
A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

spent; though in an ancient institution, made illustrious and influential, through the land and the world, by the labors of the venerated dead and the honored living. But it does not become the individual to yield to his individuality. The stream of Divine Providence, so signally conspicuous in the life of the church, and of its members, is the stream upon which the diffident as well as the confident must alike cast themselves. And he who enters upon a new course of labor for the church of God, with just views of the greatness and glory of the kingdom, and of the comparative unimportance of any individual member, will be most likely to perform a work that will best harmonize with the development and progress of the great whole.

ARTICLE VII.

CHAUCER AND HIS TIMES.

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MR. ADDISON has somewhere said, that "a reader seldom peruses a book till he knows whether the author of it be a black or a fair man; of a mild or choleric disposition; married or bachelor, with other particulars of the like nature that conduce very much to the right understanding of an author." Whether we accept the assertion and adopt the implied conclusion or not, it is a fact that, in seeking for a life of many of the imperial geniuses of the world, we are obliged to reverse this process and read their biography chiefly in their works. Of Homer we know neither how nor where he lived nor when he died. Very little of outward biography has come to us of most of the great poets of antiquity; and, even in respect to Shakspeare, the most of his external life seems to have got equally beyond the research of the antiquary and the industry of the historian. How intense, indeed, would be our interest in the details of his early life, and that succession of years which intervened between his marriage and his flight to London, where his

genius first became known to the world. A life of Shakspeare, as full and reliable as Mr. Lockhart has given us of Scotland's great novelist, would be *the* book for its time, in the English language. But while the works of the great bard are everywhere known, read and admired, in every language which has a literature in Christendom, the bard himself stands before us a dim and shadowy form, as much almost a mythical character as a historical reality.

Geoffrey Chaucer, the father of English verse, is no exception to this unfortunate rule. While of his writings no inconsiderable amount has come down to our day, all that we are sure of respecting his external life and relations, may be brought within the compass of a few pages. The man Chaucer, as he lived and moved among men, — the courtier, the citizen, the poet, — we would fain behold with more distinctness than veritable history will at present allow. His contemporaries are provokingly silent respecting him. Even Sir John Froissart, himself a poet who must have known him well, hardly mentions his name, though inclined to gossip of every body whom he knew. Was the aristocratic old canon jealous of his brother poet? Or, what is more probable, did he purposely pretend ignorance of the man who did not scruple to satirize the corrupt ecclesiastics of his time?

As he has told us himself, he was a native of London; and, as the inscription on his tomb in Westminster Abbey tells us, he was born in 1328, one year after the accession of Edward III., whose long and eventful reign is distinguished in English history. His father has been supposed to have been a merchant, which is certainly very possible, when we see everywhere in his writings proofs of a minute knowledge of the world in its every-day aspects. Having finished such preparatory studies as were at that day required, he entered the University of Cambridge, where, according to Mr. Godwin, there were gathered six thousand students.

Whatever his birth, or social position in life, he could not have lived many years in London, as it then was, without decided results. He had ample opportunity of knowing and remarking upon the growth of that rising rank of men, the burgesses, who were even then beginning, as they afterwards completed, an entire change in the political constitution of the country. Of his youth and early manhood we further learn that he pursued the study of law, and became early known as a poet; and this

is nearly all, if we except one other act of that youthful age, which has some significance, one might suppose, his flogging a Franciscan friar in the streets of London, for which, according to an old record, he was fined two shillings. We cannot learn the cause of this castigation; but if there was even a tolerable provocation, the poet must have felt that the speculation did not on the whole prove a very bad one.

Mr. Hume has remarked that there is not a reign in English history which deserves more to be studied than that of Edward III. It has its interest for the politician as marking the era when the foundations of political and social liberty were laid. Although more than a century had elapsed since at Runnymede the Magna Charta had been wrested from the hands of despotic power, that power, never quite satisfied with its loss, omitted no opportunity to regain its original strength; but the spirit of liberty had struggled again and again to maintain its ground, and had now gained at least one great victory. It had become a recognized fact, that all orders of men had rights and privileges which no king might take away. Contemporaneous with these struggles of freedom, and as their cause, doubtless, in no small measure, there had been going on that singular process, so puzzling to the historian, of a thoroughly subdued and despised race gradually rising from beneath the feet of their oppressors, and, at length, effectually taking the place of the dominant power. Two centuries and a half before, the battle of Hastings and the victory of William the Norman had given the whole nation into the hands of the conqueror. Seldom does history show us a more complete subjugation of one race by another. And the victor took, to human view, the most effective methods to secure and perpetuate his power. The native owners of the soil were made slaves, degraded or kept from every post of honor; their very language was excluded from all the higher spheres of life; and, to such a degree was this degrading process carried, that, as Mr. Macaulay tells us, it became an ordinary form of indignant denial with a Norman gentleman: "Do you take me for an Englishman." And yet a single century had hardly passed before the descendants of that same gentleman were proud to claim kindred with the English race.

This singular elevation of an enslaved race had become complete in the age of Chaucer. The nation was now properly English. The French language had been banished from legal

courts, and the English had begun to take its place in the castle and the palace. The long and fierce struggles between Edward and the French finally sundered all ties which bound England to the Continent, and resulted in that antipathy towards her Gallic neighbors, which lives in the English bosom even to the present hour.

