

# Biography of geoffrey chaucer

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Biography of GEOFFREY CHAUCER GEOFFREY CHAUCER, English poet. The name Chaucer, a French form of the Latin *calcearius*, a shoemaker, is found in London and the eastern counties as early as the second half of the 13th century. Some of the London Chaucers lived in Cordwainer Street, in the shoemakers' quarter; several of them, however, were vintners, and among others the poet's father John, and probably also his grandfather Robert. Legal pleadings inform us that in December 1324 John Chaucer was not much over twelve years old, and that he was still unmarried in 1328, the year which used to be considered that of Geoffrey's birth. The poet was probably born from eight to twelve years later, since in 1386, when giving evidence in Sir Richard le Scrope's suit against Sir Robert Grosvenor as to the right to bear certain arms, he was set down as " del age de xl ans et plus, armez par xxvij ans." At a later date, and probably at the time of the poet's birth, his father lived in Thames Street, and had to wife a certain Agnes, niece of Hamo de Compton, whom we may regard as Geoffrey Chaucer's mother. In 1357 Geoffrey is found, apparently as a lad, in the service of Elizabeth, countess of Ulster, wife of Lionel, Duke of Clarence, entries in two leaves of her household accounts, accidentally preserved, showing that she paid in April, May and December various small sums for his clothing and expenses. In 1359, as we learn from his deposition in the Scrope suit, Chaucer went to the war in France. At some period of the campaign he was at " Retters," i. e. Rethel, near Reims, and subsequently had the ill luck to be taken prisoner. On the 1st of March 1360 the King [Edward III] contributed £16 to his ransom, and by a year or two later Chaucer must have entered the royal service, since on the 10th of June 1367 Edward granted him a pension of

twenty marks for his past and future services. A pension of ten marks had been granted by the king the previous September to a Philippa Chaucer for services to the queen as one of her "domicellae" or "damoiselles," and it seems probable that at this date Chaucer was already married and this Philippa his wife, a conclusion which used to be resisted on the ground of allusions in his early poems to a hopeless love-affair, now reckoned part of his poetical outfit. Philippa is usually said to have been one of two daughters of a Sir Payne Roet, the other being Katherine, who after the death of her first husband, Sir Hugh de Swynford, in 1372, became governess to John of Gaunt's children, and subsequently his mistress and (in 1396) his wife. It is possible that Philippa was sister to Sir Hugh and sister-in-law to Katherine. In either case the marriage helps to account for the favour subsequently shown to Chaucer by John of Gaunt. In the grant of his pension Chaucer is called "dilectus vellectus noster," our beloved yeoman; before the end of 1368 he had risen to be one of the king's esquires. In September of the following year John of Gaunt's wife, the duchess Blanche, died at the age of twenty-nine, and Chaucer wrote in her honour *The Book of the Duchesse*, a poem of 1334 lines in octosyllabic couplets, the first of his undoubtedly genuine works which can be connected with a definite date. In June 1370 he went abroad on the king's service, though on what errand, or whither it took him, is not known. He was back probably some time before Michaelmas, and seems to have remained in England till the 1st of December 1372, when he started, with an advance of 100 marks in his pocket, for Italy, as one of the three commissioners to treat with the Genoese as to an English port where they might have special facilities for trade. The accounts which he delivered on

his return on the 23rd of May 1373 show that he had also visited Florence on the king's business, and he probably went also to Padua and there made the acquaintance of Petrarch. In the second quarter of 1374 Chaucer lived in a whirl of prosperity. On the 23rd of April the king granted him a pitcher of wine daily, subsequently commuted for an annuity of 20 marks. From John of Gaunt, who in August 1372 had granted Philippa Chaucer £10 a year, he himself now received (June 13) a like annuity in reward for his own and his wife's services. On the 8th of June he was appointed Comptroller of the Custom and Subsidy of Wools, Hides and Woodfells and also of the Petty Customs of Wine in the Port of London. A month before this appointment, and probably in anticipation of it, he took (May 10, 1374) a lease for life from the city of London of the dwelling-house above the gate of Aldgate, and here he lived for the next twelve years. His own and his wife's income now amounted to over £60, the equivalent of upwards of £1000 in modern money. In the next two years large windfalls came to him in the form of two wardships of Kentish heirs, one of whom paid him £104, and a grant of £71, 4s, 6p; the value of some confiscated wool. In December 1376 he was sent abroad on the king's service in the retinue of Sir John Burley; in February 1377 he was sent to Paris and Montreuil in connexion probably with the peace negotiations between England and France, and at the end of April (after a reward of £20 for his good services) he was again despatched to France. On the accession of Richard II Chaucer was confirmed in his offices and pensions. In January 1378 he seems to have been in France in connexion with a proposed marriage between Richard and the daughter of the French king; and on the 28th of May of the same year he was sent with Sir Edward

