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CHAUCER

BY

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CHAUCER

CHAUCER, to whom we must now turn, used to be called the 'Father of English Poetry,' and although such epithets are rightly going out of fashion, if we call him the father of our modern poetry we shall be speaking the literal truth. While the works of his predecessors have only been brought back into notice during the nineteenth century, and still are read by few except professed students, Chaucer's poetry has been read and enjoyed continuously from his own day to this, and the greatest of his successors, from Spenser and Milton to Tennyson and William Morris, have joined in praising it. Moreover, he himself deliberately made a fresh beginning in our literature. He disregarded altogether the old English tradition, and even the work written at an earlier period under French influence. For miracle-plays and romances he had a sovereign contempt, and, for any influence which they exerted on him, the writings of his fellow-countrymen, from Cædmon to Langland, might never have existed. His masters in his art were the Frenchmen, Guillaume Lorris, Jean de Meung, Deguilleville, Machault; the Latins, Ovid, Virgil, and Statius; above all, the Italians, Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. The break between Layamon and the Old English writers before the Conquest is not greater than the break between Chaucer and his predecessors, and the break proceeded in each case from the same cause, the enlargement of the literary horizon and the adoption of new forms and subjects and ideas under foreign influence. We can see that there were special circumstances in Chaucer's life which

helped him to make this new departure. He was, as far as we know, the first notable English poet who was born in London, the first who was a layman, the first who was connected with the Court. The writers of some of the romances may have possessed all these qualifications, but their work was impersonal and never rose to poetic self-consciousness; nor need we trouble to inquire if Minot also was a layman and a courtier. But to a real poet the three points were all of importance. With the English language still divided into widely different dialects the penalty of provincialism was crushing. To be born in London carried with it the use of the dialect which, in the now rapidly declining vogue of French, was fast assuming the position of standard English, and allowed the writer to appeal to the widest and best educated class of readers. To be a layman, and a layman in the king's service, was no less important. It meant a new standpoint, freedom from cramping influences, and a wider knowledge of life. For three centuries English poets had lived in the shade—a shade at first so gloomy that it crushed them out, and which even when it lightened must have numbed and depressed them. Now at last the gift of poetry came to an Englishman who was in the centre of English life, who had an audience ready to listen, quick to appreciate whatever he wrote. There is melancholy in Chaucer's early work, the melancholy from which hardly any true poet seems able to escape; but it is no deeper than the clouds in April, and the sense of the warmth and beauty of life pervades all he wrote. His 'May mornings' are, no doubt, conventional, but the love of the spring was in his blood, and he himself represents the spring-tide of our modern poetry.

An interesting theory has lately been propounded that the name Chaucer, which is found in many different spellings, stands for 'Chauffecire,' or Chaff-wax, a chaff-wax being the officer who had

to prepare the large wax seals then in use for official documents. The older explanation makes it equivalent to 'chaussier,' or shoemaker, and this is perhaps still the more probable. Whatever its origin, the name was not very uncommon in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, being found more especially in London and in the eastern counties. Chaucer's grandfather and father were connected with both these parts, living in London and holding some small estate at Ipswich. The grandfather, Robert Chaucer, was a collector of customs on wine; the father, John Chaucer, a vintner, who had a house in Thames Street, went abroad on the king's service in 1338, and ten years later acted as deputy to the king's butler in the port of Southampton. Geoffrey Chaucer was probably born in 1340, or a little earlier, but we first hear of him in April 1357, when, as fragments of her household accounts show, a pair of red and black breeches, a short cloak, and shoes were provided for him as one of the servants of the Lady Elizabeth, wife of Lionel, Duke of Clarence. An entry of another payment to him shows that Chaucer passed the winter of 1357-58 at her seat at Hatfield in Yorkshire, where his future patron, John of Gaunt, was a visitor. In 1359 he bore arms for the first time, taking part in the unlucky campaign of that year in France, till he was made prisoner at 'Retters,' probably Réthel, not far from Rheims. In March 1360 the king contributed £16 towards the amount required for his ransom, and either about this time or a little earlier Chaucer must have passed into his service, for we next hear of him in 1367, as Edward III.'s 'dilectus valettus' ('well-beloved yeoman'), to whom, in consideration of his past and future services, an annuity of twenty marks was granted for life. By this time Chaucer was married, for in 1366 (when she received a pension of ten marks) the name Philippa Chaucer appears among those of the ladies of the queen's bedchamber. In 1372 John

of Gaunt granted her a pension of £10, and in 1374 this same pension was regranted to Geoffrey and Philippa Chaucer for good services rendered by them 'to the said Duke, his consort, and his mother the Queen.' It is practically certain that this Philippa Chaucer was a daughter of Sir Payne Roet of Hainault, and sister of the Katherine Swynford who ultimately became John of Gaunt's third wife.¹

Not long, probably, after 1367 Chaucer was promoted to be one of the king's esquires; in 1369 he saw another campaign in France, and between 1370 and 1379 was abroad no fewer than seven times in the king's service. Two of these missions (those of 1370 and 1376) were secret, and we know nothing of them except that in the second Chaucer was in the suite of Sir John Burley. In 1377 he went to Flanders with Sir Thomas Percy, and in this and the following year was twice in France in connection with negotiations for a peace and Richard II.'s marriage. The two missions still to be mentioned were the most important of all, for both took him to Italy. In December 1372 Chaucer was sent to Genoa to arrange with its citizens as to the choice of an English port where they should have privileges as traders; and in May or June 1378 he followed Sir Edward Berkeley to Lombardy, there to treat ('touching the King's expedition of war') with Bernabo Visconti, Lord of Milan, and with the famous free-lance Sir John Hawkwood. The earlier of these two Italian journeys probably only lasted a few months, but during it Chaucer was fortunate enough to meet at Padua the famous Petrarch,

¹ We hear of two sons born of this marriage—(1) Thomas Chaucer, who occupied the house in which his father died till his own death, was King's Butler, several times Speaker of the House of Commons, and in other ways an important person; and (2) a much younger Lewis, for whom Chaucer translated a treatise on the *Astrolabe*. Elizabeth Chaucer, for whose noviciate at the Abbey of Barking John of Gaunt paid a large sum in 1381, was probably the poet's daughter.

and to learn from him the story of Griselda which Petrarch had recently turned into Latin from the Italian of Boccaccio. Of his second mission, on which he was away eight months, we know no such pleasing incident ; but from the energy with which he devoted himself to poetry immediately after his return, and from the intimate acquaintance with the Italian of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio which his own poems now first show, it must rank as one of the most important events in his life.

On St George's Day 1374 Chaucer received from the king a grant of a pitcher of wine daily, which he subsequently commuted for an additional pension of twenty marks. In June of the same year he was appointed Comptroller of the Customs and Subsidy of Wools, Skins, &c. in the Port of London, with the obligation to keep the rolls of his office with his own hand. In 1375 he was made the guardian of a certain Edmund Staplegate of Kent, from whom he received, for wardship and marriage-fee, a sum of £104, or over £1200 modern value. The profits of another wardship granted at the same time are not known to us ; but in 1376 we hear of a grant by the king of £71, 4s. 6d., the price of some wool forfeited at the customs for not paying duty. In 1382 the controllership of the petty customs was given him in addition to the post he already held, and in this new appointment he was allowed to employ a deputy. It is clear that Chaucer's income during these years must have been very considerable ; but it is clear also that between his controllership at home and his missions abroad he was kept busily employed, and that until the missions ceased he could have had but little time for poetry.

Of the works which Chaucer, in his references to his own writings, ascribes to his earliest period several have not come down to us. The hymns for Love's holy days 'that highten Balades, Roundels, Virelayes' have nearly all perished ;

the translation of Innocent III.'s treatise, *De Miseria Conditionis Humanæ* ('Of the wretched engendring of mankynde,' as Chaucer calls it), has left its mark on a few stanzas of the 'Man of Law's Tale;' the story of 'Ceyx and Alcioun,' from Ovid, survives, in part or whole, not as a separate piece, but in the prologue to the *Dethe of the Duchesse*. 'Origenes upon the Maudeleyne'—that is, a translation of the homily on St Mary Magdalene wrongly attributed to Origen—has perished utterly; and a 'Book of the Lion,' assigned to Chaucer by Lydgate, probably a translation of Guillaume Machault's *Le Dit du Lion*, has shared the same fate. Of what has become of Chaucer's translation of the *Roman de la Rose*, the poem of over twenty-two thousand French octosyllables, begun in the previous century by Guillaume de Lorris, and completed by Jean de Meung, it is difficult to write with brevity. A translation of about one-third of the French original has come down to us; but this translation has been shown to consist of two fragments, with a long gap between them, while the first of these fragments is again divided by linguistic tests into two sections, which yet read on without any obviously abrupt transition. The one manuscript which preserves these fragments does not give any suggestion as to who translated them; the attribution to Chaucer in the earliest printed edition—that of 1532—is of no value. The fragmentary translation is throughout quite good enough to be Chaucer's; but on the evidence of the linguistic tests, philologists now declare that, while lines 5811-7696 are not likely to be by Chaucer, lines 1706-5810 cannot possibly be by him, and lines 1-1705 not only may be, but certainly are, his work.¹

¹ The linguistic characteristics which exclude the possibility of Chaucerian authorship (except on some hypothesis too violent to be admitted) are the occurrence of northern forms in the rhymes, assonances instead of rhymes, and rhymes (especially of infinitives

All that can here be said is, that by general consent the greater part of the extant *Romaunt of the Rose* is pronounced un-Chaucerian, and that the lines which have a good claim to be his come under some suspicion from the company in which they are found.

