

THE SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF GENTILESSE  
IN SELECTED TALES BY GEOFFREY CHAUCER

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS  
IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE  
TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES AND FINE ARTS

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DENTON, TEXAS

MAY 1985

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## Chapter One

### Gentilesse: The Medieval Perspective

An examination of the concept of gentilesse provides important clues into the difference between the medieval and modern minds. Such a study can give the modern student of Geoffrey Chaucer a deep and realistic view of Chaucer's art as well as an appreciation of Chaucer's importance for both the medieval and modern eras. The medieval audience for which Chaucer composed understood gentilesse as a multi-faceted term encompassing a wide range of secular virtues such as loyalty, compassion, fame, bravery, honesty, refinement, generosity, courtesy, elegance, and nobility. Although the modern mind might search for a specific definition of gentilesse, the medieval audience viewed the term holistically and, therefore, relied upon context and tone to reveal any particular emphasis.

The use of the term gentilesse became increasingly rare after Chaucer's time. By the seventeenth century the word had virtually vanished from English usage. Its modern appearances occur within the confines of medieval study while the progeny of gentilesse, terms such as

gentry, gentleman, genteel, and gentle, focus on more limited definitions, and none of the modern terms contains the sense of honor and nobility central to the meaning of their medieval forerunner.

The philological origins of the word gentilesse involve the word root gen, which refers to the Latin word for family. Nevill Coghill points out in an important lecture on gentilesse that the philological history of the word accounts for the notion that "there was such a thing as gentle blood, a mystical thing, that showed through all efforts to disguise it; we see it in the sons of Cymbeline or in Perdita; it is a faith proper to romances . . ." ("Chaucer's Idea" 7). Even though the term did possess this social definition, it also possessed a moral and religious complex of ideas. The moral implications of gentilesse are summarized by Lindsay A. Mann when he comments that

"Gentilesse" or "courtoisie"--the words in greatest extension are synonymous and interchangeable since both are defined essentially as the pursuit of spiritual excellence and the avoidance of evil deeds or "vileinye"--had come to embrace by the fourteenth century a whole complex of chivalric and Christian ideals ("Gentilesse" 11).



Chaucer wrote during the fourteenth century when the English language experienced a virtual explosion as it usurped French as the language of the poet and the court in England. This language revolution created an extensive shifting and changing within English lexicon and definitions. Gentilesse was a word that experienced this revolution and that may have been a victim of the changes not only in the language but also in society itself. Chaucer's frequent use of the words gentilesse, gentil, and gentilnesse indicates the interest he must have had in the word and its implications. In A Concordance to the Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, gentilesse is listed some eighty-one times, gentle or gentil 113 times, and gentilnesse ten times (357-58). The majority of the references so listed fall within the various romances that Chaucer composed, especially Troilus and Criseyde and the romances told within The Canterbury Tales: the tales of the Knight, the Squire, the Franklin, and the Wife of Bath.

A count made of references to the terms in the Canterbury romances shows that the Knight used gentilesse only once but that he used gentil twelve times. The Wife of Bath used gentilesse ten times and gentil eleven; the Squire used gentilesse five times and gentil seven; the Franklin used gentilesse seven times and gentil twice.

A representative point for comparison is the Nun's Priest's Tale, which used gentilesse only twice and gentil twice (357-58). These statistical counts demonstrate Chaucer's frequent use of the word group surrounding gentilesse; furthermore, they direct the student of Chaucer to his romances as the place to begin a study of the various implications of this word group.

The most widely-accepted critical opinion concerning gentilesse received a noteworthy presentation in an address Nevill Coghill gave to the English Association in 1971. In his Presidential Address entitled "Chaucer's Idea of What Is Noble," Coghill voiced the major critical opinion that gentilesse served as Chaucer's philosophical concept of true nobility of character and that this concept theoretically excluded birth and family as the most important requirements for the possession of gentilesse. In his address Coghill traced the evolution of Chaucer's view of gentilesse through the writings and influence of Aristotle, the New Testament, Boethius, and Dante (1-19).

W. Héraucourt, another critic who has examined Chaucer's interest in social and moral concepts, points out what amounts to a dialectical approach to gentilesse within Chaucer's works. He contrasts Chaucer's connection of the term gentilesse with good blood or family

status in phrases taken from Chaucer's works such as "gentilesse of blood," "gentil born," "gentil blood," and "gentil house" with Chaucer's usage of gentilesse as a matter of personal worth in phrases such as "he is gentil that doth gentil dedis" and "we clayme of him [Christ] our gentilesse" (56). The modern debate about the respective influences of heredity and environment may not be so modern after all.

This apparent discrepancy or inconsistency in Chaucer's use of the term is an example of the medieval tendency to accept disunities and then attempt to harmonize them. C. S. Lewis explains that medieval scholars who ran across contradictory authorities "hardly ever decided one of the authorities was simply right and the other wrong, and never that all were wrong" ("Imagination" 50). Peter Elbow uses the same basic concept when he explains that the medieval period "was a time when presented with an opposition, one might be instinctively more interested in showing how both sides were true than how one of them was false" (Oppositions 15). Both Lewis and Elbow point the modern student of Chaucer away from the need to decide exactly where the historical Chaucer stood on the question of the source of gentilesse. The modern student may be more comfortable with an "either-or"

approach when studying philosophical and social ideas; however, Lewis and Elbow suggest the importance of a "both-and" approach to analyzing a medieval term of such import as gentilesse.

Chaucer's own opinions about gentilesse would, of necessity, reflect his environment, his place in medieval society, and his own personal beliefs. It may be satisfying for the modern reader of Chaucer to find what he thinks are modern democratic ideas expressed in Chaucer's works and to assume that Chaucer's personal beliefs were far ahead of his time, but for every Wife of Bath Chaucer created, he also presented a patient Griselda.

Nonetheless, many critics agree that Chaucer's personal opinion about gentilesse exhibits itself in his lyric balade entitled "Gentilesse" and its close counterpart, the curtain speech of the loathly lady within the tale of the Wife of Bath. This study, however, will treat Chaucer's use of the term gentilesse rather than attempt to determine his personal opinions on the topic. This approach should prove productive because our look at Chaucer's mind must, of necessity, be filtered through the narrative personae he so adeptly introduced in his fiction.

The personae he created in The Canterbury Tales represent an interesting cross-section of English society

in the fourteenth century. Chaucer's awareness of social class distinctions needs no detailed exploration. Dramatic undertones for much of the conflict among the pilgrim characters within the tales emanate from Chaucer's conscious implementation of social class prejudices. In the Prologue to The Canterbury Tales, Chaucer provides an introduction to the pilgrims with courtesy-book attention to the protocol of order and precedence:

Er that I ferther in this tale pace,  
 Me thynketh it acordaunt to resoun  
 To telle yow al the condicioun  
 Of ech of hem, so as it semed me,  
 And whiche they weren, and of what degree  
 (Robinson I.36-40).

Chaucer then proceeds to introduce the Knight:

A Knyght ther was, and that a worthy man,  
 That fro the tyme that he first bigan  
 To riden out, he loved chivalrie,  
 Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie

. . .

He was a verray, parfit gentil knyght  
 (I.43-46,72).

The first reference to gentil in The Canterbury Tales, then, connects gentility and chivalry. Since gentillesse

seems to have such a close connection to chivalry, the term logically appears most frequently in tales concerned with chivalry--the romances. The romances found in The Canterbury Tales provide a place to begin as this study attempts to gain a medieval perspective of the concept of gentillesse. The pure romances within the Tales are told by representatives of different social classes. Two of the romances are told by members who uphold the chivalric code, the Knight and the Squire. Two other romances are told by representatives of the rising middle class, the Franklin and the Wife of Bath. The Franklin is a member of what later became known as the landed gentry, and the Wife of Bath is a member of the business middle class which provides the economic backbone for English trade and power during the fourteenth century. The juxtaposing and intertwining of the views on gentillesse given by the Knight, the Squire, the Wife of Bath, and the Franklin demonstrate that gentillesse, as a term and a concept, can be used to study the social changes occurring in the fourteenth century.

