

Philippa de Roet was wife of the poet, Geoffrey Chaucer, and the sister of Katherine Swynford, third wife of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster.

In 1359 Geoffrey Chaucer became a soldier, and served in the army under the King of England, Edward III, in an attack upon France, and was taken prisoner. It is supposed he was detained there about a year; and, being ransomed by Edward, when he came back to England, he married a lady named Philippa. She was the younger daughter of Sir Paon de Roet, of Hainault, who came over to England in the retinue of Queen Philippa, who was also of Hainault in the Low Countries of the Holy Roman Empire. These two Philippas, coming from the same place, remained friends during all the Queen's life; for when Chaucer married Philippa de Roet, she was one of the Queen's maids of honour; and, after her marriage, the Queen gave her an annual pension which was continued to her by the King after Queen Philippa died.



There are entries mentioning Philippa Chaucer in 1366, 1372, and 1374. The former names her as one of the ladies of the bedchamber to Queen Philippa, who conferred the annuity of ten marks in September, 1366. In 1372 John of Gaunt conferred on Philippa Chaucer an annuity of £10. Her name is mentioned when the grant to Chaucer of a pitcher of wine daily is commuted into money payment, June 13, 1374, by John of Gaunt (again a pension of £10), for good services rendered by the Chaucers to the said Duke, his consort, and his mother the Queen. Some people say she was the Queen's god-daughter. If you would like to know what Chaucer's wife looked like, we do not know what she was like in the face, but the fashion of the times is what she wore. We believe she had long yellow hair, which Chaucer describes so often and so prettily. Chaucer's wife wore one of those funny head-dresses like crowns, or rather like boxes, over a gold net, with her hair braided in a tress, hanging down her back. She had a close green dress, the favorite colour of that day, with tight sleeves, reaching right down over the hand, to protect it from the sun and wind; and a very long skirt, falling in folds about her feet, sometimes edged with beautiful white fur, ermine, or a rich grey fur, called vair. The colour of this grey fur was much liked, and when people had light grey eyes, of somewhat the same colour, it was thought very beautiful. Many songs describe pretty ladies with 'eyes of vair.'

When Chaucer's wife went to Court, she wore dresses far more splendid than any to be seen now—dresses of all colours, worked in with flowers and branches of gold, sometimes with heraldic devices and strange figures, and perfectly smothered in jewels. No one has pearls, and emeralds, and diamonds sewn on their gowns now; but in the fourteenth century, rich people had the seams of their clothes often covered with gems. They wore splendid belts, round their hips, all jewelled, and strings of glittering jewels hung round their necks, and down from the belt, and on the headdress. People did not wear short sleeves then, but long ones, made sometimes very curiously with streamers hanging from the elbow; a long thin gauze veil, shining with silver and gold; and narrow pointed shoes, much longer than their feet which, they thought, made the foot look slender. If ladies had not had such long shoes, they would never have showed beneath their long embroidered skirts, and they would always have been stumbling when they walked. It was a very graceful and elegant costume that Chaucer's wife wore. When she walked out of doors, she had tall clogs to save her pretty shoes from the mud of the rough streets; and when she rode on horseback with the Queen, or her husband Chaucer, she sat on a pillion, and placed her feet on a narrow board, called a *planchette*.



We do not know much about Chaucer's children. Thomas Chaucer was born in or about 1367, and died in 1434. Elizabeth Chaucer's novitiate was paid for by John of Gaunt in 1381. If Elizabeth Chaucer was about 16 in 1381 she would have been born about 1365; and, therefore, as far as dates are concerned, either Thomas or Elizabeth may well have been elder children of the poet: the chances being that he married in 1361-64. Moreover, John of Gaunt's interest in both of these persons, Thomas Chaucer and Elizabeth Chaucer, gives this a colour of probability. At the same time Chaucer seems to have been no uncommon name. Chaucer's exceptional notice of his little son Lewis who must have been born in 1381, the year of Elizabeth's novitiate, since Chaucer describes him as being ten years old in his *Treatise on the Astrolabe* in 1391, may have been due to the appearance of a 'Benjamin' rather late in life.

In Honour of Lady Day the 25th

And all was conscience and tender heart!
Most daintily her tresses plaited was:
Her nose was straight; eyes were grey as glass;
Her mouth was little, and so soft and red!
Besides, she had a very fine forehead,
That measured nigh a span across, I trow!
For certainly her stature was not low.
And very daintily was the cloak she wore...