For the literary man also, no less than for the politician, do the times of Chaucer possess peculiar interest For then it was that the night of barbarism which had for centuries hung over Europe, was beginning to pass away. The day of science and learning had dawned. Petrarch and Boccacio in Italy, and Chaucer in England, were among the most conspicuous heralds of that glorious dawn. During the latter half of the fourteenth century, Italy was truly "a busy labratory of ancient literature." It was the glory of her princes to aid the cause of letters; they expended immense sums in founding libraries and galleries of art. Here was a zealous reformation, and, what does not often happen, a reformation without radicalism. The restoration of learning was but the restoration of a healthful conservatism; for letters are essentially preservative of rational liberty and wholesome laws. What of generous learning yet tarried in Constantinople, had begun to hear an inquiring voice in Italy and western Europe; and the answering word was not delayed. This but stimulated the enthusiasm; and then commenced the general hunt for manuscripts. Smyrna, Alexandria, and other cities of the East, were visited by eager aspirants for the honor of discovery. To have discovered a classic manuscript was matter of almost as much exultation as to have found a new continent. Even merchant princes joined in the exciting work; and not seldom were ships from the Levant and the Bosphorus freighted with the treasures of literature as well as with more legitimate articles of commerce. The universities, from Italy to England, were thronged with young men, at last for other purposes, we must think, than Mr. Hume supposes, "to learn bad Latin and worse logic." About the middle of the fourteenth century, a chronicler informs us, that there were thirty thousand students in Oxford alone.

We do not say that in this age either literature or liberty had gained full sway. There was much of ignorance and much of despotism yet remaining; and, though the dark pall of barbarism which had for so many ages rested on the nations, was raised,

yet many of its ponderous folds still swept the ground. In England, especially, though commerce had commenced a vigorous growth and the corner-stone of freedom had been securely laid; though those grand old architectural piles, now the admiration of every foreigner, were in process of rearing; though most or all of the refinement which belonged to chivalry in its best days yet remained, there was still much of ignorance and vice, of vulgar luxury and barbaric splendor. But the first great achievements of civilization had been made; a light had risen which for five hundred years has been gaining to itself brightness and glory.

The age of Chaucer, moreover, claims the attention of all Protestants, for it was also the age of Wiclif, who was born in 1324, four years before the poet. Both, indeed, belonged to the same liberal party, and the poet was no more a friend to papal aggression than was the intrepid doctor. The absurdities which were easily practised upon the ignorant and superstitious, were not alone manifest to the better informed class; the good sense and shrewdness of the unlettered commons had begun also to penetrate the flimsy exterior, with which ghostly cunning had invested them, and to demand their removal. The Reformation had not yet become a fact; but the forces of which it was the resultant, were even then in vigorous activity. The abuses of the church, which had been accumulating for ages, become at length a mass reeking with corruption, and hanging upon the vitals of society like a burdensome and putrid disease. A cure was, indeed, possible, but it was to be no easy thing. As the human mind gradually awoke from its long lethargy, it became aware of the presence of this disease, and, with the instinctive promptings of self-preservation, cast about for the remedy, which for long years it was not destined to find. The sickly body felt its malady and groaned being burdened, though the deliverance was not yet. Thus in England the abominations of ecclesiastical power were almost as distinctly condemned by Wiclif and his party in the fourteenth century, as they were by Luther in the sixteenth. And not in England only; in Italy even, popular writers did not hesitate to ridicule the unworthy practices of the ecclesiastics; and the fact that this was so common proves not only the extent of the evil, but also that the people to some extent were aware of it. How Chaucer dealt with them we shall have occasion to notice hereafter.

Wiclif did not, any more than Luther, become a reformer

from any premeditated purpose; for, until he was nearly fifty years of age, he was known chiefly as a learned priest, skilled in all the scholastic lore of his time, which, with his unusual talents, he was ever ready to consecrate to the service of the church. And it was only when one or two enormous abuses had been thrust upon his notice, and he had found, as did Luther, in his own experience, that the *healing* of such evils was not in accordance with the genius of popery, that he fully awoke to a knowledge of the true source and vast extent of the mischief. He had observed from time to time the character and influence of the Mendicant Friars,

"White, black, and grey, with all their trumpery,"

who, at that time, had grown from very modest beginnings and pretensions, to be a universal nuisance. While impressing the people with a belief in their superior sanctity and humility, they used the influence thus acquired, to replenish their coffers, which in those days were not apt to be empty; for, under the garb of poverty, and pretending entire disregard for all comforts and luxuries, they resorted to every device which a perverse ingenuity could supply, to drain the people of their well-earned pence; and with such success that vast sums accrued to their respected orders. The honest and straightforward doctor saw the abuse and fearlessly attacked it in a tractate containing various heads of impeachment, with abundance of plain talking. He declares therein, that the Friars are most dangerous enemies to Church and State, inasmuch as they interfere with the curates in the performance of their appropriate duties, and rob poor people, on false pretences, of immense sums of money. After such plain dealing he had of course no favor to expect from the Friars. They became his sworn enemies.

Another and a bolder push of papal power stirred the soul of Wiclif to its depths; as, indeed, it roused the spirit of every true Englishman. Urban V., in the depth of his weakness, as if struck with some strange madness, demanded tribute of Edward III. when at the summit of his power. The weak and cowardly John, it is true, had been frightened into an oath of fealty to the pope, during his reign; but the people never had sanctioned this silly act, and, though tribute had been formerly paid, it was always done reluctantly and irregularly, while for thirty-three years the pontificate had been wisely silent respect-

ing such preposterous vassalage. Wiclif was among the first to raise his voice against the audacious demand. He defended his country against such a disgrace, and stimulated the people to repel it. A parliament was summoned (one of the seventy assembled during this reign), which, after a short deliberation, decided unanimously — the bishops with the rest — that no king could alienate the sovereignty to any foreign power, without consent of parliament, and that, if the pope should proceed against the king of England as his vassal, the whole nation ought to rise at once in defence of its rights. We hear no more of tributary claims from that time downward. Wiclif was soon after made one of the chaplains of the king.

