

8. What part did Arthur play in the early history of Britain? How long did the struggle between Britons and Saxons last? What Celtic names and elements entered into English language and literature?

9. What is a ballad, and what distinguishes it from other forms of poetry? Describe the ballad which you like best. Why did the ballad, more than any other form of literature, appeal to the common people? What modern poems suggest the old popular ballad? How do these compare in form and subject matter with the Robin Hood ballads?

CHRONOLOGY

HISTORY	LITERATURE
912. Northmen settle in Normandy	
1066. Battle of Hastings. William, king of England	1086. Domesday Book completed
1087. William Rufus	
1093. Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury	1094(<i>cir.</i>). Anselm's <i>Cur Deus Homo</i>
1096. First Crusade	
1100. Henry I	1110. First recorded Miracle play in England (see chapter on the Drama)
1135. Stephen	1137(<i>cir.</i>). Geoffrey's <i>History</i>
1147. Second Crusade	
1154. Henry II	
1189. Richard I. Third Crusade	
1199. John	1200(<i>cir.</i>). Layamon's <i>Brut</i>
1215. Magna Charta	
1216. Henry III	1225(<i>cir.</i>). Ancren <i>Riwle</i>
1230(<i>cir.</i>). University of Cambridge chartered	
1265. Beginning of House of Commons. Simon de Montfort	1267. Roger Bacon's <i>Opus Majus</i>
1272. Edward I	
1295. First complete Parliament	1300-1400. York and Wakefield Miracle plays
1307. Edward II	1320(<i>cir.</i>). <i>Cursor Mundi</i>
1327. Edward III	
1338. Beginning of Hundred Years' War with France	1340(?). Birth of Chaucer 1350(<i>cir.</i>). <i>Sir Gawain. The Pearl</i>

CHAPTER IV

THE AGE OF CHAUCER

THE NEW NATIONAL LIFE AND LITERATURE

History of the Period. Two great movements may be noted in the complex life of England during the fourteenth century. The first is political, and culminates in the reign of Edward III. It shows the growth of the English national spirit following the victories of Edward and the Black Prince on French soil, during the Hundred Years' War. In the rush of this great national movement, separating England from the political ties of France and, to a less degree, from ecclesiastical bondage to Rome, the mutual distrust and jealousy which had divided nobles and commons were momentarily swept aside by a wave of patriotic enthusiasm. The French language lost its official prestige, and English became the speech not only of the common people but of courts and Parliament as well.

The second movement is social; it falls largely within the reign of Edward's successor, Richard II, and marks the growing discontent with the contrast between luxury and poverty, between the idle wealthy classes and the overtaxed peasants. Sometimes this movement is quiet and strong, as when Wyclif arouses the conscience of England; again it has the portentous rumble of an approaching tempest, as when John Ball harangues a multitude of discontented peasants on Black Heath commons, using the famous text:

When Adam delved and Eve span
Who was then the gentleman?

and again it breaks out into the violent rebellion of Wat Tyler. All these things show the same Saxon spirit that had won its freedom in a thousand years' struggle against foreign enemies, and that now felt itself oppressed by a social and industrial tyranny in its own midst.

Aside from these two movements, the age was one of unusual stir and progress. Chivalry, that mediæval institution of mixed good and evil, was in its Indian summer, — a sentiment rather than a practical system. Trade, and its resultant wealth and luxury, were increasing

enormously. Following trade, as the Vikings had followed glory, the English began to be a conquering and colonizing people, like the Anglo-Saxons. The native shed something of his insularity and became a traveler, going first to view the places where trade had opened the way, and returning with wider interests and a larger horizon. Above all, the first dawn of the Renaissance is heralded in England, as in Spain and Italy, by the appearance of a national literature.

Five Writers of the Age. The literary movement of the age clearly reflects the stirring life of the times. There is Langland, voicing the social discontent, preaching the equality of men and the dignity of labor; Wyclif, greatest of English religious reformers, giving the Gospel to the people in their own tongue, and the freedom of the Gospel in unnumbered tracts and addresses; Gower, the scholar and literary man, criticising this vigorous life and plainly afraid of its consequences; and Mandeville, the traveler, romancing about the wonders to be seen abroad. Above all there is Chaucer,—scholar, traveler, business man, courtier, sharing in all the stirring life of his times, and reflecting it in literature as no other but Shakespeare has ever done. Outside of England the greatest literary influence of the age was that of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, whose works, then at the summit of their influence in Italy, profoundly affected the literature of all Europe.

CHAUCER (1340?—1400)

'What man artow?' quod he;
'Thou lokest as thou woldest finde an hare,
For ever upon the ground I see thee stare.
Approchē neer, and loke up merily. . . .
He semeth elvish by his contenance.'

