

LIFE OF GEOFFREY CHAUCER.

NOT in point of genius only, but even in point of time, Chaucer may claim the proud designation of "first" English poet. He wrote "The Court of Love" in 1345, and "The Romaunt of the Rose," if not also "Troilus and Cressida," probably within the next decade: the dates usually assigned to the poems of Laurence Minot extend from 1335 to 1355, while "The Vision of Piers Plowman" mentions events that occurred in 1360 and 1362 -- before which date Chaucer had certainly written "The Assembly of Fowls" and his "Dream." But, though they were his contemporaries, neither Minot nor Langland (if Langland was the author of the Vision) at all approached Chaucer in the finish, the force, or the universal interest of their works and the poems of earlier writer; as Layamon and the author of the "Ormulum," are less English than Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Norman. Those poems reflected the perplexed struggle for supremacy between the two grand elements of our language, which marked the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; a struggle intimately associated with the political relations between the conquering Normans and the subjugated Anglo-Saxons. Chaucer found two branches of the language; that spoken by the people, Teutonic in its genius and its forms; that spoken by the learned and the noble, based on the French. Yet each branch had begun to borrow of the other -- just as nobles and people had been taught to recognise that each needed the other in the wars and the social tasks of the time; and Chaucer, a scholar, a courtier, a man conversant with all orders of society, but accustomed to speak, think, and write in the words of the highest, by his comprehensive genius cast into the simmering mould a magical amalgamant which made the two half-hostile elements unite and interpenetrate each other. Before Chaucer wrote, there were two tongues in England, keeping alive the feuds and resentments of cruel centuries; when he laid down his pen, there was practically but one speech -- there was, and ever since has been, but one people.

Geoffrey Chaucer, according to the most trustworthy traditions- for authentic testimonies on the subject are wanting -- was born in 1328; and London is generally believed to have been his birth-place. It is true that Leland, the biographer of England's first great poet who lived nearest to his time, not merely speaks of Chaucer as having been born many years later than the date now assigned, but mentions Berkshire or Oxfordshire as the scene of his birth. So great uncertainty have some felt on the latter score, that elaborate parallels have been drawn between Chaucer, and Homer -- for whose birthplace several cities contended, and whose descent was traced to the demigods. Leland may seem to have had fair opportunities of getting at

the truth about Chaucer's birth -- for Henry VIII had him, at the suppression of the monasteries throughout England, to search for records of public interest the archives of the religious houses. But it may be questioned whether he was likely to find many authentic particulars regarding the personal history of the poet in the quarters which he explored; and Leland's testimony seems to be set aside by Chaucer's own evidence as to his birthplace, and by the contemporary references which make him out an aged man for years preceding the accepted date of his death. In one of his prose works, "The Testament of Love," the poet speaks of himself in terms that strongly confirm the claim of London to the honour of giving him birth; for he there mentions "the city of London, that is to me so dear and sweet, in which I was forth grown; and more kindly love," says he, "have I to that place than to any other in earth; as every kindly creature hath full appetite to that place of his kindly engendrure, and to will rest and peace in that place to abide." This tolerably direct evidence is supported -- so far as it can be at such an interval of time -- by the learned Camden; in his Annals of Queen Elizabeth, he describes Spencer, who was certainly born in London, as being a fellow-citizen of Chaucer's -- "Edmundus Spenserus, patria Londinensis, Musis adeo ardentibus natus, ut omnes Anglicos superioris aevi poetas, ne Chaucero quidem concive excepto, superaret." <1> The records of the time notice more than one person of the name of Chaucer, who held honourable positions about the Court; and though we cannot distinctly trace the poet's relationship with any of these namesakes or antecessors, we find excellent ground for belief that his family or friends stood well at Court, in the ease with which Chaucer made his way there, and in his subsequent career.

Like his great successor, Spencer, it was the fortune of Chaucer to live under a splendid, chivalrous, and high-spirited reign. 1328 was the second year of Edward III; and, what with Scotch wars, French expeditions, and the strenuous and costly struggle to hold England in a worthy place among the States of Europe, there was sufficient bustle, bold achievement, and high ambition in the period to inspire a poet who was prepared to catch the spirit of the day. It was an age of elaborate courtesy, of high-paced gallantry, of courageous venture, of noble disdain for mean tranquillity; and Chaucer, on the whole a man of peaceful avocations, was penetrated to the depth of his consciousness with the lofty and lovely civil side of that brilliant and restless military period. No record of his youthful years, however, remains to us; if we believe that at the age of eighteen he was a student of Cambridge, it is only on the strength of a reference in his "Court of Love", where the narrator is made to say that his name is Philogenet, "of Cambridge clerk;" while he had already told us that when he was stirred to seek the Court of Cupid he was "at eighteen year of age." According to Leland, however, he was

educated at Oxford, proceeding thence to France and the Netherlands, to finish his studies; but there remains no certain evidence of his having belonged to either University. At the same time, it is not doubted that his family was of good condition; and, whether or not we accept the assertion that his father held the rank of knighthood -- rejecting the hypotheses that make him a merchant, or a vintner "at the corner of Kirton Lane" -- it is plain, from Chaucer's whole career, that he had introductions to public life, and recommendations to courtly favour, wholly independent of his genius. We have the clearest testimony that his mental training was of wide range and thorough excellence, altogether rare for a mere courtier in those days: his poems attest his intimate acquaintance with the divinity, the philosophy, and the scholarship of his time, and show him to have had the sciences, as then developed and taught, "at his fingers' ends." Another proof of Chaucer's good birth and fortune would be found in the statement that, after his University career was completed, he entered the Inner Temple -- the expenses of which could be borne only by men of noble and opulent families; but although there is a story that he was once fined two shillings for thrashing a Franciscan friar in Fleet Street, we have no direct authority for believing that the poet devoted himself to the uncongenial study of the law. No special display of knowledge on that subject appears in his works; yet in the sketch of the Manciple, in the Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, may be found indications of his familiarity with the internal economy of the Inns of Court; while numerous legal phrases and references hint that his comprehensive information was not at fault on legal matters. Leland says that he quitted the University "a ready logician, a smooth rhetorician, a pleasant poet, a grave philosopher, an ingenious mathematician, and a holy divine;" and by all accounts, when Geoffrey Chaucer comes before us authentically for the first time, at the age of thirty-one, he was possessed of knowledge and accomplishments far beyond the common standard of his day.

