

GENTILLESSE IN THE CANTERBURY TALES

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ABSTRACT

The chivalric code was a popular theme of writers during the Middle Ages. An aspect of that code was gentillesse, a quality based on religious and moral behavior.

It is the purpose of this thesis to explore Geoffrey Chaucer's view of gentillesse and to show how his view affected medieval society.

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GENTILLESSE IN THE CANTERBURY TALES

An Abstract

Presented to

the Graduate Council of

Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Linda Smith Tucker

August, 1978

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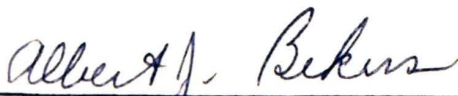
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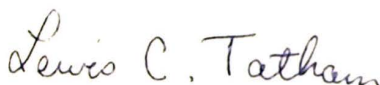
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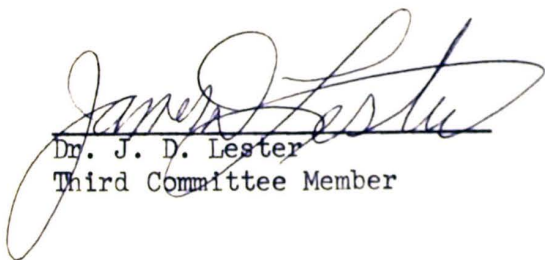


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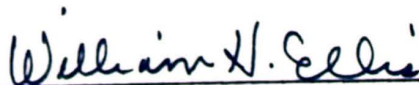


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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The chivalric code was a popular theme in medieval English literature. A significant aspect of the chivalric code was gentillesse, a quality based on social, ethical, and religious values. In the Dictionnaire D'Ancien Francais, gentillesse is defined as "prettiness, graciousness, engaging manner, sweetness of manner, pretty ways, pleasant disposition, and gracious words or deeds."¹ In Middle English gentillesse generally signified "nobility of birth or rank."² By the 14th century the word became synonymous with the deeds and characteristics of the aristocracy.

However, the people of medieval England were not so narrow-minded that they believed those nobly born always behaved nobly, or that those who behaved nobly were always aristocrats. Nevertheless, appropriate behavior was expected among social classes. Thus, in the Middle Ages, gentillesse connoted not only "nobility or character, manners, generosity, kindness, gentleness, or graciousness,"³ it emphasized as well, "courtesy, politeness, and good breeding."⁴ But perhaps even more significantly, gentillesse included a mode of behavior

¹Dictionnaire D'Ancien Francais (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1947), p. 320.

²Sherman M. Kuhn and John Reidy, eds., Middle English Dictionary (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), p. 73.

³Ibid.

⁴The Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 116.

which in literary terms emphasized exemplary moral and religious behavior: noblesse, vaillance, action noble, sentiment noble, and, of course, courtoisie.⁵ It is in these latter senses that gentillesse is so difficult to define, and it is in this sense that Chaucer was concerned with gentillesse in The Canterbury Tales.

Even in his early works, Chaucer was already interested in gentillesse. In his ballade Gentillesse, written in the early 1370's, Chaucer defines poetically his view of the term. Because the poem is extremely significant in the discussion that follows, it is quoted here in its entirety:

The firste stok [God or Christ], fader of gentillesse -
 What man that claymeth gentil for to be
 Must folowe his trace, and alle his wittes dresse
 Vertu to sewe, and vyces for to flee.
 For unto vertu longeth dignitee,
 And noght the revers [reverse], sauflly [safely] dar I deme,
 Al were he mytre, croune, or diademe. 5

This firste stok was ful of rightwisnesse,
 Trewe of his word, sobre, pitous, and free,
 Clene of his gost, and loved besinesse, 10
 Ayeinst the vyce of slouth, in honestee;
 And, but his heir love vertu, as dide he,
 He is noght gentil, thogh he riche seme,
 Al were he mytre, croune, or diademe.

Vyce may wel be heir to old richesse; 15
 But ther may no man, as men may wel see,
 Bequethe his heir his vertuous noblesse
 (That is appropred unto no degree
 But to the firste fader in magestee,
 That maketh hem his heyres that him queme),
 Al were he mytre, croune, or diademe.⁶ 21

⁵Dictionnaire D'Ancien Francaise, p. 320.

⁶The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, F. N. Robinson, ed., Second Edition, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957).

In this early ballade, Chaucer begins by stating that whoever claims to be noble must follow in the steps of "the firste stok, fader of gentillesse" and set all his wit to follow virtue and to flee vice. Although one may wear a mitre, crown, or diadem, "virtue longeth dignitee/And noght the revers."

In the second stanza, Chaucer describes the qualities of gentillesse belonging to "this firste stok":

This firste stok was ful of rightwisnesse,
Trewe of his word, sobre, pitous, and free,
Clene of his gost, and loved besinesse,
Ayeinst the vyce of slouthe, in honestee.

Again, Chaucer repeats the same tenet as in the first stanza--that although one may be an heir to riches, "He is noght gentil, thogh he riche seme."

In the final stanza, Chaucer states that vices may be inherited as easily as virtues, "Vyce may wel be heir to old richesse"; but as men may well perceive, no man can bequeath to his heir the virtuous nobleness which "is appropred unto no degree," except to the Father who "maketh hem his heyres that him queme." The poem's basic thesis, then, is an appeal to Christian charity rather than to feudal rule: God alone gives men happiness, and it is through God that man acquires gentillesse.

Although in his ballade Gentillesse, Chaucer focuses on a specific religious aspect of the term, he uses it also in more subtle contexts--in the human drama in The Canterbury Tales. Many of the pilgrims refer to gentillesse, making it one of Chaucer's basic themes in his greatest poem.

Many critics have discussed Chaucer's view of gentillesse in The Canterbury Tales. The first influential criticism came in 1911, from George L. Kittredge, who concentrated on The Wife of Bath's Tale and The Franklin's Tale as part of the "debate of matrimony" and concluded that Chaucer felt the qualities of gentillesse should be included in an ideal marriage.⁷ Kittredge's opinion remained unchallenged until 1964, when Alan T. Gaylord disputed Kittredge's identification of Chaucer's voice with the Franklin's and decided that the Franklin's concept of gentillesse is confused and naïf.⁸

The majority of the critics, however, agree with Kittredge's views. Joseph P. Roppolo expands Kittredge's ideas and demonstrates that the "Loathly Lady's sermon" on gentillesse is the turning point of the Wife of Bath's story.⁹ W. P. Albrecht agrees with Kittredge and Roppolo but adds that "the desirability of gentillesse in love and marriage is a theme linking several tales."¹⁰

However, to fully appreciate Chaucer's concept and use of gentillesse in The Canterbury Tales, one must analyze together several key tales that major criticism has ignored. Such analysis clearly illustrates that Chaucer has a much more complex and subtle understanding of gentillesse.

⁷G. L. Kittredge, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," MP, 9 (1911-12), 435-67.

⁸Alan T. Gaylord, "The Promises in 'The Franklin's Tale,'" ELH, 31 (1964), 331-65.

⁹Joseph P. Roppolo, "The Converted Knight in Chaucer's 'Wife of Bath's Tale,'" College English, 12 (Feb., 1951), 263-69.

¹⁰W. P. Albrecht, "The Sermon of Gentillesse," College English, 12 (Feb., 1951), 459.