Of the early poems by Chaucer which have come down to us, all exhibit a vague melancholy and tender grace, and several are more or less distinctly religious. The *Dethe of Blaunche the Duchesse*, which he wrote in 1369-70 to commemorate Blanche of Castile, John of Gaunt's first wife, shows him strongly under the influence of his French models. The central feature of the poem (which runs to over thirteen hundred lines) is the description by the knight who represents John of Gaunt of the beauty and virtue of the 'goode faire white' whom he had won and lost. This is led up to by the conventional devices of a dream in which the poet finds himself in a fair park, joins in a hunt, and then strays from it, and finds, seated in sorrow beneath an oak, the knight, whom he persuades to tell him the cause of his grief. Perhaps a little before, perhaps a little after, the *Dethe of Blaunche the Duchesse*, Chaucer translated from the French of Guillaume de Deguilleville a hymn to the Blessed Virgin, in which the stanzas began with the different letters of the alphabet in their order, whence its name *The A. B. C.* Most of the stanzas open well, but Chaucer had not yet learnt to translate with freedom and ease, and few of them end as well as they begin. A much finer poem, the *Exclamation of the Dethe of Pite*, is mostly connected with

and French substantives in *-yë*—for example, 'cryë,' 'maladyë'—with adverbs in *-y*—for example, 'trewely,' 'tendrelly') of words and forms to which the *e*-final is essential with other words or forms which have no claim to it. The first and second characteristics give negative evidence that poems which show them cannot be Chaucer's; the third, it is claimed, goes beyond this, because no one save Chaucer cared for these niceties, and therefore any poem in which they are strictly observed must be by him.

the *Dethe of Blaunche the Duchesse*, because its complaint against the cruelty of Love is thought to fit in well with a passage in the latter poem which speaks of the poet's sleeplessness and of a mysterious eight-year sickness, which is explained as referring to a hapless love-affair. It is by no means certain that either poem has any real biographical import, and the *Dethe of Pite* is so finely written that it seems rash to claim for it a very early date on the score of the meaning we read into it. With the dubious exception of an ingenious poem, the *Compleynt of Mars* (full of astronomical learning and with a possible reference to a Court intrigue between the Lady Isabella of York and Lord Huntingdon), claimed, on no very strong evidence, for the year 1379, we know of no other separate poems which Chaucer wrote during the 'seventies and which are now extant. It seems certain, however, that three or four of the *Canterbury Tales* were written during this period, long before that great scheme had entered the poet's head, and were subsequently inserted in their place with more or less revision. The first of these is the 'Second Nun's Tale,' the 'Lyf of Saint Cecyle,' a weak translation from the *Legenda Aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine. As it stands among the *Canterbury Tales* the narrator is still made to speak of herself as a *son* of Eve; there is a reference to readers instead of listeners, and the feebleness with which the story is handled proves still more surely than it was written long before the earliest possible date at which the *Tales*, as a whole, can have been planned. With this we may reckon the 'Clerk's Tale' of the Patience of Griselda, the story, as he tells us himself, which Chaucer heard from Petrarch, from whose Latin version of Boccaccio's Italian it is translated; also the 'Man of Law's Tale' of the Fortitude of Constance (the Emperor of Rome's daughter, so cruelly persecuted by her heathen mothers-in-law), translated from the Anglo-French chronicle of Nicholas Trivet, a Do-

minican friar who had died soon after Chaucer was born. Both these are well told, with passages of pathetic beauty, and we can trace in them the increasing freedom with which Chaucer used his poetic material. The last *Canterbury Tale* for which an early date is claimed, the story of the tragedies of great men told by the sporting Monk, seems at first sight obviously late, for one of the stories refers to the death of Bernabo Visconti of Milan in 1385. But it is possible, without hair-splitting, to divide the seventeen tragedies into five written when the *Canterbury Tales* were in view, and twelve earlier ones; and even when these are thrown into the scale, Chaucer's extant work which can be assigned to an earlier date than 1380 remains strikingly small in comparison with his splendid productiveness during the next ten or twelve years.

The great quickening of Chaucer's poetic gifts which we can trace about 1380 must be directly connected with the second of his two Italian missions, that of 1378-79. Six years before, when he had made his first journey to Italy, he had probably known very little Italian, and had very little money to buy books. His second mission enabled him to perfect himself in the language, and we cannot doubt that he brought home with him at least three Italian masterpieces, the *Divina Commedia* of Dante, and the *Teseide* and *Filostrato* of Boccaccio. At first he made experiments. A fragment of metrical essays, now called for convenience *A Complaynt to his Lady*, is partly written in Dante's terza-rima: and another fragment, *Anelida and Arcyte*, shows him beginning an ambitious rehandling of the *Teseide*, from which seventy of its three hundred and fifty-seven lines are translated. His third manuscript proved more immediately productive, for (probably between 1380 and 1383) he carried to completion his magnificent version of the *Filostrato*, the *Troilus and Creseyde*, which still remains the finest narrative poem of its kind in the English language. Here for the first time

his absolute poetic mastery is apparent. He translates, when he chooses to translate, with ease and grace, and he raises the whole poem to a higher level, investing the faithless Creseyde with a piteousness which pleads for her forgiveness, and turning her go-between uncle, Sir Pandarus, whose original character has made his name a hateful word, into a good-natured humorous friend, whose easy code of morals is quite distinct from baseness. While at work on the *Troilus*, Chaucer seems to have found time to translate a treatise of a very different kind, the *De Consolatione Philosophiæ* of the Roman statesman Boethius, who wrote it in prison while awaiting his murder by the Emperor Theodoric in A.D. 525. The *De Consolatione* is written in alternate prose and verse. Chaucer rendered it all into rather obscure and laboured prose, but some of the passages which most attracted him appear after this date embedded in his poetry, the easy flow of the verse presenting a striking contrast to the artificiality of his prose. He was called off again from the *Troilus* in 1381 or 1382 to celebrate the betrothal of Richard II. to Anne of Bohemia, and in the *Parlement of Foules*, with its tale of the mustering of the birds on St Valentine's Day, and their debate as to which of her suitors is worthiest of the beautiful 'formel-eagle,' who represented the queen, produced the brightest and daintiest of courtly allegories.

When the *Troilus* was finished Chaucer turned to his *Divina Commedia*, and in the *Hous of Fame* endeavoured to describe a journey with a heaven-sent guide, in which, despite its lighter vein, the influence of Dante is clearly discernible. When contrasted with the *Dethe of Blaunche the Duchesse*, written in the same octosyllabic couplet, the growth of metrical power in the *Hous of Fame* is very marked. It contains also fine passages, notably the description of the temple of Fame and of the suitors to the wayward goddess, but

Chaucer's lack of constructive genius left it a failure and a fragment. The golden eagle of Jupiter had soared with him to Fame's abode, and he had been shown all that there was to see; but there was no possible climax to be reached, and for lack of a climax Chaucer left the poem unfinished.

His next venture, as to which we can speak with certainty,¹ the *Legende of Good Women*, shared the same fate. Elsewhere he refers to this poem as the 'Seintes Legende of Cupide,' the Legend of Cupid's Saints, of the fair women who had loved too well, and had died as Love's martyrs. In a prologue, of which two versions exist, both admirably written, he feigns that Love had threatened him with punishment for the treasons he had written against him in his translation of the *Roman de la Rose*, and in *Troilus and Creseyde*; that he had been saved by the intercession of Love's queen, the fair Alcestis—the heroine of Greek legend who died for her unworthy husband, Admetus—and had been bidden to write these stories of women's faithfulness as a palinode. There were to be nineteen such stories, with that of Alcestis herself to crown them, and the book when finished was to be presented to the queen (not Cupid's, but Richard II.'s), who was no doubt intended to identify herself with Alcestis. Not nineteen but nine stories were written, the earlier ones, especially those of Cleopatra and Dido, together with the prologue, being admirably told. But, as the Greek philosophers had long since discovered, while wickedness is multiform, virtue admits of less variation; and as Chaucer wrote story after story of faithful women—Thisbe, Medea, Lucretia, Ariadne, Philomela, Phyllis, Hypermnestra—he began to tire of so uniform a theme, and even

¹ It is not improbable that the rehandling of the story of Palamon and Arcite, from the *Teseide*, which has come down to us as the 'Knight's Tale,' was written contemporaneously with, or before, the *Legende*.

falls from tragedy into comedy by throwing out a hint that he was the only man to whom women could safely trust. In 1385 he was permitted to exercise his Controllorship of the Customs of Wool by deputy, a privilege accorded from the first in the case of the petty customs ; and perhaps in this or the next year a holiday pilgrimage to Canterbury, made in his own person, set his brain throbbing with a new scheme which, in its variety and boundless possibilities, was in striking contrast with that on which he was engaged. In any case, the *Legende of Good Women* was abandoned, and the *Canterbury Tales*, the crowning work of his life, took its place.