Chaucer at this period possessed also other qualities fitted to recommend him to favour in a Court like that of Edward III. Urry describes him, on the authority of a portrait, as being then "of a fair beautiful complexion, his lips red and full, his size of a just medium, and his port and air graceful and majestic. So," continues the ardent biographer, -- "so that every ornament that could claim the approbation of the great and fair, his abilities to record the valour of the one, and celebrate the beauty of the other, and his wit and gentle behaviour to converse with both, conspired to make him a complete courtier." If we believe that his "Court of Love" had received such publicity as the literary media of the time allowed in the somewhat narrow and select literary world -- not to speak of "Troilus and Cressida," which, as Lydgate mentions it first among Chaucer's works, some have supposed to be a

youthful production -- we find a third and not less powerful recommendation to the favour of the great co-operating with his learning and his gallant bearing. Elsewhere <2> reasons have been shown for doubt whether "Troilus and Cressida" should not be assigned to a later period of Chaucer's life; but very little is positively known about the dates and sequence of his various works. In the year 1386, being called as witness with regard to a contest on a point of heraldry between Lord Scrope and Sir Robert Grosvenor, Chaucer deposed that he entered on his military career in 1359. In that year Edward III invaded France, for the third time, in pursuit of his claim to the French crown; and we may fancy that, in describing the embarkation of the knights in "Chaucer's Dream", the poet gained some of the vividness and stir of his picture from his recollections of the embarkation of the splendid and well-appointed royal host at Sandwich, on board the eleven hundred transports provided for the enterprise. In this expedition the laurels of Poitiers were flung on the ground; after vainly attempting Rheims and Paris, Edward was constrained, by cruel weather and lack of provisions, to retreat toward his ships; the fury of the elements made the retreat more disastrous than an overthrow in pitched battle; horses and men perished by thousands, or fell into the hands of the pursuing French. Chaucer, who had been made prisoner at the siege of Retters, was among the captives in the possession of France when the treaty of Bretigny -- the "great peace" -- was concluded, in May, 1360. Returning to England, as we may suppose, at the peace, the poet, ere long, fell into another and a pleasanter captivity; for his marriage is generally believed to have taken place shortly after his release from foreign durance. He had already gained the personal friendship and favour of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, the King's son; the Duke, while Earl of Richmond, had courted, and won to wife after a certain delay, Blanche, daughter and co-heiress of Henry Duke of Lancaster; and Chaucer is by some believed to have written "The Assembly of Fowls" to celebrate the wooing, as he wrote "Chaucer's Dream" to celebrate the wedding, of his patron. The marriage took place in 1359, the year of Chaucer's expedition to France; and as, in "The Assembly of Fowls," the formel or female eagle, who is supposed to represent the Lady Blanche, begs that her choice of a mate may be deferred for a year, 1358 and 1359 have been assigned as the respective dates of the two poems already mentioned. In the "Dream," Chaucer prominently introduces his own lady-love, to whom, after the happy union of his patron with the Lady Blanche, he is wedded amid great rejoicing; and various expressions in the same poem show that not only was the poet high in favour with the illustrious pair, but that his future wife had also peculiar claims on their regard. She was the younger daughter of Sir Payne Roet, a native of Hainault, who had, like many of his countrymen, been attracted to England by the example and patronage of Queen Philippa. The favourite attendant on

the Lady Blanche was her elder sister Katherine: subsequently married to Sir Hugh Swynford, a gentleman of Lincolnshire; and destined, after the death of Blanche, to be in succession governess of her children, mistress of John of Gaunt, and lawfully-wedded Duchess of Lancaster. It is quite sufficient proof that Chaucer's position at Court was of no mean consequence, to find that his wife, the sister of the future Duchess of Lancaster, was one of the royal maids of honour, and even, as Sir Harris Nicolas conjectures, a god-daughter of the Queen -- for her name also was Philippa.

Between 1359, when the poet himself testifies that he was made prisoner while bearing arms in France, and September 1366, when Queen Philippa granted to her former maid of honour, by the name of Philippa Chaucer, a yearly pension of ten marks, or L6, 13s. 4d., we have no authentic mention of Chaucer, express or indirect. It is plain from this grant that the poet's marriage with Sir Payne Roet's daughter was not celebrated later than 1366; the probability is, that it closely followed his return from the wars. In 1367, Edward III. settled upon Chaucer a life- pension of twenty marks, "for the good service which our beloved Valet -- 'dilectus Valettus noster' -- Geoffrey Chaucer has rendered, and will render in time to come." Camden explains 'Valettus hospitii' to signify a Gentleman of the Privy Chamber; Selden says that the designation was bestowed "upon young heirs designed to be knighted, or young gentlemen of great descent and quality." Whatever the strict meaning of the word, it is plain that the poet's position was honourable and near to the King's person, and also that his worldly circumstances were easy, if not affluent -- for it need not be said that twenty marks in those days represented twelve or twenty times the sum in these. It is believed that he found powerful patronage, not merely from the Duke of Lancaster and his wife, but from Margaret Countess of Pembroke, the King's daughter. To her Chaucer is supposed to have addressed the "Goodly Ballad", in which the lady is celebrated under the image of the daisy; her he is by some understood to have represented under the title of Queen Alcestis, in the "Court of Love" and the Prologue to "The Legend of Good Women;" and in her praise we may read his charming descriptions and eulogies of the daisy -- French, "Marguerite," the name of his Royal patroness. To this period of Chaucer's career we may probably attribute the elegant and courtly, if somewhat conventional, poems of "The Flower and the Leaf," "The Cuckoo and the Nightingale," &c. "The Lady Margaret," says Urry, ". . . would frequently compliment him upon his poems. But this is not to be meant of his Canterbury Tales, they being written in the latter part of his life, when the courtier and the fine gentleman gave way to solid sense and plain descriptions. In his love-pieces he was obliged to have the strictest regard to modesty and decency; the ladies at that time insisting so much