In 1968 D. S. Brewer challenged scholars to take a closer look at the social implications of vocabulary in Chaucer's canon. In an article entitled "Class Distinctions in Chaucer," Brewer noted that Chaucer was acutely

aware of the fact of social mobility but was equally aware of "the notion of proper behaviour within one's degree" (290). He also noted that "social fluidity creates greater awareness of what social structures are" (302). Consequently, the imaginative world of Chaucer is rich in social structures as well as social mobility. The social implications inherent in the use of the word gentilesse will form the heart of this study into Chaucer's romances in The Canterbury Tales.

During the medieval period in England, gentilesse was delimited by the degree or rank of the person within the hierarchical society; slowly the term became the property of the rising middle class in various forms: gentry, gentleman, and genteel. The idea behind gentilesse depended upon a social background that changed radically during the Renaissance, so gentilesse was lost during the Renaissance as the rising gentleman took its place. The change in language mirrors the change in society; the decline of the feudal order in England and the concurrent rise to power of the economic order represented by the common merchants and landowners provides the heart of the dichotomy present in the medieval concept of gentilesse. On the one hand gentilesse epitomized the superiority and

nobility of the upper classes, and on the other hand, it represented a morally superior set of ideals available to any class.

On Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrimage, the Knight and his son the Squire embody the courtly attitudes toward the chivalric ideal. Members of nobility, then as now, would not have accompanied a general pilgrimage to Canterbury; they would have arranged their own select entourage. However, the courtly attitudes held by the nobility of England would be upheld within this company by the Knight and the Squire. Men such as these made up the aristocratic warrior class. They held a vested interest in the feudal and chivalric systems; their swords defended the status quo literally, and their stories defend the system verbally.

If indeed the Knight and the Squire personify the status quo upheld by fourteenth-century English nobility, they also embody a contrast. The essence of knighthood itself experiences subtle but significant shifts during Chaucer's time. A comparison of the older experienced warrior with his "embrouded" son the Squire will demonstrate both the importance of the system of knighthood and the reality of its eminent decline.



## Chapter Two

### The Knight and the Squire: The Warrior Class in Transition

The ethical ideals of the feudal warrior class profoundly influenced the ethics of the medieval period and remain an important part of our cultural and social heritage today. Dominant among the ideals of this class were the concepts of a gentleman and the ideal state of love and marriage (Cazel 1-2). Chaucer carefully examines these concepts in his works. Modern critics have even noted what is commonly called the Marriage Group in The Canterbury Tales, and both D. S. Silvia and Willene Schaefer have gone so far as to suggest that the Marriage Group might be better labeled the Gentilesse Group. Chaucer's concern with the ideals of the gentil classes creates a thematic concern within The Canterbury Tales and more especially within the romances in the work.

The romances told by the Knight and the Squire demonstrate the concern of the gentil classes with the idea of gentilesse; however, both the marriage theme and the concept of gentilesse received emphasis in the romances told by the middle class pilgrims, the Wife of Bath

and the Franklin. These four characters show in their tales and in their personalities a truth about the era: the social influence of feudalism was experiencing a slow decline during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Before this time feudal overlords awarded fiefs to knights in exchange for armed service and the administration of local justice. As England created a more centralized government and a more nationalistic spirit, the system became inefficient. A larger and more dependent warrior class made up of mercenaries and career soldiers slowly replaced the knight as the backbone of the English army (Cazel 10). Gunpowder eventually rendered the armored knight obsolete, but the social system that supported the ideals of the knightly class lived on well into the century following Chaucer's.

Chaucer's Knight and Squire represent the ideals of the warrior class in transition. The Knight is still a revered and necessary part of society; his fighting experience and expertise were valued by throne and church since the Crusades were still being waged during Chaucer's day. Chaucer recounts an impressive list of five crusades and three tournaments in which the Knight saw active service. His manner and dress clearly exemplify the experienced warrior. His vest, for example, was worn

and smeared from long contact with his armor, but his horses were well groomed. The squire with his embroidered clothing and curled hair presents quite a contrast to his somber, sober father.

The contrast obviously demonstrates the difference between youth and age, inexperience and experience; however, the contrast could also suggest the dual nature of knighthood during the fourteenth century. The knight of that day aspired to excellence in both military and social virtues; nonetheless, Chaucer demonstrates that personalities often fall short of the ideal.

The contrast between the Knight as a man of military experience and his son as a young man of social awareness is echoed in the Knight's Tale. Chaucer personifies the dual nature of the expectations of ideal knighthood in the characters of Palamon and Arcite. Arcite appeals to Mars in a prayer before the trial by tournament. In so doing he exemplifies the knightly virtues of military prowess and experience. Arcite, on the other hand, follows Venus and represents the courtly lover--a man of dreams, a man who fights for the love of a lady rather than for personal fame and fortune.

Several scholars have noted that the actual words used to describe the virtues of knighthood also demonstrate

the military and social ideals of knighthood. W. O. Evans points out that the very word courtaysye can be defined both as skill in fighting and as polite social behavior (147). Honour may refer to the specific reputation a knight earns in war, or it may refer to his general moral virtue. Trouthe may define loyalty to a specific military leader, or it may define a knight's general trustworthiness. Even fredom carries the abstract-and-concrete contrast. Fredom may refer to the generosity of a knight when distributing loot from a battle, or it may refer to his general generosity of spirit (Luminasky, "Chaucer's Philosophical Knight" 51).

So when Chaucer wrote:

A Knyght ther was, and that a worthy man,  
That fro the tyme that he first bigan  
To riden out, he loved chivalrie,  
Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie  
(Robinson I.42-45).

the medieval audience automatically recognized both the concrete and the abstract meanings inherent in the list of knightly virtues. The long list of the Knight's exploits in battles and crusades "in his lordes werre" (I.47) provides the context for the medieval audience to judge the Knight as a practical and experienced warrior.

The Squire's exploits in the military serve primarily as a way to impress his lady. Chaucer contrasts the Knight's service with the Squire's by commenting that the Squire had

. . . been somtyme in chyvachie

In Flaundres, in Artoys, and Pycardie,

And born him weel, as of so litel space,

In hope to stonden in his lady grace (I.84-88).

The medieval audience would recognize the emphasis on polite social behavior motivated by the courtly love tradition in the Squire's description. His short gown is embroidered in white and red; he is as "fressh as is the month of May" (92). His clothes are fashionable; he rides well; he can sing, recite, dance, draw, and write: his virtues as a future knight place him squarely in the upcoming courtier tradition. In fact, on the surface he sounds something like a description of Castiglione's young courtier--the new man of the Renaissance, the gentleman of the court.

The historical evolution of knighthood in England basically passed through four stages. At first the knight served as the feudal vassal. His role emerged from the urgent need for a reliable military force to protect small areas from the internal strife so common in

England's tenth and eleventh centuries. As times changed, the crusading soldier enlarged the military role of the knight. The Church saw the importance of the system of knighthood and worked to include it as an extension of the moral and power systems of the institutional church itself. The Templars are a good example of the assimilation of the knightly brotherhood by the Church for its own purposes. By Chaucer's time a knight not belonging to the Templars received criticism from the church on moral grounds (Cazel 103). The third stage knighthood underwent involved acquisition of the courtly conventions epitomized in the courtly love tradition. As refinement of chivalry began to emphasize the court over the cheval, the courtly lover began to emerge especially in the romance literature of the period. The Squire in The Canterbury Tales appropriately fits into this category--just as the Knight fits ideally into the category of the crusading warrior (Wiber 72). After the fifteenth century, the courtly lover emerged as the courtier and finally, in the seventeenth century, as the gentleman who dominated the courts and literature of Renaissance England (Ferguson 52).

