

**JOHN OF GAUNT,  
HIS LIFE AND  
CHARACTER**

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John of Gaunt, his life and character by C. W. Empson

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[MEMBERS' PRIZE ESSAY 1872,]

BY

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"Pride in their port, defiance in their eye,  
I see the lords of humankind pass by."  
GOSWORTHY.

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## INTRODUCTION.



THE fourteenth century, pregnant as it was with organic changes in religion, politics, and industry, forms an important era in English history. The preceding century had witnessed the power of the Church at its height, the following its downfall, while throughout this the change was slowly taking place. Simultaneously the people struggled successfully after liberty, and emerged from a state of darkness into that light, which had so long been denied them by their priestly rulers. The spirit of enterprise, which had remained dormant for ages, now sprung up with renewed vigour, and the impoverished coffers of the kingdom began to be refilled. These were no slight or unimportant revolutions, but made themselves felt in all the relations of life. As the improvements resulted from the power of the Church being gradually confined within proper limits, it will be well to briefly survey the leading points of the current religious history.

When the sceptre of England was in the feeble hands of John and Henry III., the Papal extortions knew no bounds; livings and canonries were disposed of to foreigners and strangers, who never betrayed any interest in their benefices, far less visited them. The sole object of the Pope seemed to be to gather money into the hands of the Church, and, too often, into his own. But with the accession of Edward I., indisputably the greatest of the Plantagenets, the order of things changed. He saw the clergy usurping every office, he saw the wealth of the realm pouring away into foreign countries, and determined to put a stop to all this in the interest of the nation. With consummate skill he shifted the odium of persecution from his own

shoulders to those of his subjects. He placed the clergy out of the pale of the law, enjoining his judges to give every man justice against them, but them justice against none. Those who will not contribute to the support of my government must not expect to reap the benefit of its protection ; so ran the rigorous logic of this resolute politician. The distress of the clergy was great ; any man who had a grudge against them might indulge his anger with impunity, and do endless damage to the property of his enemy. Edward, moreover, caused the famous Statute of Mortmain to be passed, forbidding at the same time the exportation of the proceeds of any English benefice or abbey. These wise laws were confirmed by Edward III., who added many minor ones to give more detail to the general regulations of his predecessors, while in 1392 the Statute of Præmunire became part of our Constitution. In 1371 the Parliament petitioned the King to fill the highest offices of State with laymen instead of ecclesiastics,<sup>1</sup> and William of Wykeham, who was then Chancellor, resigned his post. There was much reason for the popular outcry against the Church, apart from the great covetousness it displayed. The power and riches of the English clergy, had, it is true, been increasing beyond all precedent : the owners of half the landed estates in England, they also possessed personal property of untold value. Had this wealth been wisely and liberally employed for the benefit of the people, all might have remained unchanged for ages longer. The bishops held high offices of State to the prejudice of their sees, where the secular clergy were living in a deplorable condition of laxness and immorality, which completely lost them the respect of the people. The monasteries, too, had fallen grievously from the standard of purity and simplicity proposed by their founders. They became the resort of men who wished to have their private pleasures curtailed as little as possible, while they enjoyed the peace and security afforded by these sanctuaries. So gross and notorious was the conduct of both seculars and regulars,<sup>2</sup> that the Pope felt bound to save the honour and dignity of his name by attempting to stem the torrent of vice. For this purpose he commissioned the Mendicant Friars, who numbered many energetic and restless men in their ranks, to cross over to England. Bound by a



vow of poverty, and clothed in the humblest of dress, they presented the greatest conceivable contrast to the wealthy ecclesiastics. Addressing the people in plain homely language, they speedily gained an influence over them, such as the seculars, with their laboured, monotonous discourses, unintelligible to the common people, had never attained. But in time they also fell into evil courses, corrupted by the luxury that met them on every hand, and, quarrelling among themselves, united only to abuse the regulars. When the teachers of religion were thus sunk in wickedness, when two rival Popes disputed the ecclesiastical supremacy, when indulgences were granted to the greatest criminals, if only they paid high enough for them, no wonder people sighed for a purer faith, and welcomed the advent of Wickliffe. Langland and Chaucer launched biting sarcasms against the iniquity of the clergy; nor does the latter's picture of the Pardonere at all exaggerate the extent of the evil.<sup>2</sup>