upon the nicest punctilios of honour, that it was highly criminal to depreciate their sex, or do anything that might offend virtue." Chaucer, in their estimation, had sinned against the dignity and honour of womankind by his translation of the French "Roman de la Rose," and by his "Troilus and Cressida" -- assuming it to have been among his less mature works; and to atone for those offences the Lady Margaret (though other and older accounts say that it was the first Queen of Richard II., Anne of Bohemia), prescribed to him the task of writing "The Legend of Good Women" (see introductory note to that poem). About this period, too, we may place the composition of Chaucer's A. B. C., or The Prayer of Our Lady, made at the request of the Duchess Blanche, a lady of great devoutness in her private life. She died in 1369; and Chaucer, as he had allegorised her wooing, celebrated her marriage, and aided her devotions, now lamented her death, in a poem entitled "The Book of the Duchess; or, the Death of Blanche.<3>

In 1370, Chaucer was employed on the King's service abroad; and in November 1372, by the title of "Scutifer noster" -- our Esquire or Shield-bearer -- he was associated with "Jacobus Pronan," and "Johannes de Mari civis Januensis," in a royal commission, bestowing full powers to treat with the Duke of Genoa, his Council, and State. The object of the embassy was to negotiate upon the choice of an English port at which the Genoese might form a commercial establishment; and Chaucer, having quitted England in December, visited Genoa and Florence, and returned to England before the end of November 1373 -- for on that day he drew his pension from the Exchequer in person. The most interesting point connected with this Italian mission is the question, whether Chaucer visited Petrarch at Padua. That he did, is unhesitatingly affirmed by the old biographers; but the authentic notices of Chaucer during the years 1372-1373, as shown by the researches of Sir Harris Nicolas, are confined to the facts already stated; and we are left to answer the question by the probabilities of the case, and by the aid of what faint light the poet himself affords. We can scarcely fancy that Chaucer, visiting Italy for the first time, in a capacity which opened for him easy access to the great and the famous, did not embrace the chance of meeting a poet whose works he evidently knew in their native tongue, and highly esteemed. With Mr Wright, we are strongly disinclined to believe "that Chaucer did not profit by the opportunity . . . of improving his acquaintance with the poetry, if not the poets, of the country he thus visited, whose influence was now being felt on the literature of most countries of Western Europe." That Chaucer was familiar with the Italian language appears not merely from his repeated selection as Envoy to Italian States, but by many passages in his poetry, from "The Assembly of Fowls" to "The Canterbury Tales." In the opening of the first poem there is a striking parallel to Dante's inscription on the gate of Hell. The first Song of Troilus,

in "Troilus and Cressida", is a nearly literal translation of Petrarch's 88th Sonnet. In the Prologue to "The Legend of Good Women", there is a reference to Dante which can hardly have reached the poet at second-hand. And in Chaucer's great work -- as in The Wife of Bath's Tale, and The Monk's Tale -- direct reference by name is made to Dante, "the wise poet of Florence," "the great poet of Italy," as the source whence the author has quoted. When we consider the poet's high place in literature and at Court, which could not fail to make him free of the hospitalities of the brilliant little Lombard States; his familiarity with the tongue and the works of Italy's greatest bards, dead and living; the reverential regard which he paid to the memory of great poets, of which we have examples in "The House of Fame," and at the close of "Troilus and Cressida" <4>; along with his own testimony in the Prologue to The Clerk's Tale, we cannot fail to construe that testimony as a declaration that the Tale was actually told to Chaucer by the lips of Petrarch, in 1373, the very year in which Petrarch translated it into Latin, from Boccaccio's "Decameron."<5> Mr Bell notes the objection to this interpretation, that the words are put into the mouth, not of the poet, but of the Clerk; and meets it by the counter-objection, that the Clerk, being a purely imaginary personage, could not have learned the story at Padua from Petrarch -- and therefore that Chaucer must have departed from the dramatic assumption maintained in the rest of the dialogue. Instances could be adduced from Chaucer's writings to show that such a sudden "departure from the dramatic assumption" would not be unexampled: witness the "aside" in The Wife of Bath's Prologue, where, after the jolly Dame has asserted that "half so boldly there can no man swear and lie as a woman can", the poet hastens to interpose, in his own person, these two lines:

"I say not this by wives that be wise, But if it be when they them misadvise."

And again, in the Prologue to the "Legend of Good Women," from a description of the daisy --

"She is the cleanness and the very light, That in this darke world me guides and leads,"

the poet, in the very next lines, slides into an address to his lady:

"The heart within my sorrowful heart you dreads And loves so sore, that ye be, verily, The mistress of my wit, and nothing I," &c.