It was, however, not till the reformer had found that the suppression of error and abuse formed no part of the policy of the church, that we hear him saying: "It is lawful for kings, in cases limited by law, to take away temporalities from churchmen who habitually abuse them;" and again: "An ecclesiastic, even the pope of Rome, may on some occasions be corrected by his subjects; and, for the benefit of the church, may be impleaded by both clergy and laity." After having been repeatedly tried for heresy, and having in this way acquired, as no otherwise he could have done, an insight into the animating spirit of the papacy, his course became more and more aggressive. He exposed errors, combatted unreasonable assumptions, translated the Scriptures into English, and made many converts to his opinions. In fact, the fourteenth century seemed fast becoming the era of reformation. And why should it not be so? The most liberal, and one of the wisest kings England had ever seen, was upon the throne. The spirit of civil and ecclesiastical liberty was rife among the people, and the reformers were patronized by those high in power. Truly was there reason to hope for the future. But the rising day was destined to be obscured. Though Wiclif himself was taken away from the coming gloom, in due time it fell, and when the wrath of heresy-hunters could not touch nor harm the "Evangelic Doctor" himself, with impotent rage it desecrated his tomb, dragging forth his bones from their forty years' rest and giving them to the flames. The hope of reform was crushed, but not forever. A day of reckoning was to come.

Whoever seeks the cause of this failure, may find it partly in the injudicious conduct of Wiclif's associates and succes-

sors, and partly in such mobocratic spirits as Wat Tyler and John Ball. These last are not unusual accompaniments of every genuine reform; though by no means, as is sometimes supposed, its offspring. They are rather the legitimate children of previous oppression. Our own righteous revolution had its adjuncts of radicalism and rank infidelity, which did it no small hurt. With Luther's reformation, the anabaptists sprung into being. And liberty in France is to-day dying under the blows it has received from its professed friends of the Red Republican stamp. Crazy John Ball preaching communism, with Jack Straw and Wat Tyler sowing sedition and exciting insurrections among the people, awakened the fears of all good citizens, who, seeing anarchy just before them, as a chain of evils, fell back into the arms of despotism.

Any notice of this interesting epoch, however brief, would be incomplete without some allusion to the family of Edward III. For it is not a common thing to meet with such a family in the annals of royalty. Edward himself was a stalwart knight, bold and chivalrous on the field, wise and discreet in council. His queen, Philippa of Hainault, was not only a model queen, intensely interested for the good of the realm, and sharing with her husband the cares, and to some extent the labors, of the government, but also a model wife and mother. Their marriage was not, as was too often the case in those times, an affair of state-policy, in which the most interested parties were the mere puppets of managing princes; it was grounded on thorough personal acquaintance and a mutual regard, which, when we consider their position and the times in which they lived, was unusually steadfast through a union of more than forty years. Not many things in the history of royal families, are more touching than Froissart's unvarnished chronicle of this excellent lady's death. "When the good queen," says he, "perceived that her end approached, she called to the king, and extending her right hand from under the bed-clothes, put it into the right hand of King Edward, who was oppressed with sorow, and thus spoke:

"'We have, my husband, enjoyed our long union in peace, happiness and prosperity. But I entreat you before I depart, and we are forever separated in the world, that you will grant me three requests.' King Edward with sighs and tears replied: 'Lady, name them; whatever be your requests they shall be granted.' 'My lord,' she said, 'I beg you will fulfil whatever

engagements I have entered into with merchants for their wares as well on this as on the other side of the sea; I beseech you to fulfil whatever gifts or legacies I have made, or left, to churches wherein I have paid my devotions, and to all my servants, male or female; and, when it shall please God to call you hence, you will choose no other sepulchre than mine, and that you will lie by my side in the cloisters of Westminster Abbey.' The king in tears replied, 'Lady, all this shall be done.'

"Soon after," continues the chronicler, "the good lady made the sign of the cross on her breast, and having recommended to the king her youngest son, Thomas, who was present, praying to God, she gave up her spirit which I firmly believe was caught by holy angels and carried to the glory of heaven, for she had never done anything by thought or deed to endanger her soul."

This good queen, though the mother of twelve children whom she nurtured and educated herself, was ever busy with plans and deeds of general benevolence. She was the patroness of learning and the useful arts. Soon after her marriage, having hardly reached womanhood, she interested herself in the introduction of woollen manufactories into England from her own country, for which a monastic chronicler utters this benediction: "Blessed be the memory of Edward III. and Philippa of Hainault, his queen, who first invented clothes;"[1] i. e. the making of wool into cloth. Queen's College, Oxford, took its name in honor of Philippa, and received her patronage as far as the royal purse, in those days never full, would allow. And her children were worthy of their patronage; accomplished and virtuous beyond most of their time. The heroic Black Prince, centering in himself the warmest love of his parents and their fondest hopes; as distinguished for his valor and his virtue as for his manly beauty; "John of Gaunt, time-honored Lancaster," the brave champion and patron of the reformers; and Lionel, gigantic in stature and noble in heart, were sons of whom any king might reasonably be proud. The daughters, too, did honor to the matronly training and virtues of their mother. One of them, the Countess of Pembroke, was one of the most learned ladies of her time, and the patroness of Chaucer, as was Philippa herself. If the vast labors performed by this family, the hardships they voluntarily endured, and the dangers they braved, may be taken for a specimen, royalty was no sinecure in those times.

