

enacted. Amidst the spiritual lethargy which had fallen upon the nations, there were some who struggled for liberty of thought and conscience, for "freedom to worship God." Gower manfully appeals to the Church to reform its abuses, and Langlande points to the life of duty as he beholds it in the vision of Christ, seen through the clouds of humanity. Nor were these men alone in forecasting the inevitable issue of the growing worldliness amongst those who should have been the guardians of religion. Wycliffe sent on an embassy to the court of Gregory XI., saw the vices that everywhere prevailed in that city, and returned home filled with indignation. From that visit sprang the first translation of the Bible into the English tongue. Chaucer too had visited sunny Italy, and there made the acquaintance of Petrarch and Boccaccio, whose sentiments, both on literary and religious topics he made his own, and moved by Wycliffe's spirit of righteous indignation he satires in his "Pardoner's Tale" the baseness of the people.

The king meanwhile, on the throne of England, was keeping pace with the advancing march of time. Never had the surroundings of the Court been more splendid. Never so many festal occasions and tournaments as now. Life seemed one grand pageant—a panorama passing in review. A more powerful monarch never reigned. He subdued Scotland, invaded France, and without any reason save ambition and the love of war, claimed the crown of that country for himself. Then it was that the famous battle of Crezy was fought, when the Black Prince won a fame that was afterwards doubled by the distinction which he gained at Poitiers. During this time also a fearful pestilence known as the Black Death raged throughout Europe, and is estimated to have cost more lives than all the wars of Edward.

Chaucer was for a time intimately associated with the life of this gay court. His was a chequered experience. While an accomplished poet and a favorite at Court, he was also at different times captured in a siege, a prisoner (narrowly escaping the gallows), and an exile from home. He had lived amidst the smiles and frowns, the temptations as well as the flatteries of Court life.

These changes of circumstance might have sufficed to injure a less decided character, or have caused the life plans of one possessed of less firmness to be dissipated. But such deviations from the smooth and beaten path, though they must have discouraged, had no power to mar the steadfast purpose of this noble character. But from the dim, uncertain story of his life, history points us to his works, which have won for him just renown and unqualified praise. By these he is best known, and they will best speak to his honor. But he must be studied to be appreciated. In them he reveals the real spring-time of English life, so dewy and invigorating. He uses a vocabulary in which words are pictures—bright and fresh. The grave humor of the philosopher blends in perfect harmony with the simple grace of the narrator, and throughout the whole there is a unity of idea which makes the most discordant note sound as "a chord in one great instrument," and this we never find except in productions of the highest minds.

Men are but copies, one of another. That which they see and hear they strive to imitate. But in Chaucer's earnest endeavor to form a literature in England he received no aid from his own countrymen. Hitherto there had been no minds great enough to be equal to the task of creating models. But in meeting with Petrarch in Italy, and through him Boccaccio, he added at the same time to his already overflowing stores of classical lore, and was provided with a never-failing spring from whence to draw incidents and characters for his muse, which greatly enabled him to enrich and beautify his native tongue; and as he became more and more familiar with these great poets of Italy, their vigorous artistic life guided his riper genius to the full expression of its powers.

The rest of Europe did not then possess men who had attained to the same degree of splendor and magnificence in literary fame. France could boast of a few learned men,—such as Oresme, Berchoire, and Froissart,—and Spain had as yet only a few historical romancers and some few theologians, while first in his own country was Langlande, Gower, Lydgate, Surrey and Wyatt, to whom his life was an example until it was reproduced in the pure-minded Spenser.