When, therefore, the Clerk of Oxford is made to say that he will tell a tale --

"The which that I Learn'd at Padova of a worthy clerk, As

proved by his wordes and his werk. He is now dead, and nailed in his chest,
I pray to God to give his soul good rest. Francis Petrarc', the laureate poete,
Highte this clerk, whose rhetoric so sweet Illumin'd all Itaile of poetry. . . .
But forth to tellen of this worthy man, That taughte me this tale, as I
began." . . .

we may without violent effort believe that Chaucer speaks in his own person, though dramatically the words are on the Clerk's lips. And the belief is not impaired by the sorrowful way in which the Clerk lingers on Petrarch's death -- which would be less intelligible if the fictitious narrator had only read the story in the Latin translation, than if we suppose the news of Petrarch's death at Arqua in July 1374 to have closely followed Chaucer to England, and to have cruelly and irresistibly mingled itself with our poet's personal recollections of his great Italian contemporary. Nor must we regard as without significance the manner in which the Clerk is made to distinguish between the "body" of Petrarch's tale, and the fashion in which it was set forth in writing, with a proem that seemed "a thing impertinent", save that the poet had chosen in that way to "convey his matter" -- told, or "taught," so much more directly and simply by word of mouth. It is impossible to pronounce positively on the subject; the question whether Chaucer saw Petrarch in 1373 must remain a moot-point, so long as we have only our present information; but fancy loves to dwell on the thought of the two poets conversing under the vines at Arqua; and we find in the history and the writings of Chaucer nothing to contradict, a good deal to countenance, the belief that such a meeting occurred.

Though we have no express record, we have indirect testimony, that Chaucer's Genoese mission was discharged satisfactorily; for on the 23d of April 1374, Edward III grants at Windsor to the poet, by the title of "our beloved squire" -- dilecto Armigero nostro -- unum pycher. vini, "one pitcher of wine" daily, to be "perceived" in the port of London; a grant which, on the analogy of more modern usage, might be held equivalent to Chaucer's appointment as Poet Laureate. When we find that soon afterwards the grant was commuted for a money payment of twenty marks per annum, we need not conclude that Chaucer's circumstances were poor; for it may be easily supposed that the daily "perception" of such an article of income was attended with considerable prosaic inconvenience. A permanent provision for Chaucer was made on the 8th of June 1374, when he was appointed Controller of the Customs in the Port of London, for the lucrative imports of wools, skins or "wool-fells," and tanned hides -- on condition that he should fulfil the duties of that office in person and not by deputy, and should write out the accounts with his own hand. We have what seems evidence of Chaucer's compliance with these terms in "The House of Fame", where, in

the mouth of the eagle, the poet describes himself, when he has finished his labour and made his reckonings, as not seeking rest and news in social intercourse, but going home to his own house, and there, "all so dumb as any stone," sitting "at another book," until his look is dazed; and again, in the record that in 1376 he received a grant of L731, 4s. 6d., the amount of a fine levied on one John Kent, whom Chaucer's vigilance had frustrated in the attempt to ship a quantity of wool for Dordrecht without paying the duty. The seemingly derogatory condition, that the Controller should write out the accounts or rolls ("rotulos") of his office with his own hand, appears to have been designed, or treated, as merely formal; no records in Chaucer's handwriting are known to exist -- which could hardly be the case if, for the twelve years of his Controllorship (1374-1386), he had duly complied with the condition; and during that period he was more than once employed abroad, so that the condition was evidently regarded as a formality even by those who had imposed it. Also in 1374, the Duke of Lancaster, whose ambitious views may well have made him anxious to retain the adhesion of a man so capable and accomplished as Chaucer, changed into a joint life-annuity remaining to the survivor, and charged on the revenues of the Savoy, a pension of L10 which two years before he settled on the poet's wife -- whose sister was then the governess of the Duke's two daughters, Philippa and Elizabeth, and the Duke's own mistress. Another proof of Chaucer's personal reputation and high Court favour at this time, is his selection (1375) as ward to the son of Sir Edmond Staplegate of Bilsynton, in Kent; a charge on the surrender of which the guardian received no less a sum than L104.

We find Chaucer in 1376 again employed on a foreign mission. In 1377, the last year of Edward III., he was sent to Flanders with Sir Thomas Percy, afterwards Earl of Worcester, for the purpose of obtaining a prolongation of the truce; and in January 1378, he was associated with Sir Guichard d'Angle and other Commissioners, to pursue certain negotiations for a marriage between Princess Mary of France and the young King Richard II., which had been set on foot before the death of Edward III. The negotiation, however, proved fruitless; and in May 1378, Chaucer was selected to accompany Sir John Berkeley on a mission to the Court of Bernardo Visconti, Duke of Milan, with the view, it is supposed, of concerting military plans against the outbreak of war with France. The new King, meantime, had shown that he was not insensible to Chaucer's merit -- or to the influence of his tutor and the poet's patron, the Duke of Lancaster; for Richard II. confirmed to Chaucer his pension of twenty marks, along with an equal annual sum, for which the daily pitcher of wine granted in 1374 had been commuted. Before his departure for Lombardy, Chaucer -- still holding his post in the Customs -- selected two representatives or trustees, to

protect his estate against legal proceedings in his absence, or to sue in his name defaulters and offenders against the imposts which he was charged to enforce. One of these trustees was called Richard Forrester; the other was John Gower, the poet, the most famous English contemporary of Chaucer, with whom he had for many years been on terms of admiring friendship -- although, from the strictures passed on certain productions of Gower's in the Prologue to *The Man of Law's Tale*,^{<6>} it has been supposed that in the later years of Chaucer's life the friendship suffered some diminution. To the "moral Gower" and "the philosophical Strode," Chaucer "directed" or dedicated his *"Troilus and Cressida;"* ^{<7>} while, in the *"Confessio Amantis,"* Gower introduces a handsome compliment to his greater contemporary, as the "disciple and the poet" of Venus, with whose glad songs and ditties, made in her praise during the flowers of his youth, the land was filled everywhere. Gower, however -- a monk and a Conservative -- held to the party of the Duke of Gloucester, the rival of the Wycliffite and innovating Duke of Lancaster, who was Chaucer's patron, and whose cause was not a little aided by Chaucer's strictures on the clergy; and thus it is not impossible that political differences may have weakened the old bonds of personal friendship and poetic esteem. Returning from Lombardy early in 1379, Chaucer seems to have been again sent abroad; for the records exhibit no trace of him between May and December of that year. Whether by proxy or in person, however, he received his pensions regularly until 1382, when his income was increased by his appointment to the post of Controller of Petty Customs in the port of London. In November 1384, he obtained a month's leave of absence on account of his private affairs, and a deputy was appointed to fill his place; and in February of the next year he was permitted to appoint a permanent deputy -- thus at length gaining relief from that close attention to business which probably curtailed the poetic fruits of the poet's most powerful years. ^{<8>}

