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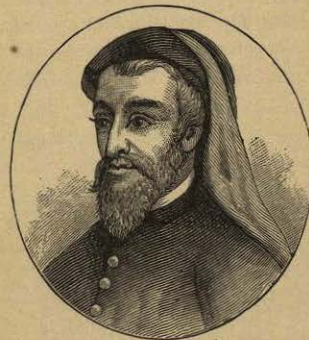


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## PREFACE.

EXCEPT in the use of some words which have since become obsolete, and in the retention or partial retention of certain inflections, the language of Chaucer is essentially the same as our own; and were he a prose writer, one might easily, all philological considerations apart, make him intelligible to all by simply giving a glossary of such words as have gone entirely out of use, and modernizing the spelling and inflections of those which are common.

But Chaucer wrote with metre and rime, and all attempts to make him more intelligible by reducing his quaint archaic English to the diction of the nineteenth century, end in obliterating the rhythm, which, whatever views one may hold as regards metre and rime, is essential to all forms of poetry. Indeed the adapters of Chaucer have mostly gone further, and being ignorant of the grammatical value of the several inflections, have, by confusing different tenses, numbers, and even parts of speech, turned his wit to nonsense.

The devotion with which the study of the childhood and youth of our mother tongue has within the last score years been taken up by a small band of earnest students, has not only brought to light several very old MSS., but has enabled us to examine them critically, because intelligently, and to make great progress towards the construction of a text more correct than any single one extant.

The only way to understand Chaucer is to learn his language, and the little labour given to the study will be well repaid by the enjoyment; by the discovery that his verse, instead of being the rude and halting doggerel which "modernized" texts present, is almost as finished and flowing as that of Pope, and incomparably more natural and musical. It reflects the childhood, the springtide of our poetry; it is full of the sights and sounds of the fields and woods, and of pictures of the life of merry England in the olden days.

In the determination of the text I have made use of Mr. T. Wright's revision of the Harleian MS., and Dr. Morris' text which he has constructed by collation with the six texts edited by Mr. Furnivall, and I have myself compared it line by line with these, adopting whichever reading seemed to me to give the best sense and sound, and occasionally giving the more important variations if they seemed of equal merit or probability.

But I have introduced a new feature, viz., an attempt by the employment of different type to indicate the correct metre and pronuncia-



tion, so far at least as is essential to the scanning of the verse. This qualification is necessary, for we have few means of knowing how the individual vowels and consonants were sounded. We can, for example, generally appreciate the poetry of the Elizabethan and seventeenth century writers without strictly following even what we know to have been their own pronunciation. We must, indeed, occasionally read *Room* for *Rome* in Shakespeare, when he plays on the words—

“Now it is Rome indeed and room enough.”

—*Julius Cæsar*, act i. sc. 2, line 156 (Globe).

and in this poem, lines 670–1, where “Rome” rimes with “to me,” and must plainly be pronounced like “roomy;” or “*achies* in one’s *jointes*,” in Butler; but it is not necessary to read of “*resaving sarvices of goold* and *yellow chāney*,” or of “being obleeged to *poonish* a marchant,” since these peculiarities do not affect the verse.

The signs I have employed are explained in the notice on the Versification. I may, however, take this opportunity of justifying an idea of my own with regard to Chaucer’s verse, in which I fear all will not agree. Rime and metre were not indigenous among the Teutonic nations, but derived from the Romance languages, and I believe that before they were completely naturalized among us they were adopted with the peculiarities of French poetry, and that consequently when a line ended with a syllable containing a silent “e” that vowel was *always* sounded, though not so full or decidedly as others. I mean, to take a simple illustration, that though the word *pilgrimage* occurring in the middle of a line had but three syllables, yet when it ended a line it was read as of four; not so strongly pronounced as in the plural *pilgrimages*, but still it was pronounced. I had thought of using some special mark, as a single dot over the letter, but I have foregone this refinement, and written it, as I have other e’s which I wish the reader to sound, thus, &c.

For the Life of Chaucer and the Grammar of the Language in his time I am greatly indebted to Dr. Morris’ edition of the Prologue and Knightes Tale in the Clarendon Press Series, from which I have also borrowed freely in the notes; but I have had recourse to every historical and philological authority within my reach, in the hope of rendering this little work as perfect and useful as I could.

LONDON, January, 1881.

## THE ARGUMENT AND CHARACTERS OF THE PROLOGUE.

The general plan of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* seems to have been suggested by the *Decameron* of Boccaccio, which had appeared some thirty years before. Each is a collection of stories more or less romantic, drawn from the French and Provençal literature of the Troubadours, and the older Italian writers; some again being traceable through these to Arabian, or, though oddly metamorphosed in transmission, to classic sources, the whole strung together by the simple artifice of being supposed to be told in turn by the members of a company who, having no present employment, agree thus to pass away their time.

But in the conception of their plots Boccaccio and Chaucer differ as strongly as did their individual characters or those of their respective societies. The Italian imagines five elegant *dilettanti* nobles with a like number of accomplished and youthful ladies retiring to the beautiful gardens of a villa in the country in order to escape the dangers and to avoid the horrors of the pestilence which in 1348 ravaged the city of Florence.

Gay, selfish, and callous to the sufferings of their poorer fellow-citizens, they spend their time in a round of feasting and revelry, or in walking amid the enchanting scenery of the Apennines, regardless of aught but their own enjoyment. Chaucer, on the contrary, was full of human sympathy, and though familiar with the languages, literature, and society of France and Italy, intensely English. Sprung from the middle class, but thrown by his varied avocations into contact with men and women of every rank, he had ample opportunities for cultivating a natural insight into character, he could appreciate whatever was good and true whether in “gentil Knight” or “poure Persoun” and his “Plowman brother,” and had a no less keen perception of the vices, the faults, and the foibles of high and low. Yet his satire, though unsparring, is rather of the nature of kindly ridicule than stern invective; he aims rather at making its objects appear ludicrous, or at the worst contemptible, than at exciting hatred, indignation, or disgust; he laughs them down, and we, if not they themselves, enjoy the laugh.