THE KNIGHT'S TALE

When the travelers begin their pilgrimage to Canterbury, it is appropriate that the Knight tells the first tale. He is ~~the~~ highest on the social scale in the Middle Ages, and he embodies the virtues that signify a noble life of "Trouthe and honor, fredom and curteisye" (l. 46), all qualities of gentillesse. The Knight is chivalry personified. In Chaucer's characterization of him, he stresses the words "worthy" and "worthynesse" five times in essentially the same context in the thirty-six lines of description in the General Prologue (ll. 43, 47, 50, 64, and 68), which indicates that Chaucer wants his readers to respect this quality he epitomizes.

On the literal level, The Knight's Tale describes the rivalry between Palamon and Arcite--two young, noble knights of Thebes--for the hand of Emelye--who is the sister-in-law of Theseus, king of Athens. During a war between Athens and Thebes, Palamon and Arcite are captured and imprisoned in Athens.

However, when we probe deeper into a full understanding of the tale, we realize that Chaucer is exploring the honored code of gentillesse in conflict with romantic love.

The Knight's presentation of the heroes is so impartial that the reader cannot perceive any significant distinction between them:

Two yonge knyghtes liggyng by and by,
Bothe in oon armes, wroght ful richely,
of whiche two Arcita highte that oon,
And that oother knyght highte Palamon.

. . .
. . . they that weren of the blood roial
Of Thebes, and of sustren two yborn.
(ll. 1011-14, 1018-19)

However, it is Theseus who feels that Palamon and Arcite are a pair of infatuated fools because "Who may been a fool, but if he love" (l. 1799). More importantly, however, Emelye expresses no interest in either of them:

" . . . wel wostow that I
Desiren to ben a mayden al my lyf,
 . . .
And noght to ben a wyf and be withe childe."
(ll. 2304-05, 2310)

Here is a central irony of the tale: both Palamon and Arcite love a woman who does not reciprocate either of their loves. This fact displays their lack of gentillesse.

When from his prison window Palamon views Emelye wandering in the garden, he falls in love with her at first sight, and he takes on the sudden sickness characterized in courtly lovers:

He cast his eye upon Emelya,
And therwithal he bleynte and cride, "A!"
As though he stongen were unto the herte.
(ll. 1077-79)

Palamon further describes Emelye as Venus, who is the goddess of courtly love:

"I noot wher she be womman or goddesse,
But Venus is it soothly, as I gesse."
(ll. 1101-02)

Thus, Palamon's devotion to love as a religion characterizes his subsequent words and deeds.

Arcite wonders what has caused Palamon's sudden outburst, and he also looks out the window and sees Emelye:

And with that word Arcite gan espye
Wher as this lady romed to and fro,
And with that sighte hir beautee hurte hym so,
That, if that Palamon was wounded sore,
Arcite is hurt as muche as he, or moore.
(ll. 1112-16)

Palamon and Arcite argue about who loved Emelye first, and Arcite states the difference in their loves:

"Thyn is affaccioun of hoolynesse,
And myn is love, as to a creature."
(ll. 1158-59)

The distinction here, then, is between Palamon's love of Emelye as a goddess and Arcite's love of Emelye as a woman and an object of his desire. Thus, Palamon's devotion is to possess an unattainable goddess and Arcite's desire is to satisfy a physical need. Neither of these "loves," however, reflect Chaucer's concept of gentillesse because neither Palamon nor Arcite has "vertu," "dignitee," "pity," or noblesse," as exemplified in Chaucer's ballade Gentillesse. Rather, they both display the superficial, physical laws of courtly love as discussed by Andreas Capellanus in The Art of Courtly Love when he states, "Love is a certain inborn suffering," and "He who is not jealous cannot love."¹¹

Perotheus, a friend of Theseus, visits Athens and intervenes for Arcite. He is released from prison with the stipulation that he never return to "any contree of this Theseus" (l. 1213), else "with a sword he sholde lese his heed" (l. 1215).

After seven years of imprisonment, Palamon escapes and in the woods he accidentally meets Arcite, who has returned to Athens. They begin to fight over Emelye but are interrupted by Theseus. Palamon and Arcite explain to Theseus their quarrel, and Theseus declares that

". . . this day fifty wykes fer ne ner,
Everich of you shal brynge an hundred knyghtes

¹¹Andreas Capellanus, The Art of Courtly Love (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1941), p. 184.

Armed for lystes up at alle rightes,
 Alredy to darreyne hire by bataille."
 (11. 1850-53)

Neither Palamon nor Arcite display any qualities of gentillesse because they agree to settle their conflict by combat rather than by mutual agreement and understanding based on their brotherhood.

On the morning of the tournament, Arcite prays to Mars for a victory, which he thinks will be the means of possessing Emelye. Palamon prays to Venus not for a victory, but for Emelye. And, although Palamon wins the battle, the gods do not assist him, for Palamon is the victor because of fate, not because he possesses gentillesse.

In Arcite's dying speech to Emelye, he enumerates Palamon's virtues as a lover:

"I have heer with my cosyn Palamon
 Had strif and rancour many a day agon
 For love of yow, and for my jalousye.
 And Juppiter so wys my soule gye,
 To speken of a servaunt proprely,
 With alle circimstances trewely -
 That is to seys, trouthe, honour, knyghthede,
 Wysdom, humblesse, estaat, and heigh kyndrede,
 Fredom, and al that longeth to that art -
 So Juppiter have of my soule part,
 As in this world right now ne knowe I non
 So worthy to ben loved as Palamon,
 That serveth yow, and wol doon al his lyf."
 (11. 2783-95)

According to Chaucer's concept of gentillesse in his ballade, however, Arcite's ideas of Palamon's attributes are inappropriate because Palamon does not possess such qualities.

Although the Knight as narrator attempts to portray in two young aristocrats the gentillesse he possesses, by the end of his tale, we realize that neither Palamon nor Arcite understand the true meaning of gentillesse. Each is a representative of courtly love--one loves an

unattainable goddess, the other loves a physical object, and, in addition, they both pray to pagan gods. Neither view includes any concept of Christianity in relation to Emelye; and this lack of a Christian ethic indicates that neither of them understands true gentillesse.

But the pilgrims are not aware of the lack of gentillesse in Palamon and Arcite because they are too delighted with the narrative romance and with the Knight himself. However, we as readers comprehend Chaucer's subtle ironies and his true purpose of The Knight's Tale, which is to display the false, artificial characteristics of courtly, romantic love as opposed to true gentillesse.

CHAPTER III

THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

With the challenge of her opening lines

"Experience, though noon auctoritee
Were in this world, is right ynough for me
To speke of wo that is in mariage."

(11. 1-3)

the Wife of Bath bursts her bawdy prologue unexpectedly upon the pilgrims. She proclaims a long familiarity with the miseries of married life and dismisses the opinions of authorities with the assurance of her own judgment. She recounts her varied experiences with her many husbands which demonstrate that the only satisfactory arrangement in marriage is the one that she had with her fifth husband Jankyn. Although she had married him for love, he was at first a burden to her because he would not succumb to her mastery. After their quarrel concerning Jankyn's book of wicked wives, the Wife pretends to be seriously injured when Jankyn strikes her. Jankyn is so distraught that he gives his wife the sovereignty that she claims she desires. The Wife uses her varied experiences to support the validity of this thesis: Happiness can be achieved in love and marriage only if the man yields sovereignty to the woman.

