

FORD MADOX BROWN'S "CHAUCER AT THE COURT OF EDWARD III"

Ford Madox Brown, by carefully documenting the progress and significance of Chaucer at the Court of Edward III in his diary and 1865 Piccadilly Exhibition catalogue entry, would seem to have handed commentators their work on a plate. However, it is my aim here to suggest that what he tells us is in fact only half the story and that there are aspects of the work that neither he, nor subsequent critics, have fully explained. This article makes no claim to do so, but only to highlight a neglected side of the painting, and to discuss its uneasy and disturbing qualities.

Brown's comment that "this picture is the first in which I endeavoured to carry out the notion . . . of treating light and shade absolutely, as it exists at any one moment"¹ has led to its being heralded as marking the breakthrough of realism in his art, while its composition has been traced back to the influence of early Italian and Flemish art and to the work of Nazarene painters, whom Brown met while in Rome. Certainly its realism and dramatic dynamism are a long way from his original grand design of a triptych (with Chaucer occupying the central panel, flanked by other, later great English poets) intended not only to salute those poets, but to glorify, through them, English poetry as descended from Chaucer. In the original painting of Chaucer -- now at the Sydney Art Gallery² -- figures are still seen on the distant ramparts, representing "the overthrow, through Chaucer, of the Saxon Bard and Norman Troubadour."³ These, in a sense, are all that remains of the original grand allegorical scheme. By the time Brown comes to paint the Tate replica, even this last echo has disappeared and the reality of the painted moment has taken over from formal allegory. But what exactly is that reality?

In the summer of 1845 Brown first conceived plans for the painting; as he read the passage relating to Chaucer in Sir James Mackintosh's history of England, Brown reports, he "immediately saw visions of Chaucer reading his poems to knights and Ladyes fair, to the king and court amid air and sun shine".⁴ When one comes to look at the painting itself, its "air and sun shine" are mostly in evidence in the landscape background, far away from the courtly group who are actually placed half in the shadow of the castle wall. Although some of the figures are struck with sunlight, it is a cold light, falling on pale flesh and stone, and not the same, warm sun as bathes the landscape beyond in summery greens and yellows. True, Alice Perrers, seated by the old king, waves her peacock feather fan, indicative of heat, but still the colours of the foreground have a chilly rawness overriding any such indications of warmth. Brown,