Chaucer's Knight represents the idealization of what was good about the crusading knight: "He was a verray,

parfit gentil knyght" (72). One critic points to the Knight as the "finest figure of courtesy in The Canterbury Tales" (Coghill, Geoffrey Chaucer 26). Chaucer carefully makes him a very realistic campaigner whose crusades were familiar to Chaucer's audience. He represents a long-standing tradition of the warrior elite. His vested interest in the status quo makes him old fashioned and conservative in his views. However, his experiences and his place in society make him the appropriate spokesman for the high style of the romance he tells. He remains apart from the "newe world" mentioned by Chaucer in connection with the Monk--"a world devoted not to service but to power, to acquisition, to self-assertion" (Spearing, The Knight's Tale 48-49). In fact the Knight interrupts the Monk's tragedy later in the pilgrimage, and this interruption may well be the protest of the traditional against the new. The Monk's Tale chronicled the fall from places of authority of such historical greats as Nero, Alexander, and even Julius Caesar. Even though the fall of a noble man due to a fatal personal flaw defined classical tragedy, the Knight may well have been uncomfortable with what he viewed as an unnecessary litany of the fall of established order. The Knight

defends his interruption as follows: "I seye for me, it is a greet disese, / Whereas men han been in great welthe and ese, / To heren of hire sodeyn fal, allas!" (VII.2771-73).

The Knight presents a tale where a concern with order and with the power of authority reigns supreme. The Knight describes in his romance the ideal aristocratic world as a place of order and noble aspirations. The characters, the setting, the plot, and the arrangement of speeches are all ordered and balanced. His idealistic universe provides Chaucer a model creation through which to display the whole of chivalric tradition (Hussey 132).

In The Waning of the Middle Ages, John Huizinga comments in depth about the need which a more primitive society feels to create just such an idealized picture of an ordered life. He points out:

In aristocratic periods . . . to be representative of true culture means to produce by conduct, by customs, by manners, the illusion of a heroic being, full of dignity and honour, of wisdom, and, in all events, of courtesy. . . . Life is regulated like a noble game. Only a small aristocratic group can come up to the standard of this artistic game . . . (39-40).



The consciousness of the period, which was predominantly pessimistic, searched for a way to escape to an ideal life. According to Huizinga, three avenues open up for such an escape. One involves forsaking the world; the medieval monk, hermit, and mystic demonstrate that the medieval period capitalizes on this avenue of escape. The second method involves an amelioration of the world by "consciously improving political, social, and moral situations and conditions" (37). The idea of the order of knighthood, the Crusades, and especially the Peasant's Revolt all manifest the medieval impulse for escape through this type of reordering of society. The final avenue of escape from reality singled out by Huizinga is dreams. The medieval dream vision plays a significant role in the literature of the era; Pearl, Chaucer's Book of the Duchess, and Langland's Piers the Plowman are but a few examples of the interest this period showed in dream literature.

Interestingly, the ordered world created in the Knight's Tale uses some of the techniques of the dream vision. Palamon and Arcite first view Emelye in a garden. She appears like a vision in a May garden--the month of May and the garden motif often introduce the genre of romance and may mark the movement into a type of

otherworld. Since Palamon and Arcite are imprisoned, their view of Emelye takes on other characteristics of a dream or a vision. They cannot communicate with her. Their view of her is restricted, and they cannot be at all sure that they will be able to recapture the vision. Palamon laments: "I noot wher she be womman or goddesse, / But Venus is it soothly, as I gesse" (I.1101-102).

Although the Knight's Tale itself is not a dream vision, the "vision" of Emelye in the garden inspires the two heroes to a love that tests and finally breaks their sworn military brotherhood. The resulting struggle between two apparently equal knights provides the framework for Chaucer to present what Charles Muscatine terms "a poetic pageant" ("Form, Texture, and Meaning" 127). Muscatine's evaluation of the formal design of the noble life displayed in the Knight's Tale concludes on the following note:

The story is immediately concerned with those two noble activities, love and chivalry, but even more important is the general tenor of the noble life, the pomp and ceremony, the dignity and the power, and particularly the repose and assurance with which the exponent of nobility invokes order. Order, which characterizes the

framework of the poem, is also at the heart of its meaning. The society depicted is one in which form is full of significance, and wherein life's pattern is itself a . . . reproduction of the order of the universe ("Form, Texture, and Meaning" 127).

At the beginning of the tale, however, order has been disrupted by war. Duke Theseus' war on Thebes begins a chain of disruption that finally only the Duke can resolve. Theseus, as the "exponent of nobility" (Muscatine, "Form, Texture, and Meaning" 127), takes the responsibility for reestablishing order in the lives of the widows of Thebes and finally in the lives of the two heroes, Arcite and Palamon. The capture of Thebes by Theseus precipitates disorder in the lives of the sworn brothers-in-arms; as they languish in prison after defeat, the two fall in love with Emelye, the Queen's Sister. They experience love in a typically courtly manner--at first sight and from afar. Unaware of the disorder her presence creates, Emelye remains outside the action as a type of noble ideal toward which the two knights struggle. The climactic struggle, engineered by Theseus, occurs at a tournament. Elaborate formal rules of conflict place even a type of order on the fight itself.

Arcite's victory on the field demonstrates his representation of the military prowess ideally found in the knight. Nonetheless, his victory is short-lived. A spirit sent from Hades startles Arcite's horse and he falls mortally wounded. The questions asked by the tale, then--which knight is the more worthy of the lady--remains essentially unanswered. Love eventually wins the day; Palamon wins the lady because he remains as the only suitor worthy of her hand. The marriage binds together the romance with a traditional restoration of order engineered by the god-like Theseus.

Theseus' closing speech, inspired by Chaucer's intimate knowledge of Boethian philosophy, credits Providence and Destiny with the ultimate victory of the knight who represents Love. Love's victory did not come on the field of battle; however, destiny shaped his victory. In a corresponding manner, the ultimate movement of the system of knighthood away from the military toward courtly traditions seems to be predestined. Through the idealized portrait of the Knight and the powerful romance which the Knight tells, Chaucer indicates that the old ways are to be admired, but he also recognized that the new ways are destined to supercede the old.

New traditions, in fact, arise from the old. Such a parable would please the didactic intentions of the Knight. The primary purpose of romance was to teach young squires, and Chaucer's Squire learned much both from the example set and from the story told by his father. Like his father, the Squire is an idealized representative of the military class; he will more than likely inherit from his father the claim to knighthood. Although knighthood was not a title to be handed down like a baronage, sons of knights were more likely by both birth and experience to achieve the status of knighthood (Gaylord, Seed of Felicity 191). As the Prologue points out, the Squire had already developed some military experience; he had fought "In Flaundres, in Artoys, and Pycardie / And born hym weel, as of so litel space" (I.86-87). However, the Squire is both more secular and more modern than his father. The outward appearance of gentillesse concerns him; this concern is reflected in his fashionable clothing, style, and manners.

The words gentillesse and gentil within the two tales told by the Knight and the Squire offer another interesting comparison. The Knight refers to the words gentil and gentillesse infrequently in his tale. The nobility of the characters in his tale demands little added emphasis.

Within his tale of over 3,000 lines the Knight uses the term gentillesse only once and gentil only twelve times. The Knight most frequently uses the term gentil as an adjective, naming his knights gentil Palamon and gentil Arcite; the romance commonplace that "good blood will tell" remains a given in the Knight's Tale with no need for added emphasis. Theseus' remarks to Emelye when he arranges her marriage to Palamon demonstrate the implicit courtly definition of gentillesse: a quality of the highborn. Theseus recommends to Emelye:

That gentil Palamon, youre owene knyght,  
 That serveth yow with wille herte, and myght,  
 And ever hath doon syn ye first hym knewe,  
 That ye shul of youre grace upon hym rewe,  
 And taken hym for housbonde and for lord.  
 Lene me youre hond, for this is oure accord.  
 Lat se now of youre wommanly pitee.  
 He is a kynges brother sone, pardee;  
 And though he were a povre bachelor,  
 Syn he hath served yow so many a yeer,  
 And had for yow so greet adversitee,  
 It moste been considered, leeveth me;  
 For gentil mercy oghte to passen right  
 (I.3077-89).

Palamon proves gentil on two important counts: first, he was "a kynges brother sone," and second, he had served Emelye through "greet adversitee." In the Knight's Tale gentilesse comes from blood and service; the two cannot be separated.

The use of the words gentilesse and gentil within the Squire's unfinished tale is statistically much greater than that of his father's. The Squire's Tale is unfinished and is less than a fifth of the length of the Knight's romance, and yet the Squire mentions gentilesse five times and gentil seven. The young Squire seems to be noticeably self-conscious about gentilesse.