Although the Prologue may be complex and digressive, the Wife seems entirely aware of her contradictory attitudes. However, the theme of her Tale and the romance of the Loathly Lady suit the Wife because of its concern with sovereignty in marriage. The Hag's attitude toward sovereignty and gentillesse is actually the Wife's true views, not the opinions she expresses in the Prologue.

First of all, we note that the knight does not follow the exemplary code of the Round Table as illustrated in Gawain and King Arthur. The opening scene in which the knight rapes a maiden by "verray force," reveals his selfish lust without consideration of the consequences or of the victim.

According to the law of the land, he "sholde han lost his heed" (l. 892). But the knight is evidently a favorite not only with the ladies of the court, but also with the Queen, since they intercede for him. Thus, the Queen does not condemn him to death. Instead, she assigns a task to the erring knight: she will grant mercy if he can ascertain "What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren" (l. 905).

The knight diligently seeks the answer to the Queen's question. But perhaps he still values life above honor as shown in his dealings with the Loathly Lady. He promises her anything if she will show him how to save himself. He returns to the Queen and gives the answer that he learned from the Hag:

"Wommen desiren to have sovereyntee
As wel over hir housbond as hir love,
And for to been in maistrie hym above."
(ll. 1038-40)

The Hag has saved his life, but the knight, in return, begs for release from his promise to her. When the Hag says he must marry her, he complains, "taak al my good, and lat my body go" (l. 1061). The Lady argues that she deserves to have her wish satisfied since she has saved his life. Thus, the Loathly Lady is adamant, and she forces the knight to marry her.

At no point does the knight show resignation or courtesy. His reaction to the Hag before the wedding--when she asserts that all

she desires is to be his wife and love--is cruel and violent: "My love?" quod he, 'nay, my dampnacioun'" (l. 1067).

The marriage is a private one, and, on the wedding night, the knight's vanity is so wounded that he ignores his marital duties and chides the Hag. With a fine sense of irony that reverts to the opening situation and his forgotten chivalric ideals, the Lady promises to amend whatever guilt she may have. The knight denies that such a change is possible, complaining that she is

" . . . so loothly, and so oold also,
And therto comen of so lough a kynde."
(ll. 1100-01)

Up to this point, the knight's character is anything but admirable. The knight must change, and it is the Loathly Lady's sermon on gentillesse that causes him to change. One by one the Hag examines the knight's charges against her. The knight listens attentively because she has made it clear she "koude amende al this" (l. 1106) if he would listen to her. The knight certainly wants to hear any possible way out of his unfortunate situation.

The Hag begins her lecture with the accusation that bothers her most, "And therto comen of so lough a kynde" (l. 1101). She attempts to "convert" the knight from his socially-oriented view of life to a spiritual understanding of gentillesse. She makes it clear that true gentillesse belongs to both the nobility and the poor, to him "that dooth gentil dedis" (l. 1170). The lady declares that if one wants to find the gentlest man,

"Looke who that is moost vertuous alway,
Pryvee and apert, and moost entendeth ay
To do the gentil dedes that he kan;

Taak hym for the grettest gentil man."
(ll. 1113-16)

She then disclaims the ancient idea that only the nobility have the qualities of gentillesse (ll. 1118-24). She further argues that a man of noble birth may perform "vileyns synful dedes" (l. 1157), even though his ancestors were virtuous.

The Hag uses religious, classical, and philosophical authorities. She first cites Dante:

"'Ful selde up riseth by his branches smale
Prowesse of man, for God, of his goodnesse,
Wol that of hym we clayme oure gentillesse.'"
(ll. 1128-30)

She then repeats the views of Seneca and Boethius:

"Reedeth Senek, and redeth eek Boece;
Ther shul ye seen expres that it no drede is
That he is gentil that dooth gentil dedis."
(ll. 1168-70)

Thus, the old Hag states,

"Thy gentillesse cometh from God allone.
Thanne comth oure verray gentillesse of grace;
It was no thyng biquethe us with oure place."
(ll. 1162-64)

The Hag also argues that it is the knight's malevolent deed and his guilt rather than her wish that must be amended.¹² In contrast to the knight, the Lady concludes the first section of her lecture by stating that, contrary to her low birth, she possesses true gentillesse from God:

"And therfore, leeve housbonde, I thus conclude:

¹²Bernard S. Levy, "The Wife of Bath's Queynte Fantasye," Chaucer Review, 4, (1970), 108.

Al were it that myne auncestres were rude,
 Yet may the hye God, and so hope I,
 Grante me grace to lyven vertuously.
 Thanne am I gentil, what that I bigynne
 To lyven vertuously and weyve synne."

(11. 1171-76)

The Hag continues her lecture by disputing the knight's ideas of poverty and old age. Poverty, she says, is honorable, for Jesus chose freely to live in poverty. Poverty makes one know God and himself, for poverty is the great teacher of wisdom and patience.

As far as old age is concerned, the Hag argues that,

". . . ye gentils of honour
 Seyne that men sholde an oold wight doon favour,
 And clepe hym fader, for youre gentillesse
 And auctours shal I fynde, as I gesse."

(11. 1209-12)

Thus, the Loathly Lady demonstrates that poverty and old age, even ugliness, can lead to virtuous living and to true gentillesse.

The Lady finally asks the knight whether he would have her old and ugly and always faithful, or young and beautiful and completely unfaithful. Implied in the Hag's question is the dilemma: Mere possession of a woman can give a man little joy since he can only hold physical domination over her. On the other hand, being independent may allow her to be too free with her love and cause him jealousy.¹³

The knight gives the correct answer, which is not to choose either of these alternatives because both involve a selfish, egotistical decision: the well-being of one partner is sacrificed for the pleasure

¹³Trevor Whittock, A Reading of "The Canterbury Tales," (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 115.

of the other.¹⁴ The knight chooses rightly by giving the choice to her, "I put me in youre wise governance" (l. 1231).

By so doing, the knight learns that the Lady will be both beautiful and faithful. By his full recognition of the spiritual qualities of gentillesse, he is rewarded by her free acceptance of him. Bernard S. Levy states that the knight's submission is

. . . a virtuous act in which he [knight] is converted from a false view of gentillesse to a true perception, from vice to virtue, from the apparent gentillesse of noble birth to the true gentillesse of noble deeds.¹⁵

Thus, only in their mutual recognition and their voluntary submission can both the knight and the old Hag share their mastery. Here is the true meaning of the Wife's tale. The Wife actually desires a marriage in which there is no mastery, for mastery involves subordination of a beloved's will. We learn that the Wife does not actually want to have the kind of marriage she proclaims she desires in her Prologue. The Wife reveals her true feelings in the Loathly Lady's "pillow lecture," when she directly states that true gentillesse comes from God alone and brings with it an awareness of moral worth and spiritual comfort.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 117.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 109.

CHAPTER IV

THE CLERK'S TALE

Harry Bailley notices that the Clerk seems withdrawn and tells him to "telle us som myrie tale" (l. 9), and not preach "as freres doon in Lente" (l. 12); he is to "telle us som myrie thyng of adventures" (l. 15); he is not to indulge in "height style," but is to speak plainly enough to be understood by all. The Clerk responds courteously and says he will tell a tale he learned at "Padowe" from "Fraunceys Petrak" (l. 31).