The profoundly superstitious age was now past, when men were unable to resist the effects of an excommunication, so that they no longer feared to maintain the rights of their country against the encroachments of the Church. It is only fair to add, that the prelates of England, however covetous and avaricious they might be when their own interests were concerned, often showed themselves no less ready to uphold the rightful authority of the Crown, than to defend their own ancient privileges in the face of Papal interference. The latter half of the fourteenth century was the time of continual struggle between the clergy and the Lollards, as the followers of Wickliffe were called. Whatever opinions we may hold with reference to Wickliffe's doctrines, we cannot but acknowledge the singular adaptation of means to his end. The Romish Church delighted in gorgeous ritual; Wickliffe advocated the simplest and plainest service possible. Its clergy were possessed of enormous wealth; he taught that the ministers of religion should imitate the primitive poverty of the Apostles. It regarded the Pope as the representative of Christ on earth; he denounced him as Anti-Christ. It issued pardons, indulgences, excommunications, absolutions; he declared these were the invention of the devil. Lastly, its great doctrine was that of Transubstantiation; he

entirely rejected it. In short, in every way possible, he presented the greatest contrast to the Romish Church. Ignorant men might be unable to distinguish between the rival doctrines, but no one could mistake the difference between the simple service of one party, and the ornate service of the other. Still he was only incomplete. He destroyed the existing system, but did not reconstruct a new one. Yet the minds of the people were ripe for a change, and nearly half the population were accounted Lollards. It was the vicious lives that the clergy were leading that precipitated this revolution of feeling, and caused men to rebel against the authority of the Church sooner than they would otherwise have done.

Nor was this laxity of morals and general licentiousness confined to the clergy; unhappily it pervaded all ranks of society. This so-called age of chivalry was disgraced by the most bare-faced vice, an accomplished knight enjoying the same prerogatives as were claimed by the dissolute courtiers of Charles II. or Louis XV.\* In the dawn of chivalry a sort of material love for our Lady was fostered in the minds of warriors; she was the guide of their actions, the pole star of their affections. From this the transition to a high regard for, and a deference to ladies was easy. But as time went on, love almost entirely took the place of respect, and when that barrier was broken down, the fiery spirits of the knights knew no restraint. Open licentiousness became the rule, instead of the exception, as the old poets and romancers only too plainly show.

But in spite of this, the feelings of loyalty, courtesy, and liberality were not extinct; nor are we at a loss to point out men of this century, who were pre-eminent as mirrors of chivalry. Foremost of their day stand Edward III., the Black Prince, and Bertrand du Guesclin, while round them were gathered a brilliant crowd, scarcely inferior in reputation: Henry, Duke of Lancaster, the Captal de Buche, Lord Chandos, Sir John Hawkwood, Sir Walter Manny, are names that will readily occur to all. Such noble and heroic characters as these shine with such brilliancy, that we are apt at first to believe

\* St. Palaye, *Mém. sur la Chevalerie* n., 60.

that they were the more prominent in an age when each man was a hero. But when we examine facts with care, we find that in every period heroic persons were few in number, while the rest were too often covetous and perjured. The zenith of chivalry seems ever in the past,<sup>4</sup> yet if the code of knighthood had at any time real influence in England, surely it was in the reign of Edward III. But enough of knights and their prowess; let us turn for a brief space to the humbler affairs of the people.

During this century a great impulse was given to the cause of liberty, after which we find the lower orders of Europe constantly struggling. The Italian republics had in most cases attained a fair degree of freedom, but were beginning to lose it, and at this time it is very hard to distinguish between their popular risings and party quarrels. Still in 1378, when Salvestro de Medici was Gonfalonier of Justice at Florence, there was an undoubted insurrection, caused by the imposition of an obnoxious law. It was quelled for a time, but a month afterwards the Ciompi, or lowest populace, broke out in rebellion again, and placed one of their order, Michel di Lando, in power. Fortunately, although of humble birth, he was a moderate and able man, and managed to restore order, acting in all things so fairly, that he was accused of betraying the popular cause. The result of these disturbances was that the Guelf chiefs learned so much wisdom, that by ruling in tolerable accordance with the laws, they were able to maintain their power for half a century.\*

In Rome the impassioned eloquence of Rienzi obtained such a mastery over the people, that they rose in 1347, and expelled the nobles, appointing Rienzi their tribune. This lasted but for a time, and then Rienzi was compelled to give up his rule, being thrown into prison at Avignon. Becoming possessed again of the supreme power by a strange freak of fortune, he behaved so tyrannically that he was murdered in 1354.†

In France a terrible insurrection broke out in 1358, owing to the

\* Hallam's Hist. Middle Ages, i., 439.

† Milman, Hist. Lat. Christ. v. 517.