

merely drawing upon what he has read, but that his genius is being fed by his wide and deep knowledge of life itself.

10. Chaucer's Work in General. It is usual and convenient to divide Chaucer's literary career into three periods, which are called his French, his Italian, and his English period, respectively. His genius was nourished, to begin with, on the French poetry and romance which formed the favourite reading of the court and cultivated society during the time of his youth. Naturally he followed the fashion, and his early work was done on French models. Thus, besides translating portions at least of the then popular *Roman de la Rose*, he wrote, among other quite imitative things, an allegory on the death of Blanche, John of Gaunt's wife, which he called *The Bóké of the Duchesse* (1369), and which is wholly in the manner of the reigning French school. Then, almost certainly as a direct result of his visits to Italy, French influences disappear, and Italian influences take their place. In this second period (1370-84), Chaucer is the disciple of the great Italian masters, for *The House of Fame* clearly owes much to Dante, while *Troilus and Cryseyde*, by far his longest single poem, is based upon, and in part translated from, Boccaccio's *Filostrato*. To the close of this period the unfinished *Legende of Good Women* may also be referred. Finally, he ceases to be Italian as he had ceased to be French, and becomes English. This does not mean that he no longer draws freely upon French and Italian material. He continues to do this to the end. It simply means that, instead of being merely imitative, he becomes independent, relying upon himself entirely even for the use to which he puts his borrowed themes. To this last period belong, together with sundry minor poems, the *Canterbury Tales*, in which

we have Chaucer's most famous and most characteristic work.

11. The Canterbury Tales. These are a collection of stories fitted into a general framework which serves to hold them together. Some of them were certainly written earlier, and before the framework had been thought of ; but we put the *Tales* as a whole into Chaucer's third period, because it was then that most of them were composed, and that the complete design shaped itself in the poet's mind. That design explains the title. A number of pilgrims on the eve of their departure meet at the Tabard Inn in Southwark, where, as it chances, Chaucer himself is also staying ; and, as he too is bent on the same errand, he is easily persuaded to join the party. Pilgrimages were very popular in the fourteenth century ; they were often undertaken, as here, in companies, partly for the sake of society by the way, and partly because of the dangers of the roads ; and, it must be admitted, their prevailing spirit was anything but severely devotional. Sometimes the pilgrims went, as Chaucer's *Wife of Bath* had already done, as far afield as Rome and Jerusalem ; but one of the favourite expeditions nearer home was to the shrine of the murdered St. Thomas à Becket at Canterbury ; and thither these particular pilgrims are bound. The jolly host of the Tabard, Harry Bailly, gives them hearty welcome and a supper of his best—good victual and strong drink to match ; and, after they are satisfied, he makes this proposal : that to beguile the tedium of the journey each member of the party shall tell two tales on the way to Canterbury, and two on the way back ; that he himself shall be the judge ; and that the one who tells the best tale shall be treated by all the rest to a supper on their return to the Tabard Inn. The

suggestion is applauded, and these *Canterbury Tales* are the result.

All this is explained in the *Prologue*, after which Chaucer proceeds to introduce his fellow-pilgrims. Though limited to what we may broadly call the middle classes, the company is still very comprehensive. The military profession is represented by a knight, a squire, and a yeoman; the ecclesiastical, by a prioress, a nun (her secretary), a monk, a friar, a sunnour (summoner of those charged under the jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical courts), a pardoner (or seller of pardons), a poor parson, and a Clerk of Oxford, who is a student of divinity. Then we have a lawyer and a physician, and, running down the social scale, a number of miscellaneous characters whom one cannot well classify—a franklin (freeholder of land), a merchant, a shipman (sailor), a miller, a cook, a manciple (caterer for colleges), a reeve (land steward), a haberdasher, a carpenter, a weaver, a dyer, a tapycer (tapestry maker), a ploughman (the poor parson's brother), and a well-to-do west-country cloth-maker named Alison, who, however, is better known as the Wife of Bath. In his descriptions of the most prominent of these people Chaucer's powers are shown at their very highest, and this *Prologue* is a masterpiece of insight, sureness of touch, fine discrimination, and subtle humour. All the characters are individualised, yet their thoroughly typical quality gives unique value to Chaucer's picture of men and manners in the England of his time.

As according to programme each of the pilgrims was to have told four stories, the poet's plan was a very large one. He lived to complete a small portion only, for the work, as we have it, is merely a fragment of twenty-four tales. Yet even as it stands its interest is wonderfully varied, for Chaucer is guided by a sense of dramatic

propriety, and so the tales differ in character as widely as do those by whom they are told. Thus, to take extreme examples, we have the chivalrous epic of the Knight and the Clerk's beautiful account of the patient Griselda's wifely devotion balanced in strange contrast by the coarse farcical stories of the Miller and the Reeve. It should be noted that in no case are the tales original in theme. Chaucer takes his raw material from many different sources, and the range of his reading and his quick eye for anything and everything which would serve his purpose wherever he found it, are shown by the fact that he lays all sorts of literature, learned and popular, Latin, French, and Italian, under contribution. But whatever he borrows he makes entirely his own, and he remains one of the most delightful of our story-tellers in verse.

His finest work as a narrative poet is the *Knights Tale*, which in accordance with the law of dramatic propriety is heroic in subject, chivalrous in sentiment, and romantic in tone. Based on the *Teseide* of Boccaccio, it tells of two young cousins of royal blood, named Palamon and Arcite, who, when Duke Theseus makes war against their city of Thebes, are taken captive by him, and imprisoned in a tower of his palace. From their window one May morning they chance to see Emily, the beautiful sister of the Duke's wife, walking in the garden beneath; whereupon their life-long friendship is shattered in an instant and they become rivals in love. Arcite is presently ransomed, but unable to endure banishment from Emily, returns to Athens in disguise, and finds a menial place in the Duke's service. Then, after several years, Palamon makes his escape. The cousins meet in duel, but are surprised and interrupted by the Duke and his train as they ride out to hunt. Theseus dooms them both to

death on the spot, but relenting on the petition of the ladies, spares their lives on condition that each shall collect a hundred knights, and that the case shall be decided in a great tournament, the hand of Emily being the victor's prize. In this tournament Arcite falls, and the story ends with the nuptials of Palamon and Emily. Brilliant in itself, this fine tale is also intensely interesting as the embodiment of that romantic spirit which, as we have seen, prevailed in the court circles of Chaucer's youth. Nominally, it is a tale of the heroic age of Greece, but as yet no notion existed of what we call historic truth, and everything in it—characters, sentiments, setting—is mediaevalised. It is in fact an idealised picture of the fast-vanishing middle ages, and is steeped in the atmosphere of chivalry. Its account of the tournament, its presentation of the principles of knightly ethics, and the vividness with which it portrays the chivalrous conception of love, are among the features of it which we should specially note in studying it from the historical point of view.

12. General Characteristics of Chaucer's Poetry.

Chaucer was not in any sense a poet of the people. He was a court poet, who wrote for cultured readers and a refined society. The great vital issues of the day never inspired his verse. He made his appeal to an audience composed of the favoured few, who wanted to be amused by comedy, or touched by pathos, or moved by romantic sentiment, but who did not wish to be disturbed by painful reminders of plagues, famines, and popular discontent. Thus, though he holds the mirror up to the life of his time, the dark underside of it is nowhere reflected by him. It is significant that his only mention of the peasants' revolt is in the form of a humorous reference in the *Nonnes Priestes Tale* of the Cock and the Fox. It