[1] Miss Strickland's Queens of England.

Such, in brief, was the age and such were the contemporaries of Chaucer. It was an era of great national importance to England, and of great interest to the world, as being the dawn of a returning day of commerce, art, liberty and letters. Old superstitions had begun to totter on their foundations, and free thought was struggling for a free utterance. One of those great transition-periods which society witnesses at long intervals of time, had commenced. Chaucer was a man of his age. He looked at the future in common with his generation, and was not an indifferent spectator on the theatre of his times. He was not merely a man of letters; he was also a man of the world, holding political office and receiving political emolument. It has been supposed that he travelled in early life; but it is more certain that he was early connected with the court of Edward (at that time the most splendid in Europe), and received various appointments from his sovereign, among which was that of embassador to Genoa, in the year 1372. Petrarch was at this time residing in Padua, and there is some proof that he visited that accomplished scholar and restorer of learning. But granting this to be only a fiction of the antiquaries, it is quite obvious that this Italian journey was made to add very materially to his already acquired stores of learning, and had a direct bearing upon his literary character and writings. He tells us explicitly that he learned the story of Patient Gresilda, from "Francis Petrarch, a learned clerk of Padua." Many of his tales are translations or imitations of popular Italian stories.

That Chaucer, before his connection with the English court, had distinguished himself by his poetical productions, is quite certain; but there is little reason to suppose that it was to this that he owed any special preferment. That was an age when mere courtly accomplishments would win royal favor far sooner than the productions of genius. Most probably he owed his promotion to the Duke of Lancaster; to whose interests he was attached, and who ultimately became his brother-in-law. He became thus indirectly allied to royalty, an uncommon, if not an unlawful, thing for poets. Politically allied to Lancaster, he espoused the doctrines of Wiclif, of whom the duke was a steadfast friend and defender. His party earnestly engaged in promoting reforms both in Church and State. But the enterprise, as we have already seen, ended in disaster and defeat; and the whole party was broken and scattered. After remaining some

time in Zealand, as an exile, he was induced to return again to his home; but former friends proved false; potent enemies prevailed against him, and he was cast into prison. How long he remained in confinement is uncertain; but he has told us, "every hour seemed an hundred winters."

This history of his fall from influence; of his exile; his imprisonment and subsequent release, is enveloped in obscurity. It has been said that he regained his liberty by betraying his associates. But this needs proof; and all his life of which we are certain, indicates that he could never have been a traitor. He might have made some revelations respecting those former friends who deserted him in his banishment, and left him to languish in a dungeon; and to them, indeed, he owed no favors; but Lancaster he could not certainly have betrayed, for that prince afterward was his steadfast friend and protector. After his release, the wheel of fortune turned again in his favor. Under the reign of Richard II. Lancaster was again in power, Chaucer was reinstated in office, receiving for his civil labors a generous compensation. His later days were spent in retirement and ease, and it was in this quiet evening of his life, the storms having all passed away, that he wrote his best poems; those which stand forth as the prominent works of his genius. He died in 1400, seventy-two years of age.

The thing that strikes the ordinary reader most obviously, on first opening a volume of Chaucer, is the strangeness, the foreign air of the language. He seems to have fallen upon an unknown tongue. And this suggests to us a peculiar difficulty with which the writer of that day had to struggle. The English tongue, if such it could be called, was a rude mass, *rudis indigestaque moles*, a material the most unpromising possible for genius to find an utterance in. The French had been used by the higher classes, Latin by the learned, and the Saxon by the common people; and during the period of Norman ascendency, for more than two centuries, the Anglo Saxon had ceased to be a written language. It was only a dialect of slaves, the *patois* of a crushed and despised race. It must, therefore, have suffered much and lost much since the days of Alfred. But, as fast as the indomitable Saxon rose from his condition of serfdom, he brought his native tongue along with him into the higher spheres of life; and with the elevation of the race came also the elevation of the language. Still, it was as yet the tongue of a barbarous and ignorant people,

equally unfit for the philosophic and the poetic muse. Chaucer as an Englishman, partaking of that national pride which the rising power of the realm had so naturally awakened, would not be likely to use a foreign language as a medium for the inspiration of his genius. There was left for him but one other course to pursue. He must take the yet mechanical mixture, the unamalgamated languages, and form a dialect for himself as best he could, through which he might speak to his own and succeeding ages. This was a task the difficulty of which we shall not be likely at once to appreciate; but the poet shrunk not from it. Right manfully did he put his hand to the work; and the success he attained, is well reckoned one of the proudest achievements in literature or art. Rarely, if ever, has the history of letters recorded such a phenomenon as we here behold. A great genius, one of the world's elect bards, arises in a country and in an age where the language is an unfit and an insufficient medium for his utterances, and where he must not only create his forms and conceptions, but in some sense, the language also, with which to clothe them. As we behold Chaucer thus carving from the French, the Latin, and the Saxon, as from a mixed, raw material, hard and unyielding, a language for himself, we are reminded of the theory which represents Homer as choosing a form, now from one dialect and now from another, and working all together into a Divine harmony. But how great the contrast, even supposing the theory correct, between the two. The dialects of those old Greeks were exquisitely perfect, flexile to the last degree for all purposes of poetry and philosophy; even in that far distant heroic age fit dialects for the gods. And so it has usually happened, that genius has found, already formed to its hand, a language fitted for its purposes. The Homeric Greek was exactly adapted to the simple, lifelike and beautiful descriptions with which the Iliad and Odyssey everywhere abound. It never fails the immortal poet, whether seeking appropriate epithets for Paris or Agamemnon; describing the death-struggle between Hector and Achilles; or with delicate hand depicting that pathetic meeting between Andromache and her husband, as he was going forth to engage in that series of conflicts in which he was destined to meet an untimely fate. And so in a later age, when Aeschylus would represent to the Athenian people those grand old myths of an earlier time with their sublime morality, he found a language capable of giving form, as was his