de Berkeley to the lord of Milan and Sir John Hawkwood to treat for help in the king's wars, returning on the 19th of September. This was his last diplomatic journey, and the close of a period of his life generally considered to have been so unproductive of poetry that little beyond the Clerk's "Tale of Grisilde," one or two other of the stories afterwards included in the Canterbury Tales, and a few short poems, are attributed to it, though the poet's actual absences from England during the eight years amount to little more than eighteen months. During the next twelve or fifteen years there is no question that Chaucer was constantly engaged in literary work, though for the first half of them he had no lack of official employment. Abundant favour was shown him by the new king. He was paid £22 as a reward for his later missions in Edward III's reign, and was allowed an annual gratuity of 10 marks in addition to his pay of £10 as comptroller of the customs of wool. In April 1382 a new comptrollership, that of the petty customs in the Port of London, was given him, and shortly after he was allowed to exercise it by deputy, a similar licence being given him in February 1385, at the instance of the earl of Oxford, as regards the comptrollership of wool. In October 1385 Chaucer was made a justice of the peace for Kent. In February 1386 we catch a glimpse of his wife Philippa being admitted to the fraternity of Lincoln cathedral in the company of Henry, Earl of Derby (afterwards Henry IV), Sir Thomas de Swynford and other distinguished persons. In August 1386 he was elected one of the two knights of the shire for Kent, and with this dignity, though it was one not much appreciated in those days, his good fortune reached its climax. In December of the same year he was superseded in both his comptrollerships, almost certainly as a result of the

absence of his patron, John of Gaunt, in Spain, and the supremacy of the Duke of Gloucester. In the following year the cessation of Philippa's pension suggests that she died between Midsummer and Michaelmas. In May 1388 Chaucer surrendered to the king his two pensions of 20 marks each, and they were re-granted at his request to one John Scalby. The transaction was unusual and probably points to a pressing need for ready money, nor for the next fourteen months do we know of any source of income possessed by Chaucer beyond his annuity of £10 from John of Gaunt. In July 1389, after John of Gaunt had returned to England, and the king had taken the government into his own hands, Chaucer was appointed clerk of the works at various royal palaces at a salary of two shillings a day, or over £31 a year, worth upwards of £500 present value. To this post was subsequently added the charge of some repairs at St George's Chapel, Windsor. He was also made a commissioner to maintain the banks of the Thames between Woolwich and Greenwich, and was given by the Earl of March (grandson of Lionel, Duke of Clarence, his old patron) a sub-forestership at North Petherton, Devon, obviously a sinecure. While on the king's business, in September 1390, Chaucer was twice robbed by highwaymen, losing £20 of the king's money. In June 1391 he was superseded in his office of clerk of the works, and seems to have suffered another spell of misfortune, of which the first alleviation came in January 1393 when the king made him a present of £10. In February 1394 he was granted a new pension of £20. It is possible, also, that about this time, or a little later, he was in the service of the Earl of Derby. In 1397 he received from King Richard a grant of a butt of wine yearly. For this he appears to have asked in terms that suggest poverty, and

