fell upon them, and they were ground down by severe laws, which prevented them bettering themselves. They felt this all the more because so many of them had bought their freedom, and began to feel the delight of freedom. It was then that in their misery they turned to religion, not only as their only refuge, but as supplying them with reasons for a social revolution. The other cause was the Black Death, the great Plague which, in 1349, '62, and '69, swept over England. Grass grew in the towns; whole villages were left uninhabited; a wild panic fell upon the people, which was added to by a terrible tempest in 1362, that to men's minds told of the wrath of God. In their terror then, as well as in their pain, they fled to religion.

31. **Piers the Plowman.**—All these elements are to be found fully represented in the *Vision of Piers the Plowman*. Its author, William Langland, though we are not certain of his surname, was born about 1332, at Cleobury Mortimer, in Shropshire. His "Vision" begins with a description of his sleeping on the Malvern Hills, and the first text of it was probably written in the country in 1362. At the accession of Richard II., 1377, he was in London. The great popularity of his poem made him in that year, and again in the next year, send forth two more texts of his poem. In these texts he added to the original *Vision* the poems of *Do Wel*, *Do Bet*, and *Do Best*. In 1399, he wrote at Bristol his last poem, *The Deposition of Richard II.*, and then died, probably in 1400.

He paints his portrait as he was when he lived in Cornhill, a tall, gaunt figure, whom men called Long Will; clothed in the black robes in which he sung for a few pence at the funerals of the rich; hating to take his cap off his shaven head to bow to the lords and ladies that rode by in silver and furs as he stalked in observant moodiness along the Strand. It is this figure, which in indignant sorrow walks through the whole poem.

32. **His Vision.**—The dream of the "field full of folk," with which it begins, brings together nearly as many typical characters as the Tales of Chaucer do. In the first part, the Truth sought for is *righteous dealing* in Church, and Law, and State. In the second part, the Truth sought for is that of *righteous life*. None of those who wish to find Truth know the way, till Piers the Plowman, who at last enters the poem, directs them aright. The search for a righteous life is a search to *Do Well*, to *Do Better*, to *Do Best*, the three titles of the poems which were added afterwards. In a series of dreams, and a highly-wrought allegory, *Do Well*, *Do Better*, and *Do Best*, are identified with Jesus Christ, who appears at last as Love, in the dress of Piers the Plowman. The second of these poems describes Christ's death, His struggle with sin, His resurrection, and the victory over Death and the Devil. And the dreamer wakes in a transport of joy, with the Easter chimes pealing in his ears. But as Langland looked round on the world, the victory did not seem real, and the stern dreamer passed out of triumph into the dark sorrow in which he lived. He dreams again in *Do Best*, and sees, as Christ leaves the earth, the reign of Antichrist. Evils attack the Church and mankind. Envy, Pride, and Sloth, helped by the Friars, besiege Conscience. Conscience cries on Contrition to help him, but Contrition is asleep, and Conscience, all but despairing, grasps his pilgrim staff and sets out to wander over the world, praying for luck and health, "till he have Piers the Plowman," till he find the Saviour.

This is the poem which wrought so strongly in men's minds that its influence was almost as great as Wyclif's in the revolt which had now begun against Latin Christianity. Its fame was so great, that it produced imitators. In 1394, another alliterative poem was set forth by an unknown author, with the title of *Pierce the Plowman's Crede*, and the *Plowman's*

Tale attributed to Chaucer is another witness to the popularity of Langland.

33. **Wyclif.**—At the same time as the *Vision* was being read all over England, John Wyclif, about 1380, began his work in the English tongue with our first complete *translation of the Bible*, and in it did as much probably to fix our language as Chaucer did in his Tales. But he did much more than this for our tongue. He made it the popular language of religious thought and feeling. In 1381 he was in full battle with the Church on the doctrine of transubstantiation, and was condemned to silence. He replied by appealing to the whole of England in the speech of the people. He sent forth tract after tract, sermon after sermon, couched not in the dry, philosophic style of the schoolmen, but in short, sharp, stinging sentences, full of the homely words used in his own Bible, denying one by one almost all the doctrines, and denouncing the practices, of the Church of Rome. He was our first Protestant. It was a new literary vein to open, the vein of the pamphleteer. With his work then, and with Langland's, we bring to the year 1400 the English prose and poetry pertaining to religion which we have been tracing since the Conquest.