Part I of the tale is devoted to Walter the Marquis, who is

The gentilleste yborn of Lumbardye,
A fair persone, and strong, and yong of age,
And ful of honour and of curteisye;
Discreet ynough his contree for to gye.
(ll. 72-75)

Walter's subjects remind him that he is required to marry, and they promise to provide him with a noble bride, "born of the gentilleste and of the meeste/Of al this land" (ll. 131-32). Walter, however, willfully declines this offer and asserts that he distrusts heredity and will choose his wife with faith in God's aid:

"For God it woot, that children ofte been
Unlyk hir worthy eldres hem bifore;
Bountee comth al of God, nat of the streen
Of which they been engendred and ybore.
I truste in Goddes bountee."
(ll. 155-59)

With its emphasis on the fact that gentillesse cannot be inherited, this passage is not only reminiscent of the Loathly Lady's sermon, but it is also particularly important because on the one hand, Walter does not believe heredity is a necessary pre-requisite for

gentillesse, but he does not himself adhere to the code in his testing of Griselda and in his dominance over her.

At the beginning of the second section of his tale, the Clerk turns to the hut of Griselda's father Janicula and shows us the gentillesse of his family: "But hye God somtyme sende kan/His grace into a litel oxes stalle" (ll. 206-07). Griselda is what Donald C. Baker calls "natural" gentillesse.¹⁶ Although she is poor, she is also both good and beautiful. She draws her strength from hardship and from her long self-sacrifice in caring for her father. She is modest and reverent, and Walter, we are told, is particularly impressed with her "wommanhede/ And eek her vertu" (ll. 239-40).

Walter has allowed his subjects to select a wedding day for him, but he deliberately lets the appointed day arrive without a hint as to who is to be his bride. On the assigned day, Walker asks Janicula if he would permit Griselda to marry. When Janicula gives his consent, Walter proposes to Griselda and openly demands her complete subservience to him:

"I seye this, be ye redy with good herte
To al my lust, and that I frely may,
As me best thynketh, do yow laughe or smerte,
And nevere ye to grucche it, myght ne day?
And eek when I sey 'ye,' ne sey nat 'nay,'
Neither by word ne frownyng contenance?
Swere this, and heere I swere oure alliance."
(ll. 351-57)

Griselda replies to Walter's proposal of marriage with a solemn promise never to disobey him:

¹⁶Donald C. Baker, "Chaucer's Clerk and the Wife of Bath on the Subject of Gentillesse," Studies in Philology 59, (1962), 634.

"And heere I swere that nevere willyngly,
 In werk ne thoght, I nyl yow disobeye,
 For to be deed, though me were looth to deye."
 (11. 362-64)

As the new "markysesse," Griselda is an extraordinary success, which illustrates true gentillesse and demonstrates that gentillesse is found not only in the nobility:

And shortly forth this tale for to chace,
 I seye that to this newe markysesse
 God hath swich favour sent hire of his grace,
 That it ne semed nat by liklynesse
 That she was born and fed in rudenesse,
 As in a cote or in an oxe-stalle,
 But norissed in an emperoures halle.
 (11. 393-99)

Griselda fills her new position as naturally as she had previously tended sheep. She gives to Walter the same unfeigned love and devotion that she had given her father. It is no wonder that Walter loves her, and the people believe "that she from heaven sent was" (1. 440). Thus, Griselda is transformed from the good and beautiful peasant girl to the still more virtuous and wise lady, the perfect mistress of the household and one who is noted for her skill in public affairs.

A person with true gentillesse can accept sudden prosperity without flaw and can also withstand sudden adversity when it emerges. Walter's love of experiments pervades through the final four sections of The Clerk's Tale.

For the first test, Walter--on the pretext of appeasing public unrest--informs Griselda that their first-born child, a daughter, must be taken away. Anxiously, Walter awaits for Griselda's reply, which she give without hesitation:

"Lord, al lyth in youre pleasaunce.
 My child and I, with hertely obsesiaunce,
 Been youres al, and ye mowe save or spille
 Youre owene thyng; werketh after youre wille."
 (ll. 501-04)

After the child is taken by the sergeant, Walter watches to see if Griselda is outwardly affected by this trial. She, however, was "to hym in every maner wyse" (l. 605), never speaking of her daughter or her misfortune.

When a son is born to Walter and Griselda, the question of gentillesse becomes more apparent. Walter tests Griselda further by announcing that because the child possesses "the blood of Janicle" (l. 632), he is unworthy to be in the line of succession. He, as is the daughter, is also mysteriously taken away.

Griselda's submission to this second test astonishes Walter, who still looks for evidence of some change in Griselda. She remains undaunted, not only in appearance ("visage"), but also in spirit ("herte"). Griselda captures the reader's admiration because she faces her situation without complaint or real submission. In fact, she grows "moore trewe" as time passes.

Walter has two final tests for Griselda. He tells her that she is to be replaced by a new wife because the people want him to wed another; and, further, she must act as a lady-in-waiting to his new bride. When she is ordered from the palace to return to her father, Janicula, she is still uncomplaining and seemingly unemotional. The people, however, love her greatly, and they weep for her fall from a high to a low state.

After her return to her father's home, Griselda displays no

resentment, nor does she appear to long for "hir heighe estaat" (l. 923). The crowning instance of her extraordinary patience, however, occurs when she is called back to the palace to receive Walter's new bride in royal fashion. She prays that Walter will spare his new wife:

"O thyng biseke I yow, and warne also,
That ye ne prikke with no tormentynge
This tendre mayden, as ye had doon mo;
For she is fostred in hire norissynge
Moore tendrely, and, to my supposynge,
She koude nat adversitee endure
As koude a povre fostred creature."
(ll. 1037-43)

Walter finally understands that Griselda is patient, cheerful, and loving. He comments that under all adversity she was "ay sad and constant as a wal" (l. 1047). Thus, Walter is convinced of her faithfulness, so he stops the testing. Walter accepts Griselda because she proved her steadfastness both "in greet estaat and povreliche arrayed" (l. 1055).

Griselda is then presented with her daughter and son who were not killed as supposed, but who were sent to live with Walter's sister in Bologna. It would seem that Walter is finally convinced of Griselda's devotion.

The Clerk's Tale stresses that the essence of gentillesse is patience, constancy, and the ultimate belief in God's divine plan. To the Clerk, gentillesse does not give one the authority to rule; it is rather the quality of a true servant, God's servant. This aspect of gentillesse is exemplified by Griselda through her generosity, humility, and suffering. Griselda does not complain when Walter abuses her and her children because her conduct is based on an acceptance of God's higher order. For this reason, Griselda is extremely popular with her

people because her honesty and obvious disregard for self-esteem win respect.

According to the Clerk, the person possessing gentillesse is one who recognizes divine wisdom and God's hierarchial pattern and is also one who is content in whatever position God has placed him. Therefore, Griselda becomes a convincingly human embodiment of patience, Christian humility, and excellence of character, all of which coalesce in gentillesse.

CHAPTER V

THE MERCHANT'S TALE

Both The Wife of Bath's Tale and The Clerk's Tale illuminate complex spiritual aspects of gentillesse, whereas The Merchant's Tale mocks both the Hag's view of marriage and Griselda's enduring patience. The Merchant's Tale is a story of a wife's total contempt for her husband and is perhaps Chaucer's most bitter attack against those who abuse gentillesse.