At this date of 1385-86, when we think of Chaucer as beginning to plan his *Canterbury Tales*, he was eminently prosperous. The *Tales* can have been only just begun when misfortune befell him. In October 1386 he sat in Parliament as one of the knights of the shire for Kent, an accession of dignity which, by bringing him into active political life, probably cost him his offices. His patron, John of Gaunt, was out of England, and his place in the government was filled by the hostile Duke of Gloucester. A commission was appointed to inquire into the state of the subsidies and customs, and by December new appointments show us that Chaucer had been superseded in both his controller-ships. His deputies may have played him false, or he himself may have been in fault, but it seems at least as likely that the supersession was political, and would not have been enforced had he not sat in Parliament a month before. In the second half of 1387 he lost his wife's pension (granted her in 1366), either by her death or by its being commuted. In May 1388 he assigned away his own pensions from the king, obviously in order to raise money, and was thus, as far as we know, left with nothing but the pension of £10 originally granted by John of Gaunt to Philippa Chaucer, but subsequently regranted to both husband and wife. It

seems reasonable to believe that it was during these distressful times that Chaucer wrote some or all of the series of balades, *The Former Age*, *Fortune*, *Truth*, *Gentilesse*, *Lak of Stedfastnesse*, which all owe something to the *De Consolatione Philosophiæ* of Boethius. In the *Truth*, with its fine opening, 'Flee from the press, and dwell with soothfastness,' we must imagine that Chaucer is consoling himself; in the *Fortune* (the *balade de visage sans peinture*, the 'unpainted face' of a faithful friend) he makes the fickle goddess herself plead on his behalf:

Prynces, I prey you of your gentilesse
 Let nat this man on me thus crye and pleyne,
 And I shal quytè you your bysynesse.

In the *Lak of Stedfastnesse*, which has been strangely misinterpreted, and therefore misdated, he seems to applaud the measures which Richard II. took against the 'merciless Parliament' when he declared himself of age in May 1389. According to a copyist (Shirley), who records several such traditions, this poem was sent by Chaucer 'to his souverain lorde kynge Rycharde the secounde, than being in his Castell of Windesore,' and nothing that we know of Chaucer makes it likely that he would have offered advice unless he was sure it would be acceptable. In any case, he speedily profited by the change of Ministry, being appointed Clerk of the King's Works in July 1389, and a Commissioner of the Roadway between Greenwich and Woolwich in 1390. But a year later he had lost his clerkship again, and even if he is to be identified with the Geoffrey Chaucer who about this time was made Forester of North Petherton Park in Somersetshire (an appointment in the gift of the family of his first patroness), his income must have seemed to him sadly small.

It was probably during these five years (1386-91) of financial vicissitudes that the bulk of the

Canterbury Tales were written. If Chaucer had less income he had more leisure, and he used it to good purpose. The idea of the Canterbury Pilgrimage as a framework for a series of stories seems to have been entirely his own. Pilgrimages were still immensely popular in England, and that to the shrine of St Thomas of Canterbury the most popular of all. It offered a pleasant holiday in varied company, and with religious opportunities which the pilgrims could use as they pleased. The men and women whom Chaucer pictures as meeting at the Tabard Inn at Southwark, the usual starting point for pilgrims from London and the neighbourhood, were distinctly holiday folk, but they were religious enough to be willing to listen to a very long sermon as they drew near their destination. In his immortal Prologue Chaucer tells us all about them—about the brave courteous Knight, his son the Squire, and their sturdy Yeomen; about the Lawyer and the Doctor who rode on pilgrimage, though the one was so busy and the other's study was 'but little on the Bible;' about the dinner-loving Franklin, the Merchant with his thoughts always on his business, the pirate Shipman, the rascally Miller, the drunken Cook, the crafty Manciple, the crabbed Reeve, the five London burgesses, and the honest, kind-hearted Ploughman; most of all about the 'religious' people—the tender-hearted Prioress, with her lady-chaplain and priests, the hunting Monk, the Friar, 'the best beggar in his house,' the Summoner and Pardoner, types of the very worst hangers-on of the Church; and, to balance these, the good Parson and the studious Clerk of Oxford, with not an ounce of worldliness between them. All these Chaucer paints for us in lively colours, and then starts them on their four days' ride through Deptford, Greenwich, Rochester, and Sittingbourne, fitting them with tales of chivalry and romance, of noble endurance and low adventure, of medieval miracle and old-world legend and myth, a range of narrative as great as

the diversity of the tellers, and the narrative, with few exceptions, almost perfectly told. It was a great scheme worthily carried out, though not to completion, for instead of the hundred and twenty tales originally planned only twenty-four were written, and of these one was only just begun, another left incomplete, and two others more dramatically broken off before they were finished.

The scheme which Harry Bailey, the host of the 'Tabard,' proposed to his guests was that each of them should tell two tales on the way to Canterbury and two on the return journey, and that the teller of the best tale should be rewarded by a supper at the cost of the rest. In the morning, when they reach the halting-place known as the Watering of St Thomas, lots are cast as to who shall tell the first tale, and the Knight, to whom the lot falls, responds with the story of Palamon and Arcyte, a splendid rendering of Boccaccio's *Teseide*. Then follow tales by two of the Churls, the Miller and Reeve, each seeking to discredit the other's craft by a knavish story, into the telling of which, more especially the Reeve's, Chaucer put all his skill. A similar tale by the Cook is placed next in order, but is a mere fragment; and these are all Chaucer wrote for the first day's ride from Southwark to Deptford.

The next day's tale-telling, after a late start (ten o'clock) from Deptford, begins with the old story of Constance (see page 10), which Chaucer, rather unsuitably, assigns to the Man of Law. Then the Shipman tells a story of a trusting husband, faithless wife, and roguish monk; to which an effective contrast is offered by the Prioress's legend, told with devout simplicity, of a little Christian chorister murdered by the Jews. The poet himself is then called upon, and the 'merry words' of Harry Bailey, the host of the 'Tabard,' who acted as leader of the party, may serve as a good example of the talks on the road with which the *Tales* are linked together:—

Whan seyde was al this miracle, every man
 As sobre was that wonder was to se,
 Til that oure Hostè jopen tho bigan jest then
 And than at erst he lookèd upon me, then at first
 And seyde thus : ' What man artow ? ' quod he ; art thou
 ' Thou lookest as thou woldest fynde an hare ;
 For ever upon the ground I se thee stare.

Approché neer, and looke up murily.
 Now war yow, sires, and lat this man have place ; beware
 He in the waast is shape as wel as I ;
 This were a popet in an arm t' embrace
 For any womman, smal and fair of face.
 He semeth elvyssh by his contenance,
 For unto no wight doth he daliaunce.

Sey now somewhat, syn other folk have sayd ;
 Telle us a tale of myrthe, and that anon.'
 ' Hostè,' quod I, ' ne beth nat yvele apayd, I
 For other talè certès kan I noon, know
 But of a rym I lernèd longe agoon.' rhyme
 ' Ye, that is good,' quod he, ' now shul we heere
 Som deyntee thyng, me thynketh by his cheere.'

(*Canterbury Tales*, B. 1881-1901, Globe Ed.)

¹ Do not be ill-pleased.

But Chaucer was far too wise really to put one of his dainty things into his own mouth. The rhyme 'he lerned longe agoon' proves to be a parody of the old romances, the delightful 'Tale of Sir Thopas,' which, of course, Harry Bailey takes quite seriously and indignantly interrupts. Then Chaucer gives up poetry and tells an interminable tale of 'Melibeus and his wife Prudence' (translated from a French version of the *Liber Consolationis* of Albertano of Brescia, written c. 1238), which is heard to the bitter end. As if this were not enough, the Monk, instead of a hunting story, pours out the string of 'tragedies' which Chaucer had written some years before, with five new ones, and the Knight and Harry Bailey interrupt him most righteously. Unlike Chaucer, he will not make a second attempt, but the Nun's Priest comes to

the rescue with a bright rendering of the old folk-tale of the 'Fox and the Hen,' filled out in the poet's happiest vein.