The reasons for his self-consciousness may be as simple as the fact that he realizes he must still prove himself to the world at large and to the audience on the pilgrimage in particular. He is not yet a knight; he must earn the respect that is accorded to his father's rank. He is, after all, the youngest member of the group. He is eager to please his audience and is especially conscious of the need to compliment his father. Marie Neville, in her analysis of the Squire's Tale, points out that the Squire wishes to emulate and yet surpass his father. To that end he outlines an ambitious romance. He imitates his father's genre choice but plans to increase the romantic elements (169).

The openings of the two tales are so very much alike that it is obvious that Chaucer wants to show that the Squire copied his father. Like his father, the Squire opens his romance with a description of a ruler who is unequalled in majesty and might. The Knight praises Theseus as the greatest ruler under the son, the Squire praises Cambyuskan as being without equal in any region. To increase the romantic quality, the Squire goes into greater detail than the Knight; he embellishes Cambyuskan's gentil qualities by adding references to his royalty, his youth, his beauty, and his courage (Neville 170). The Squire also borrowed two of his father's favorite themes, that "Pitee runneth soone in gentil herte" (I.1761 and V.479) and that it is wise to "maken vertu of necessittee" (I.3043, V.593). The characters and the setting are again strictly gentil; the court of Cambyuskan may provide a less familiar setting than the classical one chosen by the Knight, but it fulfills the tacit requirement for a romance setting; it must be in a place remote in time and/or distance from the everyday world.

Despite the fact that the Squire's Tale echoes the Knight's in subject matter, genre choice, characters, and structure, its concern with gentillesse seems



excessive when compared to that of his father's romance. The Squire's story draws careful attention to the niceties of the chivalric code. It emphasizes compassion, seemliness, and the other obligations of the gently born (Neville, "The Function . . ." 177). Perhaps the Knight assumed the traditional acceptance of gentillesse as a quality belonging only to the gentil classes while the Squire saw a need to defend the traditional system which he understood was under siege. The Squire insists that the gently born are the most likely to exhibit true gentillesse in his statement that "gentil herte kitheth gentillesse" (V.483).

The Squire's emphasis may also have been occasioned by his need to answer the Wife of Bath. The Wife's Tale ends with a scene in which a gentil knight learns about true gentillesse from a commoner, and to add insult to injury she is poor, ugly, and old. The Squire strongly implies a distaste for the social implications behind the Wife of Bath's assertions about true gentillesse (Pichaske 95). The Squire answers the Wife's assertions by beginning a romance that will demonstrate the true aristocratic nature of gentillesse. The aristocratic impulse inherent in romance is described by Northrop Frye as follows:

One very obvious feature of romance is its pervasive social snobbery. Naive romance confines itself largely to royal families; sentimental romance gives us patterns of aristocratic courage and courtesy, and much of it adopts a "blood will tell" convention, the association of moral virtue and social rank implied in the word "noble" (The Secular Scripture 161).

The Squire's contempt for the "lewed" people demonstrates itself clearly in a passage about the stir created by the magical brass horse presented to Cambyuskan. The common people sound like "a swarm of been" (V.204) as they speculate on what the horse is and how it works; one compares the horse to Pegasus, another to the Trojan horse, another to the magic of a "jogelour." The Squire comments of their speculations in the following lines:

Of sondry doutes thus they jangle and trete,  
As lewed peple demeth comunly  
Of thynges that been maad moore subtilly  
Than they kan in hir lewedness comprehende;  
They demen gladly to the badder ende (V.220-24).

The Squire's snobbery may be excused or at least explained by his youth, his insecurity, or the power of the Wife

of Bath's attack on the traditional views held by the knightly class on the subject of gentillesse.

The unfinished state of the Squire's romance presents problems for Chaucer students. Some critics view the tale as a disjointed, tedious, unstructured catastrophe that marks the very heart of the decline of the entire knightly system. Among these is Stanley J. Kahrl, who is contemptuous of the exotic setting and who suggests that the unevenness he finds in the tone of the tale is Chaucer's conscious comment on the Squire's ineptitude; in short, Kahrl believes that the Squire's story embodies signs of the waning of the knightly tradition (Kuhl 198). As able a scholar as Nevill Coghill maintains that the Squire's Tale promises to be an almost endless boring recital of romance story lines ("The Prologue" 171). On the other hand, H. R. Patch calls the Squire a "proper young man of the upper classes" (On Rereading 67) and believes Chaucer gave him the beginning of a good story. Patch believes the Franklin's praise of the Squire's story is an indication of the general reaction Chaucer planned for the completed romance.

What is absolutely certain is that Chaucer's Squire's Tale does not appear in any known manuscript in finished form. Why the tale remained unfinished remains an area

for speculation, but what the Squire understood and believed about gentillesse does appear quite emphatically in the fragment, and his views on gentillesse reveal a great deal about the shifting of the knightly world view from the old ways to the new.

However Chaucer may have intended to end the Squire's romance, it stops abruptly after an outline of the story is given. The Squire promises to tell the military adventures of Cambyuskan, the love story of Algarsif and Theodora where the brass horse will save the day, and finally the conflict Cambalo faces with two brothers to win Canacee (661-670). The Franklin provides a commentary on the unfinished tale when he exclaims:

"In feith, Squier, thow hast thee well yquit  
And gentilly. I preise wel thy wit."  
Quod the Frankeleyn, "considerynge thy yowthe,  
So feelyngly thou spekest, sire, I allow the!  
As to my doom, ther is noon that is heere  
Of eloquence that shal be thy peere" (V.673-78).

This is high praise indeed. The Franklin knows a good romance when he hears one. He follows the Squire's romance with his own Breton lay, which features the love relationship. The niceties of style are what the Franklin praises in the Squire's performance. The outward show of

gentillesse impresses the Franklin; moreover, the Franklin is intensely interested in gentillesse and its acquisition. His concern shows in his tale and in his fulsome praise of the Squire.

Some critics view the Franklin's praise of the Squire as a clever interruption and a ploy to stop the Squire's story, which promises to be boring and tedious (see Pearsall, Peterson, Duncan, and Hadow for amplification of this viewpoint). However, the Squire's Tale had progressed to only some 600 lines in length compared to the 3,000-line Knight's Tale. Sometimes modern readers and critics forget that "the most important single feature of the medieval romance is that it is never in a hurry" (Hussey, Chaucer: Introduction (128)).

Despite the unfinished status of the Squire's romance, it is possible to conclude that the Squire reflected his father's concern over the obligations of gentillesse for the upper classes. The Squire appears to be self-conscious about the outward forms of gentillesse both in his personal appearance and in the telling of his tale. The Knight and his tale demonstrate the importance of authority, order, and military prowess. On the other hand, the Squire and his romance glorify love and the courtly love traditions. A comparison of

the two men and the two tales foreshadows the waning of one era and the beginning of a new one.

### Chapter Three

#### The Franklin and the Wife of Bath:

#### The Appearance and the Reality of Gentilesse

The romance told by the Franklin immediately follows the unfinished tale of the Squire. What the Squire began--an investigation into the nature of love and gentilesse--the Franklin completes with a masterful story that aims to soothe and placate the rather disturbing tensions among several members of the pilgrimage. The Wife of Bath's brash prologue and her tale had precipitated a veritable barrage of argument, point and counter point, among the pilgrims. Her prologue is interrupted first by the Pardoner and later by the Summoner and the Friar. Immediately following the Wife's story, the Summoner and the Friar continue their bitter exchange with spiteful tales designed to enrage each other.

The Wife's famous prologue and tale introduce what most critics now call the Marriage Group. The concern about marriage is a concern of the Clerk's narrative of patient Griselda, who is the antithesis of the Wife; the Merchant continues the marriage theme with his bitter

tale of January and May. At this point the host, Herry Bailly, apparently hoping for diversity, calls upon the Squire to tell a tale of love. The Squire's unfinished romance introduces the ideals of love and gentillesse but does not obviously contribute to the marriage debate. The Franklin's Tale finally reconciles the various themes and ideas about marriage, love, and gentillesse.

