderation to be observed in turning Chaucer's language so as to suit the modern reader, without taking off too much of the bloom from the English of the prime.

He begins by reminding us how all poets must needs dispense a freshening influence, 'a perpetual, slight novelty,' but Christian poets more so than Pagan poets, for to them has been made plain that God's world cannot die. The poet may be wildly lyrical about politics, or he may not, but he cannot be indifferent to morals, since morals are eternal things.

In the second chapter, 'The Age of Chaucer,' there is a very precious hint as to what ailed those Whig historians who are fast becoming waste paper: 'The real vice of the Victorians was that they regarded history as a story that ended well—because it ended with the Victorians.' He is equally illuminating about the ailment of earlier chroniclers, for instance how the men of Shakespeare's time understood far less of the Democratic ideal than the men of Chaucer's time. Neither Toryism nor Whiggery is synonymous with progress or even daylight. There is more daylight in Chaucer than in the whole of literature ever since, not excluding the works of William Shakespeare.

Against our natural tendency to patronise Chaucer, the author sets in bold relief not only the fact that certain things in Chaucer's time were quite as hideously up-to-date as many things in our time, but that Chaucer himself was as much before and behind them and above them as any of our own broader-minded seers. For illustration, consult Chesterton's treatment of Chaucer's treatment of the Pardoners, the Friars versus the Bishops, and the Pope as the leader who was always in advance. He notes how the Dyer has disappeared, but the doctor is still typical, hardly changed at all except in the words he uses, just because the Doctors are still organised according to the idea of a Mediaeval Guild.

The mutual interactions of Chaucer and Romance give rise to some illuminating remarks on the mutual interactions of Christianity and the world of men. The Kingdom of Heaven is like unto leaven, but we are often at a loss for a neat illustration of this most tremendous feature of the Kingdom. That simple sentence contains more subtlety and vastness than any similar phrase of six words that human lips have formed, but on page 150 and the following pages there is a very succinct and suggestive sermon on this small text.

Blackfriars

In the chapter on the *Canterbury Tales*, Chesterton is in his glory, taking his good things where he finds them and gleefully sharing them out with all and sundry. He makes us almost look forward to some bad weather in the winter when we can join the Pilgrimage ourselves in spirit.

We trust it will not derogate from the dignity of the whole book to say that, once freed from the careful consideration of the text, we are let out from school to recreate ourselves with the contemplation of Chaucer as an Englishman, Chaucer and the Renaissance, and the Religion of Chaucer. We are so much left guessing at Chaucer's individual life that the only conclusion to arrive at is that his private life was very public and his public life very private, just as the English love to have it. Thus he emerges God's own Englishman. There are other reasons why the same obscurity should enfold the career of Shakespeare, but all is very English. So equally dulled are the edges of his contacts with Dante and Petrarch. Chesterton leaves no doubt that Chaucer fell in with both and was influenced by their work, as indeed he was by many other European writers, but it is just like the English Chaucer to leave no more record than this.

A chapter on the Religion of Chaucer may be almost dubbed a *vade-mecum*, for all who have to deal with those follies of the Reformation which persist to our own day in the obstinate attribution of Reformation principles to those high-minded children of the Church in every age, who merely had a longing for reform. And the moral of the story is the wonderful amount of *colportage*, or brokerage, used by Chaucer in days when there were very precious things to be exchanged between nations, but neither safe nor easy communications; when France was just ceasing to be a province of England and England thereby finding herself at last, Chaucer brought into England all that of Europe which is imperishable, because baptized of water and the Holy Ghost; and by his faith and free translation from current romance, he Europeanised the English language. If Milton crowned the work, the credit of its inception is Chaucer's.

J.O'C.

SUMMA THEOLOGIAE MORALIS : AD MENTEM D. THOMAE ET AD NORMAM JURIS NOVI. By Benedict Henry Merkelbach, O.P. Vol. I; de Principiis et Virtutibus theologicis; pp. 756; 30 frs. Vol. II; de Virtutibus moralibus; pp. 994; 40 frs. (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer.)

Those who have been fortunate to study under Fr. Merkelbach at Louvain and at Rome, and many who have read his