To the morning of the third day have been assigned, with no great certainty, the Doctor of Physic's very poor retelling of the story of Appius and Virginia (from the *Roman de la Rose*), the Pardoner's unblushing Prologue, with its revelations of the tricks of his wretched trade, and his story (ultimately of Indian origin) of the three ruffians who went out in search of Death, and found him by murdering each other in their eagerness to have possession, each for himself alone, of a treasure-trove of gold. It is as likely as not that these tales belong to the fourth day; but to the third, while the pilgrims were on their way to dine at Sittingbourne, and thence, according to the accustomed route, to sleep at Ospringe, we can certainly assign five stories. Of these, the first, preceded by a prologue as shameless and as amusing as the Pardoner's, is the Wife of Bath's tale of the knight who, when he took courage to marry the hag who had saved his life, found her a fair maid. This is followed by the tales in which, like the Miller and Reeve, the Friar and Summoner cast stones at each other's calling; the Summoner's Tale, though its humor is of the lowest, being another example of Chaucer's supreme skill. After a break the Clerk is furnished with a story by Chaucer's hunting up his old version of Patient Griselda, with some added stanzas; and then the Merchant redresses the balance by his tale showing how Jove himself could not prevent a young wife from fooling her old husband.

The fourth day's story-telling opens on a higher level with the Squire's 'half-told' romance of Cambuscan and the horse of brass, followed by the Franklin's version of a lost French story in which a wife is ready to sacrifice even her honour rather than break her word. In reading this, as in the stories of Constance and Griselda, we have

to remember that medieval moralists were apt to think of only one virtue at a time, and when this is understood it takes a high place among the *Tales*. Again there is a gap. Then the legend of St Cecilia, left in all its weakness of early work, is assigned to the Prioress's attendant Nun, to be followed by an unexpected incident, the overtaking of the Pilgrims by a Canon and his Yeoman, who have ridden hard to catch them up. The Canon is an alchemist, who wastes his own substance and that of his dupes in trying to turn silver into gold ; and his Yeoman, after putting his master to flight by his frank confessions, tells a tale of another rogue of the same sort. After this the Manciple explains (from Ovid) how a white crow's indiscreet revelations caused Apollo to turn all crows black ; and then, as Canterbury comes in sight, the Pilgrims bethink them of their religious duties, and listen to a long sermon on repentance, delivered by the good Parson, who at an earlier stage of the journey had been very peremptorily given to understand that no preaching was wanted.

Altogether the *Canterbury Tales* contain some eighteen thousand lines of verse besides the two prose treatises—i.e. the tale of Melibee and the Parson's sermon. We have no record and no sure grounds for conjecture as to over how many years their composition was spread, but except it be in the Doctor's tale or the Manciple's they show no sign of failing power ; and it is probable that they were written in quick succession, until loss of favour at Court or some other cause discouraged the poet, and he laid his bulky manuscript aside, unfinished. As we have seen, he lost his Clerkship of the Works in 1391 ; and if, as seems probable from the occurrence of the date '12 March 1391' [O.S.] in one of its calculations, he was writing the treatise on the Astrolabe soon after this, we may fairly take it as a sign that his interest in the *Tales* was already waning. In his humorous *Envoy a Bukton*, which was written about 1396, he prays

his friend to read the 'Wife of Bath' upon the marriage question; and we are left to wonder whether he allowed copies of the *Tales* in their incomplete form to be multiplied during his life, or whether it was only after his death that they reached a wider public than his immediate friends. Of other work he did but little during the last decade of his life. His treatise on the Astrolabe (an instrument for taking astronomical observations), addressed to his little ten-year-old son Lewis, was left incomplete, like so much else, though in this case he had the treatises of the old Arabian astronomer Messahala, and of the Yorkshire mathematician John Holywood (Johannes de Sacro Bosco), on which to draw. Of poems of this period we have only four remaining, all of them short, and all apparently written with something less than his wonted ease. The sportive *Envoy a Scogan*, on the vengeance he might expect from Venus for having 'given up' his lady, may belong to the year 1393, and ends with a pitiful request from the poor road-commissioner that the favoured dweller 'at the stream's head'—i.e. the Court at Windsor—would 'mind his friend there it may fructifye.' The so-called *Compleynt of Venus*, a triple balade from the French of Graunson, a Savoyard knight, pensioned by Richard II. in 1393, may belong to the same year. The *Envoy a Bukton*, giving him his 'counseil touching mariage,' is dated by its reference to the English expedition to Friesland in 1396. The *Compleynt to his Purs*, sent to the 'Conquerour of Brutes Albioun,' from whom it elicited a fresh pension, belongs, of course, to 1399. None of these poems are unworthy of Chaucer, and it is true that he never wrote his balades and short poems with the ease of his narrative in the couplet stanza, but they seem to belong to a later and less happy period than any of the *Canterbury Tales*, and we may reasonably conclude that the *Tales*, though the crowning work of his life, were not being written right up to the last.

In truth, it is to be feared that the last nine years of Chaucer's life were not very prosperous or happy. His friends did not desert him, for in 1394 Richard II. granted him a new pension of twenty pounds a year ; but we find him frequently anticipating it by small loans from the Exchequer, and in May 1398 he obtained from the king letters of protection to prevent his creditors suing him. In October Richard granted him a tun of wine yearly, apparently in answer to a petition which begged for it as a 'work of charity ;' and a year later, when Richard had been deposed, Henry IV., the son of Chaucer's old patron, John of Gaunt, by an additional pension of forty marks (£26, 13s. 4d.), granted in answer to the *Compleynt to his Purs*, placed the old poet once more in comfortable circumstances. On the following Christmas Eve Chaucer took a long lease, for fifty-three years, of a house in the garden of St Mary's Chapel, Westminster, which his son, Thomas Chaucer, the King's Butler, continued to occupy after his death ; and there are records of his drawing instalments of his pensions in February and June of 1400. The June payment was received on his behalf by a friend, which may or may not, point to his already being ill. All that we know is that, according to an inscription on a tomb erected to him by a lover of his works in 1556, he died on 25th October 1400, and that he was buried in St Benet's Chapel in Westminster Abbey, the first of the many poets who have found their last resting-place in what we now know as Poet's Corner.

In estimating Chaucer's position among English poets we have to consider his work in relation to that of his predecessors and contemporaries, and, secondly, the extent of his actual achievement. On the first point something has already been said ; but the most important difference which separates Chaucer from the poets whose work we have already reviewed is that he first of English writers whose names we know (the limitation is in-

roduced to exclude the author of *Pearl*, a possible exception) conceived of poetry as an art. Our earlier poets, whose subjects would often have been as fitly treated in prose, wrote 'straight on,' with very little ornament, and very little care for finding the right word or varying their verse. Their modesty saved them from many mistakes, and though their work is always on a level, it is by no means on a dead level. But any one who will read, say, the *Cursor Mundi* from end to end and not find it tedious must have a special taste for old-world things. Even Langland, who was continually recasting his *Vision*, recast it not so much that he might improve what he had already said, but that he might say something different; and, as we have noted, he as often changed a good line for a worse as a poor line for a better. In Chaucer's poetry, on the other hand, we find a continuous development, and evidence of the hard work and enterprise by which that development was attained. He begins as a mere translator, and becomes, in his own way, one of the most individual of poets; he begins with monotonous verse, full of padding, and attains a metrical freedom as complete as Shakespeare's; he begins in the prevalent fashion, and soon enriches English literature with two new metres of capital importance (the seven-line stanza and decasyllabic couplet), and with a new range of subjects. Though he had to work harder for his living than most of his predecessors, he took his art far more seriously, and starting at a happier moment and with greater natural gifts, he attained results which differ from theirs not merely in degree but in kind.

As regards his positive achievement some large admissions must be made. The pretty little songs in the *Dethe of the Duchesse* and the *Parlement of Foules* do not entitle us to claim for him any serious lyrical gift, and his shorter poems generally are known rather by fine single lines than as successful wholes. With the absence of the lyrical

faculty goes the absence of passion and depth of thought. The true tragic note is not sounded once in all his poems, and his portrayal of love is languishing and sensuous, never strong. Three of his women are perfectly drawn: the fashionable Prioress, the triumphantly vulgar Wife of Bath, as sketches; the small-souled, piteous Cressida as a finished portrait. The rest are personifications or conventional types, quickened now and again by some happy touch, but not possessed of flesh and blood. As for his asserted deep religious feelings, there has certainly been much exaggeration. He was interested in the problems of free-will and predestination; he had the man of the world's admiration for practical piety wherever he saw it; he had his religious moments, and towards the end of his life may have been devout; but the humorous lines in 'The Knightes Tale'—

His spirit chaungèd hous and wenté ther,
As I cam never, I kan nat tellen wher:
Therefore I stynte, I nam no divinistre
Of soulés fynde I nat in this registre,

are typical of his spirit in the heyday of his powers; and though he laid bare the worldliness and knavery of the hangers-on of religion, they fill him with no deep repugnance.

Lastly, it must be owned that Chaucer had little or no constructive power. He could fill in other men's outlines and improve other men's work as triumphantly as Shakespeare himself, but the inconclusiveness of the *Dethe of the Duchesse* and the *Parlement of Foules*, and the unfinished condition of every other poem in which he tried to work on his own lines as regards plot, prove that he had no aptitude for inventing a story and developing it from prelude to climax.