The interplay of themes and moral questions in this group of tales and the contrasting personalities of the characters who tell them have produced a veritable morass of criticism and comment. A seminal essay on this group of tales was written in 1911 by George Lyman Kittredge. Taken from a series of six lectures he delivered at Johns Hopkins University, the chapters on The Canterbury Tales include his now-famous comments on the Marriage Group of tales. Kittredge maintains that the issue of dominance in marriage raised by the Wife is solved in the Franklin's Tale. The solution requires the application of the principles of gentillesse to the marriage. Kittredge notes that

the married lovers dwell together in perfect accord, each deferring to the other, and neither claiming the sovereignty; and it is this relation of mutual love and forbearance, the



outcome of gentillesse, that carries them safely through the entanglements of the plot and preserves their happiness unimpaired as long as they live (207).

A study of the non-romance tales of this entire group would prove useful in assessing Chaucer's presentation of the problems of relationships and would also help in the assessment of middle-class values because the major tales that debate this subject are narrated by members of the bourgeois group on the pilgrimage. Nonetheless, this study is limited to the romance because this literary genre is most closely associated with the concept of gentillesse. The Marriage Group opens with the tale of the Wife of Bath and closes with the tale of the Franklin. Both of these tales are romances, and both tales turn upon the importance of gentillesse for the presentation of character and plot. It is of particular importance to this study that the Marriage Group is framed by two tales of romance told by two middle-class representatives.

The romance tells the story of the adventures of a noble hero; consequently, the genre would seem to be more appropriate in the mouths of aristocratic characters like the Knight and the Squire. However, D. S. Brewer

speculates that the audience for romances during Chaucer's time was predominantly the upper middle classes. He believes that the gentry who were rich enough to hire a minstrel or buy a book enjoyed the romance even more than the aristocrat. The popular or comic romances of the period lend credence to Brewer's view as does the fact that the aristocratic French language and style were steadily being replaced by the English language and a distinctive English style. Charles Muscatine has noted that the English style still creates problems for some critics. He comments:

Some Continental critics have found Chaucer irreducibly "middle class" on account of this language. . . . It is rather a great part of his delightful Englishness ("Canterbury Tales" 93).

For the aristocratic audience the purpose of the romance is didactic. The tales provide the young squires and noblemen inspiring examples of true gentillesse in action. For the middle-class audience the purpose of the romance could also be didactic providing the listener subscribed to the importance of the ideals presented in the romance. In The Anatomy of Criticism Northrop Frye advances the idea that romance is closest to a

"wish-fulfillment dream" (186). Within each era, he asserts, the romance has tended to absorb and propagate the ideals and social concepts of "the ruling social or intellectual class" (186). The entire idea of "wish-fulfillment" assumes that the reader of (or listener to) the romance enjoys the genre as an expression of what he would like to become or acquire. In addition, the idea suggests an audience a step or two down the social ladder who look to the ruling class for a model to emulate. Frye also points out "the proletarian element in romance." He states that "no matter how great a change may take place in society, romance will turn up again . . . looking for new hopes and desires to feed on" (186).

Proletarian is an interesting word choice; it expresses unusually well the added elements found in the romances of the Franklin and the Wife of Bath. The shift in emphasis and the common touches are subtly included in the Franklin's story but present themselves loudly and clearly in the Wife of Bath's romance. The modern word proletarian connotes revolution and change brought about by the common people. Revolutions certainly may change society, but conversely a change in society itself may bring about a revolution.

There was a proletarian revolution going on in English society in the late Middle Ages. It was a quiet, long-suffering revolution that saw some of the common workers of the country begin to accumulate wealth and acquire positions of power and influence. The aristocracy, weakened by the Hundred Years' War and the Black Death, came to rely upon the political and economic skills of the rising bourgeoisie. The development of this new class became noticeable during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in England when the trading segment of society began to organize into companies. The trading companies were usually established and controlled by well-to-do craftsmen who helped develop what became rich and powerful trading monopolies. These men put their money back into the land and added to a new class which we call the landed gentry today (Lewis 22-26).

One critic suggests that in England the classes separate into gentry and non-gentry rather than upper, middle, and lower (Brewer, "The Relationship" 12). Another critic notes the fact that "in England . . . it was perhaps easier than in most places for a man of lower status to attain the dignity of knighthood through financial achievement . . . " (Ferguson 20). The portrait of the Franklin provided in the prologue, the link passages,

and the tale itself demonstrates Chaucer's awareness of the social climbing possible to ambitious men of his day.

When Chaucer describes the Franklin as a veritable "Seint Julian" (Robinson I.340) and "Epicures owene sone" (I.336), he emphasizes two of the usual outward signs of gentillesse--wealth and generosity. An Epicurean, then as now, was associated with a love for living luxuriously, and Saint Julian was the patron of hospitality. Hospitality was most often associated with food, and the elaborate provisions the Franklin made for food and drink occupy over half of his description in the prologue. A sample of his largess is described in the following lines:

Withoute bake mete was nevere his hous  
Of fissh and flessch, and that so plentevous,  
It snewed in his hous of mete and drynke,  
Of alle deyntees that men koude thynke (I.343-46).

In addition to his legendary hospitality the Franklin busied himself with responsibilities and service within his community. His experience in civil and domestic matters is also mentioned in the prologue. The list reads like a medieval Who's Who:

At sessiouns ther was he lord and sire;  
Ful ofte tyme he was knyght of the shire.

. . .

A shirreve hadde he been, and a contour.

Was nowher swich a worthy vavasour (I.355-60).

When Chaucer writes of the Franklin that "A bettre envyned man was nowher noon" (I.342), he reveals that the Franklin enjoys a position of power and a prestige born from his own experience. One critic notes that the Franklin's "social position . . . bridges the gap between 'cherl' and 'gentil'" (Duncan 163). Chaucer highlights the Franklin's description by using many courtly-sounding nouns: he is "lord and sire"; he served as "a knyght of the shire." These titles were usually reserved for a nobleman or a knight. Even the office of knight of the shire was usually held by a true knight; however, the opportunity to represent the shire in Parliament sometimes fell to people outside the knightly caste. Chaucer himself served as a knight of the shire on one occasion, and he bestows the same honor on the worthy Franklin.

The Franklin's interest in gentillesse and his effusive praise of the Squire's romance underscore similarities between the Knight and the Franklin. Each is the highest-ranked member of his respective group on the pilgrimage; each has practical experience within his sphere of influence, and each has had a measure of personal renown.

Despite the Franklin's modest insistence in his prologue that he is a burel man, the medieval audience would easily understand the difference between what the Franklin says and the reality of the situation. Burel could mean simply uneducated, or it could more specifically describe a low-class man dressed in rough woolen garments. Since the Franklin wears a girdle that is "whit as morne milk" (I.358) and owns a silk game bag or purse, the term burel obviously does not refer to his clothing. If the Franklin uses the term to comment on his lack of education, his forthcoming tale demonstrates familiarity with the colors of rhetoric which displays some degree of knowledge which may have come from education or experience or a combination of both.

The Franklin's admiration for the Squire and his story provides an important insight into the character of the Franklin as an individual and into the aspirations of the landed gentry as a class. If, as Northrop Frye suggests, the romance genre is a type of wish-fulfillment dream, the Franklin's interest in the romance and in the Squire reveals a great deal about the wishes he would fulfill.

He compliments the Squire for his gentility and his wit (V.674) and then laments that his son is not a man of

"swich discrecioun" (V.685). His son would "levere talken with a page / Than to commune with any gentil wight / Where he myghte lerne gentillesse aright" (V.692-93). The Franklin's lament for his son's lack of gentillesse reveals two important facts. First of all, the Franklin realizes that his own interest in gentillesse cannot be passed on to his son, and second, he believes that gentillesse is something that can be learned or acquired through determination and education rather than something inherited through family or class.

By dint of his own determination and desire the Franklin has achieved a position that he knows could serve his son well. The fact that his son does not seem to aspire to a higher social standing worries the Franklin; this family concern colors the high praise the Franklin gives the Squire. The Squire becomes a type of wish-projection for the Franklin of the type of son he desires.