in May 1398 he obtained letters of protection against his creditors, a step perhaps rendered necessary by an action for debt taken against him earlier in the year. On the accession of Henry IV a new pension of 40 marks was conferred on Chaucer (13th of October 1399) and Richard II's grants were formally confirmed. Henry himself, however, was probably straitened for ready money, and no instalment of the new pension was paid during the few months of his reign that the poet lived. Nevertheless, on the strength of his expectations, on the 24th of December 1399 he leased a tenement in the garden of St Mary's Chapel, Westminster, and it was probably here that he died, on the 25th of the following October. He was buried in Westminster Abbey, and his tomb became the nucleus of what is now known as Poets' Corner. The portrait of Chaucer, which the affection of his disciple, Thomas Hoccleve, caused to be painted in a copy of the latter's Regement of Princes (now Harleian MS. 4866 in the British Museum), shows him an old man with white hair; he has a fresh complexion, grey eyes, a straight nose, a grey moustache and a small double-pointed beard. His dress and hood are black, and he carries in his hands a string of beads. We may imagine that it was thus that during the last months of his life he used to walk about the precincts of the Abbey. Henry IV's promise of an additional pension was doubtless elicited by the Complaynt to his Purs, in the envoy to which Chaucer addresses him as the "conquerour of Brutes Albioun." Thus within the last year of his life the poet was still writing. Nevertheless, as early as 1393-1394, in lines to his friend Scogan, he had written as if his day for poetry were past, and it seems probable that his longer poems were all composed before this date. In the preceding fifteen – or, if another view be

taken, twenty - years, his literary activity was very great, and with the aid of the lists of his works which he gives in the *Legende of Good Women* (lines 414-431), and the talk on the road which precedes the " *Man of Law's Tale*" (*Canterbury Tales*, B. 46-76), the order in which his main works were written can be traced with approximate certainty, 1 while a few, both of these and of the minor poems, can be connected with definite dates. The development of his genius has been attractively summed up as comprised in three stages, French, Italian and English, and there is a rough approximation to the truth in this formula, since his earliest poems are translated from the French or based on French models, and the two great works of his middle period are borrowed from the Italian, while his latest stories have no such obvious and direct originals and in their humour and freedom anticipate the typically English temper of Henry Fielding. But Chaucer's indebtedness to French poetry was no passing phase. For various reasons - a not very remote French origin of his own family may be one of them - he was in no way interested in older English literature or in the work of his English contemporaries, save possibly that of " the moral Gower." On the other hand he knew the *Roman de la rose* as modern English poets know Shakespeare, and the full extent of his debt to his French contemporaries, not merely in 1369, but in 1385 and in 1393 (the dates are approximate), is only gradually being discovered. To be in touch throughout his life with the best French poets of the day was much for Chaucer. Even with their stimulus alone he might have developed no small part of his genius. But it was his great good fortune to add to this continuing French influence, lessons in plot and construction derived from Boccaccio's *Filostrato* and *Teseide*, as well as some glimpses of the higher



art of the *Divina Commedia*. He shows acquaintance also with one of Petrarch's sonnets, and though, when all is said, the Italian books with which he can be proved to have been intimate are but few, they sufficed. His study of them was but an episode in his literary life, but it was an episode of unique importance. Before it began he had already been making his own artistic experiments, and it is noteworthy that while he learnt so much from Boccaccio he improved on his originals as he translated them. Doubtless his busy life in the service of the crown had taught him self-confidence, and he uses his Italian models in his own way and with the most triumphant and assured success. When he had no more Italian poems to adapt he had learnt his lesson. The art of weaving a plot out of his own imagination was never his, but he could take what might be little more than an anecdote and lend it body and life and colour with a skill which has never been surpassed. The most direct example of Chaucer's French studies is his translation of *Le Roman de la rose*, a poem written in some 4000 lines by Guillaume Lorris about 1237 and extended to over 22, 000 by Jean Clopinel, better known as Jean de Meun, forty years later. We know from Chaucer himself that he translated this poem, and the extant English fragment of 7698 lines was generally assigned to him from 1532, when it was first printed, till its authorship was challenged in the early years of the Chaucer Society. The ground of this challenge was its wide divergence from Chaucer's practice in his undoubtedly genuine works as to certain niceties of rhyme, notable as to not rhyming words ending in -y with others ending -ye. It was subsequently discovered, however, that the whole fragment was divisible linguistically into three portions, of which the first and second end respectively at lines 1705