When all these admissions have been made, Chaucer yet remains one of the greatest English poets, because in his own art of narrative verse he attained a mastery which has never been ap-

proached. Where he should be ranked, as compared with Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Shelley, or Tennyson, depends entirely on the value the critic attaches to different kinds of excellence. In his own Chaucer stands first. While his predecessors lack readers because they had too little art, later writers have often failed, because they have tried to introduce too much. In Chaucer alone we find narrative in perfection—simple, direct, fluent, varying easily with the subject, full of his own individuality, everywhere controlled and enlivened by his abounding humour, and written in verse of never-failing music and metrical power. He is a great artist, with an artist's self-consciousness; at the same time he is absolutely natural and at his ease. There are few English poets to whom we should attribute the combination of these qualities; there is no other who has combined them to the same extent.

A narrative poet can never receive justice from quotations, but the extracts which follow are chosen to illustrate as far as is possible in a few pages the variety of Chaucer's verse and his happiness in dealing with different subjects. We take him first in his early days as the pensive, rather sentimental young poet, weaving his own sorrows, real or imagined, into his lament for the wife of his patron, John of Gaunt,¹ of which our quotation forms the opening lines :

¹ This and the following quotations are taken from the 'Globe' Chaucer, *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, edited by A. W. Pollard, H. F. Heath, Mark H. Liddell, W. S. McCormick (Macmillans, 1898). The *Canterbury Tales* were printed by Caxton in 1478 and 1483, and reprinted by Pynson (c. 1492) and Wynkyn de Worde (1498). Caxton also printed the *Parlement of Foules* and some of the minor poems about 1478, and the *Troilus* about 1483, this being printed again by Wynkyn de Worde in 1517. In 1526 Pynson printed most of Chaucer's works in a volume in three parts, but the first collected edition was that printed by Godfray in 1532, and edited by Thynne. This was reprinted in 1542 and 1550, and again (with additions supplied by the antiquary John Stowe) in 1601. In 1598 and 1602 editions appeared edited by Thomas Speght, and others were issued in 1687 and 1721, the latter edited by Urry.

I have gret wonder, by this lyghte,
 How that I lyve, for day ne nyghte
 I may slepè wel neigh noght ;
 I have so many an ydel thoght,
 Purely for defaute of slepe,
 That, by my trouthe, I take no kepe heed
 Of no thyng how hit cometh or gooth, it—goes
 Ne me nis no thyng leef nor looth. is not—dear nor hateful
 Al is y-lichè good to me,— alike
 Joye or sorwe, wherso hit be,—
 For I have felyng in no thyng,
 But as it were, a masèd thyng dazed
 Always in poynt to falle a-doun ;
 For sorwful ymagynacioun
 Is alway hoolly in my mynde. wholly
 And wel ye woot agaynès kynde against nature
 Hit were to liven in this wyse,
 For Nature woldè nat suffyse
 To noon erthly crèature
 Not long tymè to endure
 Withoutè slepe, and been in sorwe ;
 And I ne may, no nyght ne morwe,
 Slepe ; and this melancolye
 And drede I havè for to dye,
 Defaute of slepe and hevynesse,

These collected editions contained many works not by Chaucer, and their text was disfigured by every possible blunder, so that the music of Chaucer's verse was entirely lost and his meaning obscured. A beginning of better things was made by Thomas Tyrwhitt's edition of the *Canterbury Tales* (1775-78), a really fine piece of editing for its date. Thomas Wright's edition for the Percy Society (1842), and that of Richard Morris in Bell's Aldine Classics (1866), both of them founded on Harleian MS. 7334, were further improvements. But no accurate text was possible until Dr Furnivall founded the Chaucer Society in 1866, and printed parallel texts from all the best manuscripts that could be found, including the Ellesmere, which is now generally considered the best. From these texts Professor Skeat in 1894 edited for the Clarendon Press *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, in six volumes, with a wealth of illustrative notes ; and the 'Globe' edition of 1898 was based on the same materials. In addition to its work on Chaucer's text, the Chaucer Society has cleared up the sources of many of his poems, and has settled the true order of the *Canterbury Tales*, the letters A-I which appear in references to line-numbers denoting the different groups under which, in their incomplete condition, it is necessary to arrange them.

Hath sleyn my spirit of quyknesse
 That I have lost al lustihede.
 Suche fantasyes been in myn hede
 To I noot what is best to do. know not

But men myghte axé me why so ask
 I may not slepe, and what me is? what is wrong with me
 But nathéless, who aské this nevertheless
 Leseth his asking trewély. Loses
 My selven can not tellé why
 The sothe; but trewely, as I gesse,
 I holdé hit ben a siknesse to be
 That I have suffred this eight yere,
 And yet my boote is never the nere; cure—nearer
 For ther is phisicien but oon
 That may me hēle; but that is doon.
 Passe we over until eft; after
 That wil not be, moot nede be left. must needs

(*Dethe of Blaunche the Duchesse*, ll. 1-42.)

The gentle melancholy of this prelude finds a more sonorous echo in the *Compleynt of the Dethe of Pitee*, from which also we may quote the opening lines :

Pitè that I have sought so yore ago
 With herté sore and ful of besy peyne,
 That in this worlde was never wight so wo
 With-outé dethe; and if I shal not feyne,
 My purpos was to Pite to compleyne
 Upon the crueltee and tirannye
 Of Love, that for my trouthé doth me dye.

And when that I, by lengthe of certeyn yeres,
 Had evere in oon a tymé sought to speke, alike
 To Pité ran I, al bespreynt with teres, sprinkled
 To preyen hir on Crueltee me a-wreke; avenge
 But er I myght with any worde out-breke,
 Or tellen any of my peynés smerte,
 I fond hir deed and buried in an herte. found her dead

Adoun fel I when that I saugh the herse,
 Deed as a stoon, whyl that the swogh me laste; swoon
 But up I roos with colour ful dyverse,
 And pitously on hir myn eyen I caste,
 And ner the corps I gan to presen faste, 1, 2
 And for the soule I shoop me for to preye; 3
 I nas but lorne, ther was no more to sey. was utterly lost

Thus am I slayn sith that Pitè is deed ;
 Allas the day ! that ever hit shulde falle !
 What maner man dar now holde up his heed ?
 To whom shal any sorwful hertè calle ?
 Now Crueltee hath cast to sleen us alle,
 In ydel hope, folk redèlees of peyne,—
 Sith she is deed, to whom shul we compleyne ? 4

(*Compleynt of the Dethe of Pitee*, ll. 1-28.)

¹ Nearer. ² Began to press. ³ Addressed myself. ⁴ Bewildered from suffering.

To illustrate Chaucer's earlier narrative work, we must be content with three stanzas from the 'Tale of Constance.' They strike that note of pathos and pity which with Chaucer takes the place of deeper tragedy. King Alla had married Constance after the miracle which proved her innocent of a murder of which she had been falsely accused ; but now, in his absence from home, he has been beguiled, and sends an order that both she and his little child are to be thrust out to sea in a rudderless boat in three days' time :

Wepen bothe yonge and olde in al that place
 Whan that the kyng this curséd lettré sente,
 And Custance, with a deedly palé face,
 The fershè day toward the ship she wente ; fourth
 But nathélees she taketh in good entente
 The wyl of Crist, and knelynge on the stronde,
 She seyde, ' Lord, ay welcome be thy sonde ; sending
 He that me kepté fro the falsé blame,
 While I was on the lond amongès yow,
 He kan me kepe from harm, and eek fro shame,
 In salté see, al-thogh I se noght how.
 As strong as ever he was he is yet now.
 In hym triste I, and in his mooder deere,—
 That is to me my seyl, and eek my steere.' sail—rudder
 Hir litel child lay wepyng in hir arm,
 And knelynge, pitously to hym she seyde,
 ' Pees, litel sone, I wol do thee noon harm !'
 With that hir coverchief of hir heed she breyde, 1
 And over his litel eyen she it leyde,
 And in hir arm she lulleth it ful faste,
 And into hevene hir eyen up she caste.

(' Man of Lawes Tale,' *Canterbury Tales*, B. 820-840.)

¹ She tore the kerchief from her head.

From all this tenderness we must pass rapidly to the tales of chivalry and romance, full of vivid colour, the brightness of youth, and joy of love, which are the most prominent feature in Chaucer's second period. Among these *Troilus and Cressida* stands supreme ; and we may take from it first this picture of Criseyde when Troilus first sees her, and is suddenly struck down, amid his mockery of love, by the beauty he despised :

Among thise othré folk was Criseyda
 In widwes habit blak ; but nathéles, widows
 Right as our firsté lettre is now an A,
 In beauté first so stood she makélés : matchless
 Her goodly loking gladéd al the prees ; crowd
 N'as neveré seyn thing to ben prayséd derre, 1, 2
 Nor under cloudé blak so bright a sterre, star

As was Criseyde, as folk seyde everychone
 That her behelden in her blaké wede.
 And yit she stood ful lowe and stille alone
 Behinden othré folk in litel brede breadth
 And nigh the dore, ay under shamés drede, 3
 Simple of atir and debonaire of chere, attire
 With ful assuréd loking and manére.