The Franklin's position and desires represent the upwardly mobile aspirations of the upper middle class of the period. Chaucer surely understood these aspirations, which may have mirrored those of his own family. Chaucer's father and grandfather had built a thriving trade as vintners. The wealth accumulated by two generations enabled Chaucer to gain both an education and then a post in the



court of Prince Lionel. The first written accounts concerning Geoffrey Chaucer list him as a page in the service of Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster and wife of Prince Lionel (Robinson, Introduction to The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer xx). When Chaucer married, perhaps as early as 1366, his wife Philippa was the daughter of a Knight, Sir Payne Roet. Connections with court and marrying into a higher social class were two significant ways to improve social status, and Chaucer benefited from both.

Philippa maintained significant connections at court. She was listed as a lady-in-waiting to the Queen and to Constance of Castile. Philippa's sister, Katherine, became the mistress and then the third wife of John of Gaunt. John of Gaunt was a powerful noble, the third surviving son of Edward III and an uncle to Richard II. The fact that Chaucer and John of Gaunt eventually married sisters suggests that Chaucer married into a higher class. His relationship with John of Gaunt provided patronage and position not easily obtained. One biographer analyzes this relationship by stating that "Gaunt could give Chaucer the station and self-respect that Englishmen of the middle class hungered for (as no one knew better than Chaucer himself, who dramatized that

hunger in the Canterbury Tales)" (Gardner 157). By marrying the daughter of a knight, Chaucer guaranteed that his sons would possess a coat of arms from her family. Thomas Chaucer, who used both the poet Chaucer's seal and the coat of arms of his mother's family, demonstrates the next step the Chaucer family took toward realization of social status. Thomas' power and position in the fifteenth century became so great that some critics have suggested that he was not Chaucer's son, but the illegitimate son of John of Gaunt. Perhaps these critics would support the idea of gentillesse being inherited only through noble blood-lines! To date no historical facts have been uncovered to reveal that Thomas' father was anyone other than Geoffrey Chaucer. Thomas' daughter Alice married first the Earl of Salisbury and later the Duke of Suffolk, William de la Pole (Robinson, "Introduction" to The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer xxvi). The Chaucer family, then, represents well the aspirations of the middle class; within five generations the family moved from being wine merchants to being titled.

Chaucer's connections at court led to civil service jobs ranging from sometimes secret diplomatic trips abroad to a forestership. From 1382 to 1386 he served as a comptroller of petty customs, as a justice of the

peace in Kent, and as knight of the shire to Parliament in October 1386. The list sounds familiar. The Franklin served as a lord at sessions (justice of the peace), a contour (accountant or comptroller), and also a knight of the shire. Critics have noted the close affinity between the portrait of the Franklin and the history of Chaucer. Critics generally agree that most of The Canterbury Tales were written from 1387 to 1400, so even the dates support the speculations that exist connecting Chaucer to the Franklin. The Franklin's love of good food, for example, has been pointed out to resemble the legend of the rotund figure and gourmet inclinations of the poet. Other critics, notably Kittredge, have considered the Franklin's tale as a reflection of Chaucer's personal views on marriage. Whether or not the Franklin serves as a sort of fictionalized self-portrait, the Franklin and Chaucer both represent a class of important men in the medieval period. Chaucer's personal understanding and background obviously helped in the creation of the Franklin and in the telling of the tale itself.

The tale turns upon a rhetorical question: Which character in the tale is the most fre (noble), or who displayed the greatest amount of gentillesse? The Knight's romance had also turned upon a rhetorical question:

Which knight was the more worthy to win Emelye? An important difference, however, in the telling of the tales can be demonstrated when the settings and characters are compared. The setting of the Knight's Tale is classical as are its philosophical concerns; on the other hand, the setting of the Franklin's Tale is close at hand--the coast of Brittany. The main characters of the Knight's Tale are a Duke, an Amazon princess, and two highborn knights (brothers to a king). The Franklin's Tale includes a knight, a lady, a squire, and a clerk. Both the setting and the characters are understandable to the English romance audience, which included members of the middle and lower classes.

The knight, his lady, and the squire in the Franklin's Tale are all gentil characters; however, they are not distinguished as members of nobility as are the characters in the Knight's romance. Furthermore, the squire turns to a commoner, the clerk of Orleans, for the solution to his problem. The clerk becomes a major character and is included in the Franklin's final question: "Lordynges this question thanne wol I aske now, / Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?" (V.1621-22).

The Knight's romance has concerned itself with the worthiness of two apparently equal and noble young

knights; its philosophical inquiries climax with a traditional tournament, a death, and a royal marriage ceremony. The Franklin's Tale, on the other hand, concerns itself with more practical considerations. The wooing and winning of the ideal lady are condensed into the first fourteen lines of the story; the rest of the plot concerns the practical considerations of making a marriage work. Dorigen and Arveragus, the protagonists of the Franklin's romance, agree to an unusual marriage arrangement. They promise to continue the courtly love tradition in which the woman retains mastery of her own body and will. The Franklin as narrator of the story intrudes to comment on this unusual relationship:

For o thyng, sires, saufly dar I seye  
 That freendes everych oother moot obeye  
 If they wol longe holden compaignye.  
 Love wol nat been constreyned by maistrye.  
 When maistrie comth, the God of Love anon  
 Beteth his wynges, and farewel, he is gon!  
 Love is a thyng as any spirit free.  
 Wommen, of kynde, desiren libertee  
 And nat to been constreyned as a thral;  
 And so doon men, if I sooth seyen shal.

Looke who that is moost pacient in love.

He is at his advantage al above (V.761-72).

The importance of the Franklin's marriage plan is stressed in The Art of the Canterbury Tales in which Ruggiers points out that "the result is a marriage of the ideal sort described in terms of a delicate mixture and balance of service and lordship, a marriage in which Dorigen is both the beloved of courtly tradition and the wife of acceptable theological doctrine" (230). This artful and practical blending of two major medieval roles for women is an example of the Franklin's ability to take medieval opposites and blend them together. The medieval period was a great time of amalgamation of ideas; the Franklin's characters act out just such a mixture.

Such an ideal marriage would, of course, need to be tested. The first test is separation. Arveragus leaves Dorigen for two years fulfilling his obligation to "seke in armes worshipe and honour" (V.811). During his absence Dorigen is tested by two problems. The first is her overwhelming dread that the black rocks along the coast will cause a permanent separation if Arveragus wrecks upon them. The second test comes when "a lusty squier, servant to Venus, / Which that ycleped was Aurelius" (V.937-38) declares his love for her. She refuses

Aurelius but softens her refusal with the rash promise to love him above all men if he should remove the ominous black rocks along the coastline. Her promise is sealed when she swears "by heighe God above" and then pledges her "trouthe." The plot now revolves around Dorigen's rash promise.

The third test of the marriage arrangement occurs when the Squire hires a clerk who magically creates the illusion that all the rocks are gone. When Arveragus comes home, three days after the rocks disappear, he and his wife face the test together. The manner in which they decide how Dorigen will refuse or accept the consequences of her sworn "trouthe" becomes the ultimate test of their belief that Dorigen should not be constrained by her husband. If Arveragus countermands Dorigen's sworn troth, he will violate his agreement; if Dorigen violates her sworn troth, she violates a most important aspect of true nobility, the reliability of a person's word.

Next Aurelius faces a test of his gentillesse when Dorigen comes to him and reveals that both Arveragus and she will face the shame of adultery rather than go back on her sworn promise. Aurelius rises to the occasion and, in turn, acts nobly and releases Dorigen from her

promise. Gentilesse seems to be a contagious quality in the tale since the clerk who arranged the magical feat also rises to the occasion and releases Aurelius from payment of the promised fee of a thousand pounds. The clerk figures in the Franklin's final question: "Lordynges, this question, thanne wol I aske now, / Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?" (V.1621-22).

The question goes unanswered: which was most noble or fre? However, more important is the inclusion of the clerk in the question. The Franklin drives home his point with a clever curtain speech by the clerk just in case the audience has missed the social significance of the clerk's noble qualities:

Everich of yow dide gentilly til oother.  
 Thou art a squier, and he is a knyght;  
 But God forbede, for his blisful myght  
 But if a clerk koude doon a gentil dede  
 As wel as any of yow, it is no drede! (V.1608-1612)

Kittredge assesses the Franklin's performance by stating that the tale not only resumes the marriage question "but carried it to a triumphant conclusion by solving the problem. He solves it, too, by an appeal to precisely that quality which he so admires in the Squire . . . the quality of 'gentilesse'" (Chaucer and His Poetry 205).