and 5810, and that in the first of these three sections the variations from Chaucer's accepted practice are insignificant. Lines 1-1705 have therefore been provisionally accepted as Chaucer's, and the other two fragments as the work of unknown translators (James I of Scotland has been suggested as one of them), which somehow came to be pieced together. If, however, the difficulties in the way of this theory are less than those which confront any other, they are still considerable, and the question can hardly be treated as closed. While our knowledge of Chaucer's *Romaunt of the Rose* is in this unsatisfactory state, another translation of his from the French, the *Book of the Lyon* (alluded to in the "Retraction" found, in some manuscripts, at the end of the *Canterbury Tales*), which must certainly have been taken from Guillaume Machault's *Le Dit du lion*, has perished altogether. The strength of French influence on Chaucer's early work may, however, be amply illustrated from the first of his poems with which we are on sure ground, the *Book of the Duchesse*, or, as it is alternatively called, the *Deth of Blaunche*. Here not only are individual passages closely imitated from Machault and Froissart, but the dream, the May morning, and the whole machinery of the poem are taken over from contemporary French conventions. But even at this stage Chaucer could prove his right to borrow by the skill with which he makes his materials serve his own purpose, and some of the lines in the *Deth of Blaunche* are among the most tender and charming he ever wrote. Chaucer's *A. B. C.*, a poem in honour of the Blessed Virgin, of which the stanzas begin with the successive letters of the alphabet, is another early example of French influence. It is taken from the *Pelerinage de la vie humaine*, written by Guillaume de Deguilleville about 1330. The occurrence of some magnificent

lines in Chaucer's version, combined with evidence that he did not yet possess the skill to translate at all literally as soon as rhymes had to be considered, accounts for this poem having been dated sometimes earlier than the Book of the Duchesse, and sometimes several years later. With it is usually moved up and down, though it should surely be placed in the 'seventies, the *Compleynt to Pity*, a fine poem which yet, from its slight obscurity and absence of Chaucer's usual ease, may very well some day prove to be a translation from the French. While Chaucer thus sought to reproduce both the matter and the style of French poetry in England, he found other materials in popular Latin books. Among his lost works are renderings of "Origenes upon the Maudeleyne," and of Pope Innocent III on "The Wreced Engendring of Mankind" (*De miseria conditionis humanae*). He must have begun his attempts at straightforward narrative with the *Lyf of Seynt Cecyle* (the weakest of all his works, the second Nun's Tale in the Canterbury series) from the *Legenda Aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine, and the story of the patience of Grisilde, taken from Petrarch's Latin version of a tale by Boccaccio. In both of these he condenses a little, but ventures on very few changes, though he lets his readers see his impatience with his originals. In his story of Constance (afterwards ascribed to the Man of Law), taken from the Anglo-Norman chronicle of Nicholas Trivet, written about 1334, we find him struggling to put some substance into another weak tale, but still without the courage to remedy its radical faults, though here, as with Grisilde, he does as much for his heroine as the conventional exaltation of one virtue at a time permitted. It is possible that other tales which now stand in the Canterbury series were written originally at this period. What is certain

is that at some time in the 'seventies three or four Italian poems passed into Chaucer's possession, and that he set to work busily to make use of them. One of the most interesting of the poems reclaimed for him by Professor Skeat is a fragmentary "Compleynt," part of which is written in terza rima. While he thus experimented with the metre of the Divina Commedia, he made his first attempt to use the material provided by Boccaccio's Teseide in another fragment of great interest, that of Quene Anelida and Fals Arcyte. More than a third of this is taken up with another, and quite successful, metrical experiment in Anelida's "compleynt," but in the introduction of Anelida herself Chaucer made the first of his three unsuccessful efforts to construct a plot for an important poem out of his own head, and the fragment which begins so well breaks off abruptly at line 357. For a time the Teseide seems to have been laid aside, and it was perhaps at this moment, in despondency at his failure, that Chaucer wrote his most important prose work, the translation of the De Consolatione Philosophiae of Boethius. Reminiscences of this helped to enrich many of his subsequent poems, and inspired five of his shorter pieces (The Former Age, Fortune, Truth, Gentillesse and Lak of Stedfastnesse), but the translation itself was only a partial success. To borrow his own phrase, his "Englysh was insufficient" to reproduce such difficult Latin. The translation is often barely intelligible without the original, and it is only here and there that it flows with any ease or rhythm. If Chaucer felt this himself he must have been speedily consoled by achieving in Troilus and Criseyde his greatest artistic triumph. Warned by his failure in Anelida and Arcyte, he was content this time to take his plot unaltered from the Filostrato, and to follow Boccaccio step by step through