This Troilus, as he was wont to gide
 His yongé knightés, ladde hem up and down
 In th'ilké largé temple on every side, that same
 Biholding ay the ladies of the toun,
 Now here, now there ; for no devocioun
 Hadde he to non, to reven him his reste, deprive
 But gan to preyse and lakken whom him leste. disparage

And in his walk ful faste he gan to wayten watch
 If knight or squiér of his companýe
 Gan for to sike or lete his ýen bayten sigh—feed
 On any woman that he coude espýe :
 He woldè smile and holden it folýe,
 And seye him thus, ' God wot, she slepeth softe
 For love of thee, whan thou tornest ful ofte !

' I have herd told, pardieux, of your livínge,
 Ye lovers, and your lewéd óbservauncés, 4
 And which a labour folk han in winnfnge

Of love, and in the keping which doutaunces ;
 And whan your preye is lost, wo and penaunces !
 O verray foolés, nyce and blynd ben ye ! foolish
 Ther n'is nat oon can war by other be !' beware

And with that word he gan caste up the browe
 Ascaunces, ' Lo ! is this nat wisly spoken ?'
 At which the God of Love gan loken rowe roughly
 Right for despit, and shop for to ben wroken : 5
 He kidde anon his bowè n'as nat broken ! showed
 For sodeinly he hitte him at the fulle ;
 And yit as proud a pecok can he pulle ! pluck
 (*Troilus and Cressida*, Bk. i. ll. 169-210.)

¹ There was not. ² More dearly. ³ In dread of being shamed
 (she was daughter of the Greek Calchas). ⁴ Common, foolish.
⁵ Prepared himself to be avenged.

Cupid made Troilus pay heavily for his gibes,
 and cheated him at the last ; yet he allowed him a
 little spell of happiness ; and here is Chaucer's de-
 scription of the supreme moment of love's reward :

O, soth is seid, that heléd for to be
 As of a fevere, or other gret siknése,
 Men mosté drinke, as men may alday see,
 Ful bittrè drinke ; and for to han gladnése,
 Men drinken ofté peyne and gret distresse :
 I mene it here, as for this áventure
 That thourgh a peyne hath founden al his cure.

And now swetnéssé semeth moré swete
 That bitternesse assayéd was biforn ;
 For out of wo in blissé now they flete ; float
 Non swich they felten sin they werè born. since
 Now is this bet than bothé two be lorn ! better
 For love of God, take every womman hede
 To werken thus, whan it com'th to the nede !

Criseyde, al quit from every drede and tene, sorrow
 As she that justé cause had him to triste, trust
 Made him swich feste, it joyè was to sene,
 Whan she his trouthe and clene ententé wiste ;
 And as aboute a tree with many a twisté
 Bitrent and wryth the swoté wodébinde, 1
 Gan ech of hem in armés other winde.

The *Troilus*, which has this solemn end, is a 'tragedy,' but it is a tragedy as full of light as of shade; in it we first find Chaucer's humour in its perfection, and to suit this humour he attunes his verse to another key with masterly ease. Here is a passage from an earlier part of the poem describing a call paid (in the interest of Troilus) by Sir Pandarus on his niece, then in the stage of widowhood in which thoughts of consolation may be trifled with :

Whan he was come unto his neces place,
 'Wher is my lady?' to her folk quod he;
 And they him tolde, and he forth in gan pace, passed
 And fond two othré ladies sete and she seated
 Withinne a pavéd parlour; and they three
 Herden a mayden reden hem the geste story
 Of al the sege of Thebés, whil hem leste.

Quod Pandarus, 'Madámé, God you see,
 With al your book and al the companýe!'—
 'Ey, uncle, now welcómé y-wis!' quod she; surely
 And up she ros, and by the hond in hye hastily
 She took him faste, and seyde, 'This night thrye— thrice
 To goodé mote it torne!—of you I mette.' dreamt
 And with that word she doun on bench him sette.

'Ye, necé, ye shal faré wel the bet, better
 If God wile, al this yer!' quod Pandarus; will
 'But I am sory that I have you let hindered
 To herken of your book ye preisen thus.
 For Goddés love, what seith it? Tel it us!
 Is it of love? O, som good ye me lere!' teach
 'Uncle!' quod she, 'your maistresse is not here!'

With that they gonnen laughe; and tho she seyde,
 'This rómaunce is of Thebés, that we rede;
 And we han herd how that King Laius deyde
 Thorough Edippus his sone, and all that dede;
 And here we stinten at this lettres rede, 1, 2
 How that the bisshop, as the book can telle,
 Amphiorax, fil thorough the grounde to helle.'

Quod Pandarus, 'Al this knowe I my-selve,
 And al th' assege of Thebés, and the care;
 For herof ben ther makéd bookés twelve.
 But lat be this, and tel me how ye fare.

Do wey your barbe, and shewe your facè bare. 3
 Do wey your book : ris up, and lat us daunce,
 And lat us don to May som óbservaunce !'

'Ey, God forbedè !' quod she, 'Be ye mad ?
 Is that a widwes lif, so God you save ?
 By God, ye maken me right sore adrad ! afraid
 Ye ben so wilde, it semeth as ye rave !
 It satè me wel bet, ay in a cave would be fit
 To bidde and rede on holy seintès lives ! pray
 Lat maydens gon to daunce, and yongè wives !'
 (*Troilus and Cressida*, Bk. ii. ll. 78-119.)

¹ Stop. ² The chapter-heading written in red letters in a manuscript. ³ A collar partly hiding the face.

The absolute ease of this passage is in striking contrast to Chaucer's early use of the stanza in the story of St Cecyle, and has perhaps never been equalled in the same form save by Byron. To accompany these quotations from the *Troilus*, we may take the 'Knichtes Tale' out of its place in the *Canterbury* series, in order to show how Chaucer treats chivalry under arms, as in the *Troilus* he treats of chivalry in love. The cousins Palamon and Arcite both love the fair Emily, sister to their enemy, Theseus, 'Duke' of Athens. Arcite overhears Palamon speaking of his love when in hiding from Theseus, and, as his cousin is weaponless, rides off to fetch him armour and weapons that they may fight out their quarrel. The quotation describes how they arm each other and then fight furiously till Theseus interrupts them. It is the more noteworthy because, while Chaucer is translating the *Teseide* of Boccaccio, all the vivid and dramatic touches are his own :

Arcite is riden anon unto the toun,
 And on the morwe, er it were dayès light,
 Ful prively two harneys hath he dight, 1, 2
 Bothe suffisaunt and metè to darreyne fight out
 The bataille in the feeld betwix hem tweyne ;
 And on his hors, allone as he was born,
 He carieth al the harneys hym biforn :

And in the grove, at tyme and place y-set, appointed
 This Arcite and this Palamon ben met.
 To chaungen gan the colour in hir face,
 Right as the hunters, in the regne of Trace, 3
 That stondeth at the gappé with a spere,
 Whan hunted is the leoun or the bere,
 And hereth hym come russhyng in the greves, groves
 And breketh both bowès and the leves,
 And thynketh, ' Heere cometh my mortal enemy,
 With-outé failé he moot be deed or I ; must be dead
 For outhér I moot sleen hym at the gappe, either
 Or he moot sleen me, if that me myshappe' :
 So ferden they in chaungyng of hir hewe, 4, 5
 As fer as everich of hem outhér knewe,
 Ther nas no ' Good day,' ne no saluyng,
 But streight, withouten word or rehersyng,
 Everich of hem heelpé for to armen outhér ;
 As frendly as he were his owene brother ;
 And after that, with sharpé sperés stronge,
 They foynen ech at outhér wonder longe. fence
 Thou myghtest wené that this Palamoun,
 In his fightyng were a wood leoun, mad
 And as a cruel tigre was Arcite :
 As wildé borés gonné they to smyte,
 That frothen whit as foom for iré wood,— mad anger
 Up to the ancle foghte they in hir blood. their

And in this wise I lete hem fightyng dwelle,
 And forth I wole of Thesëus yow telle.

Cleer was the day, as I have toold er this,
 And Thesëus, with allé joye and blis,
 With his Ypolita, the fairé queene,
 And Emelyë, clothéd al in grene,
 On huntynge be they riden roially ;
 And to the grove, that stood ful fasté by,
 In which ther was an hert, as men hym tolde,
 Duc Thesëus the streighté way hath holde ;
 And to the launde he rideth hym ful right,— open space
 For thider was the hert wont have his flight,—
 And over a brook, and so forth in his weye.
 The Duc wol han a cours at hym, or tweye,
 With houndès, swiche as that hym list commaundé.

And whan the Duc was come unto the launde
 Under the sonne he looketh, and anon

He was war of Arcite and Palamon
 That foughten breme, as it were borès two. furiously
 The brightè swerdès wenten to and fro
 So hidously, that with the leestè strook
 It seméd as it woldè fille an ook ; fell
 But what they werè no thyng he ne woot.
 This duc his courser with his sporès smoot,
 And at a stert he was bitwix hem two,
 And pulléd out a swerd, and cridè, ‘ Hoo !
 Namooore, up peyne of lesyng of youre heed ! upon
 By myghty Mars, he shal anon be deed
 That smyteth any strook, that I may seen.
 But telleth me what mystiers men ye been, what kind of
 That been so hardy for to fighten heere
 Withouten juge, or oother officere,
 As it were in a lystès roially ?’