The Merchant's Tale is divided into three sections. The first part describes January, the lecherous old bachelor who is contemplating marriage. The reader feels no sympathy for January because the narrator describes his senile lechery as repulsive and ridiculous. January is at best a man who has not grown up. He cannot believe that sex is anything but physical and totally self-satisfying; he practices the sensual stare, confuses virtue and innocence with ignorance, and is only interested in training his wife in the art of sexual satisfaction.

He begins his reflections on marriage with an affirmation--
 "To take a wyf is a glorious thyng" (l. 1268)--and moves to his justification for marriage:

" . . . whan a man is oold and hoor;
 Thanne is a wyf the fruyt of his tresor.
 Thanne sholde he take a yong wfy and a feir
 On which he myghte engendren hym an heir
 And lede his lyf in joye and in solas.
 (11. 1269-73)

January takes counsel with his friends Justinus and Placebo. These two characters represent the two aspects of January's mind--Justinus representing an awareness of right conduct and Placebo representing

self-indulgence.¹⁷ When Justinus advises that no woman can safely be taken as a wife, January grows angry and asks for Placebo's ideas, which naturally parallel his own.

January begins to think on his purchasing a new bride:

Many fair shap and many a fair visage
 Ther passeth thurgh his herte nyght by nyght,
 As whoso tooke a mirrour, polissed bryght,
 And sette it in a commune market-place,
 Thanne shold he se ful many a figure pace
 By his mirrour.

(ll. 1580-85)

This mirror reflects January's own desires. The "commune market-place" is a world of fantasy fulfillment, with parading girls viewed as purchasable objects of passion.

January, however, is a victim of spiritual blindness. He imagines that what attracts him to a woman is "Hir wis governaunce, hir gentillesse,/Hir wommanly berynge, and hire sadnesse" (ll. 1603-04). Further, "fresshe beautee," "age tendre," "myddel smal," and "armes longe and sklendre" imply to January wise behavior, gentility, and constancy. However, there is no reality in January's mirror; it cannot reflect gentillesse. Thus, if the mirror is a symbol of January's mind, he cannot distinguish between true and false gentillesse.

When January is wedded to May, the narrator portrays her as scarcely a person at all. She is barely described and rarely speaks. We learn that she is hypocritical enough to be reasonably good in playing January's game. "Fresshe" and "benign" are the words Chaucer constantly uses to describe her.

¹⁷Bernard Felix Huppe, A Reading of "The Canterbury Tales," (Albany: State University of New York, 1964), p. 151.

Chaucer's most bitter satire focuses on the notion that in holy wedlock a man can do no wrong to his wife; in other words, marriage is a license for lust.

"It is no fors how longe that we pleye;
In trewe wedlok coupled be we tweye;
And blessed be the yok that we been inne,
For in oure actes we mowe do no synne."

(11. 1835-38)

In the description of the wedding and the "game" that follows, we are shown the self-centered lust of January in three ways: first, by his growing desire in the drunken riot at the wedding feast; second, by his loading himself with aphrodisiacs; and third, by the physical repulsiveness of his appearance:

And Januarue hath faste in armes take
His fresshe May, his paradys, his make.
He lulleth hire, he kisseth hire ful ofte;
With thikke brustles of his berd unsolte,
Lyk to the skyn of houndfyssh, sharp as brere.

(11. 1821-25)

After his night of play, January sings, a sign of his joyfulness; however, "Got woot what that May thoughte in hir herte" (1. 1851).

With Damian's entrance into the tale, the focus broadens from merely a marital struggle between January and May to a courtly triangle that further debases gentillesse. Damian becomes the courtly lover, and May is the mistress he will serve. He is the typical courtly lover; he covets May at once, takes to his bed "sike," writes verses, and merely does as May asks of him.

May feels pity for Damian:

This gentil May, fulfilled of pitee
Right of hire hand a lettre made she,
In which she graunteth hym hire verray grace.

(11. 1995-97)

Inappropriately, January believes that May has the qualities of gentillesse, but she does not. Although pity is one of its central characteristics, the reader realizes Chaucer's irony. When we read the next line--"Ther lakketh noght, oonly but day and place" (l. 1998)--we are further convinced of January's blindness.

To increase his pleasure, January builds an enclosed garden, a mirror image of the Garden of Eden. This product of his fantasy enhances the irony that January also becomes physically as well as spiritually blind. This second blindness represents January's lack of self-knowledge, his jealous suspiciousness, and his ignorant possessiveness.

The final section of the tale occurs in the garden, where Damian and May attempt to consummate their affair in the pear tree. January discovers Damian and May in the branches, realizes their unfaithfulness, and becomes angry. However, May's clever wit persuades him that he is mistaken.

Thus, his eyes have the power of sight, but January is still not able to see. Spiritual blindness is clearly the antithesis of gentillesse and is more detrimental to the character than physical blindness.

The Merchant's Tale, then, is a bawdy comment on lust and January's and May's lack of gentillesse. Thus, The Merchant's Tale becomes an ironic reversal of the idea of gentillesse portrayed in the Hag's sermon to the knight and in Griselda's enduring patience. The Merchant comments ironically on May's "gentil pitifulness," that she is a "gentil womman and no wenche" (l. 2202).

The final irony is displayed in January's outraged bewilderment

when May's unfaithfulness is finally revealed to him. He verbally attacks her and bitterly calls her "lady," a title to which she now has no claim whatsoever. The tirade by January paves the way for his total subjugation to his ingenious wife.

January represents a total debasement of gentillesse because he longs only to satisfy his physical lust. He has some distant notion of the worth of a true wife and of the true joys of marriage, but because January cannot recognize true gentillesse, the story must end where it began--in January's mind that is now completely enslaved by blindness.

CHAPTER VI

THE SQUIRE'S TALE

In The General Prologue, the Squire is described in terms of courtly love. He must learn certain aspects of writing, rhetoric, and courtliness, which are qualities of a gentil man. He is of noble birth, but he does not yet understand his responsibility; he knows the theories of knighthood, love, and art, but his views regarding them are still immature and adolescent. The Squire is attempting to be impressive, to seem subtle and exquisite like his father. However, the Knight controls his tale; his son does not because he rambles with no apparent purpose until the Franklin courteously interrupts him.

The openings of The Knight's Tale and The Squire's Tale are quite similar. In each, the ruler of a distant, romantic land is described. In The Knight's Tale, Theseus is given two honorable traits: wisdom and chivalry, which are both exhibited through his actions; the Knight describes his hero by what he does. On the other hand, Cambuskyan in The Squire's Tale is praised greatly for his age, office, and fortune:

Hym lakked noght that longeth to a kyng.
 As of the secte of which that he was born
 He kepte his lay, to which that he was sworn;
 And therto he was hardy, wys, and riche,
 And pitous and just, alwey yliche.

(ll. 16-20)

Cambuskyan's actions are insignificant; he simply presides at lavish events and receives mysterious gifts.

Thus, a basic distinction of gentillesse arises. In The Knight's Tale, gentillesse is based on worthy deeds and spiritual values; whereas, the Squire feels that gentillesse is founded on birth

and appearances.