(The Host's description of Chaucer,
Prologue, *Sir Thopas*)

On Reading Chaucer. The difficulties of reading Chaucer are more apparent than real, being due largely to obsolete spelling, and there is small necessity for using any modern versions of the poet's work, which seem to miss the quiet



GEOFFREY CHAUCER

After the Rawlinson Pastel Portrait, Oxford

charm and dry humor of the original. If the reader will observe the following general rules (which of necessity ignore many differences in pronunciation of fourteenth-century English), he may, in an hour or two, learn to read Chaucer almost as easily as Shakespeare: (1) Get the lilt of the lines, and let the meter itself decide how final syllables are to be pronounced. Remember that Chaucer is among the most musical of poets, and that there is melody in nearly every line. If the verse seems rough, it is because we do not read it correctly. (2) Vowels in Chaucer have much the same value as in modern German; consonants are practically the same as in modern English. (3) Pronounce aloud any strange-looking words. Where the eye fails, the ear will often recognize the meaning. If eye and ear both fail, then consult the glossary found in every good edition of the poet's works. (4) Final *e* is usually sounded (like *a* in Virginia) except where the following word begins with a vowel or with *h*. In the latter case the final syllable of one word and the first of the word following are run together, as in reading Virgil. At the end of a line the *e*, if lightly pronounced, adds melody to the verse.¹

In dealing with Chaucer's masterpiece, the reader is urged to read widely at first, for the simple pleasure of the stories, and to remember that poetry and romance are more interesting and important than Middle English. When we like and appreciate Chaucer—his poetry, his humor, his good stories, his kind heart—it will be time enough to study his language.

Life of Chaucer. For our convenience the life of Chaucer is divided into three periods. The first, of thirty years, includes his youth and early manhood, in which time he was influenced almost exclusively by French literary models. The second period, of fifteen years, covers Chaucer's active life as diplomat and man of affairs; and in this the Italian influence seems stronger than the French. The

¹ The reader may perhaps be more interested in these final letters, which are sometimes sounded and again silent, if he remembers that they represent the decaying inflections of our old Anglo-Saxon speech.

third, of fifteen years, generally known as the English period, is the time of Chaucer's richest development. He lives at home, observes life closely but kindly, and while the French influence is still strong, as shown in the *Canterbury Tales*, he seems to grow more independent of foreign models and is dominated chiefly by the vigorous life of his own English people.

Chaucer's boyhood was spent in London, on Thames Street near the river, where the world's commerce was continually coming and going. There he saw daily the shipman of the *Canterbury Tales* just home in his good ship Maudelayne, with the fascination of unknown lands in his clothes and conversation. Of his education we know nothing, except that he was a great reader. His father was a wine merchant, purveyor to the royal household, and from this accidental relation between trade and royalty may have arisen the fact that at seventeen years Chaucer was made page to the Princess Elizabeth. This was the beginning of his connection with the brilliant court, which in the next forty years, under three kings, he was to know so intimately.

At nineteen he went with the king on one of the many expeditions of the Hundred Years' War, and here he saw chivalry and all the pageantry of mediæval war at the height of their outward splendor. Taken prisoner at the unsuccessful siege of Rheims, he is said to have been ransomed by money out of the royal purse. Returning to England, he became after a few years squire of the royal household, the personal attendant and confidant of the king. It was during this first period that he married a maid of honor to the queen. This was probably Philippa Roet, sister to the wife of John of Gaunt, the famous Duke of Lancaster. From numerous whimsical references in his early poems, it has been thought that this marriage into a noble family was not a happy one; but this is purely a matter of supposition or of doubtful inference.

In 1370 Chaucer was sent abroad on the first of those diplomatic missions that were to occupy the greater part of the next fifteen years. Two years later he made his first official visit to Italy, to arrange a commercial treaty with Genoa, and from this time is noticeable a rapid development in his literary powers and the prominence of Italian literary influences. During the intervals between his different missions he filled various offices at home, chief of which was Comptroller of Customs at the port of London. An enormous amount of personal labor was involved; but Chaucer

seems to have found time to follow his spirit into the new fields of Italian literature:

For whan thy labour doon al is,
And hast y-maad thy rekeninges,
In stede of reste and newe thinges,
Thou gost hoom to thy hous anoon,
And, also domb as any stoon,
Thou sittest at another boke
Til fully daswed is thy loke,
And livest thus as an hermyte.¹

In 1386 Chaucer was elected member of Parliament from Kent, and the distinctly English period of his life and work begins. Though exceedingly busy in public affairs and as receiver of customs, his heart was still with his books, from which only nature could win him:

And as for me, though that my wit be lyte,
On bokes for to rede I me delyte,
And to hem yeve I feyth and ful credence,
And in myn herte have hem in reverence
So hertely, that ther is game noon
That fro my bokes maketh me to goon,
But hit be seldom, on the holyday;
Save, certeynly, whan that the month of May
Is comen, and that I here the foules singe,
And that the floures ginnen for to springe —
Farwel my book and my devocioun!²

In the fourteenth century politics seems to have been, for honest men, a very uncertain business. Chaucer naturally adhered to the party of John of Gaunt, and his fortunes rose or fell with those of his leader. From this time until his death he is up and down on the political ladder; to-day with money and good prospects, to-morrow in poverty and neglect, writing his "Complaint to His Empty Purs," which he humorously calls his "saveour doun in this werlde here." This poem called the king's attention to the poet's need and increased his pension; but he had but few months to enjoy the effect of this unusual "Complaint." For he died the next year, 1400, and was buried with honor in Westminster Abbey. The last period of his life, though outwardly most troubled, was the most fruitful of all. His

¹ *House of Fame*, II, 652 ff. The passage is more or less autobiographical.

² *Legend of Good Women*, Prologue, ll. 29 ff.

"Truth," or "Good Counsel," reveals the quiet, beautiful spirit of his life, unspoiled either by the greed of trade or the trickery of politics:

Flee fro the prees, and dwelle with sothfastnesse,
Suffyce unto thy good, though hit be smal;
For hord¹ hath hate, and climbing tikelnesse,
Prees² hath envye, and wele³ blent⁴ overal;
Savour no more than thee bihovē shal;
Werk⁵ wel thyself, that other folk canst rede;
And trouthe shal delivere, hit is no drede.