34. **Story-telling** is the other line on which we have placed our literature, and it is represented first by JOHN GOWER. He belongs to a school older than Chaucer, inasmuch as he is never touched by the Italian, only by the French influence. He belongs to a different school even as an artist; for his tales are not pure story-telling like Chaucer's, but tales with a special moral. Partly the religious and social reformer, and partly the story-teller, he represents a transition and fills up the intellectual space between Langland and Chaucer. In the church of St. Saviour, at Southwark, his head is still seen resting on his three great works, the *Speculum Meditantis*, the *Vox Clamantis*, the *Confessio Amantis*, 1393. It marks the unsettled state of our literary language, that each of these was written in a different tongue, the first in French, the second in Latin, the third in English.

The third is his English work. In 30,000 lines or more, he mingles up allegory, morality, the sciences, the philosophy of Aristotle, all the studies of the day, with comic or tragic tales as illustrations. We have seen that Robert de Brunne was the first to do this; Gower was the second. The tales are wearisome and long, and the smoothness of the verse makes them more wearisome. Gower was a careful writer of English; and in his satire of evils, and in his grave reproof of the follies of Richard II., he rises into his best strain. The king himself, even though reproved, was a patron of the poet. It was as Gower was rowing on the Thames that the royal barge drew near, and he was called to the king's side. "Book some new thing," said the king, "in the way you are used, into which book I myself may often look;" and the request was the origin of the *Confession of a Lover*. It is with pleasure that we turn from the learned man of talent to Geoffrey Chaucer—to the genius who called Gower, with perhaps some of the irony of an artist, "the moral Gower."

35. **Chaucer's French Period.**—Geoffrey Chaucer was the son of a vintner, of Thames Street, London, and was born, it is now believed, in 1340. He lived almost all his life in London, in the centre of its work and society. When he was sixteen he became page to the wife of Lionel, Duke of Clarence, and continued at the Court till he joined the army in France in 1359. He was taken prisoner, but was ransomed at the treaty of Bretigny, in 1360. We then know nothing of his life for six years; but from items in the Exchequer Rolls, we find that he was again connected with the Court, from 1366 to 1372. It was during this time that he began to write. His first

poem may have been the A, B, C, a prayer Englished from the French at the request of the Duchess Blanche. The translation of the *Romaunt of the Rose* has been attributed to him, but the best critics are doubtful of, or deny, his authorship. They are only sure of two poems, the *Compleynte to Pity* in 1368, and in the next year the *Dethe of Blaunche the Duchesse*, whose husband, John of Gaunt, was Chaucer's patron. These, being written under the influence of French poetry, are classed under the name of Chaucer's first period. There are lines in them which seem to speak of a luckless love affair, and in this broken love it has been supposed we find the key to Chaucer's early life.