Chaucer is next found occupying a post which has not often been held by men gifted with his peculiar genius -- that of a county member. The contest between the Dukes of Gloucester and Lancaster, and their adherents, for the control of the Government, was coming to a crisis; and when the recluse and studious Chaucer was induced to offer himself to the electors of Kent as one of the knights of their shire -- where presumably he held property -- we may suppose that it was with the view of supporting his patron's cause in the impending conflict. The Parliament in which the poet sat assembled at Westminster on the 1st of October, and was dissolved on the 1st of November, 1386. Lancaster was fighting and intriguing abroad, absorbed in the affairs of his Castilian succession; Gloucester and his friends at home had everything their own way; the Earl of Suffolk was dismissed from the woolsack, and impeached by the Commons; and although Richard at first

stood out courageously for the friends of his uncle Lancaster, he was constrained, by the refusal of supplies, to consent to the proceedings of Gloucester. A commission was wrung from him, under protest, appointing Gloucester, Arundel, and twelve other Peers and prelates, a permanent council to inquire into the condition of all the public departments, the courts of law, and the royal household, with absolute powers of redress and dismissal. We need not ascribe to Chaucer's Parliamentary exertions in his patron's behalf, nor to any malpractices in his official conduct, the fact that he was among the earliest victims of the commission.<9> In December 1386, he was dismissed from both his offices in the port of London; but he retained his pensions, and drew them regularly twice a year at the Exchequer until 1388. In 1387, Chaucer's political reverses were aggravated by a severe domestic calamity: his wife died, and with her died the pension which had been settled on her by Queen Philippa in 1366, and confirmed to her at Richard's accession in 1377. The change made in Chaucer's pecuniary position, by the loss of his offices and his wife's pension, must have been very great. It would appear that during his prosperous times he had lived in a style quite equal to his income, and had no ample resources against a season of reverse; for, on the 1st of May 1388, less than a year and a half after being dismissed from the Customs, he was constrained to assign his pensions, by surrender in Chancery, to one John Scalby. In May 1389, Richard II., now of age, abruptly resumed the reins of government, which, for more than two years, had been ably but cruelly managed by Gloucester. The friends of Lancaster were once more supreme in the royal councils, and Chaucer speedily profited by the change. On the 12th of July he was appointed Clerk of the King's Works at the Palace of Westminster, the Tower, the royal manors of Kennington, Eltham, Clarendon, Sheen, Byfleet, Childern Langley, and Feckenham, the castle of Berkhamstead, the royal lodge of Hathenburgh in the New Forest, the lodges in the parks of Clarendon, Childern Langley, and Feckenham, and the mews for the King's falcons at Charing Cross; he received a salary of two shillings per day, and was allowed to perform the duties by deputy. For some reason unknown, Chaucer held this lucrative office <10> little more than two years, quitting it before the 16th of September 1391, at which date it had passed into the hands of one John Gedney. The next two years and a half are a blank, so far as authentic records are concerned; Chaucer is supposed to have passed them in retirement, probably devoting them principally to the composition of *The Canterbury Tales*. In February 1394, the King conferred upon him a grant of L20 a year for life; but he seems to have had no other source of income, and to have become embarrassed by debt, for frequent memoranda of small advances on his pension show that his circumstances were, in comparison, greatly reduced. Things appear to have grown worse and worse with the poet; for in May 1398 he was compelled to obtain from the King

letters of protection against arrest, extending over a term of two years. Not for the first time, it is true -- for similar documents had been issued at the beginning of Richard's reign; but at that time Chaucer's missions abroad, and his responsible duties in the port of London, may have furnished reasons for securing him against annoyance or frivolous prosecution, which were wholly wanting at the later date. In 1398, fortune began again to smile upon him; he received a royal grant of a tun of wine annually, the value being about L4. Next year, Richard II having been deposed by the son of John of Gaunt <11> -- Henry of Bolingbroke, Duke of Lancaster -- the new King, four days after his accession, bestowed on Chaucer a grant of forty marks (L26, 13s. 4d.) per annum, in addition to the pension of L20 conferred by Richard II. in 1394. But the poet, now seventy-one years of age, and probably broken down by the reverses of the past few years, was not destined long to enjoy his renewed prosperity. On Christmas Eve of 1399, he entered on the possession of a house in the garden of the Chapel of the Blessed Mary of Westminster -- near to the present site of Henry VII.'s Chapel -- having obtained a lease from Robert Hermodsworth, a monk of the adjacent convent, for fifty-three years, at the annual rent of four marks (L2, 13s. 4d.) Until the 1st of March 1400, Chaucer drew his pensions in person; then they were received for him by another hand; and on the 25th of October, in the same year, he died, at the age of seventy-two. The only lights thrown by his poems on his closing days are furnished in the little ballad called "Good Counsel of Chaucer," -- which, though said to have been written when "upon his death-bed lying in his great anguish, "breathes the very spirit of courage, resignation, and philosophic calm; and by the "Retractation" at the end of The Canterbury Tales, which, if it was not foisted in by monkish transcribers, may be supposed the effect of Chaucer's regrets and self-reproaches on that solemn review of his life-work which the close approach of death compelled. The poet was buried in Westminster Abbey; <12> and not many years after his death a slab was placed on a pillar near his grave, bearing the lines, taken from an epitaph or eulogy made by Stephanus Surigonus of Milan, at the request of Caxton:

"Galfridus Chaucer, vates, et fama poesis Maternae, hoc sacra sum
tumulatus humo." <13>

About 1555, Mr Nicholas Brigham, a gentleman of Oxford who greatly admired the genius of Chaucer, erected the present tomb, as near to the spot where the poet lay, "before the chapel of St Benet," as was then possible by reason of the "cancelli," <14> which the Duke of Buckingham subsequently obtained leave to remove, that room might be made for the tomb of Dryden. On the structure of Mr Brigham, besides a full-length representation of Chaucer, taken from a portrait drawn by his "scholar"

Thomas Occleve, was -- or is, though now almost illegible -- the following inscription:--

M. S. QUI FUIT ANGLORUM VATES TER
MAXIMUS OLIM, GALFRIDUS CHAUCER CONDITUR HOC
TUMULO; ANNUM SI QUAERAS DOMINI, SI TEMPORA VITAE,
ECCE NOTAE SUBSUNT, QUE TIBI CUNCTA NOTANT. 25
OCTOBRIS 1400. AERUMNARUM REQUIES MORS. N.
BRIGHAM HOS FECIT MUSARUM NOMINE SUMPTUS
1556. <15>

Concerning his personal appearance and habits, Chaucer has not been reticent in his poetry. Urry sums up the traits of his aspect and character fairly thus: "He was of a middle stature, the latter part of his life inclinable to be fat and corpulent, as appears by the Host's bantering him in the journey to Canterbury, and comparing shapes with him.<16> His face was fleshy, his features just and regular, his complexion fair, and somewhat pale, his hair of a dusky yellow, short and thin; the hair of his beard in two forked tufts, of a wheat colour; his forehead broad and smooth; his eyes inclining usually to the ground, which is intimated by the Host's words; his whole face full of liveliness, a calm, easy sweetness, and a studious Venerable aspect. . . . As to his temper, he had a mixture of the gay, the modest, and the grave. The sprightliness of his humour was more distinguished by his writings than by his appearance; which gave occasion to Margaret Countess of Pembroke often to rally him upon his silent modesty in company, telling him, that his absence was more agreeable to her than his conversation, since the first was productive of agreeable pieces of wit in his writings, <17> but the latter was filled with a modest deference, and a too distant respect. We see nothing merry or jocose in his behaviour with his pilgrims, but a silent attention to their mirth, rather than any mixture of his own. . . . When disengaged from public affairs, his time was entirely spent in study and reading; so agreeable to him was this exercise, that he says he preferred it to all other sports and diversions.<18> He lived within himself, neither desirous to hear nor busy to concern himself with the affairs of his neighbours. His course of living was temperate and regular; he went to rest with the sun, and rose before it; and by that means enjoyed the pleasures of the better part of the day, his morning walk and fresh contemplations. This gave him the advantage of describing the morning in so lively a manner as he does everywhere in his works. The springing sun glows warm in his lines, and the fragrant air blows cool in his descriptions; we smell the sweets of the bloomy haws, and hear the music of the feathered choir, whenever we take a forest walk with him. The hour of the day is not easier to be discovered from the reflection of the sun in Titian's paintings,

than in Chaucer's morning landscapes. . . . His reading was deep and extensive, his judgement sound and discerning. . . . In one word, he was a great scholar, a pleasant wit, a candid critic, a sociable companion, a steadfast friend, a grave philosopher, a temperate economist, and a pious Christian."

Chaucer's most important poems are "Troilus and Cressida," "The Romaunt of the Rose," and "The Canterbury Tales." Of the first, containing 8246 lines, an abridgement, with a prose connecting outline of the story, is given in this volume. With the second, consisting of 7699 octosyllabic verses, like those in which "The House of Fame" is written, it was found impossible to deal in the present edition. The poem is a curtailed translation from the French "Roman de la Rose" -- commenced by Guillaume de Lorris, who died in 1260, after contributing 4070 verses, and completed, in the last quarter of the thirteenth century, by Jean de Meun, who added some 18,000 verses. It is a satirical allegory, in which the vices of courts, the corruptions of the clergy, the disorders and inequalities of society in general, are unsparingly attacked, and the most revolutionary doctrines are advanced; and though, in making his translation, Chaucer softened or eliminated much of the satire of the poem, still it remained, in his verse, a caustic exposure of the abuses of the time, especially those which discredited the Church.

The Canterbury Tales are presented in this edition with as near an approach to completeness as regard for the popular character of the volume permitted. The 17,385 verses, of which the poetical Tales consist, have been given without abridgement or purgation -- save in a single couplet; but, the main purpose of the volume being to make the general reader acquainted with the "poems" of Chaucer and Spenser, the Editor has ventured to contract the two prose Tales -- Chaucer's Tale of Meliboeus, and the Parson's Sermon or Treatise on Penitence -- so as to save about thirty pages for the introduction of Chaucer's minor pieces. At the same time, by giving prose outlines of the omitted parts, it has been sought to guard the reader against the fear that he was losing anything essential, or even valuable. It is almost needless to describe the plot, or point out the literary place, of the Canterbury Tales. Perhaps in the entire range of ancient and modern literature there is no work that so clearly and freshly paints for future times the picture of the past; certainly no Englishman has ever approached Chaucer in the power of fixing for ever the fleeting traits of his own time. The plan of the poem had been adopted before Chaucer chose it; notably in the "Decameron" of Boccaccio -- although, there, the circumstances under which the tales were told, with the terror of the plague hanging over the merry company, lend a grim grotesqueness to the narrative, unless we can look at it abstracted from its setting. Chaucer, on the other hand, strikes a perpetual key-note of

gaiety whenever he mentions the word "pilgrimage;" and at every stage of the connecting story we bless the happy thought which gives us incessant incident, movement, variety, and unclouded but never monotonous joyousness.