the poem. But he did not follow him as a mere translator. He had done his duty manfully for the saints " of other holinesse" in Cecyle, Grisilde and Constance, whom he was forbidden by the rules of the game to clothe with complete flesh and blood. In this great love-story there were no such restrictions, and the characters which Boccaccio's treatment left thin and conventional became in Chaucer's hands convincingly human. No other English poem is so instinct with the glory and tragedy of youth, and in the details of the story Chaucer's gifts of vivid colouring, of humour and pity, are all at their highest. An unfortunate theory that the reference in the Legende of Good Women to " al the love of Palamon and Arcyte" is to a hypothetical poem in seven-line stanzas on this theme, which Chaucer is imagined, when he came to plan the Canterbury Tales, to have suppressed in favour of a new version in heroic couplets, has obscured the close connexion in temper and power between what we know as the " Knight's Tale" and the Troilus. The poem may have been more or less extensively revised before, with admirable fitness, it was assigned to the Knight, but that its main composition can be separated by several years from that of Troilus is aesthetically incredible. Chaucer's art here again is at its highest. He takes the plot of Boccaccio's Teseide, but only as much of it as he wants, and what he takes he heightens and humanizes with the same skill which he had shown in transforming the Filostrato. Of the individual characters Theseus himself, the arbiter of the plot, is most notably developed; Emilie and her two lovers receive just as much individuality as they will bear without disturbing the atmosphere of romance. The whole story is pulled together and made more rapid and effective. A comparison of almost any scene as

told by the two poets suffices to show Chaucer's immense superiority. At some subsequent period the "Squire's Tale" of Cambuscan, the fair Canacee and the Horse of Brass, was gallantly begun in something of the same key, but Chaucer took for it more materials than he could use, and for lack of the help of a leader like Boccaccio he was obliged to leave the story, in Milton's phrase, "half-told," though the fragment written certainly takes us very much less than half-way. Meanwhile, in connexion (as is reasonably believed) with the betrothal or marriage of Anne of Bohemia to Richard II (i. e. about 1381-1382), Chaucer had brought to a successful completion the Parlement of Foules, a charming sketch of 699 lines, in which the other birds, on Saint Valentine's day, counsel the "Formel Egle" on her choice of a mate. His success here, as in the case of the Deth of Blaunche the Duchesse, was due to the absence of any need for a climax; and though the materials which he borrowed were mainly Latin (with some help from passages of the Teseide not fully needed for Palamon and Arcyte) his method of handling them would have been quite approved by his friends among the French poets. A more ambitious venture, the Hous of Fame, in which Chaucer imagines himself borne aloft by an eagle to Fame's temple, describes what he sees and hears there, and then breaks off in apparent inability to get home, shows a curious mixture of the poetic ideals of the Roman de la rose and reminiscences of the Divina Commedia. As the Hous of Fame is most often remembered and quoted for the personal touches and humour of Chaucer's conversation with the eagle, so the most-quoted passages in the Prologue to the Legende of Good Women are those in which Chaucer professes his affection for the daisy, and the attack on his loyalty by Cupid

and its defence by Alceste. Recent discoveries have shown, however, that (besides obligations to Machault) some of the touches about the daisy and the controversy between the partisans of the Flower and of the Leaf are snatches from poems by his friends Froissart and Deschamps, which Chaucer takes up and returns to them with pretty compliments, and that he was indebted to Froissart for some of the framework of his poem. 2 Both of the two versions of the Prologue to the *Legende* are charming, and some of the tales, notably that of Cleopatra, rank with Chaucer's best work. When, however, he had written eight and part of the ninth he tired of his scheme, which was planned to celebrate nineteen of Cupid's faithful "saints," with Alcestis as their queen. With his usual hopefulness he had overlooked the risk of monotony, which obviously weighed heavily on him ere he broke off, and the loss of the other ten stories is less to be regretted than that of the celebration of Alceste, and a possible epilogue which might have exceeded in charm the Prologue itself. Chaucer's failure to complete the scheme of the *Legende of Good Women* may have been partly due to the attractions of the *Canterbury Tales*, which were probably taken up in immediate succession to it. His guardianship of two Kentish wards, his justiceship of the peace, his representing the county in the parliament of 1386, his commissionership of the river-bank between Greenwich and Woolwich, all make it easy to understand his dramatic use of the merry crowds he saw on the Canterbury road, without supposing him to have had recourse to Boccaccio's *Decamerone*, a book which there is no proof of his having seen. The pilgrims whom he imagines to have assembled at the Tabard Inn in Southwark, where Harry Bailey was host, are said to have numbered "wel nyne and twenty in a