The diplomacy of the Franklin in his solution also reveals the gentillesse he possesses. He reframes the Wife of Bath's philosophy by making the wife in his story a person who retains her own sovereignty even after marriage; he compliments the Knight by imitating his genre choice and also by creating a flattering portrait of a wise knight as the husband in his tale; he shows the squire to be a true courtly lover but also a true gentil man when he releases Dorigen from her pledge, and finally he flatters the Clerk by demonstrating that a common clerk has the power and knowledge to remove the appearance of the rocks along the coastline and then has the generosity of spirit to forgive the debt owed by the squire. Each pilgrim could comfortably feel assured that his or her counterpart in the tale was the most noble.

The entire question of true nobility or gentillesse remains an insistent moral consideration in Chaucer's works. The plot and characterization of the Franklin's tale certainly turn on the true nature of gentillesse. The Franklin carefully demonstrates through his plot that a common man like the clerk of Orleans can demonstrate gentil behavior; however, he is careful to suggest that the commoner learns his lesson from his betters and that gentillesse travels down a type of Great Chain of

Nobility. It is as if the Franklin believes that gentillesse is available to any man and comes only from God's grace, but he thinks it more diplomatic to suggest that the noble qualities inherent in the concept of gentillesse follow a logical order from the top of society to the bottom.

While the Wife of Bath certainly does agree with the Franklin that gentillesse comes to any worthy person from God alone, she does not countenance the Franklin's concern with the outward appearances of authority and rank. She preaches throughout her prologue and her romance that practical experience in the real world is the best way to learn true values. She adamantly rejects any authority that does not stand up to the test of her own experience. In fact she actually reverses the Great Chain of Nobility to suggest that the lowest ranked members of society may have the most to teach the highest ranked. The radical nature of many of the Wife's contentions spark many of the tales told after hers, especially those that have been called the Marriage Group.

The most important example of the Wife of Bath's radical stance is her argument that the wife should be the master in the marriage relationship. Church doctrine and social custom supported the medieval insistence that

the husband in any marriage was absolute master. The Wife of Bath, however, is undaunted by such important authorities. R. M. Lumiansky defines the Wife's presentation as "a masterful . . . a purposeful attempt at vigorous argumentation" (Of Sondry Folk 120). Such a powerful example of the art of debate in the medieval period could be expected of a theologian, a lawyer, or a clerk but certainly not from an uneducated lower middle-class woman who worked as a medieval weaver!

The Wife of Bath's description in the General Prologue to the tales has led us to expect a good-natured jolly woman--"In felaweshipe wel koude she laughe and carpe" (I.474). Like the Franklin she has a sanguine personality: "Boold was hir face, and fair, and reed of hewe" (I.458). She is presented as having had five husbands and having been on at least five pilgrimages (to Jerusalem, Rome, Bologna, Galice at Saint-James, and Cologne). Her wide travels and many marriages have afforded the Wife with a wide range of experience, and it is this experience that she calls upon to present her unorthodox ideas concerning marriage. She begins her rambling prologue explaining that "Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right ynogh for me / To speke of wo that is in marriage" (III.1-3).

The prologue is divided into two sections punctuated by a humorous interruption by the Pardoner, who asserts that he was thinking of marriage but after the Wife's description of the married state he is reconsidering! Before the Pardoner's interruption the Wife had systematically argued against two religious theories about marriage; one concerned the idea that a person should marry only once and the next concerned the idea that ideally a religious person should be chaste throughout life. The sexually aware and eminently practical Wife humorously reminds the listener that "if ther were no seed ysowe, / Virginitee, thanne whereof sholde it growe?" (III.71-72).

The second portion of the unusually long prologue told by the Wife contains an autobiographical look at her five marriages--her experience. The Wife argues that the reality of marriage differs dramatically from what various widely-read authorities contend in their writings. She is careful to point out that the anti-feminist literature so common in the medieval period was written by old clerks, for whom she has rather biting comments including the following:

The clerk, whan he is oold, and may noght do  
Of Venus werkes worth his olde sho,

Thanne sit he down, and writ in his dotage  
 That wommen kan nat kepe hir marriage (III.706-  
 710)!

Later the Clerk on the pilgrimage answers this charge neatly and perhaps sarcastically with the tale of the incredibly patient Griselda. But no such tales had fallen from the lips of the Wife's young fifth husband, the clerk Jankyn. Her memories of his constantly reading aloud from the book of wicked wives still rankle. The climactic struggle for supremacy in this, her happiest marriage, occurred when Jankyn knocked her down after she damaged his book. Jankyn's anger resulted, no doubt, from the Wife's act of disobedience, but also from the fact that books themselves were so very valuable. The blow to her head was hard enough to make her somewhat deaf in one ear, but the Wife played on Jankyn's guilt over the incident and was able to hear the words that made her happy: "'Myne owene trewe wyf, / Do as thee lust the terme of al they lyf; / Keep thyn honour, and keep eek myn estat'" (III.819-21). The battle of the sexes consequently provided both the comedy and the subject matter of the Wife's prologue. Paul Ruggiers analyzes the prologue as follows:

It must have seemed a fine stroke to Chaucer, in an age when celibate theory preached the subjection of women to men in marriage as the relation of the lower to the higher reason, and when the literature of the aristocrats advocated the Knight's faithful and humble service to his lady as an ideal of social behavior, to demonstrate marriage as a kind of free-for-all in which the wife wrests the upper hand and dupes him out of money and lands (200).

The Wife's prologue examines the anti-feminism of the period. F. N. Robinson points out that

Nothing could be more skillful than the way in which Chaucer has put into the mouth of the "arch-wife" the confession, boastful and cynical, but none the less engaging, of all the deceits and vices charged against women in satire from antiquity down (Introduction to The Works 7).

The Wife challenges the validity of the anti-feminist claims not only in her prologue but also in her fairy-tale romance.

The tale that the Wife of Bath narrates with such skill provides some striking parallels to the Franklin's

Tale. Like the Franklin, the Wife set her romance in a setting familiar to the English audience; she chose the England of King Arthur's day. Furthermore, like the Franklin, the Wife included a major character, the loathly lady, who could not be mistaken for a member of the nobility. Despite the magical transformation that occurs, the loathly lady of the Wife's Tale appears to be the very antithesis of nobility; she is poor, she is lowly, she is old, and she is ugly.

An important difference between the tales hangs upon the degree of lowliness assigned to the loathly lady. In the Franklin's Tale all the characters, including the learned clerk, are assumed to have demonstrated some degree of gentillesse; in the Wife's Tale, however, the lowly lady seems to be the only major character who demonstrates an understanding of gentillesse.

The tale opens with the hero, a young knight, raping a young peasant girl. In lieu of the death penalty, Queen Guinivere pleads with Arthur for the knight to be sent on a quest: he is to discover what it is that women most desire. After a traditional year and a day the knight seems no closer to discovering the answer than he did on the day of sentencing. The usual romance features a knight saving damsels from distress; the

damsels are quite often in the woods. In the Wife's Tale the knight first ravishes a young girl and then is rescued by another woman in a wood. The knight is a cad, and the lady is the real hero. How appropriate this tale is for the teller!

The answer, of course, fits neatly into the scheme of the Wife's prologue. The thing that women most desire is mastery in marriage. The loathly lady's price for giving the knight the answer is marriage. When the woman holds the knight to his promise to do as she requires, he is reluctant. Like the Franklin's Dorigen, however, this knight does keep his word. He is nonetheless horrified when he learns that she expects a traditional wedding night. He complains,

Thou art so loothly, and so oold also  
And therto comen of so lough a kynde,  
That litel wonder is thogh I walwe and wynde,  
So wolde God myn herte wolde breste (III.1100-  
1103)!

Perhaps the most famous of Chaucer's writings on gentillesse follows the knight's rather ungracious complaint. The hag's pillow lecture on the true nature of nobility echoes the Wife's prologue in that she quotes many sources of authority to prove her unorthodox views.