Tempest⁶ thee noght al croked to redresse,
In trust of hir⁷ that turneth as a bal:
Gret reste stant in litel besinesse;
And eek be war to sporne⁸ ageyn an al⁹;
Stryve noght, as doth the crokke with the wal.
Daunte¹⁰ thyself, that dauntest otheres dede;
And trouthe shal delivere, hit is no drede.

That thee is sent, receyve in buxumnesse,
The wrastling for this worlde axeth a fal.
Her nis non hoom, her nis but wildernesse:
Forth, pilgrim, forth! Forth, beste, out of thy stal!
Know thy contree, look up, thank God of al;
Hold the hye wey, and lat thy gost thee lede:
And trouthe shal delivere, hit is no drede.

Works of Chaucer, First Period. The works of Chaucer are roughly divided into three classes, corresponding to the three periods of his life. It should be remembered, however, that it is impossible to fix exact dates for most of his works. Some of his *Canterbury Tales* were written earlier than the English period, and were only grouped with the others in his final arrangement.

The best known, though not the best, poem of the first period is the *Romaunt of the Rose*,¹¹ a translation from the French *Roman de la Rose*, the most popular poem of the

¹ wealth. ² the crowd. ³ success. ⁴ blinds. ⁵ act. ⁶ trouble.
⁷ i.e. the goddess Fortune. ⁸ kick. ⁹ awl. ¹⁰ judge.

¹¹ For the typography of titles the author has adopted the plan of putting the titles of all books, and of all important works generally regarded as single books, in italics. Individual poems, essays, etc., are in Roman letters with quotation marks. Thus we have the "Knight's Tale," or the story of "Palamon and Arcite," in the *Canterbury Tales*. This system seems on the whole the best, though it may result in some inconsistencies.

Middle Ages, — a graceful but exceedingly tiresome allegory of the whole course of love. The Rose growing in its mystic garden is typical of the lady Beauty. Gathering the Rose represents the lover's attempt to win his lady's favor; and the different feelings aroused — Love, Hate, Envy, Jealousy, Idleness, Sweet Looks — are the allegorical persons of the poet's drama. Chaucer translated this universal favorite, putting in some original English touches; but of the present *Romaunt* only the first seventeen hundred lines are believed to be Chaucer's own work.

Perhaps the best poem of this period is the "Dethe of Blanche the Duchesse," better known as the "Boke of the Duchesse," a poem of considerable dramatic and emotional power, written after the death of Blanche, wife of Chaucer's patron, John of Gaunt. Additional poems are the "Compleynte to Pite," a graceful love poem; the "A B C," a prayer to the Virgin, translated from the French of a Cistercian monk, its verses beginning with the successive letters of the alphabet; and a number of what Chaucer calls "ballads, roundels, and virelays," with which, says his friend Gower, "the land was filled." The latter were imitations of the prevailing French love ditties.

Second Period. The chief work of the second or Italian period is *Troilus and Criseyde*, a poem of eight thousand lines. The original story was a favorite of many authors during the Middle Ages, and Shakespeare makes use of it in his *Troilus and Cressida*. The immediate source of Chaucer's poem is Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*, "the love-smitten one"; but he uses his material very freely, to reflect the ideals of his own age and society, and so gives to the whole story a dramatic force and beauty which it had never known before.

The "Hous of Fame" is one of Chaucer's unfinished poems, having the rare combination of lofty thought and simple, homely language, showing the influence of the great Italian master. In the poem the author is carried away in a dream

by a great eagle from the brittle temple of Venus, in a sandy wilderness, up to the hall of fame. To this house come all rumors of earth, as the sparks fly upward. The house stands on a rock of ice

written ful of names
Of folk that hadden grete fames.

Many of these have disappeared as the ice melted; but the older names are clear as when first written. For many of his ideas Chaucer is indebted to Dante, Ovid, and Virgil; but the unusual conception and the splendid workmanship are all his own.

The third great poem of the period is the *Legende of Goode Wimmen*. As he is resting in the fields among the daisies, he falls asleep and a gay procession draws near. First comes the love god, leading by the hand Alcestis, model of all wifely virtues, whose emblem is the daisy; and behind them follow a troupe of glorious women, all of whom have been faithful in love. They gather about the poet; the god upbraids him for having translated the *Romance of the Rose*, and for his early poems reflecting on the vanity and fickleness of women. Alcestis intercedes for him, and offers pardon if he will atone for his errors by writing a "glorious legend of good women." Chaucer promises, and as soon as he awakes sets himself to the task. Nine legends were written, of which "Thisbe" is perhaps the best. It is probable that Chaucer intended to make this his masterpiece, devoting many years to stories of famous women who were true to love; but either because he wearied of his theme, or because the plan of the *Canterbury Tales* was growing in his mind, he abandoned the task in the middle of his ninth legend,—fortunately, perhaps, for the reader will find the Prologue more interesting than any of the legends.

Third Period. Chaucer's masterpiece, the *Canterbury Tales*, one of the most famous works in all literature, fills the third or English period of his life. The plan of the work is magnificent: to represent the wide sweep of English life by gathering

a motley company together and letting each class of society tell its own favorite stories. Though the great work was never finished, Chaucer succeeded in his purpose so well that in the *Canterbury Tales* he has given us a picture of contemporary English life, its work and play, its deeds and dreams, its fun and sympathy and hearty joy of living, such as no other single work of literature has ever equaled.