own lofty imagination of giving conception, to those noble tragedies, which, in stately grandeur, stand the first in rank, as they were the first in time, of all high dramatic poetry. The same may be said of Cicero and Virgil; of Shakspeare, Goethe and Milton.

To this general rule Chaucer is a singular, almost a solitary exception. The mixed material in which he wrought, was neither Pentelic nor Parian marble, but rather a sort of conglomerate, tough, crabbed and hard. A slight inspection shows us the difficulties with which the poet struggled. But if the language fails, not so the writer. As Mr. D'Israeli has finely remarked: "the material from which he sculptured has betrayed the noble hand of the artist; the statue was finished; but the gray and spotty veins come forth clouding its lucid whiteness." In this bold and successful attempt, Chaucer has not only given proof of his own great power; he has also done most signal service to the cause of letters. He is almost as much the father of the English language as of English poetry. To him belongs the high honor of standing foremost among those who began that process of fusing into the Anglo Saxon appropriate words of foreign birth, which has adapted the English, by its strength, its simplicity and its variety, to be, as it is fast becoming, the most universal language of the civilized world.

The want of chronology which belongs to Chaucer's life, belongs also to his writings. With few exceptions we can assign no certain date to his numerous poems. If we cannot have the chronology of his outward life, it would be worth something to be able to trace the history of his genius step by step, through all its transitions, "kindling the cold ashes of translation into the fire of invention; from cloudy allegory breaking forth into the sunshine of the loveliest landscape-painting; and from the amatory romance, gliding into that vein of humor and satire, which, in his old age, poured forth a new creation." But of this neither he nor his contemporaries tell us much. From his first poem to his last and greatest work, the Canterbury Tales, an interval reaching over a space of forty-six years, nearly all succession is lost. It would be interesting, indeed, to know when and where this man of business, this court gentleman, dwelt with the Muses during all those forty-six years; but we are left here only to dubious conjecture.

Of Chaucer's translations, "the Romance of the Rose" ranks

the first, whether we regard the intrinsic character of the piece, or the translator's execution of his task. Mr. Warton has given copious extracts from it, with the parallel passages in the French, by comparing which it appears to have lost nothing by its transfer into another tongue. It was the most celebrated allegory of the old French poetry, and was an early favorite with Chaucer. In his youth, long before he translated it, as he tells us in his "Dreme," he used to imagine its scenes and characters painted on the walls of his chamber as he lay musing upon his couch. In its imaginative character, the strength and boldness of its descriptions, the splendor of its scenes and the distinctness of its characters, it was well suited to the poet's own tastes and genius. The whole poem, which is long and sometimes tedious, is the product of a gorgeous imagination; and shows, as do many of the tales of that age, unquestionable evidence of its oriental origin. For the East was the birthplace not of religion and philosophy only; in the Orient, also, sprung the germs of many a story which modern genius has recast, but which may be easily traced through German or Italian media, to an earlier Arabic literature, that, like a brilliant Aurora of the north, flashed athwart the darkness of the Middle Ages.

It is the opinion of Mr. Campbell, that the two capital allegories of Chaucer, are his "House of Fame" and the "Flower and the Leaf," both of which have been paraphrased in modern English; the former by Pope, and the latter by Dryden. And certainly they must rank high among the poet's works. Both show the working of that genial and fertile imagination, which places Chaucer in the first rank of poets; though it must be confessed that, in the "House of Fame," this imagination borders sometimes upon an excess of luxuriance. It contains a fine satire upon the caprice of Fame; and, under its gorgeous and sometimes grotesque exterior, lurks many a valuable moral. Pope, in his imitation of this allegory, has endeavored to remove its extravagances and substitute beauties of his own. He has given us here, as in his other translations, fine verses and specimens of elegant diction. But here, as elsewhere, he has failed to render the spirit of the poem. Neither Dante nor Chaucer nor Homer can be well translated by those whose culture belongs exclusively to a more refined, and, consequently, to a more artificial age. In trying to change the dress, Pope has changed the species. Mr. Warton has well said: "An attempt to unite order

and exactness of imagery with a subject formed on principle so professedly romantic and anomalous, is like giving Corinthian pillars to a Gothic palace. When I read Pope's elegant imitation of this piece, I think I am walking among the modern ornaments unsuitably placed in Westminster Abbey."