36. **Chaucer's Italian Period.** — Chaucer's second poetic period may be called the period of Italian influence, from 1372 to 1384. During these years he went for the king on no less than seven diplomatic missions. Three of these, in 1372, '74, and '78, were to Italy. At that time the great Italian literature which inspired then, and still inspires, European literature, had reached full growth, and it opened to Chaucer a new world of art. If he read the *Vita Nuova*, and the *Divina Commedia* of Dante, he knew for the first time the power and range of poetry. He read the Sonnets of Petrarca, and he learnt what is meant by "form" in poetry. He read the tales of Boccaccio who made Italian prose, and in them he first saw how to tell a story exquisitely. Petrarca and Boccaccio he may even have met, for they died in 1374 and 1375, but he never saw Dante, who died at Ravenna in 1321. When he came back from these journeys he was a new man. He threw aside the romantic poetry of France, and laughed at it in his gay and kindly manner in the *Rime of Sir Thopas*, afterwards made one of the *Canterbury Tales*. His chief work of this time bears witness to the influence of Italy. It was *Troylus and Creseide*, 1382 (?), which is a translation, with many changes and additions, of the *Filostrato* of Boccaccio. The additions (and he nearly doubled the poem) are stamped with his own peculiar tenderness, vividness, and simplicity. His changes from the original are all towards the side of purity, good taste, and piety. We meet the further influence of Boccaccio in the birth of some of the *Canterbury Tales*, and of Petrarca in the Tales themselves. To this time is now referred the tale of the Second Nun, that of the Doctor, the Man of Law, the Clerk, the Prioress, the Squire, the Franklin, Sir Thopas, and the first draft of the Knight's Tale, borrowed, but very slightly, from the *Teseide* of Boccaccio. The other poems of this period were the *Parlament of Foules*, the *Compleynt of Mars*, *Anelida and Arcite*, *Boece*, and *the Former Age*, all between 1374 and '76, the *lines to Adam Scrivener*, 1383, and the *Hous of Fame*, 1384 (?). In the passion with which Chaucer describes the ruined love of Troilus and Anelida, some have traced the lingering sorrow of his early love affair. But if this be true, it was now passing away, for in the creation of Pandarus in the *Troilus*, and in the delightful fun of the *Parlament of Foules*, a new Chaucer appears, the humorous poet of the *Canterbury Tales*. In the active business life he led during this period he was likely to grow out of mere sentiment, for he was not only employed on service abroad, but also at home. In 1374 he was Comptroller of the Wool Customs, in 1382 of the Petty Customs, and in 1386 Member of Parliament for Kent.

37. **Chaucer's English Period.**—It is in the next period, from 1384 to 1390, that he left behind Italian influence as he had left French, and became entirely himself, entirely English. The comparative poverty in which he now lived, and the loss of his offices, for in John of Gaunt's absence he lost Court favour, may have given him more time for study, and the retired life of a poet. At least in

his *Legende of Good Women*, the prologue to which was written in 1385, we find him a closer student than ever of books and of nature. His appointment as Clerk of the Works in 1389 brought him again into contact with men. He superintended the repairs and building at the Palace of Westminster, the Tower, and St. George's Chapel, Windsor, till July, 1391, when he was superseded, and lived on pensions allotted to him by Richard and by Henry IV., after he had sent the King in 1399 his *Compleint to his Purse*. Before 1390, however, he had added to his great work its best tales, those of the Miller, the Reeve, the Cook, the Wife of Bath, the Merchant, the Friar, the Nun, Priest, Pardoner, and perhaps the Sompnour. The Prologue was probably written in 1388. In these, in their humour, in their vividness of portraiture, in their ease of narration, and in the variety of their characters, Chaucer shines supreme. A few smaller poems belong to this best time, such as *Truth* and the *Moder of God*.

During the last ten years of his life, which may be called the period of his decay, he wrote some small poems, and along with the *Compleynte of Venus*, and a prose treatise on the Astrolabe, five more tales, the Canon's, Yeoman's, Manciple's, Monk's, and Parsone's. The last was written the year of his death, 1400. Having done this work, he died in a house under the shadow of the Abbey of Westminster. Within the walls of the Abbey Church, the first of the poets who lies there, that "sacred and happy spirit" sleeps.