Plan of the Canterbury Tales. Opposite old London, at the southern end of London Bridge, once stood the Tabard



TABARD INN

Inn of Southwark, a quarter made famous not only by the *Canterbury Tales*, but also by the first playhouses where Shakespeare had his training. This Southwark was the point of departure of all travel to the south of England, especially of those mediæval pilgrimages to the shrine of Thomas a Becket in Canterbury. On a spring evening, at the inspiring time of the year when "longen folk to goon on pilgrimages," Chaucer alights at the Tabard Inn, and finds it occupied by a various company of people bent on a pilgrimage. Chance alone had brought them together; for it was the custom of

pilgrims to wait at some friendly inn until a sufficient company were gathered to make the journey pleasant and safe from robbers that might be encountered on the way. Chaucer joins this company, which includes all classes of English society, from the Oxford scholar to the drunken miller, and accepts gladly their invitation to go with them on the morrow.

At supper the jovial host of the Tabard Inn suggests that, to enliven the journey, each of the company shall tell four tales, two going and two coming, on whatever subject shall suit him best. The host will travel with them as master of ceremonies, and whoever tells the best story shall be given a fine supper at the general expense when they all come back again, — a shrewd bit of business and a fine idea, as the pilgrims all agree.

When they draw lots for the first story the chance falls to the Knight, who tells one of the best of the *Canterbury Tales*, the chivalric story of "Palamon and Arcite." Then the tales follow rapidly, each with its prologue and epilogue, telling how the story came about, and its effects on the merry company. Interruptions are numerous; the narrative is full of life and movement, as when the miller gets drunk and insists on telling his tale out of season, or when they stop at a friendly inn for the night, or when the poet with sly humor starts his story of "Sir Thopas," in dreary imitation of the metrical romances of the day, and is roared at by the host for his "drasty ryming." With Chaucer we laugh at his own expense, and are ready for the next tale.

From the number of persons in the company, thirty-two in all, it is evident that Chaucer meditated an immense work of one hundred and twenty-eight tales, which should cover the whole life of England. Only twenty-four were written; some of these are incomplete, and others are taken from his earlier work to fill out the general plan of the *Canterbury Tales*. Incomplete as they are, they cover a wide range, including stories of love and chivalry, of saints and legends, travels,

adventures, animal fables, allegory, satires, and the coarse humor of the common people. Though all but two are written in verse and abound in exquisite poetical touches, they are stories as well as poems, and Chaucer is to be regarded as our first short-story teller as well as our first modern poet. The work ends with a kindly farewell from the poet to his reader, and so "here taketh the makere of this book his leve."

Prologue to the Canterbury Tales. In the famous "Prologue" the poet makes us acquainted with the various characters of his drama. Until Chaucer's day popular literature had been busy chiefly with the gods and heroes of a golden age; it had been essentially romantic, and so had never attempted to study men and women as they are, or to describe them so that the reader recognizes them, not as ideal heroes, but as his own neighbors. Chaucer not only attempted this new realistic task, but accomplished it so well that his characters were instantly recognized as true to life, and they have since become the permanent possession of our literature. Beowulf and Roland are ideal heroes, essentially creatures of the imagination; but the merry host of the Tabard Inn, Madame Eglantyne, the fat monk, the parish priest, the kindly plowman, the poor scholar with his "bookës black and red," — all seem more like personal acquaintances than characters in a book. Says Dryden: "I see all the pilgrims, their humours, their features and their very dress, as distinctly as if I had supped with them at the Tabard in Southwark." Chaucer is the first English writer to bring the atmosphere of romantic interest about the men and women and the daily work of one's own world, — which is the aim of nearly all modern literature.

The historian of our literature is tempted to linger over this "Prologue" and to quote from it passage after passage to show how keenly and yet kindly our first modern poet observed his fellow-men. The characters, too, attract one like a good play: the "verray parfit gentil knight" and his manly son, the modest prioress, model of sweet piety and

society manners, the sporting monk and the fat friar, the discreet man of law, the well-fed country squire, the sailor just home from sea, the canny doctor, the lovable parish priest who taught true religion to his flock, but "first he folwed it himselve"; the coarse but good-hearted Wyf of Bath, the thieving miller leading the pilgrims to the music of his bagpipe, — all these and many others from every walk of English life, and all described with a quiet, kindly humor which seeks instinctively the best in human nature, and which has an ample garment of charity to cover even its faults and failings. "Here," indeed, as Dryden says, "is God's plenty." Probably no keener or kinder critic ever described his fellows; and in this immortal "Prologue" Chaucer is a model for all those who would put our human life into writing. The student should read it entire, as an introduction not only to the poet but to all our modern literature.

The Knight's Tale. As a story, "Palamon and Arcite" is, in many respects, the best of the *Canterbury Tales*, reflecting as it does the ideals of the time in regard to romantic love and knightly duty. Though its dialogues and descriptions are somewhat too long and interrupt the story, yet it shows Chaucer at his best in his dramatic power, his exquisite appreciation of nature, and his tender yet profound philosophy of living, which could overlook much of human frailty in the thought that

Infinite been the sorwes and the teres
Of oldē folk, and folk of tendre yeres.

The idea of the story was borrowed from Boccaccio; but parts of the original tale were much older and belonged to the common literary stock of the Middle Ages. Like Shakespeare, Chaucer took the material for his poems wherever he found it, and his originality consists in giving to an old story some present human interest, making it express the life and ideals of his own age. In this respect the "Knight's Tale" is remarkable. Its names are those of an ancient civilization, but its

characters are men and women of the English nobility as Chaucer knew them. In consequence the story has many anachronisms, such as the mediæval tournament before the temple of Mars; but the reader scarcely notices these things, being absorbed in the dramatic interest of the narrative.