The "Flower and the Leaf," is an exquisite fancy-piece, concealing under its beautiful imagery a yet more beautiful moral. It belongs to a species of poetry, popular in that day, which sprang up after the decline of the famous old Provencial, and which Froissart, as well as Chaucer, was fond of cultivating. It consisted of short pieces, of a highly allegorical character, and mostly in the pastoral style; and, as Mr. Warton supposes, took its peculiar type from the Floral games instituted by Clementine, Countess of Toulouse, in the year 1324, and annually celebrated in the month of May. At these games all the poets in France were assembled in artificial arbors dressed in flowers, where he who produced the best poem, was rewarded with a violet of gold. Other prizes were conferred for inferior productions. Meanwhile the conquerors were crowned with wreaths of natural flowers. Rewards so conferred in such an age must certainly have been a powerful stimulus to such poetic genius as then existed in the land.[1]

In this little poem, so full of vernal scenes and fairy work, a lady is represented as placed in a delicious arbor, cool and fresh, full of sweet odors, and thickly interwoven with eglantine. Troops of knights and ladies soon advance, some, subjects to a Lady of the Flower, and some, to a Lady of the Leaf; and all are decked with the ornaments of spring. Besides, in agreement with the taste of the times, the whole array glitter with gold and precious stones, and are preceded by minstrels in vestments of green. Some of the company do obeisance to the Flower, and others to the Leaf of the Daisy, The lady in the arbor, puzzled to know the meaning of this display, is informed that those who worship the flower, denote the followers of Indolence and Pleasure; as Dryden paraphrases the passage:

> Who, nursed in idleness and trained in courts,
> Passed all their precious hours in sports,
> Till death behind, came stalking on unseen,
> And withered, like the storm, the freshness of their green;
> These and their mates enjoy the present hour,
> And, therefore, pay their homage to the flower.

[1] Warton's History of English Poetry, II. 223.

The Leaf symbolizes perseverance, virtue and honorable fame; its worshippers, therefore, are those who seek for permanent excellence. In this allegorical style are many of Chaucer's poems; and in adopting it he followed no less the promptings of his own imagination, than the tastes of his age. The allegory was a favorite with the readers of that time, if we may judge from its preponderance among the productions of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

But in the Canterbury Tales, our poet leaves this fanciful region where he had so fondly lingered, and places before us persons and scenes of the most matter-of-fact kind possible. This was his last and greatest work; the labor of his old age. And we cannot forbear repeating here, what, indeed, has often been remarked before, that some of the best and freshest works of genius have been produced late in life. "Old" and "blind" are the legendary epithets of Homer. We are the better assured of the story of Sophocles, that, when in extreme age having been accused by his elder sons as being childish and unfit to manage his affairs, he simply read to the judges, by way of defence, that noble tragedy, the Edipus at Colonos, just composed; on hearing which, they not only acquitted him without consultation, but bore him in triumph to his home. We remember, too, that Milton might have been called an old man when he finished the grandest epic of modern days. Of Young it has been said, that he wrote nothing worthy of the name of poetry till he was over sixty years of age. Cowper was over fifty when he wrote "The Task." In like manner, Chaucer was sixty-four when he finished his master-piece. So true it is, that the imagination does not of necessity decline with the body in which it dwells; for true genius never grows old.

About thirty years previous, Boccacio had written, in Italy, the Decameron, a series of one hundred tales, which he supposes to have been related as follows. During the plague in Florence, in 1348, ten young persons of both sexes went into the country for purposes of health; and, desiring to spend ten days agreeably together, it was agreed that each in turn should tell one story a day for that period. This collection of stories had become popular throughout Europe, and the critics have generally supposed that Chaucer here found a hint from which he constructed the Canterbury Tales. But this should hardly have been mentioned, since Chaucer's plan is every way superior to that of Boccacio,

whether we consider the skill of his design, or the ingenuity of its execution. He supposes that, in early spring, when April, with its fertilizing showers and "zephyr with its sweet breath," were tempting forth alike the traveller and the pilgrim, a company of twenty-nine persons met of an evening at the Tabard, an inn at Southwark, near London, on a pilgrimage to Thomas a Becket's tomb at Canterbury. They are of various ages; of differing occupations, and represent every grade of that great middle class, which was even then a peculiarity in English social life. In the group we find a monk, a merchant, a scholar, a friar, a ploughman, a miller, a sailor, a parson, a seller of indulgences, a doctor of physic, and, to mention no more, a lady prioress and the wife of Bath. Their object being a common and a religious one, and being assembled, as was the custom of the time, at a common table, a sort of travelling acquaintance is formed at once. At the suggestion of "mine host," who seems to have been well adapted to entertain his guests, they agree not only to pursue the remainder of their journey together, but also, in order to relieve the tedium of the way, that each should divert the company in turn by a story; and that he who should tell the best tale should have a supper at the expense of the others. The host enters right earnestly into the plan, appoints himself judge in the pleasant strife, and prepares to accompany the travellers on their way in the morning.

In his prologue to the tales, the poet portrays the travellers one by one, by a few bold and skilful touches; but each picture is exceedingly graphic and intensely individual, and together they constitute a gallery of characters which will hardly find a parallel. We are aware of the difficulty of verifying what we have said, by brief and imperfect extracts, but cannot quite resist the temptation to give them; for, if no other object is accomplished thereby, we shall thus give some specimens of the English language as it was nearly five hundred years ago.[1]

The *prioress* is chiefly remarkable for over nicety and affectation of excessive delicacy. She could speak French "full fair," but, as is not unusual in our day, it was a questionable kind of French.

After the schole of Stratford atte bowe
For French of Paris was to her unknowe.

[1] The extracts are from Tyrwhitt's London edition, 1843.

She was, moreover, endued with an overwrought sensibility, which the poet touches with a gentle hand.