The poet, the evening before he starts on a pilgrimage to the shrine of St Thomas at Canterbury, lies at the Tabard Inn, in Southwark, curious to know in what companionship he is destined to fare forward on the morrow. Chance sends him "nine and twenty in a company," representing all orders of English society, lay and clerical, from the Knight and the Abbot down to the Ploughman and the Sompnour. The jolly Host of the Tabard, after supper, when tongues are loosened and hearts are opened, declares that "not this year" has he seen such a company at once under his roof-tree, and proposes that, when they set out next morning, he should ride with them and make them sport. All agree, and Harry Bailly unfolds his scheme: each pilgrim, including the poet, shall tell two tales on the road to Canterbury, and two on the way back to London; and he whom the general voice pronounces to have told the best tale, shall be treated to a supper at the common cost -- and, of course, to mine Host's profit -- when the cavalcade returns from the saint's shrine to the Southwark hostelry. All joyously assent; and early on the morrow, in the gay spring sunshine, they ride forth, listening to the heroic tale of the brave and gentle Knight, who has been gracefully chosen by the Host to lead the spirited competition of story-telling.

To describe thus the nature of the plan, and to say that when Chaucer conceived, or at least began to execute it, he was between sixty and seventy years of age, is to proclaim that *The Canterbury Tales* could never be more than a fragment. Thirty pilgrims, each telling two tales on the way out, and two more on the way back -- that makes 120 tales; to say nothing of the prologue, the description of the journey, the occurrences at Canterbury, "and all the remnant of their pilgrimage," which Chaucer also undertook. No more than twenty-three of the 120 stories are told in the work as it comes down to us; that is, only twenty-three of the thirty pilgrims tell the first of the two stories on the road to Canterbury; while of the stories on the return journey we have not one, and nothing is said about the doings of the pilgrims at Canterbury -- which would, if treated like the scene at the Tabard, have given us a still livelier "picture of the period." But the plan was too large; and although the poet had some reserves, in stories which he had already composed in an independent form, death cut short his labour ere he could even complete the arrangement and connection of more than a very few of the Tales. Incomplete as it is, however, the magnum opus of Chaucer was in his own time received with immense favour; manuscript copies are

numerous even now -- no slight proof of its popularity; and when the invention of printing was introduced into England by William Caxton, The Canterbury Tales issued from his press in the year after the first English-printed book, "The Game of the Chesse," had been struck off. Innumerable editions have since been published; and it may fairly be affirmed, that few books have been so much in favour with the reading public of every generation as this book, which the lapse of every generation has been rendering more unreadable.

Apart from "The Romaunt of the Rose," no really important poetical work of Chaucer's is omitted from or unrepresented in the present edition. Of "The Legend of Good Women," the Prologue only is given -- but it is the most genuinely Chaucerian part of the poem. Of "The Court of Love," three-fourths are here presented; of "The Assembly of Fowls," "The Cuckoo and the Nightingale," "The Flower and the Leaf," all; of "Chaucer's Dream," one-fourth; of "The House of Fame," two-thirds; and of the minor poems such a selection as may give an idea of Chaucer's power in the "occasional" department of verse. Necessarily, no space whatever could be given to Chaucer's prose works -- his translation of Boethius' Treatise on the Consolation of Philosophy; his Treatise on the Astrolabe, written for the use of his son Lewis; and his "Testament of Love," composed in his later years, and reflecting the troubles that then beset the poet. If, after studying in a simplified form the salient works of England's first great bard, the reader is tempted to regret that he was not introduced to a wider acquaintance with the author, the purpose of the Editor will have been more than attained.

The plan of the volume does not demand an elaborate examination into the state of our language when Chaucer wrote, or the nice questions of grammatical and metrical structure which conspire with the obsolete orthography to make his poems a sealed book for the masses. The most important element in the proper reading of Chaucer's verses -- whether written in the decasyllabic or heroic metre, which he introduced into our literature, or in the octosyllabic measure used with such animated effect in "The House of Fame," "Chaucer's Dream," &c. -- is the sounding of the terminal "e" where it is now silent. That letter is still valid in French poetry; and Chaucer's lines can be scanned only by reading them as we would read Racine's or Moliere's. The terminal "e" played an important part in grammar; in many cases it was the sign of the infinitive -- the "n" being dropped from the end; at other times it pointed the distinction between singular and plural, between adjective and adverb. The pages that follow, however, being prepared from the modern English point of view, necessarily no account is taken of those distinctions; and the now silent "e" has been retained in the text of Chaucer only when required by the modern spelling, or by the

exigencies of metre.

Before a word beginning with a vowel, or with the letter "h," the final "e" was almost without exception mute; and in such cases, in the plural forms and infinitives of verbs, the terminal "n" is generally retained for the sake of euphony. No reader who is acquainted with the French language will find it hard to fall into Chaucer's accentuation; while, for such as are not, a simple perusal of the text according to the rules of modern verse, should remove every difficulty.