Briefly, the "Knight's Tale" is the story of two young men, fast friends, who are found wounded on the battlefield and taken prisoners to Athens. There from their dungeon window they behold the fair maid Emily; both fall desperately in love with her, and their friendship turns to strenuous rivalry. One is pardoned; the other escapes; and then knights, empires, nature, — the whole universe follows their desperate efforts to win one small maiden, who prays meanwhile to be delivered from both her bothersome suitors. As the best of the *Canterbury Tales* are now easily accessible, we omit here all quotations. The story must be read entire, with the Prioress' tale of Hugh of Lincoln, the Clerk's tale of Patient Griselda, and the Nun's Priest's merry tale of Chanticleer and the Fox, if the reader would appreciate the variety and charm of our first modern poet and story-teller.

Form of Chaucer's Poetry. There are three principal meters to be found in Chaucer's verse. In the *Canterbury Tales* he uses lines of ten syllables and five accents each, and the lines run in couplets:

His eyen twinkled in his heed aright
As doon the sterres in the frosty night.

The same musical measure, arranged in seven-line stanzas, but with a different rime, called the Rime Royal, is found in its most perfect form in *Troilus*.

O blisful light, of whiche the bemes clere
Adorneth al the thridde hevne faire!
O sonnes leef, O Joves doughter dere,
Plesaunce of love, O goodly debonaire,
In gentil hertes ay redy to repaire!
O verray cause of hele and of gladnesse,
Y-heried be thy might and thy goodnesse!

In hevne and helle, in erthe and salte see
 Is felt thy might, if that I wel descerne;
 As man, brid, best, fish, herbe and grene tree
 Thee fele in tymes with vapour eterne.
 God loveth, and to love wol nought werne;
 And in this world no lyves creature,
 With-outen love, is worth, or may endure.¹

The third meter is the eight-syllable line with four accents, the lines riming in couplets, as in the "Boke of the Duchesse":

Thereto she coude so wel pleye,
 Whan that hir liste, that I dar seye
 That she was lyk to torche bright,
 That every man may take-of light
 Ynough, and hit hath never the lesse.

Besides these principal meters, Chaucer in his short poems used many other poetical forms modeled after the French, who in the fourteenth century were cunning workers in every form of verse. Chief among these are the difficult but exquisite rondel, "Now welcom Somer with thy sonne softe," which closes the "Parliament of Fowls," and the ballad, "Flee fro the prees," which has been already quoted. In the "Monk's Tale" there is a melodious measure which may have furnished the model for Spenser's famous stanza.² Chaucer's poetry is extremely musical and must be judged by the ear rather than by the eye. To the modern reader the lines appear broken and uneven; but if one reads them over a few times, he soon catches the perfect swing of the measure, and finds that he is in the hands of a master whose ear is delicately sensitive to the smallest accent. There is a lilt in all his lines which is marvelous when we consider that he is the first to show us the poetic possibilities of the language. His claim upon our gratitude is twofold:³ first, for discovering the music that is in our English speech; and second, for his influence in fixing the Midland dialect as the literary language of England.

¹ *Troilus and Criseyde*, III.

² See p. 107.

³ For a summary of Chaucer's work and place in our literature, see the Comparison with Spenser, p. 111.

CHAUCER'S CONTEMPORARIES

WILLIAM LANGLAND (1332? . . . ?)

Life. Very little is known of Langland. He was born probably near Malvern, in Worcestershire, the son of a poor freeman, and in his early life lived in the fields as a shepherd. Later he went to London with his wife and children, getting a hungry living as clerk in the church. His real life meanwhile was that of a seer, a prophet after Isaiah's own heart, if we may judge by the prophecy which soon found a voice in *Piers Plowman*. In 1399, after the success of his great work, he was possibly writing another poem called *Richard the Redeless*, a protest against Richard II; but we are not certain of the authorship of this poem, which was left unfinished by the assassination of the king. After 1399 Langland disappears utterly, and the date of his death is unknown.

Piers Plowman. "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord," might well be written at the beginning of this remarkable poem. Truth, sincerity, a direct and practical appeal to conscience, and a vision of right triumphant over wrong,—these are the elements of all prophecy; and it was undoubtedly these elements in *Piers Plowman* that produced such an impression on the people of England. For centuries literature had been busy in pleasing the upper classes chiefly; but here at last was a great poem which appealed directly to the common people, and its success was enormous. The whole poem is traditionally attributed to Langland; but it is now known to be the work of several different writers. It first appeared in 1362 as a poem of eighteen hundred lines, and this may have been Langland's work. In the next thirty years, during the desperate social conditions which led to Tyler's Rebellion, it was repeatedly revised and enlarged by different hands till it reached its final form of about fifteen thousand lines.

The poem as we read it now is in two distinct parts, the first containing the vision of Piers, the second a series of

visions called "The Search for Dowel, Dobet, Dobest" (do well, better, best). The entire poem is in strongly accented, alliterative lines, something like *Beowulf*, and its immense popularity shows that the common people still cherished this easily memorized form of Saxon poetry. Its tremendous appeal to justice and common honesty, its clarion call to every man, whether king, priest, noble, or laborer, to do his Christian duty, takes from it any trace of prejudice or bigotry with which such works usually abound. Its loyalty to the Church, while denouncing abuses that had crept into it in that period, was one of the great influences which led to the Reformation in England. Its two great principles, the equality of men before God and the dignity of honest labor, roused a whole nation of freemen. Altogether it is one of the world's great works, partly because of its national influence, partly because it is the very best picture we possess of the social life of the fourteenth century:

Briefly, *Piers Plowman* is an allegory of life. In the first vision, that of the "Field Full of Folk," the poet lies down on the Malvern Hills on a May morning, and a vision comes to him in sleep. On the plain beneath him gather a multitude of folk, a vast crowd expressing the varied life of the world. All classes and conditions are there; workingmen are toiling that others may seize all the first fruits of their labor and live high on the proceeds; and the genius of the throng is Lady Bribery, a powerfully drawn figure, expressing the corrupt social life of the times.