38. **Chaucer's Character.**—Born of the tradesman class, Chaucer was in every sense of the word one of our finest gentlemen: tender, graceful in thought, glad of heart, humourous, and satirical without unkindness; sensitive to every change of feeling in himself and others, and therefore full of sympathy; brave in misfortune, even to mirth, and doing well

and with careful honesty all he undertook. His first and great delight was in human nature, and he makes us love the noble characters in his poems and feel with kindliness towards the baser and ruder sort. He never sneers, for he had a wide charity, and we can always smile in his pages at the follies and forgive the sins of men. He had a true and chivalrous regard for women, and his wife and he must have been very happy if they fulfilled the ideal he had of marriage. He lived in aristocratic society, and yet he thought him the greatest gentleman who was "most vertuous alway, privé, and pert (open), and most entendeth aye to do the gentil dedes that he can." He lived frankly among men, and as we have seen, saw many different types of men, and in his own time filled many parts as a man of the world and of business. Yet, with all this active and observant life, he was commonly very quiet and kept much to himself. The Host in the Tales japes at him for his lonely, abstracted air. "Thou lookest as thou wouldest find a hare, And ever on the ground I see thee stare." Being a good scholar, he read morning and night alone, and he says that after his (office) work he would go home and sit at another book as dumb as a stone, till his look was dazed. While at study and when he was making of songs and ditties, "nothing else that God had made" had any interest for him. There was but one thing that roused him then, and that too he liked to enjoy alone. It was the beauty of the morning and the fields, the woods, and streams, and flowers, and the singing of the little birds. This made his heart full of revel and solace, and when spring came after winter, he rose with the lark and cried, "Farewell my book and my devotion." He was the first who made the love of nature a distinct element in our poetry. He was the first who, in spending the whole day gazing alone on the daisy, set going that lonely delight in natural scenery which is so special a mark of our

later poets. He lived thus a double life, in and out of the world, but never a gloomy one. For he was fond of mirth and good-living, and when he grew towards age, was portly of waist, "no poppet to embrace." But he kept to the end his elvish countenance, the shy, delicate, half mischievous face which looked on men from its grey hair and forked beard, and was set off by his light grey-coloured dress and hood. A knife and inkhorn hung on his dress, we see a rosary in his hand, and when he was alone he walked swiftly.

39. **The Canterbury Tales.**—Of his work it is not easy to speak briefly, because of its great variety. Enough has been said of it, with the exception of his most complete creation, the *Canterbury Tales*. It will be seen from the dates given above that they were not written at one time. They are not, and cannot be looked on as a whole. Many were written independently, and then fitted into the framework of the Prologue in 1388. At that time a number more were written, and the rest added at intervals till his death. In fact, the whole thing was done much in the same way as Mr. Tennyson has written his *Idylls of the King*. The manner in which he knitted them together was very simple and likely to please English people. The holiday excursions of the time were the pilgrimages, and the most famous and the pleasantest pilgrimage to go, especially for Londoners, was the three or four days' journey to see the shrine of St. Thomas at Canterbury. Persons of all ranks in life met and travelled together, starting from a London inn. Chaucer seized on this as the frame in which to set his pictures of life. He grouped around the jovial host of the Tabard Inn men and women of every class of society in England, set them on horseback to ride to Canterbury, and made each of them tell a tale. No one could hit off a character better, and in

his Prologue, and in the prologues to the several Tales, the whole of the new, vigorous English society which had grown up since Edward I. is painted with astonishing vividness. "I see all the pilgrims in the Canterbury Tales," says Dryden, "their humours, their features, and the very dress, as distinctly as if I had supped with them at the Tabard in Southwark." The Tales themselves take in the whole range of the poetry of the middle ages; the legend of the saint, the romance of the Knight, the wonderful fables of the traveller, the coarse tale of common life, the love story, the allegory, the satirical lay, and the apologue. And they are pure tales. He has been said to have had dramatic power, but he has none. He is simply our greatest story-teller in verse. All the best tales are told easily, sincerely, with great grace, and yet with so much homeliness, that a child would understand them. Sometimes his humour is broad, sometimes sly, sometimes gay, sometimes he brings tears into our eyes, and he can make us smile or be sad as he pleases.