company," and the Prologue gives full-length sketches of a Knight, a Squire (his son), and their Yeoman; of a Prioress, Monk, Friar, Oxford Clerk, and Parson, with two disreputable hangers-on of the church, a Summoner and Pardoner; of a Serjeant-at-Law and a Doctor of Physic, and of a Franklin, or country gentleman, Merchant, Shipman, Miller, Cook, Manciple, Reeve, Ploughman (the Parson's brother) and the ever-famous Wife of Bath. Five London burgesses are described in a group, and a Nun and Priest<sup>3</sup> are mentioned as in attendance on the Prioress. Each of these, with Chaucer himself making the twenty-ninth, was pledged to tell two tales, but including one second attempt and a tale told by the Yeoman of a Canon, who overtakes the pilgrims on the road, we have only twenty finished stories, two unfinished and two interrupted ones. As in the case of the *Legende of Good Women*, our loss is not so much that of the additional stories as of the completed framework. The wonderful character sketches of the Prologue are carried yet farther by the Talks on the Road which link the different tales, and two of these Talks, in which the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner respectively edify the company, have the importance of separate Tales, but between the Tales that have come down to us there are seven links missing,<sup>4</sup> and it was left to a later and weaker hand to narrate, in the "Tale of Beryn," the adventures of the pilgrims at Canterbury. The reference to the *Lyf of Seynt Cecyle* in the Prologue to the *Legende of Good Women* gives external proof that Chaucer included earlier work in the scheme of the *Canterbury Tales*, and mention has been made of other stories which are indisputably early. In the absence of any such metrical tests as have proved useful in the case of Shakespeare, the dates at which several of the Tales



were composed remain doubtful, while in the case of at least two, the Clerk's tale of Grisilde and the Monk's tragedies, there is evidence of early work being revised and supplemented. It is fortunately impossible to separate the prologue to the charmingly told story of "yonge Hugh of Lincoln" from the tale itself, and, with the "quod sche" in the second line as proof that Chaucer was here writing specially for his Prioress, we are forbidden to limit the new stories to any one metre or tone. There can be no doubt, however, that what may be called the Tales of the Churls (Miller, Reeve, Summoner, Friar, &c.), and the conversational outpourings of the Pardoner and Wife of Bath, form, with the immortal Prologue, the most important and distinctive additions to the older work. In these, and in the Pardoner's story of Death and the Three Revellers, and the Nun's Priest's masterly handling of the fable of the Cock and Fox, both of them free from the grossness which marks the others, Chaucer takes stories which could have been told in a short page of prose and elaborates them with all the skill in narration which he had sedulously cultivated. The conjugal reminiscences of the Wife of Bath and the Reeve's Tale with its abominable climax (lightened a little by Aley's farewell, lines 316-319) are among the great things in Chaucer, as surely as Troilus, and Palamon and Arcyte and the Prologue. They help notably to give him the width of range which may certainly be claimed for him. In or soon after 1391 Chaucer wrote in prose for an eleven-year-old reader, whom he addresses as "Litel Lowis my son," a treatise on the use of the Astrolabe, its short prologue being the prettiest specimen of his prose. The wearisome tale of "Melibee and his wyf Prudence," which was perhaps as much admired in English as it had been in Latin and French, may have been translated at any