The next visions are those of the Seven Deadly Sins, allegorical figures, but powerful as those of *Pilgrim's Progress*, making the allegories of the *Romaunt of the Rose* seem like shadows in comparison. These all came to Piers asking the way to Truth; but Piers is plowing his half acre and refuses to leave his work and lead them. He sets them all to honest toil as the best possible remedy for their vices, and preaches the gospel of work as a preparation for salvation. Throughout the poem Piers bears strong resemblance to John Baptist preaching to the crowds in the wilderness. The later visions are proclamations of the moral and spiritual life of man. The poem grows dramatic in its intensity, rising to its highest power in Piers's triumph over Death. And then the poet wakes from his vision with the sound of Easter bells ringing in his ears.

Here are a few lines to illustrate the style and language; but the whole poem must be read if one is to understand its crude strength and prophetic spirit:

In a somer sesun, whon softe was the sonne,
I schop¹ me into a shroud, as I a scheep were,
In habite as an heremite, unholy of werkes,
Went wyde in this world, wondres to here.
Bote in a Mayes mornynge, on Malverne hulles,
Me byfel a ferly,² of fairie me thoughte.
I was very, forwandred, and went me to reste
Undur a brod banke, bi a bourne³ side;
And as I lay and lened, and loked on the watres,
I slumbred in a slepyng — hit swyed⁴ so murie. . . .

JOHN WYCLIF (1324?—1384)

Wyclif, as a man, is by far the most powerful English figure of the fourteenth century. The immense influence of his preaching in the native tongue, and the power of his Lollards to stir the souls of the common folk, are too well known historically to need repetition. Though a university man and a profound scholar, he sides with Langland, and his interests are with the people rather than with the privileged classes, for whom Chaucer writes. His great work, which earned him his title of "father of English prose," is the translation of the Bible. Wyclif himself translated the gospels, and much more of the New Testament; the rest was finished by his followers, especially by Nicholas of Hereford. These translations were made from the Latin Vulgate, not from the original Greek and Hebrew, and the whole work was revised in 1388 by John Purvey, a disciple of Wyclif. It is impossible to overestimate the influence of this work, both on our English prose and on the lives of the English people.

Though Wyclif's works are now unread, except by occasional scholars, he still occupies a very high place in our literature. His translation of the Bible was slowly copied all

¹ clad. ² wonder. ³ brook. ⁴ sounded.

over England, and so fixed a national standard of English prose to replace the various dialects. Portions of this translation, in the form of favorite passages from Scripture, were copied by thousands, and for the first time in our history a standard of pure English was established in the homes of the common people.

As a suggestion of the language of that day, we quote a few familiar sentences from the Sermon on the Mount, as



JOHN WYCLIF

given in the later version of Wyclif's Gospel:

And he openyde his mouth,
and taughte hem, and seide,
Blessid ben pore men in spirit,
for the kyngdom of hevenes
is herne.¹ Blessid ben mylde
men, for thei schulen welde²
the erthe. Blessid ben thei
that mornen, for thei schulen
be coumfortid. Blessid ben
thei that hungren and thristen
rightwisnesse,³ for thei schulen
be fulfillid. Blessid ben merci-
ful men, for thei schulen gete
merci. Blessid ben thei that
ben of clene herte, for thei
schulen se God. Blessid ben
pesible men, for thei schulen
be clepid⁴ Goddis children.
Blessid ben thei that suffren

persecusioun for rightfulnessse, for the kyngdom of hevenes is herne.¹ . . .
Eftsoone ye han herd, that it was seid to elde men, Thou schalt not
forswere, but thou schalt yelde⁵ thin othis to the Lord. But Y seie⁶ to
you, that ye swere not for ony thing; . . . but be youre worde, yhe,
yhe; nay, nay; and that that is more than these, is of yvel. . . .

Ye han herd that it was seid, Thou schalt love thi neighbore, and hate
thin enemye. But Y seie to you, love ye youre enemyes, do ye wel to hem
that hatiden⁸ you, and preye ye for hem that pursuen⁹ and sclaudren¹⁰
you; that ye be the sones of youre Fadir that is in hevenes, that makith
his sunne to rise upon goode and yvele men, and reyneth¹¹ on just men
and unjste. . . . Therefore be ye parfit, as youre hevenli Fadir is parfit

¹ theirs ² rule ³ righteousness ⁴ called ⁵ yield ⁶ say
⁷ them ⁸ hate ⁹ persecute ¹⁰ slander ¹¹ rains

JOHN MANDEVILLE

About the year 1356 there appeared in England an extraordinary book called the *Voyage and Travail of Sir John Maun-*
Mandeville's *deville*, written in excellent style in the Midland
Travels dialect, which was then becoming the literary language of England. For years this interesting work and its unknown author were subjects of endless dispute; but it is now fairly certain that this collection of travelers' tales is simply a compilation from Odoric, Marco Polo, and various other sources. The original work was probably in French, which was speedily translated into Latin, then into English and other languages; and wherever it appeared it became extremely popular, its marvelous stories of foreign lands being exactly suited to the credulous spirit of the age.¹ At the present time there are said to be three hundred copied manuscripts of "Mandeville" in various languages,—more, probably, than of any other work save the gospels. In the prologue of the English version the author calls himself John Maundeville and gives an outline of his wide travels during thirty years; but the name is probably a "blind," the prologue more or less spurious, and the real compiler is still to be discovered.