The strange knight enters Cambuskyan's birthday feast, bearing with him four gifts from "the kyng of Arabe and of Inde" (l. 110): a horse of brass, which can fly and can take a man anywhere in the world in one day; a mirror, which will reveal whether a man is a true friend of a foe and which will reveal the future; a gold ring, which enables communication with birds; and a sword, which has an edge that will cut through armor and a flat side that will heal any wound. To the Squire, these wonders are symbols of romance, and romance is the mirror of gentillesse.¹⁸

The elaborate but meaningless way in which the Squire deals with the magical gifts creates a series of unfulfilled expectations for the reader. Only Cambuskyan's daughter Canacee is able to act in a meaningful way, and even her responses are sometimes uncertain and negative.

The morning after Cambuskyan's birthday feast, Canacee awakens before sunrise so that she can test the ring the strange knight gave her. She meets a gentle, fainting falcon, "As wel of plumage as of gentillesse" (l. 426). Knowing the falcon must soon fall out of the tree, Canacee holds her skirt out for the hawk to drop into it. She wonders if the hawk is suffering

". . . for sorwe of deeth or los of love?
For, as I trowe, thise been causes two
That causen moost a gentil herte wo."
(ll. 450-52)

¹⁸ Marie Neville, "The Function of 'The Squire's Tale' in The Canterbury Scheme," JEGP 50 (1951), 177.

The falcon drops from the tree but misses Canacee's lap. She revives, however, and compliments Canacee with one of Chaucer's favorite lines: "That pitee renneth soone in gentil herte" (l. 479). The falcon continues with the statement, "gentil herte kitheth gentillesse" (l. 483), and she then tells a tale of gentillesse and love. The female falcon had fallen in love with a male falcon who had falsely returned her love. One day, however, he deserted her for a kite. The tale concludes with an exemplum illustrating that even gentillesse is no protection against "newfangelnesse" in love. In The Squire's Tale, then, the exemplum works ironically because the falcon has made "gentillesse of blood" a false good.

The Squire denies that there is mastery in love, and he displays this belief through the words of the falcon. She expected neither to dominate nor to be dominated. She gave her love freely; therefore, there can be no rivalry because she and the terclet exchanged their hearts. In no way was the falcon's love servile submission:

". . . my wyl obeyed his wyl
In alle thyng, as fer as reson fil,
Kepyng the boundes of my worshiþe evere."
(ll. 569-71)

This insistence on the freedom of both lovers echoes the Hag's sermon to the knight and anticipates The Franklin's Tale in which equality between partners is shown.

The Franklin's interruption of The Squire's Tale is part of Chaucer's strategy. He depicts the Squire as an inept and rhetorical failure. There is really no better way to show this failure than to have the Squire tell a tale without a beginning or a middle, and to

have it finally halted by the Franklin.

To make the satire even more effective, Chaucer follows The Squire's Tale with the words of the Franklin, who praises the Squire for his eloquence. The Franklin tells the Squire he has given an accurate description of gentillesse because of his "vertu" and "discrecioun." Although the Franklin's praise is all too transparent, Harry Bailley's rebuke "Straw for youre gentillesse" (l. 659) indicates that he at least believes the Franklin.

The Squire's Tale is a contrast to The Wife of Bath's Tale and The Merchant's Tale. The Merchant has no concept of gentillesse, and the Wife believes that gentillesse comes from God alone and comes to him that "dooth gentil dedis" (lll. 1170). The Squire, on the other hand, maintains that, although "gentillesse of blood" does not alone insure virtue, dignified deeds are more likely to issue from the hearts of aristocrats, for "gentil herte kitheth gentillesse" (l. 483).

CHAPTER VII

THE FRANKLIN'S TALE

The Franklin admired The Squire's Tale not only for its substance, but also for the eloquent style and courtly bearing of the narrator. Specifically, the Franklin is impressed with how "gentilly" the Squire displays himself. His praise of the Squire, however, is a reflection of his disappointment in his own son, who is an ungracious heir and does not want to grow up a gentleman. The son wastes his time and money playing "dees," instead of learning gentillesse.

"And he hath levere talken with a page
 Than to comune with any gentil wight
 Where he myghte lerne gentillesse aright."
 (ll. 692-94)

Virtue, then for the Franklin seems to be defined as gentillesse, and this quality is the ability to speak and consort with gentlemen.

The Franklin's guiding his son is a mirror-image of the Knight's counseling the Squire. The Franklin desires that his son learn the externals of gentillesse--elegance of manners and the ability to speak like a gentleman. On the other hand, the Knight wishes his son to attain the gentillesse "that apparailleth mannes corage with vertues and moralitees, and maketh hym Cristes child" (X, 461). In such a contrast, the Franklin's concept of gentillesse at the beginning of his tale seems to be superficial.¹⁹ However, the Franklin realizes

¹⁹Bernard Felix Huppe, A Reading of "The Canterbury Tales" (Albany: State University of New York, 1964), p. 165.

that gentillesse is more than external qualities, and his aim is to prove that gentillesse may be obtained by those outside the circle of chivalry.

Arveragus, a noble knight of Brittany, wins the love of the lady Dorigen, who "taken him for her housbond and her lord" (l. 742). Because of his pure gentillesse, he promises he will never assert his authority after they are married, but he will continue to be her humble servant as a lover ought to be.

And for to lede the moore in blisse hir lyves,
Of his free wyl he swoor hire as a knyght
That nevere in al his lyf he, day ne nyght,
Ne sholde upon hym take no maistrie
Agayn hir wyl, ne kithe hire jalousie,
But hire obeye, and folwe hir wyl in al,
As any love to his lady shal,
Save that the name of soveraynetee.

(ll. 744-51)

In return for such gentillesse, Dorigen vows never to abuse her authority but to be his true and obedient wife.

"Sire, sith of youre gentillesse
Ye profre me to have so large a reyne,
Ne wolde nevere God bitwixe us tweyne,
As in my gilt, were outhere werre or stryf.
Sire, I wol be youre humble trewe wyf;
Have heer my trouthe, til that myn herte breste."

(ll. 754-59)

Thus the married lovers dwell together in perfect accord, each deferring to the other and neither claiming sovereignty; and it is this mutual love and forbearance, the outcome of gentillesse, that transports them safely through the entanglements of the plot.

After describing the ideal marriage of Arveragus and Dorigen, the Franklin begins his tale proper. Arveragus has to leave Dorigen "to seke in armes worshipec and honor" (l. 811), and her anxiety and

grief seize upon the image of the coastal black rocks that represent disaster and suffering. Dorigen is obsessed by these "rokkes blake"; and they make her distraught.

In this state of doubt and dismay, Dorigen is approached by Aurelius and promises him that she will love him "best of any man" if he can remove the rocks. This vow is not surprising when one remembers that Dorigen's main concern is for the safety of Arveragus, and the rocks pose danger for him.

After Dorigen's promise, the focus of the tale shifts to Aurelius. His situation parallels that of Dorigen, who fears for the safety of her husband. He, too, wishes the rocks be removed, but not because he is worried for Arveragus's safety.

In despair, he turns to illusion and fantasy. Aurelius consults his brother who tells him of the powers of magicians.