He had a very fine ear for the music of verse, and the tale and the verse go together like voice and music. Indeed, so softly flowing and bright are they, that to read them is like listening in a meadow full of sunshine to a clear stream rippling over its bed of pebbles. The English in which they are written is almost the English of our time; and it is literary English. Chaucer made our tongue into a true means of poetry. He did more, he welded together the French and English elements in our language and made them into one English tool for the use of literature, and all our prose writers and poets derive their tongue from the language of the *Canterbury Tales*. They give him honour for this, but still more for that he was the first English artist. Poetry is an art, and the artist in poetry is one who writes for pure pleasure and for nothing else the thing he

writes, and who desires to give to others the same fine pleasure by his poems which he had in writing them. The thing he most cares about is that the form in which he puts his thoughts or feelings may be perfectly fitting to the subject, and as beautiful as possible—but for this he cares very greatly; and in this Chaucer stands apart from the other poets of his time. Gower wrote with a moral object, and nothing can be worse than the form in which he puts his tales. The author of *Piers the Plowman* wrote with the object of reform in social and ecclesiastical affairs, and his form is uncouth and harsh. Chaucer wrote because he was full of emotion and joy in his own thoughts, and thought that others would weep and be glad with him, and the only time he ever moralizes is in the tales of the Yeoman and the Manciple, written in his decay. He has, then, the best right to the poet's name. He is our first English artist.

40. **Mandeville.**—I have already noticed the prose of Wyclif under the religious class of English work. I have kept Sir John Mandeville for this place, because he belongs to light literature. He is called our "first writer in formed English." Chaucer himself however wrote some things, and especially one of his Tales, in rhythmical prose, and John of Trevisa translated into English prose, 1387, Higden's *Polychronicon*. Mandeville wrote his *Travels* first in Latin, then in French, and finally put them into our tongue about 1356, "that every man of the nation might understand them." His quaint delight in telling his "traveller's tales," and sometimes the grace with which he tells them, rank him among the story-tellers of England.

CHAPTER III.

FROM CHAUCER, 1400, TO ELIZABETH, 1559.

Thomas Occleve (Henry V.'s reign); J. Lydgate, *Falls of Princes* (in Henry VI.).—Sir John Fortescue's prose work, and Sir T. Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* (Edward IV.).—Caxton's prints at Westminster, 1477.—Paston Letters, 1422—1505.—Hawes' *Pastime of Pleasure*, 1506.—John Skelton's poems, 1508—1529.—Sir T. More's *History of Richard III.*, 1513.—Tyndale's *Translation of the Bible*, 1525.—*English Prayer Book*, 1549.—Ascham's *Toxophilus*, 1545.—Poems of Wyatt and Surrey, in *Tottel's Miscellany*, 1557.

SCOTTISH POETRY, begins with Barbour's *Bruce*, 1375-7; James I.'s *King's Quhair*, 1424.—T. Henryson dies, 1508.—Dunbar's *Thistle and Rose*, 1503.—Gawin Douglas dies, 1522.—Sir D. Lyndsay born, 1490; *Satire of Three Estates*, 1536; dies 1555.

41. **The Fifteenth Century Prose.**—The last poems of Chaucer and Langland bring our story up to the year 1400. The century that followed is the most barren in our literature. History sank down into a few Latin chroniclers, of whom *Thomas of Walsingham* is best known. Two *Riming Chronicles* were written in Henry V.'s time by Andrew of Wyntoun, a Scotchman, and John Harding, an Englishman. John Capgrave wrote in English, in Edward IV.'s reign, a *Chronicle of England* which began with the Creation. Political prose is then represented by SIR JOHN FORTESCUE'S book on the *Difference between Absolute and Limited Monarchy*. It is our second important book in the history of English prose. The religious war between the Lollards and the Church went on during the reign of Henry V. and VI., and in the reign of the latter, REGINALD PECOCK took it out of Latin into homely English. He fought the Lollards with their own