

**ELECTIC ENGLISH
CLASSICS. CHAUCER'S
THE PROLOGUE AND
THE KNIGHTES TALE**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649474738

Electric English Classics. Chaucer's the Prologue and the Knightes Tale by A. M. van Dyke

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

www.triestepublishing.com

A. M. VAN DYKE

**ELECTIC ENGLISH
CLASSICS. CHAUCER'S
THE PROLOGUE AND
THE KNIGHTES TALE**



GEOFFREY CHAUCER.

ECLECTIC ENGLISH CLASSICS

© CHAUCER'S
THE PROLOGUE
AND
THE KNIGHTES TALE

EDITED BY

A. M. VANDYKE, M. A.

FORMERLY DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, CINCINNATI HIGH SCHOOLS

NEW YORK ·· CINCINNATI ·· CHICAGO
AMERICAN BOOK COMPANY

INTRODUCTION.

THE parentage, date of birth, and many other details in the life of Geoffrey Chaucer, the "Father of English Poetry," are involved in more or less obscurity, and those mentioned in the following brief biography, although in accordance with the best authorities, must not all be regarded as unquestionably established. He was born probably in 1340 (not in 1328, as formerly believed). His father was John Chaucer, a wealthy vintner, evidently of some social standing, since in 1338 he was in attendance on King Edward III. Geoffrey was liberally educated. Both Cambridge and Oxford claim him as a student, and it is probable that he attended both universities, a practice not uncommon with scholars of his day. "At the period of his leaving Oxford," says Leland, "he was already an acute dialectician, a persuasive orator, an elegant poet, a grave philosopher, an able mathematician, and an accomplished divine."

In 1357 he was in the king's service as page in the household of Lionel, third son of Edward III.; and in 1359 he served in the army that invaded France, where he was taken prisoner, but soon after released, the king paying sixteen pounds toward his ransom.

During the next seven years no mention is made of him in any

of the records. Still, it is probable that he was active during this time, since in 1367 a life pension of twenty marks was granted him for services rendered and to be rendered his sovereign. In the same year he was appointed valet of the king's chamber,—a position of no mean honor. In 1368, on the death of Prince Lionel, he entered the service of the latter's brother, John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster, who became the poet's best friend and patron. About this time he is believed to have married Philippa Roet, eldest daughter of Sir Payne Roet, and sister of Catherine Roet, who later became the third wife of the duke of Lancaster.

From this time for many years his name appears frequently in the public records. An interesting entry is that of April 23, 1374, when a pitcher of wine daily was granted him for life, to be delivered into his hands by the king's butler. This was a perquisite of what came to be in later years the office of poet laureate. Between the years 1370 and 1380 he was sent abroad upon several different diplomatic missions. In the second of these, in 1372 and 1373, he is thought to have visited the poet Petrarch, at that time living near Padua. (See Prologue to "The Clerkes Tale.")

The public services of Chaucer were not confined to diplomacy, for he held important positions in the civil service of the government. In 1374 he was appointed controller of the customs of wool, skins, and leather at the port of London. This was by no means a sinecure, as he was required to keep the records in person. He no doubt earned the appointment by previous services earnestly and properly performed. To this office there was added, in 1382, the controllership of petty customs, and in 1385 he was allowed the rare privilege of having a

deputy to perform his duties as controller. In 1386 he was elected knight of the shire of Kent, in the Parliament held at Westminster; but later in the same year, for some not definitely explained cause, he gave up or was dismissed from his offices. It may be mentioned as a coincidence that his patron, John of Gaunt, sailed in August of this year to Spain, and it is possible that during his absence political influence of an adverse character operated to deprive Chaucer of his offices. This seems likely because in 1389, when Henry of Lancaster, son of John of Gaunt, had become a power in the government, Chaucer was made clerk of the king's works at Westminster and at as many as fifteen other places in personal possession of the crown. At any rate, his fortunes seem to have risen and fallen with those of the house of Lancaster. In 1394 he was granted by King Richard II. a pension of twenty pounds a year for life. It appears that in the succeeding years of his life he was in financial distress, as he often drew his pension in advance, and letters of protection were issued against his arrest and imprisonment for debt.

Although the granting of the pension of twenty pounds for life, and a tun of wine yearly, indicates that Richard II. was not unfriendly to the poet, his fortunes did not take a decided turn for the better until the accession of Henry IV., in 1399; then his pension was at once doubled.

But this new era of prosperity was not to be of long continuance. In 1399 Chaucer took a fifty-three years' lease of a house in the garden of St. Mary's Chapel in Westminster, where he died in 1400. "He was buried in the great cathedral near which in his last days he lived. He was the first, and for centuries the only one, of the many men of letters whose mortal

remains have found a resting place in this great mausoleum of the illustrious dead of England."

The following description of Chaucer's personality is taken from Charles Cowden Clarke's "Life of Chaucer":

"The person of Chaucer was of middle stature, in advanced years inclining to corpulency. His face was full and smooth, betokening regular, good health and a serene and cheerful frame of mind. His complexion was fair, verging toward paleness; his hair was of a dusky yellow, short and thin; that of his beard grew—or rather, perhaps, it was fashioned—into a forked shape, and its color was wheaten. He had an expansive and marble-like forehead, fair and unwrinkled; his eyes constantly tended toward the ground. The general expression of his countenance combined a mixture of animation, of lurking good-natured satire, of unruffled serenity, sweetness, and close thought. His features were an index of his temper, and this comprised a mixture of the lively, grave, and modest. Yet was the gayety of his disposition more prominent in his writings than in his general demeanor, which, it may be, was repressed by his modesty.

"During his relaxations from the duties of public business he continually retired to his study. Reading, indeed, was his chief delight, as appears, by his own confession, in the introduction to his 'Dream' and to the 'Legend of Good Women.' He preferred it to every amusement, with the exception of a morning walk in Maytide. He lived almost exclusively in his own world of meditation, never interfering, as he says of himself, in the concerns of others. He was temperate and regular in his diet; he 'arose with the lark, and lay down with the lamb': hence the marvelous truth and freshness of his early morning pictures.

"The career of Chaucer, from whichever point we view it, as-

sumes a character elevated above that of ordinary men. He was a poet, a philosopher, an astronomer, a logician, a linguist, a politician, a theologian, a humanist, a gentleman in the modern acceptance of the term, and a virtuous man. His conduct as a man holding a public office stands unimpeached for integrity. He was a gentleman, for he was the universal theme of admiration in a refined court, particularly by the women, and they rarely err in making a correct estimate of a man's temper and habits."

It is almost entirely as a poet, however, and as the poet of real life, that Chaucer commands our attention and secures our admiration. Like Shakespeare, Chaucer invented almost nothing. Whatever he found of use to him he took, and made of it as purely an original thing as if he himself had first found or invented it. As has been before remarked, he was a man of wide reading, and his æsthetic temperament and dramatic insight led him to discern whatever there was of poetic value in mediæval song, priestly legend, romance of chivalry, tales of travelers, fable, or allegory; but whatever he took from others as a basis of his literary work he ennobled by his genius until the original was eclipsed by the imperishable form into which he fashioned it.

The earlier literary life of Chaucer shows little English influence, except perhaps in the way of suggestion of subject. John Gower (1330-1408) was his contemporary and personal friend; but Gower was himself an imitator, and it is more probable that Gower owes his reputation to his connection with Chaucer than that Chaucer owes any part of his fame to his association with Gower. "The Tale of the Man of Lawe" and "The Tale of the Wyf of Bathe," which are supposed by some to have been borrowed by Chaucer from Gower, were common property which had come down from past ages in the form of popular legends;