(‘ Knightes Tale,’ *Canterbury Tales*, A. ll. 1628-1662,
 1683-1713.)

¹ Suits of armour. ² Got ready. ³ Kingdom of Thrace. ⁴ Be-
 haved. ⁵ Their colour.

After the *Troilus* came the *Hous of Fame*, and
 from this, did space permit, we should quote
 Chaucer’s autobiographical colloquy with the
 Golden Eagle, and some of the prayers of Fame’s
 suitors and their answers. But we must hasten to
 the *Legende of Good Women*, and choose from this
 a characteristic passage on Chaucer’s favourite
 season, Spring, not unlike that at the end of
 the *Parlement of Foules*, but written with more
 freedom :

Forgeten had the erthe his pore estate
 Of wyntir, that him naked made and mate, forlorn
 And with his swerd of colde so sorè greved ;
 Now hath the atemprè sonne al that releved temperate
 That naked was, and clad it new agayne.
 The smalè foulès, of the sesoun fayne,
 That of the panter and the nette ben scaped, a bag-net
 Upon the foweler, that hem made a-whaped scared
 In wynter, and distroyéd hadde hire broode,
 In his dispite hem thoghte it did hem goode
 To synge of hym, and in hir songe dispise
 The foulè cherle, that, for his coveytise,

Had hem betrayèd with his sophistrye.

This was hir songe, ‘The foweler we deffye,
And al his crafte.’ And somè songen clere
Layès of love, that joye it was to here,
In worshipynge and in preysing of hir make ; mate
And, for the newè blisful somers sake,
Upon the braunchès ful of blomès softe,
In hire delyt, they turnèd hem ful ofte,
And songen, ‘Blessèd be Seynt Valentyne !
For on his day I chees you to be myne,
Withouten répentynge myne hertè swete !’
And therewithal hire bekès gonnen meete,
Yeldyng honóur and humble obeysaunces
To love, and diden hire othere observaunces
That longeth onto love, and to nature ;
Construeth that as yow lyst, I do no cure.

And tho that haddè don unkyndénesse,—
As doth the tydif, for newfangelnesse,—
Besoghtè mercy of hir trespassynge,
And humblély songen hir répentynge,
And sworn on the blomès to be trewe,
So that hire makès wolde upon hem rewe,
And at the lastè maden hir acorde.

(*Legende of Good Women*, ll. 125-159.)

All the Prologue to the *Legende*, whence this is taken, is in Chaucer’s happiest vein, both in its earlier and in this later form ; and as in the last quotation it was hard to have to stop before Theseus’ speech in which he first condemns and then chaffs the lovers, so here it would be pleasant to quote all the talk with Cupid and Alcestis which follows on our extract. From the legends themselves we can only take these few lines as an example of how vigorously Chaucer could describe a sea-fight of the ancient kind :

Antonius was war, and wol nat fayle	aware
To meten with thise Romaynes, if he may,	
Took eke his rede, and both upon a day,	counsel
His wyf and he, and al his ost, forthe wente	host
To shippe anon, no lenger they ne stente,	stayed
And in the see hit happèd hem to mete.	r
Up goth the trumpe, and for to shoute and shete,	shoot

And paynen hem to sette on with the sonne ; 2
 With grisly sounne out goth the gretè gonne,
 And heterly they hurtelen al at ones, furiously
 And fro the top doun cometh the gretè stones.
 In gooth the grapènel so ful of crokes,
 Amonge the ropès, and the sheryng hokes ;
 In with the polax preseth he and he ; this one and that
 Byhynde the maste begyneth he to fle,
 And out agayn, and dryveth hem over borde ;
 He stynteth hem upon his sperès orde ; 3
 He rent the sayle with hokès lyke a sithe ; rendeth
 He bryngeth the cuppe, and biddeth hem be blithe ;
 He poureth pesen upon the hacches slidre ; 4
 With pottès ful of lyme, they goon togidre ;
 And thus the longè day in fight they spende,
 Til at the last, as every thing hath ende,
 Antony is shent, and put hym to the flyghte ; discomfited
 And al his folke to-go, that best go myghte.

(*Legende of Good Women*, ll. 629-653.)

¹ That is, Antony and Octavian. ² That is, so that the sun might be in the enemy's face. ³ Stops them on his spear's-end. ⁴ Dried peas, to prevent the enemy getting a firm footing.

We come now to the *Canterbury Tales*, and as from the portrait-gallery of the Prologue we can only take two examples, two have been chosen which show in effective contrast the good and bad sides of religion in Chaucer's day. Here is the good Parson :

A good man was ther of religioun,
 And was a POURE PERSON OF A TOWN ;
 But riche he was of hooly thought and werk ;
 He was also a lernèd man, a clerk,
 That Cristès Gospel trewely wolde preche :
 His parisshe devoutly wolde he teche.
 Benygne he was, and wonder diligent,
 And in adversitee ful pacient ;
 And swich he was y-prevèd oftè sithes. times
 Ful looth were hym to cursen for his tithes,
 But rather wolde he yeven, out of doute, give
 Unto his pourè parisshe aboute,
 Of his offrýng and eek of his substaunce :
 He koude in litel thyng have suffisaunce.
 Wyd was his parisshe, and houses fer asonder,

But he ne laftè nat, for reyn ne thonder,
 In siknesse nor in meschief to visíte
 The ferreste in his parisshe, much and lite, rich and poor
 Upon his feet, and in his hand a staf.
 This noble ensample to his sheepe he yaf gave
 That firste he wroghte and afterward he taughte.
 Out of the gospel he tho wordés caughte, those
 And this figure he added eek therto,
 That if gold rustè what shal iren doo?
 For if a preest be foul, on whom we truste,
 No wonder is a lewèd man to ruste;
 And shame it is, if a prest takè keepe, heed
 A shiten shepherde and a clenè sheepe.
 Wel oghte a preest ensample for to yive
 By his clennesse how that his sheepe sholde lyve.
 He settè nat his benefice to hyre
 And leet his sheepe encombred in the myre, left
 And ran to Londoun, unto Seint Poules,
 To seken hym a chaunterie for soules;
 Or with a bretherhed to been withholde, I
 But dwelte at hoom and keptè wel his folde,
 So that the wolf ne made it nat myscarie,—
 He was a shepherde, and noght a mercenarie:
 And though he holy were and vertuous,
 He was to synful man nat despitous,
 Ne of his spechè daungerous ne digne, difficult nor haughty
 But in his techyng discreet and benygne,
 To drawen folk to hevене by fairnesse,
 By good ensample, this was his bisynesse:
 But it were any persone obstinat,
 What so he were, of heigh or lough estat,
 Hym wolde he snybben sharply for the nonys. reprove
 A bettrè preest I trowe that nowher noon ys;
 He waited after no pompe and reverence,
 Ne makèd him a spicèd conscience,
 But Cristés loore, and his Apostles twelve,
 He taughte, but first he folwed it hym selve.

(Canterbury Tales, Prologue, ll. 477-528.)

¹ To lodge in a monastery.

And here the rogue of a Pardoner :

With hym ther rood a gentil PARDONER I
 Of Rouncivale, his freend and his compeer,
 That streight was comen fro the court of Romè.

Ful loude he soong *Com hider, love, to me!*
 This Somonour bar to hym a stif burdoun, accompaniment
 Was never trompe of half so greet a soun.
 This Pardoner hadde heer as yelow as wex hair
 But smothe it heng as doth a strike of flex; hank of flax
 By ounces henge his lokkès that he hadde, In small pieces
 And therwith he his shuldres overspradde.
 But thynne it lay by colpons oon and oon; 2
 But hood, for jolitee, ne wered he noon,
 For it was trusséd up in his walèt.
 Hym thoughte he rood al of the newè jet; fashion
 Dischevelee, save his cappe, he rood al bare. 3
 Swiche glarynge eyen hadde he as an hare,
 A vernycle hadde he sowed upon his cappe; 4
 His walet lay biforn hym in his lappe
 Bret-ful of pardon, come from Rome al hoot. Brimful
 A voys he hadde as smal as hath a goot.
 But of his craft, fro Berwyk unto Ware
 Ne was ther swich another pardoner,
 For in his male he hadde a pilwé-beer, bag—pillow-case
 Which that, he seyde, was oure lady veyl; lady's
 He seyde he hadde a gobet of the seyl piece
 That Seïnt Peter hadde, whan that he wente
 Upon the see, til Jhesu Crist hym hente.
 He hadde a croys of latoun, ful of stones, cross of brass
 And in a glas he haddé piggès bones.
 But with thise relikès, whan that he fond found
 A pourè person dwellynge upon lond,
 Upon a day he gat hym moore moneye
 Than that the person gat in monthés tweye;
 And thus with feynéd flaterye and japes
 He made the person and the peple his apes.
 But, trewèly to tellen attè laste,
 He was in chirche a noble ecclesiaste;
 Wel koude he rede a lessoun or a storie,
 But alderbest he song an Offertorie; best of all
 For wel he wisté, whan that song was songe,
 He mostè preche, and wel affile his tonge polish
 To wynné silver, as he ful wel koude;
 Therefore he song the murierly and loude. more merrily

(*Canterbury Tales*, Prologue, ll. 669-714.)