When Aurelius visits the magician, the clerk asks for a thousand pounds to make the rocks seem to disappear. Aurelius replies,

"Fy on a thousand pound!
This wyde world, which that men seye is round,
I wolde it yeve, if I were lord of it."
(11. 1227-29)

The magician does indeed make the rocks disappear. However, Arveragus has returned, and now Dorigen is trapped by her promise to Aurelius. Thus, a conflict arises between two promises--which Alan T. Gaylord calls "wedded versus 'worded' honor."²⁰

In Arveragus's absence, Dorigen contemplates suicide. She

²⁰ Alan T. Gaylord, "The Promises in 'The Franklin's Tale,'" ELH 31 (1964), 331-65.

recalls a long list of women who sacrificed themselves rather than face dishonor. However, when she confesses to Arveragus the vow she made to Aurelius, her husband does not hesitate in giving his reply:

"Ye wyf," quod he, "Lat slepen that is stille,
It may be wel, paraventure, yet to day.
Ye shul youre trouthe holden, by my fay!
For God so wisely have mercy on me,
I hadde wel levere ystiked for to be
For verray love which that I to yow have,
But if ye sholde youre trouthe kepe and save.
Trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe!"
(11. 1472-79)

"Trouthe" includes that she should honor her bond and that she must accept her situation. Thus, "trouthe," which was the guarantee of love at the opening of the tale, is now the very quality that jeopardizes that ideal situation.

In the last line of his speech to Dorigen, Arveragus sums up the tale's meaning. It is, states Gaylord, ". . . the moral assumption behind Dorigen's gentillesse, and . . . is the fundamental principle guiding him [Arveragus] in his heart-rendering decision."²¹ This quality, then, displays the great gentillesse of the knight.

After Aurelius realizes what Arveragus has done, he begins to dwell on Arveragus's honor:

And in his herte he caughte of this greet routhe
Considerynge the beste on every syde,
That fro his lust were hym levere abyde
Than doon so heigh a cherlyssh wrecchednesse
Agayns franchise and alle gentillesse.
(11. 1520-24)

Aurelius makes up his mind that he must release Dorigen from her promise so she may return to a man who has shown great gentillesse.

²¹Ibid, p. 338.

Thus, by releasing her from her promise, the squire shows that he, too, can act with gentillesse. The Franklin reiterates this idea when he states,

Thus kan a squier doon a gentil dede
As wel as kan a knyght, withouten drede.
(11. 1543-44)

Aurelius is now faced with the problem of the money he owes the clerk. Aurelius goes to see him,

And hym bischeth, of his gentillesse,
To graunte hym dayes of the remenaunt.
(11. 1574-75)

Aurelius tells the clerk the whole story--how Arveragus sent Dorigen to him so she would lose no honor, and how he released Dorigen of her promise to him because he realized Arveragus's generosity and gentillesse concerning the matter.

To the clerk, the entire scheme to make the rocks disappear has been primarily business: his generosity is not motivated by love or love-related concepts, but by admiration for the generosity of Arveragus and Aurelius and by pride of a rank as a clerk would not be less gentle than a knight or squire:

"Thou art a squier, and he a knyght'
But God forbede, for his blisful nyght,
But if a clerk koude doon a gentil dede
As wel as any of yow, it is not drede!"
(11. 1609-12)

Thus the clerk releases Aurelius from his promise of the money and the Franklin ends his tale with a question:

Lordynges, this question, thanne, wol I aske now,
Which was the moost fre, as thynketh yow?
Now telleth me, er that ye ferther wende.
I kan namoore; my tale is at an ende.
(11. 1621-24)

Though he has agreed with the Host that he will not preach about gentillesse, by the end of the tale, the Franklin defines the concept completely.

In the Franklin's discussion of gentillesse, he alludes to three earlier tales--to the Wife's discussion of husbands, to the patience of Griselda and the theories of Marquis Walter in The Clerk's Tale, and to the satire of marriage by the Merchant. He especially agrees with the Wife that "he is gentil that dooth gentil dedis" (lll. 1170). The Wife believes this capacity to do "gentil dedis" comes from God. The Franklin believes it is made possible by the grace of compassion Aurelius, aware of the suffering he has caused both Arveragus and Dorigen, is compassionate because he recognizes the quality of generosity in the actions of both of them who meet the test of "trouthe" even at the cost of their own sorrow. Further, the squire engenders gentillesse in the magician.

The Franklin's theme of gentillesse includes two basic aspects--honor and truth. When Dorigen is told that the rocks have disappeared, she is horrified at the situation in which she finds herself. Instead of refusing to keep her bargain, she contemplates suicide as her only alternative. Nor does Arveragus assume any lighter attitude toward the matter, for when she informs him of her rash promise, he views what she has said to Aurelius as a contract from which there is no honorable withdrawal. Because Dorigen promises Aurelius her love, Arveragus, regardless of personal emotions, demands Dorigen keep her word and sends her to Aurelius. His attitude is summed up in a single sentence, "Trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe" (l. 1479). Aurelius

has accepted Dorigen's words at face value, and that is sufficient for Arveragus.

Thus, the happy ending in The Franklin's Tale is based on "trouthe," "honour," "fredom," and "novlesse," the essential qualities of gentilliesse. Arveragus is devoted to the aristocratic code of "Trouthe" and "honour"; thus, he is able to learn that denial of self is the highest fulfillment of man. This object is the meaning of gentillesse the Franklin is trying to emphasize. Any man who displays the qualities of truth, honor, and generosity can be said to be a "gentil" man, worthy of admiration.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

While Chaucer discusses exemplary qualities (such as hospitality, cheerfulness, graciousness, etc.) in his concept of gentillesse, it means much more to him. One sees that Chaucer feels chivalry in its traditional sense has died and has been cherished more as a sentimental or nostalgic ideal rather than as a spiritual concept nurtured in Christian actions and beliefs.

True nobility and gentillesse do not depend on noble birth; they cannot be inherited. They are based on individual virtue which comes only from God. Chaucer states this belief in his ballade

Gentillesse quoted earlier:

Vyce may wel be heir to old richesse;
 But ther may no man, as men may we see,
 Bequethe his heir his vertuouse noblesse
 (That is appropred unto no degree
 But to the firste fader in magestee,
 That maketh hem his heyres that him queme),
 Al were he mytre, croune, or diademe.
 (ll. 15-21)

Importantly, in the last line quoted above, Chaucer makes it clear that although one may be a bishop in the church, a ruling king, or a noble in feudal society, it does not mean that he necessarily possesses gentillesse.

Thus, we would expect The Knight's Tale to display these ideals. However, the Knight reveals a traditional view of gentillesse: according to the Knight, the two young aristocrats, Palamon and Arcite, possess chivalric gentillesse simply because they are of royal blood. However, we realize that neither Palamon nor Arcite understands the true

concept of gentillesse because first their actions are motivated by the seven deadly sins, especially pride, rather than by the seven cardinal virtues based on spiritual love. Their love for Emelye is misdirected because they are concerned with the more superficial and illicit aspects of courtly love rather than spiritual love.

Secondly, Palamon and Arcite are not concerned at all with Emelye's feelings regarding their love for her. She is not in the least bit interested in either of them, but Palamon and Arcite, in total disregard for her feelings, still compete for her love. The lack of Christian feelings for Emelye indicate Palamon and Arcite do not possess gentillesse.

However, we realize Chaucer's subtle ironies in The Knight's Tale--the artificial laws of courtly love and romantic love are not characteristics of gentillesse. It must include mutual understanding and friendship between two individuals as well as the Christian ethic.