The hag within the tale reminds the knight that Christ is the supreme example of gentillesse and He chose to live in "wilful poverte." The knight must indeed have felt the full measure of the hag's scorn when she reminds him obliquely of his villainous act of rape in the following speech:

For, God it woot, men may wel often fynde  
A lordes sone do shame and vileynye;  
And he that wole han prise of his gentrye,  
For he was boren of a gentil hous,  
And hadde his eldres noble and vertuous  
And nel hymselfen do no gentil dedis  
No folwen his gentil auncestre that deed is  
He nys nat gentil, be he duc or erl;  
For vileyns synful dedes make a cherl (III.1150-58).

Finally the hag offers him the choice of a young and possibly unfaithful wife and an old but faithful one; when the crestfallen knight admits the hag's superiority by asking her to choose, he is rewarded with a transformation that includes youth, beauty, and faithfulness. As in all good fairy tales before and since, the couple live happily ever after.

The resolution of both the Wife of Bath's romance and the Franklin's Breton lay turns on the inclusion of a major character who normally does not figure in medieval romance: the commoner. The Clerk of Orleans in the Franklin's romance reflects the Franklin's subtle approach. The clerk may not have been of noble birth, but he is well-educated, and his skills are employed by a member of nobility. The Franklin chooses a character who is just a step or two away from the noble class. Conversely, the loathly lady in the Wife of Bath's Tale reflects the Wife's brash insistence that the last should be first. She establishes a character who obviously stands farthest away from the noble class. According to the Wife, only the antithesis of nobility is able to humble and teach the knight. In each story the commoner understands and demonstrates true gentillesse. The happy ending of each tale sends a message to the careful listener that gentillesse and nobility are matters of the heart and are accessible to all regardless of class distinctions.

## Chapter Four

### Gentilesse: The Real and the Ideal

Each romance presented in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales follows the time-honored principle of ending happily. Even the Squire's unfinished plot points toward the traditional happy conclusion. Order is restored in the Knight's Tale through a trial by tournament and a royal wedding; a similar restoration seems to be planned in the Squire's Tale since he outlines a climactic tournament to be fought and won by Cambalo for the love of Canacee. In the Franklin's romance order is restored by the chain reaction of gentilesse begun by the true love of the husband and wife in the tale. The Wife of Bath's fairy-tale romance ends happily when the knight learns the true nature and source of gentilesse and in return finds his teacher's youth, fidelity, and beauty as a reward.

The manner in which order is restored in each tale holds the key to understanding the social implications of the term gentilesse as it is revealed by the various narrators representing different social ranks. In each case the gentilesse of each main character is tested within the confines of his or her love relationships.

The first obvious difference between the courtly narrators and the middle-class storytellers can be demonstrated when their treatments of the subject of romantic love are compared. The tales of the gentil characters idealize the love relationship as a pursuit of the ideal. The woman in both the Knight's Tale and the Squire's Tale represents an idealized view common to courtly tradition. Emelye is actually a remote object, like the Virgin Mary, who provides inspiration to the Knights. Throughout most of the tale Emelye is completely unaware of the love she has aroused or the conflict it has caused. She is not really a character in the romance; rather, she is a prize to be awarded to the more worthy of the two knights. The courtly love tradition simply did not view women as people.

Within the confines of the courtly tradition, so richly drawn by the Knight, concern about gentillesse belongs to the nobly born; gentillesse becomes an ideal toward which the knights may strive. The Knight's Tale assumes that gentillesse is a possession of the gentil. No common folk appear in the Knight's Tale simply because there was not a place in the lofty romance he told for the inclusion of anything common. The Squire's Tale works on the same assumption; however, common people are

included in his fragment as objects of scorn. The babble of the common folk as they view the magical brass horse underscores the mystery of the gift, but it also serves as a contrast to the sophisticated behavior and intelligence of the nobility of the court.

In the romances told by the middle-class pilgrims, the Wife of Bath and the Franklin, the love relationships presented concern themselves with the practical considerations involved in making a marriage work. The pursuit of the ideal is replaced by the pursuit for workable reality. As a result of this shift in emphasis, the women in the romances of the middle-class storytellers possess separate identities and function as important characters. The degree of personal gentillesse possessed by both Dorigen in the Franklin's Tale and the loathly lady in the Wife's Tale actually becomes the turning point in the resolution of each plot.

A key character who is not noble or gentil-born appears in the Franklin's Tale; similarly, such a character appears in the Wife's Tale. In each case, the characters are allowed to demonstrate the characteristics of gentillesse. Such characterization represents an important shift away from the traditional romance of the time. In the Franklin's Tale the Clerk of Orleans

demonstrates his generosity, his forgiveness, and his pity when he releases Aurelius from a sworn obligation to pay his large debt. In short, the clerk acts nobly; he possesses gentillesse. The Wife of Bath narrates a more radical statement on gentillesse. She actually allows a gentil-born knight to be taught about the true nature of gentillesse from the antithesis of gentil appearance, the loathly lady.

The romance tradition itself reflects the different concerns of the classes who enjoy telling and hearing the tales. The Knight's romance is a high romance; it is full of classical concerns. His setting, characters, and philosophical tone all draw attention to the high style and epic qualities in his metrical romance. The court audience of Chaucer's day would enjoy the formal high style and the emphasis on balance, order, and intellect.

Although the Wife of Bath's Tale is also classified as a romance, when it is compared to the Knight's Tale many differences are obvious. The Wife's Tale is much shorter and is sometimes considered as a fairy tale as well as a romance. The folk and fairy-tale elements gleaned from the tale's Celtic background would appeal to a less sophisticated audience than the classical elements of the Knight's longer learned romance.

The investigation of this study into the four romances of The Canterbury Tales has revealed that gentillesse is a protean term. It can be used, in one instance, to emphasize religious or moral concerns; it can be utilized by the courtly tradition to reinforce the social belief that good blood will tell. In another case it can be adopted by an ambitious man like the Franklin to demonstrate that gentil is as gentil does. Such a proverbial stance would make room for the social advancement of a person who cultivates the virtues idealistically associated with the upper classes. On the one hand the term gentillesse epitomizes the superiority and nobility traditionally accorded to the upper classes in the medieval feudal order; on the other hand, gentillesse presents a morally superior set of ideals available to any level of society.

Chaucer's concern with the moral and social values inherent in gentillesse naturally extend past his romances. Two especially important examples of his treatment occur in the Parson's Tale and in the short lyric entitled "Gentillesse." The Parson's sermon, which closes the Canterbury collection, emphasizes the moral and religious virtues of gentillesse. The Parson states that gentillesse involves staying away from vice and having "a noble herte

and a diligent to attayne to heighe vertuose thynges" (Robinson X.468). He names the signs of the gentil man as courtesy and generosity, but most importantly he emphasizes the necessity of a personal rejection of sin. The lyric poem "Gentilesse" treats social as well as religious values. It warns that true gentilesse is not simply a matter of high social position. Chaucer's poem points out that regardless of the high estate of a man he cannot pass on to his heirs the virtues of his heart. The rhetorical voice of the lyric admonishes that "but his heir love vertue as dide he / He is noght gentil, thogh he riche seme / Al were he mytre, croune, or diademe" (12-14). The lyric condenses into three seven-line stanzas the essence of the loathly lady's one-hundred-line discourse within the Wife of Bath's story. In a discussion about the lyric "Gentilesse," H. R. Patch points out that the message in the poem is repeated in the Wife of Bath's Tale. He comments that "it cannot be said that a great poet never repeats himself, but it is certainly true that when he does, there is significance in the fact" (On Rereading Chaucer 63). Patch goes on to infer from Chaucer's use of the word gentilesse that the poet had obviously pondered on the thought that "'unto vertue longeth dignitee'" ("Gentilesse" 2).



This study has examined these same thoughts about gentilesse and its various shades of meaning. Chaucer indicates in several significant passages, notably the Wife of Bath's Tale and the lyric "Gentilesse," that gentilesse is a quality of character that can be achieved only through personal worth and God's grace; however, when Chaucer uses the term in the romances of the gentil characters on the Canterbury pilgrimage, it describes characters of noble birth who are well-schooled in the chivalric virtues tied up in the medieval view of gentilesse. This disparity of vision does not uncover any inconsistency in Chaucer's thematic use of the concept; instead, it faithfully reproduces the social scene of the poet's own milieu.

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