Notes to Life of Geoffrey Chaucer

1. "Edmund Spenser, a native of London, was born with a Muse of such power, that he was superior to all English poets of preceding ages, not excepting his fellow-citizen Chaucer."
2. See introduction to "The Legend of Good Women".
3. Called in the editions before 1597 "The Dream of Chaucer". The poem, which is not included in the present edition, does indeed, like many of Chaucer's smaller works, tell the story of a dream, in which a knight, representing John of Gaunt, is found by the poet mourning the loss of his lady; but the true "Dream of Chaucer," in which he celebrates the marriage of his patron, was published for the first time by Speght in 1597. John of Gaunt, in the end of 1371, married his second wife, Constance, daughter to Pedro the Cruel of Spain; so that "The Book of the Duchess" must have been written between 1369 and 1371.
4. Where he bids his "little book" "Subject be unto all poesy, And kiss the steps, where as thou seest space, Of Virgil, Ovid, Homer, Lucan, Stace."
5. See note 1 to The Tale in The Clerk's Tale.
6. See note 1 to The Man of Law's Tale.
7. "Written," says Mr Wright, "in the sixteenth year of the reign of Richard II. (1392-1393);" a powerful confirmation of the opinion that this poem was really produced in Chaucer's mature age. See the introductory notes to it and to the Legend of Good Women.
8. The old biographers of Chaucer, founding on what they took to be autobiographic allusions in "The Testament of Love," assign to him between 1354 and 1389 a very different history from that here given on the strength

of authentic records explored and quoted by Sir H. Nicolas. Chaucer is made to espouse the cause of John of Northampton, the Wycliffite Lord Mayor of London, whose re-election in 1384 was so vehemently opposed by the clergy, and who was imprisoned in the sequel of the grave disorders that arose. The poet, it is said, fled to the Continent, taking with him a large sum of money, which he spent in supporting companions in exile; then, returning by stealth to England in quest of funds, he was detected and sent to the Tower, where he languished for three years, being released only on the humiliating condition of informing against his associates in the plot. The public records show, however, that, all the time of his alleged exile and captivity, he was quietly living in London, regularly drawing his pensions in person, sitting in Parliament, and discharging his duties in the Customs until his dismissal in 1386. It need not be said, further, that although Chaucer freely handled the errors, the ignorance, and vices of the clergy, he did so rather as a man of sense and of conscience, than as a Wycliffite -- and there is no evidence that he espoused the opinions of the zealous Reformer, far less played the part of an extreme and self-regardless partisan of his old friend and college-companion.

9. "The Commissioners appear to have commenced their labours with examining the accounts of the officers employed in the collection of the revenue; and the sequel affords a strong presumption that the royal administration [under Lancaster and his friends] had been foully calumniated. We hear not of any frauds discovered, or of defaulters punished, or of grievances redressed." Such is the testimony of Lingard (chap. iv., 1386), all the more valuable for his aversion from the Wycliffite leanings of John of Gaunt. Chaucer's department in the London Customs was in those days one of the most important and lucrative in the kingdom; and if mercenary abuse of his post could have been proved, we may be sure that his and his patron's enemies would not have been content with simple dismissal, but would have heavily amerced or imprisoned him.

10. The salary was L36, 10s. per annum; the salary of the Chief Judges was L40, of the Puisne Judges about L27. Probably the Judges -- certainly the Clerk of the Works -- had fees or perquisites besides the stated payment.

11. Chaucer's patron had died earlier in 1399, during the exile of his son (then Duke of Hereford) in France. The Duchess Constance had died in 1394; and the Duke had made reparation to Katherine Swynford -- who had already borne him four children -- by marrying her in 1396, with the approval of Richard II., who legitimated the children, and made the eldest son of the poet's sister-in-law Earl of Somerset. From this long-illicit union sprang the house of Beaufort -- that being the surname of the Duke's

children by Katherine, after the name of the castle in Anjou (Belfort, or Beaufort) where they were born.

12. Of Chaucer's two sons by Philippa Roet, his only wife, the younger, Lewis, for whom he wrote the Treatise on the Astrolabe, died young. The elder, Thomas, married Maud, the second daughter and co-heiress of Sir John Burghersh, brother of the Bishop of Lincoln, the Chancellor and Treasurer of England. By this marriage Thomas Chaucer acquired great estates in Oxfordshire and elsewhere; and he figured prominently in the second rank of courtiers for many years. He was Chief Butler to Richard II.; under Henry IV. he was Constable of Wallingford Castle, Steward of the Honours of Wallingford and St Valery, and of the Chiltern Hundreds; and the queen of Henry IV. granted him the farm of several of her manors, a grant subsequently confirmed to him for life by the King, after the Queen's death. He sat in Parliament repeatedly for Oxfordshire, was Speaker in 1414, and in the same year went to France as commissioner to negotiate the marriage of Henry V. with the Princess Katherine. He held, before he died in 1434, various other posts of trust and distinction; but he left no heirs-male. His only child, Alice Chaucer, married twice; first Sir John Philip; and afterwards the Duke of Suffolk -- attainted and beheaded in 1450. She had three children by the Duke; and her eldest son married the Princess Elizabeth, sister of Edward IV. The eldest son of this marriage, created Earl of Lincoln, was declared by Richard III heir-apparent to the throne, in case the Prince of Wales should die without issue; but the death of Lincoln himself, at the battle of Stoke in 1487, destroyed all prospect that the poet's descendants might succeed to the crown of England; and his family is now believed to be extinct.

13. "Geoffrey Chaucer, bard, and famous mother of poetry, is buried in this sacred ground."

14. Railings.

15 Translation of the epitaph: This tomb was built for Geoffrey Chaucer, who in his time was the greatest poet of the English. If you ask the year of his death, behold the words beneath, which tell you all. Death gave him rest from his toil, 25th of October 1400. N Brigham bore the cost of these words in the name of the Muses. 1556.

16. See the Prologue to Chaucer's Tale of Sir Thopas.

17. See the "Goodly Ballad of Chaucer," seventh stanza.

18. See the opening of the Prologue to "The Legend of Good Women," and the poet's account of his habits in "The House of Fame".