In The Wife of Bath's Tale, the knight who rapes the maiden has the same attitude toward gentillesse as do Palamon and Arcite. It is a socially-orientated view based on social order rather than a spiritual view based on Christian deeds. The Hag attempts to change the knight's opinion in her "pillow lecture." The Loathly Lady reflects Chaucer's stated attitude in his ballade Gentillesse. She states that gentillesse does not depend on birth, but it does rely on "gentil dedis" (l. 1170). She cites Dante, Seneca, and Boethius as authorities for her opinion that true gentillesse comes from God alone and cannot be inherited.

After her sermon, the Hag asks the knight if he wants her to

be old and faithful or young and unfaithful. Either choice involves selfishness. When the knight chooses neither alternative, he recognizes the spiritual qualities of gentillesse and is rewarded by the Hag's free acceptance of him when she becomes both young and faithful. The Hag, then, denies that gentillesse is based on birth or social position. It is a spiritual gift, given by God to those who possess true Christianity.

For gentillesse nys but renomee
 Of thyne auncestres, for hire heigh bountee,
 Which is a strange thyng to thy persone.
 Thy gentillesse comth fro God allone.
 Thanne comth oure verray gentillesse of grace.
 (11. 1159-63)

In his tale, the Clerk describes Walter as "the gentilleste yborn of Lumbardye" (1.72). However, like Palamon, Arcite, and the knight in The Wife of Bath's Tale, he does not understand true gentillesse. Although he claims to distrust heredity and chooses a wife with faith in God's plan, Walter does not display gentillesse in his testing of Griselda and in his dominance over her.

Griselda and her father, Janicula, who possess gentillesse, are poor, "but hye God somtyme senden kan/His grace into a litel oxes stalle" (11. 206-07). Griselda's patience comes from hardship and her long self-sacrifice in caring for her father. She is modest and reverent--two important qualities of true gentillesse.

Griselda's gentillesse gives her strength to withstand Walter's cruel tests because she views these trials as part of God's divine plan. Thus, to the Clerk, gentillesse is a quality of a true servant of God, as exemplified by Griselda's generosity, suffering, humility, and patience under extremely difficult circumstances. Walter finally realizes that his tests were unwarranted, and he accepts

Griselda's true gentillesse as embodied in her Christian humility and constancy. According to the Clerk, then, one who possesses gentillesse recognizes God's hierarchical pattern and accepts His divine wisdom, even if it demands great hardship and sacrifice.

The Merchant's Tale, which is Chaucer's most bitter attack against those who abuse gentillesse, mocks both the Hag's idealistic, religious view of marriage and Griselda's extraordinary Christian patience. January, the lecherous old bachelor, believes that physical beauty implies wise behavior and constancy, both aspects of gentillesse. Thus, he chooses May because she is young and physically provocative.

Chaucer's most bitter satire focuses on January's belief that marriage is a license for lust. January does not take into consideration May's feelings, who herself is equally guilty of desiring the material wealth which the lecherous January can provide her and who immediately after her marriage encourages the advances of Damian. Thus, the entire tale is a comment on spiritual blindness in which each character seeks his own physical satisfaction.

The narrator in The Squire's Tale reveals his immature and adolescent view of gentillesse. The Squire is an aristocrat who fails to realize that gentillesse is not founded on birth and appearance. The Squire, like his father, the Knight, relates a tale of romance. The story of the falcon and the tercelet illustrates there can be no mastery in love because each lover must have his freedom. But the falcon is only attracted by the tercelet because of his nobility of blood. However, we understand that he is not noble because he deserts her for a kite, who is considered in medieval falconry a cowardly hawk

that typifies baseness. The ironic implication in this tale is that the falcon sees social position as an end in itself. The Squire, however, does not recognize this irony. He maintains that dignified deeds are more likely to be performed by aristocrats. Therefore, his understanding of gentillesse is based on the artificial feudal social scale that Chaucer interestingly discredits in a beast fable.

The Franklin tactfully interrupts the Squire, who has not finished his tale, and praises him for his gentility, his eloquence, and his virtue. However, in The Franklin's Tale we see a subtle coalescence in the idea of gentillesse and in Chaucer's attempt to express its subtle implications through the Franklin who is fully versed in the rhetorical poetic conventions of medieval English poetry. We see immediately the Franklin's art in the prologue when he says,

But, sires, by cause I am a burel man,
At my bigynnyng first I yow biseche,
Have me excused of my rude speche.
I lerned nevere rethorik certeyn;
Thyng that I speke, it moot be bare and pleyn.
(ll. 716-20)

This apology is obviously in the tradition of the classical modesty prologue. Throughout the tale it is clear that the Franklin sees rhetorical eloquence as an integral part of gentillesse because it is primarily through his poetic subtlety that he explores and reveals the true virtues of his subject.

Significantly, the Franklin further displays his interest in the relationship between virtue and eloquence by telling a Breton lay, which traditionally was told by "either aristocrats or the dependents of aristocratic patrons"²² to young sophisticated audiences

²²Patricia Terry, Lays of Courtly Love (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1963), p. IX.

who were well versed in classical rhetoric. Usually, the plots centered around a pair of lovers who were "aware of the restrictions of Christian morality and of feudal obligation"²³ but were totally devoted to love.

The Franklin alters this traditional theme of illicit love by relating a tale that is totally committed to a Christian theme of gentillesse. It is not surprising that throughout the tale, emphasis is placed on generosity, truth, and Christian love. One of the most striking illustrations of this blending occurs when Arveragus agrees that Dorigen should go to Aurelius to fulfill her obligation, and

Aurelius gan wondren on this cas,
 And in his herte hadde greet compassioun
 Of hire and of hire lamentacioun,
 And of Arveragus, the worthy knyght,
 That had hire holden al that she had hight,
 So looth hym was his wyf sholde breke her trouthe;
 And in his herte he caughte of this greet routhe,
 Considerynge the beste on every syde,
 That fro his lust yet were hym levere abyde
 Than doon so heigh a cherlyssh wrecchednesse
 Agayns franchise and alle gentillesse.

(11. 1514-24)

Thus, to the Franklin, gentillesse is based on the Christian qualities of compassion, truth, and honor. Arveragus demands that Dorigen should keep her promise to Aurelius because "trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe" (1. 1479). When Aurelius releases Dorigen from her vow, he, too, displays gentillesse because he is aware of the suffering he has caused Arveragus and Dorigen and recognizes fully the quality of generosity in their actions.

Further, the clerk dismisses Aurelius from his promise to

²³
 Ibid.

him because he admires the generosity of Arveragus and Aurelius and because "if a clerk koude doon a gentil dede/As wel as any of yow, it is not drede" (ll. 1611-12).

Therefore, to the Franklin, gentillesse includes not only aristocratic traditions, but more importantly true Christian love exemplified in a subtle and complex human dilemma illustrated in eloquent poetic terms.

Thus, we finally see that gentillesse cannot be described entirely in religious terms nor can its qualities be precisely enumerated in poetic terms. To Chaucer, gentillesse is a subtle and complex spiritual ideal that belies any general definition but he fully explores in terms of human interaction.

Through direct statement (as in his ballade) and through his characterizations in the various selected tales I have discussed, Chaucer reveals a subtle treatment of gentillesse as a poetic theme. Perhaps most striking is Chaucer's constant use of ironic reversal in which he treats the various possibilities of a religious and poetic theme in ways which could only be explored by a poet of his depth and caliber.

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