> She was so charitable and so pitous
> She wolde wepe if that she saw a mous
> Caughte in a trappe, if it were ded or bledde.
> Of smalle houndes hadde she that she fedde
> With rosted flesh, and milk, and wartel brede,[1]
> But sore wept she if on of hem were dede.

The Doctor of Physic was a prodigy of learning.

> He knew the cause of every maladie
> Were it of cold or hot or moist or drie
> And where engendered and of what humor,
> He was veray parfite practisour.

After enumerating, however, his great accomplishments, and giving the catalogue of his library, he could not forbear to add a gentle touch of satire.

> His study was but litel on the Bible.

And also:

> —— since gold in physic is a cordial
> He loved gold in special.

The burly Miller stands before us with sufficient distinctness.

> The Miller was a stout carl[2] for the nonce[3]
> Ful bigge was he of braun and eke of bones
> * * * *
> He was short shuldered, brode, a thikke gnarre[4]
> Ther n' as no dore, that he n' olde heve of barre
> Or breke it, at a renning[5] with his hede.
> His berd as any sowe or fox was rede,
> And thereto brode, as though it were a spade.
> Upon the cop right of his nose he hade
> A wert, an theron stode a tufte of heres
> Rede as the bristles of a sowes eres,
> His nose-thirles[6] black were and wide
> A sword and bokeler bore he by his side.
> * * * *

The Steward is quite as remarkable in his way.

> The Reve was a slendere colerike man
> His berd was shave as nighe as ever he can;

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[1] Cake-bread, made of fine flour. [2] Churl. [3] For the occasion.
[4] A tough or hard knot. [5] Running. [6] Nostrils.

His here was by his eres round [1] yshorne;
His top was docked like a preest beforne;
Ful longe were his legges and ful lene
[1] Ylike a staff, ther was no calf ysene.
* * * *

Not so the Monk, fond of hunt and hounds and good cheer.

A Monk was ther, a fayere for the maistrie [2]
An out-rider that loved venerie [3]
A manly man, to ben an abbot able,
Full many a deinte hors hadde he in stable.
* * * *
What shulde he studie, and make himselven wood,
Upon a book in cloistre alway to pore,
Or swinken [4] with his handes, and laboure,
As Austin bit? [5] how shall the world be served?
Let Austin have his swink [6] to him reserved.
* * * *
I saw his sleves purfiled at the hond
With gris [7] and that the finest of the lond.
And for to fasten his hood under his chinne,
He hadde of gold ywrought a curious pinne;
A love knotte in the greter end ther was.
His hed was balled, and shone as any glas;
And eke [8] his face as it hadde ben anointe,
He was a lord ful fat in good point,
His eyen stepe [9] and rolling in his hed
That stemed as a forneis of a led.
His botes souple, his hors in gret estat.
Now certainly he was a fayre prelat,
He was not pale as a forepined [10] gost;
A fat swan loved he best of any rost.
* * * *

The Friar, also, sits for his likeness.

A Frere ther was, a wanton and a merry,
A Limitour,[11] a ful solempne man.
In all the orders foure is non that can
So moche of dalliance and fayre langage,
He hadde ymade ful many a mariage
Of yonge wimmen at his owen cost.
Until his ordre he was a noble post.
* * * *

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[1] The y is a Saxon prefix with apparently no signification in Chaucer's time.
[2] I. e. fair above the others, v. Tyrwhitt. [3] Hunting. [4] Toil.
[5] Bade, or commanded. [6] Labor. [7] Edged with fur. [8] Also.
[9] His eyes deep set. [10] Wasted away.
[11] A mendicant licensed to beg in a particular district.

And over all ther as profit shuld arise
Curteis he was and lowly of servise
Ther n' as no man nowher so vertuous;
He was the beste beggar in all his hous,
And gave a certaine ferme[1] for the grant.
Non of his bretheren came in his haunt,
For though a widewe hadde but a shoo
(So plesant was his *in principio*),
Yet wold he have a ferthing or he went.

From Chaucer's description of the seller of indulgences, it would seem that this official inspired little more respect in him than did Tetzel a hundred and fifty years later in Luther.

This pardoner had here as yelwe as wax
But smoth it heng[2] as doth a strike of flax;
By unces[3] heng his lokkes that he hadde,
And therwith he his shulders overspradde
* * * *
His wallet lay beforne him on his lappe
Bret-ful[4] of pardons, come from Rome all hote,
A vois he hadde as smale as hath a gote;
No berd hadde he ne never non shulde have
As smothe it was as it were newe shave.

He plies his craft, however, with great success.

For in his male[5] he hadde a pilwebere,[6]
Which, as he saide, was our ladie's veil,
He said he had a gobbet[7] of the seyl[8]
Thatte seinte Peter hadde, when that he went,
Upon the see till Jesu Christ him hent.[9]
He had a crois of laton[10] ful of stones,
And in a glass he hadde pigges' bones.

With such "relikes" to aid him he made, the poet tells us, both parson and people his "apes." With these unworthy servants of the church is contrasted the "Good Parson," the description of whose sanctity, patience, industry, self-denial, and single-mindedness, does credit to the poet's ideal of the pastor's high vocation.