time. The sermon on Penitence, used as the Parson's Tale, was probably the work of his old age. " Envoys" to his friends Scogan and Bukton, a translation of some balades by Sir Otes de Granson, and the Compleynt to his Purs complete the record of his minor poetry. We have his own statement that in his youth he had written many Balades, Roundels and Virelayes in honour of Love, and the two songs embedded respectively in the Parlement of Foules and the Prologue to the Legende of Good Women are charming and musical. His extant shorter poems, however, whether early or late, offer no excuse for claiming high rank for him as a lyrist. He had very little sheer singing power, and though there are fine lines in his short poems, witness the famous " Flee fro the prees and dwell with soothfastnesse," they lack the sustained concentration of great work. From the drama, again, Chaucer was cut off, and it is idle to argue from the innumerable dramatic touches in his poems and his gift of characterization as to what he might have done had he lived two centuries later. His own age delighted in stories, and he gave it the stories it demanded, invested with a humanity, a grace and strength which place him among the world's greatest narrative poets, and which bring the England of his own day, with all the colour and warmth of life, wonderfully near to all his readers. The part played by Chaucer in the development of the English language has often been overrated. He neither corrupted it, as used to be said, by introducing French words which it would otherwise have avoided, nor bore any such part in fixing it as was afterwards played by the translators of the Bible. When he was growing up, educated society in England was still bilingual, and the changes in vocabulary and pronunciation which took place during his life were the natural results of a society, which

had been bilingual with a bias towards French, giving an exclusive preference to English. The practical identity of Chaucer's language with that of Gower shows that both merely used the best English of their day with the care and slightly conservative tendency which befitted poets. Chaucer's service to the English language lies in his decisive success having made it impossible for any later English poet to attain fame, as Gower had done, by writing alternatively in Latin and French. The claim which should be made for him is that, at least as regards poetry, he proved that English was "sufficient." Chaucer borrowed both his stanza forms and his "decasyllabic" couplets (mostly with an extra syllable at the end of the line) from Guillaume Machault, and his music, like that of his French master and his successors, depends very largely on assigning to every syllable its full value, and more especially on the due pronunciation of the final -e. The slower movement of change in Scotland allowed time for Chaucer to exercise a potent influence on Scottish poetry, but in England this final -e, to which most of the earlier grammatical forms by Chaucer's time had been reduced, itself fell rapidly into disuse during the 15th century, and a serious barrier was thus raised to the appreciation of the artistic value of his verse. His disciples, Hoccleve and Lydgate, who at first had caught some echoes of his rhythms, gradually yielded to the change in pronunciation, so that there was no living tradition to hand down his secret, while successive copyists reduced his text to a state in which it was only by accident that lines could be scanned correctly. For fully three centuries his reputation was sustained solely by his narrative power, his warmest panegyrists betraying no consciousness that they were praising one of the greatest technical masters of poetry. Even when thus

maimed, however, his works found readers and lovers in every generation, and every improvement in his text has set his fame on a surer basis. The Canterbury Tales have always been Chaucer's most popular work, and, including fragments, upwards of sixty 15th-century manuscripts of it still survive. Two thin volumes of his minor poems were among the little quartos which Caxton printed by way of advertisement immediately on his return to England; the Canterbury Tales and Boethius followed in 1478, Troilus and a second edition of the Tales in 1483, the Hous of Fame in 1484. The Canterbury Tales were subsequently printed in 1492 (Pynson), 1498 (de Worde) and 1526 (Pynson); Troilus in 1517 (de Worde) and 1526 (Pynson); the Hous of Fame in 1526 (Pynson); the Parlement of Foules in 1526 (Pynson) and 1530 (de Worde) and the Mars, " Venus" and Envoy to Bukton by Julyan Notary about 1500. Pynson's three issues in 1526 almost amounted to a collected edition, but the first to which the title The Workes of Geffray Chaucer was given was that edited by William Thynne in 1532 for Thomas Godfray. Of this there was a new edition in 1542 for John Reynes and William Bonham, and an undated reprint a few years later for Bonham, Kele, Petit and, Toye, each of whom put his name on part of the edition. In 1561 a reprint, with numerous additions, edited by John Stowe, was printed by J. Kyngston for J. Wight, and this was re-edited, with fresh additions by Thomas Speght, in 1598 for G. Bishop and again in 1602 for Adam Islip. In 1687 there was an anonymous reprint, and in 1721 John Urry produced the last and worst of the folios.