The modern reader may spend an hour or two very pleasantly in this old wonderland. On its literary side the book is remarkable, though a translation, as being the first prose

¹ In its English form the alleged Mandeville describes the lands and customs he has seen, and brings in all the wonders he has heard about. Many things he has seen himself, he tells us, and these are certainly true; but others he has heard in his travels, and of these the reader must judge for himself. Then he incidentally mentions a desert where he saw devils as thick as grasshoppers. As for things that he has been told by devout travelers, here are the dog-faced men, and birds that carry off elephants, and giants twenty-eight feet tall, and dangerous women who have bright jewels in their heads instead of eyes, "and if they behold any man in wrath, they slay him with a look, as doth the basilisk." Here also are the folk of Ethiopia, who have only one leg, but who hop about with extraordinary rapidity. Their one foot is so big that, when they lie in the sun, they raise it to shade their bodies; in rainy weather it is as good as an umbrella. At the close of this interesting book of travel, which is a guide for pilgrims, the author promises to all those who say a prayer for him a share in whatever heavenly grace he may himself obtain for all his holy pilgrimages.

work in modern English having a distinctly literary style and flavor. Otherwise it is a most interesting commentary on the general culture and credulity of the fourteenth century.

Summary of the Age of Chaucer. The fourteenth century is remarkable historically for the decline of feudalism (organized by the Normans), for the growth of the English national spirit during the wars with France, for the prominence of the House of Commons, and for the growing power of the laboring classes, who had heretofore been in a condition hardly above that of slavery.

The age produced five writers of note, one of whom, Geoffrey Chaucer, is one of the greatest of English writers. His poetry is remarkable for its variety, its story interest, and its wonderful melody. Chaucer's work and Wyclif's translation of the Bible developed the Midland dialect into the national language of England.

In our study we have noted: (1) Chaucer, his life and work; his early or French period, in which he translated "The Romance of the Rose" and wrote many minor poems; his middle or Italian period, of which the chief poems are "Troilus and Cressida" and "The Legend of Good Women"; his late or English period, in which he worked at his masterpiece, the famous *Canterbury Tales*. (2) Langland, the poet and prophet of social reforms. His chief work is *Piers Plowman*. (3) Wyclif, the religious reformer, who first translated the gospels into English, and by his translation fixed a common standard of English speech. (4) Mandeville, the alleged traveler, who represents the new English interest in distant lands following the development of foreign trade. He is famous for *Mandeville's Travels*, a book which romances about the wonders to be seen abroad. The fifth writer of the age is Gower, who wrote in three languages, French, Latin, and English. His chief English work is the *Confessio Amantis*, a long poem containing one hundred and twelve tales. Of these only the "Knight Florent" and two or three others are interesting to a modern reader.

Selections for Reading. Chaucer's Prologue, the Knight's Tale, Nun's Priest's Tale, Prioress' Tale, Clerk's Tale. These are found, more or less complete, in Standard English Classics, King's Classics, Riverside Literature Series, etc. Skeat's school edition of the Prologue, Knight's Tale, etc., is especially good, and includes a study of fourteenth-century English. Miscellaneous poems of Chaucer in Manly's English Poetry or Ward's English Poets. *Piers Plowman*, in King's Classics. Mandeville's Travels, modernized, in English Classics, and in Cassell's National Library.

For the advanced student, and as a study of language, compare selections from Wyclif, Chaucer's prose work, Mandeville, etc., in Manly's English Prose, or Morris and Skeat's Specimens of Early English, or Craik's English Prose Selections. Selections from Wyclif's Bible in English Classics Series.

Bibliography.¹ *History. Text-book*, Montgomery, pp. 115-149, or Cheyney, pp. 186-263. For fuller treatment, Green, ch. 5; Traill; Gardiner.

¹ For titles and publishers of reference works see General Bibliography at the end of this book.

Special Works. Hutton's King and Baronage (Oxford Manuals); Jusserand's Wayfaring Life in the Fourteenth Century; Coulton's Chaucer and his England; Pauli's Pictures from Old England; Wright's History of Domestic Manners and Sentiments in England during the Middle Ages; Trevelyan's England in the Age of Wyclif; Jenks's In the Days of Chaucer; Froissart's Chronicle, in Everyman's Library; the same, new edition, 1895 (Macmillan); Lanier's Boys' Froissart (i.e. Froissart's Chronicle of Historical Events, 1325-1400); Newbolt's Stories from Froissart; Bulfinch's Age of Chivalry may be read in connection with this and the preceding periods.

Literature. General Works. Jusserand; Ten Brink; Mitchell; Minto's Characteristics of English Poets; Courthope's History of English Poetry.