¹ That is, with the Summoner. ² In shreds, lock by lock
³ Dishevelled, with his hair loose. ⁴ Copy of the supposed imprint
 of Christ's face on the handkerchief of St Veronica, which the
 Pardoner might have seen at Rome.

From the *Tales* themselves we have already quoted an example of Chaucer's chivalrous style; our second extract exhibits him where he is perhaps at his strongest of all—as the teller of tales of low life, tales of which he can only have received from others the mere outline, while his expansions of them are full of humour and individuality. As to the stories of this class, Chaucer himself advised some of his readers to 'choose another page,' and the folk-story of the 'Fox and Hen' assigned to the Nonnes Prest is the only one of them which can be recommended *virginibus puerisque*; but this incident from the 'Reeves Tale,' of how a knavish miller frustrated the device of the two Cambridge clerks to prevent him from stealing their corn, stands by itself, and is altogether delightful. The clerks, it should be said, are northerners, and speak in the northern dialect. Symond is the miller :

'Symond,' quod John, 'by God, nede has na peer,
 Hym boes serve hymself that has na swayn, 1, 2
 Or elles he is a fool, as clerkes sayn.
 Our manciple I hope he will be deed expect
 Swa werkés ay the wangés in his heed ; 3, 4, 5, 6
 And forthy is I come and eek Alayn. therefore
 To grynde oure corn and carie it ham agayn. home
 I pray yow spede us heythen that ye may.' hence
 'It shal be doon,' quod Symkyn, 'by my fay !
 What wol ye doon, whil that it is in hande ?'
 'By God, right by the hopur wil I stande,' hopper
 Quod John, 'and se how that the corn gas in. goes
 Yet saugh I never, by my fader kyn,
 How that the hopur waggés til and fra.' to and fro
 Aleyn answérdé, 'John, and wiltow swa ?
 Thanne wil I be bynethé, by my croun !
 And se how that the melé fallés down
 Into the trough,—that sal be my disport ;
 For, John, y-faith, I may been of youre sort,
 I is as ille a millere as ye.'
 This millere smyléd of hir nycétee, foolishness
 And thoghte, 'Al this nys doon but for a wyle ; 7
 They wené that no man may hem bigile ;

But by my thrift yet shal I blere hir eye, cheat them
 For al the sleighte in hir philosophye.
 The moré queynté crekès that they make, cunning devices
 The moré wol I stelè whan I take.
 In stide of flour yet wol I yeve hem bren ; bran
 The gretteste clerkès been noght wisest men,
 As whilom to the wolf thus spak the mare ; 8
 Of al hir art ne counte I noght a tare.'

Out at the dore he gooth ful pryvèly,
 Whan that he saugh his tymè softèly.
 He looketh up and doun til he hath founde
 The clerkès hors, ther as it stood y-bounde.
 Bihynde the mille, under a levèsel, bower
 And to the hors he goth hym faire and wel ;
 He strepeth of the brydel right anon, strips off
 And whan the hors was laus, he gynneth gon 9, 10
 Toward the fen, ther wildè marès renne,— run
 Forth with ' Wehee ! ' thurgh thikkè and thurgh thenne.

This millere goth agayn, no word he seyde,
 But doth his note and with the clerkès pleyde, business
 Til that hir corn was faire and wel y-grounde ;
 And whan the mele is sakkéd and y-bounde,
 This John goth out, and fynt his hors away, findeth
 And gan to crie, ' Harrow ! ' and, ' Weyl-away !
 Oure hors is lorn ; Alayn, for Goddès banes bones
 Stepe on thy feet ; com out, man, al atanes ! at once
 Allas, our wardeyn has his palfrey lorn !'
 This Aleyn al forgat bothe mele and corn ;
 Al was out of his mynde his housbondrie.
 ' What, whilk way is he geen ? ' he gan to crie.

The wyf cam lepynge inward with a ren ;
 She seyde, ' Allas, youre hors goth to the fen
 With wildè mares, as faste as he may go ;
 Unthank come on his hand that boond hym so,
 And he that bettrè sholde han knyt the reyne !'

' Allas,' quod John, ' Aleyn, for Cristès peyne,
 Lay doun thy swerd, and I wil myn alswa. also
 I is ful wight, God waat, as is a raa ; 11
 By Goddès hertè ! he sal nat scape us bathe. both
 Why nadstow pit the capul in the lathe ? 12
 Il-hayl, by God, Aleyn, thou is a fonne.' Ill-luck—fool

This sely clerkès han ful faste y-ronne innocent
 Toward the fen, bothe Aleyn and eek John ;
 And whan the millere saugh that they were gon,

He half a busshel of hir flour hath take,
 And bad his wyf go knede it in a cake.
 He seyde, ' I trowe the clerkès were aferd ;
 Yet kan a millere make a clerkès berd, befool
 For al his art ; now lat hem goon hir weye !
 Lo wher they goon ; ye, lat the children pleye ;
 They gete hym nat so lightly, by my croun !'
 (' Reeves Tale,' *Canterbury Tales*, A. 4026-4099.)

¹ Behoves. ² No servant. ³ So. ⁴ (Northern plural) work.
⁵ Cheek-teeth. ⁶ Head. ⁷ Is only done for a trick. ⁸ See ' Reynard the Fox.' ⁹ Loose. ¹⁰ Begins to go. ¹¹ I am full swift, God knows, as is a roe. ¹² Why didn't you put the palfrey in the stable?

Lastly, as a contrast to these broad humours, here from the ' Prioresses Tale' is a return to Chaucer's earlier manner of tenderness and devotion, no less graceful and pleasing than of yore, and written with far greater mastery. The legend is one of many which good men—Heaven forgive them!—all over Europe sincerely believed, of a little Christian boy wantonly murdered by the Jews :

A litel scole of cristen folk ther stood
 Doun at the ferther ende, in which ther were
 Children an heepe, y-comen of Cristen blood,
 That lernéd in that scolé yeer by yere
 Swich manere doctrine as men uséd there,—
 This is to seyn, to syngen, and to rede,
 As smalé children doon in hire childhede.

Among thise children was a wydwe's sone,
 A litel clergeoun, seven yeer of age, chorister
 That day by day to scolé was his wone ; wont
 And eek also, where as he saugh thymage saw the image
 Of Cristès mooder, he hadde in usage,
 As hym was taught, to knele adoun and seye
 His *Ave Marie*, as he goth by the weye.

Thus hath this wydwe hir litel sone y-taught
 Oure blisful lady, Cristès mooder deere,
 To worshipe ay, and he forgate it naught,
 For sely child wol alday sooné leere,— 1, 2, 3
 But ay whan I remembre on this mateere,

Seint Nicholas stant ever in my presenc
 For he so yong to Crist dide reverence.

This litel child his litel book lernynge,
 As he sat in the scole at his prymer,
 He *Alma redemptoris* herdé synge,
 As children lernéd hire antiphoner ;
 And, as he dorste, he drough hym ner and ner, 5
 And herkned ay the wordés and the note,
 Til he the firsté vers koude al by rote.

Noght wiste he what this Latyn was to seye,
 For he so yong and tendre was of age ;
 But on a day his felawe gan he preye
 Texpounden hym this song in his langage,
 Or telle him why. this song was in usage ;
 This preyde he hym to construe and declare
 Ful often time upon his knowés bare. knee

His felawe, which that elder was than he,
 Answerde hym thus : ‘ This song I have herd seye
 Was makéd of oure blisful lady free, noble
 Hire to salue, and eek hire for to preye salute
 To been oure help and socour whan we deye :
 I kan na moore expounde in this mateere,
 I lernè song, I kan but smal grammeere.’ know but little

‘ And is this song makéd in reverence
 Of Cristés mooder ? ’ seyde this innocent.
 ‘ Now certés, I wol do my diligence
 To konne it al, er Cristémasse is went,
 Though that I for my prymer shal be shent, scolded
 And shal be beten thriés in an houre, thrice
 I wol it konne oure lady for to honóure ! ’

His felawe taughte hym homward prively
 Fro day to day, til he koude it by rote,
 And thanne he song it wel and boldély
 Fro word to word, acordynge with the note.
 Twiés a day it passéd thurgh his throte, Twice
 To scoléward and homward whan he wente ;
 On Cristés mooder set was his entente.

(‘ Prioresses Tale,’ *Canterbury Tales*, B. 1685-1740.)

¹ Innocent. ² Always. ³ Learn. ⁴ While at his mother's breast.
⁵ Drew him nearer and nearer.

his prose it is sufficient to say that,
could write with ease and simplicity
his guard, in his attempts at more ornate
he never attained to the artistic mastery
on everywhere marks his verse.

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