In these various characters, in the stories they relate, and in the circumstances detailed respecting them, we possess true and vivid pictures of the manners, customs, amusements, as well as

[1] Farm. [2] Hung. [3] Ounces. [4] Brimful. [5] Sack.
[6] Covering of a pillow. [7] Morsel. [8] Sail. [9] Assisted.
[10] A metallic cross.

the vices, of that dawning day of civilization. The Canterbury Tales possess a value far above their intrinsic literary merit. They present to us an epitome of English life in the fourteenth century, more truthful, probably, than can elsewhere be found in the language. Our Anglo Saxon ancestors are here marshalled into our presence just as Chaucer's minutely observant eye saw them in his time. With all their excellencies and all their faults, their social existence is here renewed; and so life-like and strongly marked is each person and each scene, that we seem for the time actually travelling with the merry company, while they pursue their journey. It is "as if Time had rebuilt his ruins and were reacting the lost scenes of existence."

In seeking for Chaucer's prominent characteristics, we recognize at once his great descriptive power. Every scene and every character lives before us. His naturalness, also, is most observable. Nothing is artificial; nature reigns supreme everywhere. He is, in fact, preëminently a poet of nature. He is the poet of spring, of the singing of the birds, of the zephyr, and the flowers. He is no weak nor lazy copyist; he takes nothing at second hand. His lines are fresh as the morning scenes he was so fond of describing, and redolent of all beauty whether of outward form or inward life. His, too, was no venal muse, for he wrote in an age when there was no temptation to such venality. He sung, as did Homer, because the deep and pent up fountains of melody within him would not be denied an utterance. And the likeness does not stop here; they both wrote in a comparatively rude age, and both stand as leaders among the poets of their respective races. Above all, they were in the highest sense original, or, we should rather say, *aboriginal*, drawing their inspiration from those pure and hidden fountains which nature reveals only to her true prophets.

And there is an antithesis in the history of poetry which we cannot forbear here to notice. Byron stands among the last, as does Chaucer among the first, of English poets. The chronological contrast is an index to that of their characters. Both were men of genius, each in his measure; but here all likeness between the two comes to an abrupt termination. It was the author of Don Juan, who spoke of Chaucer as "obscene and contemptible," and as owing all his popularity to his antiquity. So far is this from being true, it is rather true, that whatever of grossness we find in Chaucer's plain delineations of his

times, is, like that of Shakspeare's, altogether objective; it lives in the character, not in the writer. The freedom of Byron, on the other hand, is quite the reverse; we seem to behold it welling forth from the writer's own interior life. Chaucer, as well as Byron, indulges sometimes in satire. But while the satire of Byron stalks forth with the scowl of hate upon its visage, that of Chaucer is of a certain benign aspect, intending no real harm to any one. The one smites with intent to kill; the other is but the friendly messenger sent to perform a cure. Chaucer, even in old age, preserves the fresh feeling and warm glow of youth; Byron, while yet a young man, presents a spectacle of sour and discontented age. Chaucer's great heart was full of sympathies and tenderness, gushing out and spreading over every page of his poems; Byron's was but too often the abode of grovelling passion; unhappy in itself, and spreading an atmosphere of bitterness all around. While we rejoice in what Chaucer *was*, we mourn, when we see what Byron, with his native powers, social position and culture, *might have been*.

The popularity of Chaucer has experienced various vicissitudes. In the age of Queen Elisabeth, he was truly regarded as the first of English poets; and Spenser, his fond admirer and copyist, when dying, requested, as an especial honor, to be buried near his tomb. At other periods, he has not been so generally read. Of the present time, Mr. De Quincy well says: "Chaucer's divine qualities are languidly acknowledged by his unjust countrymen." And, in his later days, we hear Coleridge saying: "I take unceasing delight in Chaucer. His manly cheerfulness is especially delicious to my old age. How exquisitely tender he is." The estimation in which he will be held in future, will of course vary with the varying opinions of successive schools in poetry. There are several hindrances to his general popularity, which later poets do not suffer. Chaucer, as we have seen, has, with the greatest fidelity, painted his times; and there was much, in that semi-barbarous age, of grossness and immorality. Many of the forms of expression, too, quite current at that period, do not tally well with modern notions of propriety. Besides, the language, and especially the orthography, of the fourteenth century, present a forbidding aspect to modern eyes. Words now wholly obsolete abound, presenting no inconsiderable obstacle to the general reader; which, it should be said, however, a few days of patient labor will mostly overcome;

and every one who does this, will, we think, be richly repaid.

Whatever the general and popular estimation of his writings may be, he will be read so long as a love for nature and truth shall remain among those who speak the English language. He was worthy to lead off that noble band of British bards, who will long reflect glory on the English name. It is a conspicuous place which he holds among his compeers in that "House of Fame," which he has so graphically described to us. And as we, who are privileged with a later look into that Temple of Renown than was he, behold him there with those who in successive ages have joined him, it is altogether a goodly number. A select few are conspicuous; Chaucer in the van, fit herald of such a noble array; the "Moral Gower," his contemporary, with a less imperial bearing; the generous Surry,

> "His was the Hero's soul of fire
> And his the bard's immortal name."

Edward Spenser, who sung the Fairy Queen, and for whom dying the Genius of Poetry wept, casting garlands on his grave; Shakspeare, towering preëminent in the pomp of dramatic greatness, a king in the realm of creative thought; Milton, surpassing all in the vastness of his knowledge and the splendor of his imagination, with solemn countenance, and soul rapt with inspiration of the heavenly Muse; Pope, the undisputed master of harmonious numbers; Thompson, unsurpassed in his love of rural nature, and inimitable in his descriptions of rural scenes; and Cowper, the gentle and the pious, a spirit of heaven, jarred and put out of tune, by its connection with earth, yet, in spite thereof, giving us snatches of heavenly melody. Truly is it a goodly company. The Temple of Fame enshrines their memory; their words are the inheritance of Time.