Chaucer. (1) Life: by Lounsbury, in Studies in Chaucer, vol. 1; by Ward, in English Men of Letters Series; Pollard's Chaucer Primer. (2) Aids to study: F. J. Snell's The Age of Chaucer; Lounsbury's Studies in Chaucer (3 vols.); Root's The Poetry of Chaucer; Lowell's Essay, in My Study Windows; Hammond's Chaucer: a Biographical Manual; Hempf's Chaucer's Pronunciation; Introductions to school editions of Chaucer, by Skeat, Liddell, and Mather. (3) Texts and selections: The Oxford Chaucer, 6 vols., edited by Skeat, is the standard; Skeat's Student's Chaucer; The Globe Chaucer (Macmillan); Works of Chaucer, edited by Lounsbury (Crowell); Pollard's The Canterbury Tales, Eversley edition; Skeat's Selections from Chaucer (Clarendon Press); Chaucer's Prologue, and various tales, in Standard English Classics (Ginn and Company), and in other school series.

Minor Writers. Morris and Skeat's Specimens of Early English Prose. Jusserand's Piers Plowman; Skeat's Piers Plowman (text, glossary and notes); Warren's Piers Plowman in Modern Prose. Arnold's Wyclif's Select English Works; Sergeant's Wyclif (Heroes of the Nation Series); Le Bas's Life of John Wyclif. Travels of Sir John Mandeville (modern spelling), in Library of English Classics; Macaulay's Gower's English Works.

Suggestive Questions. 1. What are the chief historical events of the fourteenth century? What social movement is noticeable? What writers reflect political and social conditions?

2. Tell briefly the story of Chaucer's life. What foreign influences are noticeable? Name a few poems illustrating his three periods of work. What qualities have you noticed in his poetry? Why is he called our first national poet?

3. Give the plan of the *Canterbury Tales*. For what is the Prologue remarkable? What light does it throw upon English life of the fourteenth century? Quote or read some passages that have impressed you. Which character do you like best? Are any of the characters like certain men and women whom you know? What classes of society are introduced? Is Chaucer's attitude sympathetic or merely critical?

4. Tell in your own words the tale you like best. Which tale seems truest to life as you know it? Mention any other poets who tell stories in verse.

5. Quote or read passages which show Chaucer's keenness of observation, his humor, his kindness in judgment, his delight in nature. What side of

human nature does he emphasize? Make a little comparison between Chaucer and Shakespeare, having in mind (1) the characters described by both poets, (2) their knowledge of human nature, (3) the sources of their plots, (4) the interest of their works.

6. Describe briefly *Piers Plowman* and its author. Why is the poem called "the gospel of the poor"? What message does it contain for daily labor? Does it apply to any modern conditions? Note any resemblance in ideas between *Piers Plowman* and such modern works as Carlyle's *Past and Present*, Kingsley's *Alton Locke*, Morris's *Dream of John Ball*, etc.

7. For what is Wyclif remarkable in literature? How did his work affect our language? Note resemblances and differences between Wyclif and the Puritans.

8. What is *Mandeville's Travels*? What light does it throw on the mental condition of the age? What essential difference do you note between this book and *Gulliver's Travels*?

CHRONOLOGY, FOURTEENTH CENTURY

HISTORY	LITERATURE
1327. Edward III	
1338. Beginning of Hundred Years' War with France	1340(?). Birth of Chaucer
1347. Capture of Calais	1356. Mandeville's Travels
1348-1349. Black Death	1359. Chaucer in French War
	1360-1370. Chaucer's early or French period
1373. Winchester College, first great public school	1370-1385. Chaucer's Middle or Italian period
1377. Richard II. Wyclif and the Lollards begin Reformation in England	1362-1395. Piers Plowman
1381. Peasant Rebellion. Wat Tyler	1385-1400. Canterbury Tales
	1382. First complete Bible in English
1399. Deposition of Richard II. Henry IV chosen by Parliament	1400. Death of Chaucer (Dante's <i>Divina Commedia</i> , c. 1310; Petrarch's sonnets and poems, 1325-1374; Boccaccio's tales, c. 1350.)

CHAPTER V

THE REVIVAL OF LEARNING

I. HISTORY OF THE PERIOD

Political Changes. The century and a half following the death of Chaucer (1400-1550) is the most volcanic period of English history. The land is swept by vast changes, inseparable from the rapid accumulation of national power; but since power is the most dangerous of gifts until men have learned to control it, these changes seem at first to have no specific aim or direction. Henry V — whose erratic yet vigorous life, as depicted by Shakespeare, was typical of the life of his times — first let Europe feel the might of the new national spirit. To divert that growing and unruly spirit from rebellion at home, Henry led his army abroad, in the apparently impossible attempt to gain for himself three things: a French wife, a French revenue, and the French crown itself. The battle of Agincourt was fought in 1415, and five years later, by the Treaty of Troyes, France acknowledged his right to all his outrageous demands.

The uselessness of the terrific struggle on French soil is shown by the rapidity with which all its results were swept away. When Henry died in 1422, leaving his son heir to the crowns of France and England, a magnificent recumbent statue with head of pure silver was placed in Westminster Abbey to commemorate his victories. The silver head was presently stolen, and the loss is typical of all that he had struggled for. His son, Henry VI, was but the shadow of a king, a puppet in the hands of powerful nobles, who seized the power of England and turned it to self-destruction. Meanwhile all his foreign possessions were won back by the French under the magic leadership of Joan of Arc. Cade's Rebellion (1450) and the bloody Wars of the Roses (1455-1485) are names to show how the energy of England was violently destroying itself, like a great engine that has lost its balance wheel. The frightful reign of Richard III followed, which had, however, this redeeming quality, that it marked the end of civil wars and the self-destruction of feudalism, and made possible a new growth of English national sentiment under the popular Tudors.